



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

Identification: This is tape one, side one, in the social history series for the Australian War Memorial recorded with Gwen Mann in Melbourne on 23rd January 1990. It begins in five seconds from now.

Gwen Mann, where and when were you born?

I was born in Essendon in 1919.

Tell us a bit about your family, what your father and mother were doing in your early life and so on?

My mother was a school teacher until she married. She married my father, [inaudible], he was a wool-broker. I am one of five children. We started .... Four of us were born in Essendon, the fifth one was born in our own home in Brighton.

So how were the times as far as your early family life were concerned? Were they hard days or were you reasonably well off?

I think we were average. My father was self-employed. He weathered the depression quite well which was lucky for us because so many people didn't.

How did he manage to do that?

Well, he had his own business and, of course, wool was still being shorn and sold throughout those years. One thing we did have a family meeting on as to whether we'd get rid of the car or the pianola when things apparently got a bit tough and we were just small children. We were consulted and we decided we could do without the car but we couldn't do without the piano. So the car was sold. It was a Peugeot; one of the early Peugeots, a Tourer. I remember it well.

What about your mother, what sort of person was she?

My mother was a matriarch. She believe in children being seen and not heard and she never ceased teaching until the day she died when she was ninety.

Was she aloof then? Did she hold herself at arm's length?

No, not exactly. She wasn't a very emotionally ... emotional woman. She ruled us, I suppose would be considered these days, with a rod of iron. We were seen and not heard. We were strictly brought up in that respect but we had a great affection for her and I think if she'd been a male she'd have made an excellent judge.

Why was that?

Because she had a wonderful power of discerning right from wrong and being able to produce the right sort of answers to difficult questions.

How did your father then cope with such a strong character in the household?

Oh, he was always consulted. He wasn't the underdog by any means. He was never held up to us as a threat. I think they were a very good working combination and I think I am one of the fortunate people who can say we had very good parents.

Was it a religious family?

We were brought up in the Anglican church. We all went to church and to Sunday School until we became of the age when we could decide for ourselves if we wished to continue.

Was it a family where political issues or social issues had a deal of importance, that were discussed and so on?

Political issues, not so much. But social issues, yes, because on a number of occasions we were taken out around the poorer parts of Melbourne and shown how really well off we were. My mother was an indefatigable worker for the women's hospital all her life until she became too old to do those sort of things. We were .... I think we were brought up certainly to have a regard for all people but especially for people who were less well off than we were.

How many were in the family - brothers and sisters?

I am one of five. I have two sisters and two brothers and I come in the middle.

So was it a competitive family in the sense of relations between brothers and sisters?

I don't think so. We all had our specific jobs to do and we did them.

Such as, what sort of things?

Well, my brothers had to chop the wood and keep the car clean and help Dad with the garden and we girls as a special treat, we always had - or most of the time, we had a lady help who lived in and on her day off as a special treat we were allowed to cook the dinner.

How did you see yourselves? Were you British essentially? Do you recall what the sort of feeling was or was there a distinct sense that, no, there was a very different sort of identity and it was more important to be Australian as such?

Well, you must remember, these were the days when every Monday at the State school we started saying, 'I love God and my country. I honour the flag, I serve the King and chiefly I obey my parents, teachers and the law'. And all the boys would put their hands on their hearts and make this saying. The girls weren't supposed to, I don't know why. And then we'd march around to the beat of the drum and then we'd sing a couple of patriotic songs and that was how the school started at the primary school, government primary schools in those days.

(5.00) Did Gallipoli mean much or was there an attempt to impress upon you the sacrifices of Gallipoli and so on?

Oh yes, yes. Gallipoli always got a good going over.

What about in the family? Did you have members who'd served?

Yes, I had two or three uncles who had gone through the '14-'18 war, one of whom died in the UK at that period.

Did the other talk about the war at all? Did he mention it?

Not unless you mentioned it to them. But they used to march on ANZAC Day.

But, well, did you overhear or did the war in some special way, because of that family connection, have a special sort of meaning for you?

Yes it did at ANZAC Day time and Armistice Day time because my father didn't go to the war. He had a weak heart and was not allowed to enlist and so he usually, when I was a young child I can remember, he'd be absent during that period. He'd be at one of the wool sales or somewhere out of Melbourne because I think he felt very keenly that he was one of three sons who didn't go to the war but his two brothers had. And I think he always felt that he .... It was just a sad period for him because he hadn't been able to share that experience with them.

As you were growing up what sort of things did you see yourself doing? Did you have any particular notions about where you were going with your life?

Not really. But then I don't think many young women of my - that period did. I became a hairdresser after I left school.

Well, even when you were younger, before you'd got to the leaving stage, did you have any notions about - or any romantic ideas - about what you'd like to do with life?

Oh, I always wanted to travel. I wanted to travel. I wanted to read the Bible before I was twenty-one. I managed to do both things.

So you started off, did you say, as a hairdresser?

Yes. I had seven years as a hairdresser. I had a four year apprenticeship and then three years as a full hand.

And by the end of this period was this getting near the war years?

Oh, the war had started. The war started in 19... as you know, '39 and I joined the army in '42.

Well, just going back to immediately before the war, was there a sense that war was coming? Was it something discussed that you were anxious about?

Oh yes, indeed, indeed. I think we were all very aware here that it was going to happen. It was discussed quite a lot and most of my young male friends had joined the Citizen Military Forces which wasn't called that in those days. They were doing national service and preparing themselves for what seemed to be inevitable.

Did you also feel that you wanted to do your bit in some way?

Oh yes. We had decided if there was anything going we would join something and quite a lot of women's organisations were raised - little private concerns - and I didn't join any of those because I think the writing was on the wall there'd have to be something quite official.

What sort of things did it seem that you might be able to do? I mean, what were the expected limits as to the nature of the kind of service that you could give do you think?

Well, something that we could do to allow men to go away. I suppose we thought along the lines of office work as much as anything else because the other things hadn't entered our heads that we could become anything much more than that.

So filling the gaps in the work place as it were?

Yes, that sort of thing. I certainly didn't want to go and work in a factory I must say.

What was the impression you had as to, say, your mother's attitude to the war? Was she anxious about having any of her sons go off and be killed?

I think she was but then I think all mothers were. Her younger son, of course, was still a schoolboy right up until about the last year of the war when he was old enough to join the navy.

Was she against the war as such?

I wouldn't think so because she was very British - well, no, that's not quite right. That's not quite a correct statement for her. I think she didn't like the evil that she could see happening in Europe. I won't say she was so very British: she was Australian.

And your father, what was his disposition?

Yes, I think he was also - had that idea, that if there was evil that we could help suppress then it was up to us to help to do so.

Where were you then when war broke out and you had the first news?

I was home in Brighton, living with my parents - we all were at that time.

What was the feeling?

It was excitement as much as anything else. People joined clubs and started knitting nets to cover guns and saving silver paper and sorting out toothpaste tubes. There were all sorts of little things going like that that everybody seemed to join in with. I know my father went to the local technical school and made duckboards and crutches. Mother went into some sorting out place in the city where they sorted out silver paper and bottle tops and all that sort of thing.

Was there a feeling it would be all over pretty quickly or was there more sober expectation?

I think we all hoped it'd be all over pretty quickly. I don't know that I thought anything else at the time.

(10.00) So how did you go about joining up?

Well, my younger sister and I decided that we would join one of the services which by that time had got themselves off the ground and were running - army, navy, air force - for women. And we went to the city and I think it was either Myers or [Bull and Welshes?] who had a display in their windows of three models dressed in the uniforms of the women's army, navy, air force and I can see us now standing outside and looking through the window and deciding which service we'd join and we decided on the army because we liked their hats best and also we did have army connections further back with the uncles.

So having been persuaded as it were by the smart cut of the uniform, what was the next step?

Well, we wrote in of course and were sent application papers which we filled in and sent back and in due course we were told ...

Do you recall the nature of the application papers, the sort of detail, the kinds of things they were looking for ...

Oh yes. I think we had to state who we were, where we lived, what our age was, our education qualifications, our employment.

Religion?

Yes, certainly our religion. I know I used to annoy people because I just used to put down I was a protestant and they wanted to know more than that.

Was membership of political parties part of the ...

I don't recall that being on the question paper but it could have been. But I don't recall it.

So you filled that in, and then?

Yes, and then we eventually got a letter back calling us up to go in and have a medical examination which took place at Royal Park which was then called Camp Pell. There was a camp erected there which had first been occupied by the Americans and Margaret and I - my sister - went out on this particular day and we formed in a queue with a lot of other young women about much the same ages as ourselves and we were each given a glass jar with markings down the side which showed you liquid in ounces and one by one we had to go in behind a canvas screen in a corner and pass a urine specimen. And the girl who came out after me managed to fill her glass right to the top, it must have been a good pint, and she came out with this wretched thing - I had about an inch in mine because there was a big tub in there and you poured away what you didn't need in the measuring glass - and she walked right behind me and I was just very glad she had a steady hand or I'd have got the lot down my back.

So how thorough otherwise was the medical?

Oh, it was quite a good medical. And a dental, and the dentist was very rough. He opened my mouth and stuck a finger in the corner and split it and I had a sore mouth for weeks.

What, split the gum you mean?

No, split where my lips met. I was very cross about that. It needn't have happened. The medical was quite thorough, yes indeed.

So how long then before you found that everything was okay and you'd be accepted?

Oh, quite quickly, quite quickly after that we were called in. We had other tests; we had aptitude tests. But I forget just exactly what they were. I forget just what they were. But Margaret and I were allocated to a signals unit. At that time they were looking for people who had signals ability and we'd both been in the Girl Guides and both knew the Morse code and perhaps that helped.

Why had you joined the Girl Guides?

Oh, we'd been in the Guide movement for many years - many, many years.

And what value do you think that had been?

I think it had been a great value because we'd done quite a lot of camping, we'd lived among other - especially myself more than my younger sister - we'd lived among other young women, we'd been used to putting up tents and taking down tents and cooking our food over a fire and living a bit rough for those times - sleeping on the ground. I used to do a lot of lightweight camping, we'd go away on our bicycles for weekends and sleep in paddocks and all that sort of thing and carry our food in a shoe box in a basket in front of the car and a little pack on your back with your lightweight tent and your sleeping bag. So we'd become quite self-sufficient to a degree in that respect.

Was there a military-like discipline in the Girl Guides in those days?

No, not really.

So when you were then preparing to enter the army and leave home, I suppose you'd think, well, what can I take with me? Do you recall what sorts of things seemed to be important to take?

Well, as a matter of fact, we went in fully kitted in our army uniforms and we weren't allowed to take anything with us except our dressing gowns and pyjamas because the army didn't provide those.

Not even photographs of home, all that sort of ...

Oh yes, that sort of thing, yes. And I took a bedside clock, but that was about all. There was very little else. You weren't allowed to take other things if you were already fully kitted.

You mentioned the Americans had been at Camp Pell. Were there Americans around Melbourne in those days?

Oh yes, quite a number; oh, lots of them.

What was the impact then of the arrival of the Americans?

Oh, we thought they looked pretty compared to the Australian serviceman whose uniform, especially the army, was very unembellished. Of course the Americans seemed to have things hanging all over them - ribbons and colours and medals and very fine cloth that you can't imagine them going into battle in.

It was also a bit of a sore point with many Australians that they also seemed to have a lot more money and therefore could have a lot more impact with the young ladies.

That's quite so and that's just what happened of course.

Did you get to meet any Americans yourself and go out with any Americans?

No, I didn't. I saw plenty but my parents gave the hospitality every weekend to Australian servicemen and we had at least two air force fellows staying with us every weekend for many, many months. They came from the showgrounds or from local air force camps.

(15.00) Were these young men who were from interstate that were being billeted then?

Yes, they were. I think pretty well always from interstate. You see, my brother was in the air force so that gave my parents a fellow feeling for air force people I think, and he was away from home.

Did you have sisters who became at all infatuated with young servicemen visiting the house?

No, I can't say that I did. I went out a few times with some of these fellows - this is before I joined the army in '42, because this was happening in '41, '40 that we were having air force fellows in the house - and in fact I kept in touch with some of them for quite a number of years by mail and certainly they wrote to my parents and sent them Christmas cards for the next twenty or thirty years - not all of them but some of them.

What sort of outings would you have? Go to the pictures, or what?

Yes. We'd go to the local pictures or to the local dance at the church. It was all very innocuous really. They certainly didn't get anything to drink because my parents were practically teetotal.

What were the dances at the time, do you recall?

What the dances ...

The church ... yes.

Oh yes, the foxtrot and slow foxtrot and some old time dances like the Pride of Erin and plenty of waltzes, modern waltzes, circular waltzes.

So now then, having found yourself in the army with the transition to army discipline, how did you find the nature of the discipline, was it at all a shock?

No, it wasn't to me because you must remember I'd been brought up in a well disciplined family. You did as you were told when you were told.

What about other young ladies?

Oh, some of them found it very difficult. Some of them had never done a thing for themselves; they couldn't even make a bed, they'd never cleaned a pair of shoes. We were always brought up to clean your shoes before you go to school every day.

What seemed to be the attitude towards taking in large numbers of young women? Was it, 'let's knock the stuffing out of them as soon as possible and shake them up' or, what was the ...

No, it wasn't like that at all, which apparently is what happens in this current day and age in 1989-90. I think the attitude was excellent. And you must remember that the people in charge of us, young women not much older than myself - I was then twenty-three - it was an enormous responsibility for them. Most of them, or many of those early officers in the first thirteen or fourteen were people from the Guide movement who'd been used to handling young women or they were people from similar movements like the YWCA who had also been used to handling young women. They were very well chosen.

So, was it a courteous and polite form of discipline?

It certainly was; it certainly was. I think if it had been otherwise that particular officer wouldn't have lasted.

So how would an officer then call up somebody? If they were walking along and they wanted to get, say, one of the new internees, as it were, how would they address them?

They'd be new recruits.

New recruits.

By their name. Not their maiden ... not their Christian name. They'd be Private Smith or Private Brown or Corporal Smith or Corporal Brown. They were not addressed just by their family name as apparently they do in UK, always have.

Saluting at every point of contact like that?

Yes, yes. They would have attended a recruit school and learned all these things. They'd have been given lectures on how you address other people according to their rank.

What kind of accommodation did you find yourself in?

Well, in Bonegilla where I spent the first few months of my army life the accommodation was in a camp that had also been occupied by the Americans before we got there. The huts were unpartitioned, unlined with windows, up on steps - they were well above ground level - and they had twenty-three beds and between each bed was a bedside locker. Running the entire length of the hut on both sides was a broad shelf on which you put your great coat and your respirator. Under the bed you strapped down, almost where your feet would be, you hung your steel helmet and your kit bag went up approximately where your pillow was but on the ground, on the floor. It was a wooden floor which had to be scrubbed out once a week.

What about toilet and shower facilities, what were they like?

Oh yes. They were further across. They were just twenty yards away. They were also galvanised iron buildings, everything was galvanised iron. They were galvanised iron, the ablution blocks and they had thunder boxes. The place wasn't sewered. A night cart man would come two or three nights a week. The showers had cubicles and to begin with we had no doors on them. But then, the women services people insisted that these be given doors and they did have sort of stable doors installed I remember because people do like privacy - or young women do anyway.

But for many it would have been a marked sudden loss of privacy, how did they take to that?

Oh, it must have been an enormous shock to probably the majority of young women who'd never had to share a shower or go in or see another young woman with no clothes on. But you live through these things and you get used to them. For one thing we were always in a hurry.

(20.00) You had to be at certain places at certain times and there was only a certain amount of time to have your - perform your morning ablutions and in this camp there was shift work after we'd learned our signals duties and so our signals centre was manned twenty-four hours a day which meant there were three or four shifts coming and going all the time. So people were either using the ablution block prior to going and having a meal and going off to work or coming back from work and using the ablution block before they went in and had a meal and went to bed. So it was a continuous stream of traffic really and no-one having very much time for any pleasantries or for hanging about so to speak.

And did you have hot water for the showers?

Oh yes, we had hot water, certainly.

You said you'd been attracted by the cut of the uniform but, in fact, what was the actual fitting out like? Could you get reasonably fitted or was it a bit slap-dash?

No, it was reasonably fitted and it was done by people who had been employed in that sort of job in some of the big stores. And we had tailoresses who altered things if they were too long.

Would you have some who would be inordinately fussy in expecting rather too much of the cut of the uniform?

Oh, possibly, but I don't remember anybody particularly from that regard.

What about toiletries in terms of make-up and those sorts of things.

Yes.

Were you issued with such?

No, we weren't issued with anything like that and, in fact, we weren't allowed to wear earrings or rings unless they were engagement or wedding rings. No other jewellery, no bangles or that sort of thing. We could wear a wrist watch. Clear coloured nail varnish if we wished - no colour; no reds or anything like that. The hair had to be worn two inches above the collar and for the first - I had been a hairdresser, as you know - and for the first three or four days at this camp another girl and myself, who were silly enough to take our tools of trade with us, spent our entire time cutting hair to the approved length. Now this was rather funny because some poor girls had grown those long page boy bobs which were fashionable at the time. We had to cut all those off of course. So there were tears and then, of course, some young women, and men of course, just don't seem to have a neck and it's very difficult to cut hair two inches above the collar line when there isn't a neck. That was quite a problem. The funny part was that some of the young women paid us and we were so green we didn't know we shouldn't take the money; after all, the army was paying us.

How much did you get, do you recall?

Oh, only two shillings here and there, or a packet of cigarettes, or a cake of chocolate, or a pot of face cream, or a tube of toothpaste.

So you had quite a lucrative little job in a way.

Yes. But we didn't know otherwise to begin with. Then the penny dropped of course.

Were you allowed to wear, say, eye shadow or eye brow pencil or ...

No. Well, eye shadow wasn't worn much in those days, only by ladies of the night.

Well, what would happen if somebody used a very, say, pale lipstick or tried to get away with ...

Oh, you could wear lipstick, you could wear lipstick, but in moderation - in moderation - and people stuck by that.

Were you briefed as to expectations of behaviour to do with morality as it were? Were there intrusions into the life of women in the forces in a way that perhaps wouldn't take place with the men?

Well, I didn't do a normal recruit school, that unit didn't. We did our recruit school along with our signals training but when I went to the Darley Training Battalion later, and I was there for two years training recruits, there were several sex hygiene lectures as part of the curriculum and, in fact, the duty person on each particular Sunday of that recruit school had to take the recruits and I very often was the duty sergeant on those occasions and I could have given those lectures myself, I heard them so often.

What did they convey essentially?

Well, they were given by a Melbourne female doctor who used a pointer and a set of black and white slides on a screen and she pointed out various parts of male anatomy and female anatomy. She never ever said words that would appear in a medical book. She must have been very shy and, of course, we were in those days because sex wasn't discussed when I was a girl. It just wasn't discussed the way it is now or you see it on the television and you hear it on talk-backs on the radio. In those days it was still very hush-hush; even your mother didn't tell you much. But this doctor used to point out what she thought was necessary for young women to know. She used to say that during menstrual period you washed up as far as possible and down as far as possible and don't forget possible and that was considered terribly bold; everybody sniggered of course.

What about codes of behaviour? Was there some way it was implied or conveyed that there were certain standards of behaviour that were or were not acceptable?

Oh yes, very much so, because our controller who was Colonel Sybil Irving visited most of her troops over the period of the war. Many of us had quite a number of contacts with her,

she was a remarkable woman, and she always insisted that first and foremost we were women. We were not to pretend to be other than women and as women we should behave like ladies. And I would venture to suggest that the vast majority did. There were, of course, those who fell by the way. Some were discharged for unbecoming behaviour.

(25.00) What would be unbecoming?

Well, I think they did find they had a few ladies of the night who managed to get in thinking they'd be on a good wicket and they were caught out in various ways and means. And a number of young women did have babies and they were looked after by the army. They were sent - I think every state pretty well had a specific hospital or place of that kind where ...

These are as a result of pregnancies occurring after joining the service.

Yes, that's so, that's so. And then they would be thrown out. The young men who caused the problem were never thrown out, never. Nothing happened to them, not a thing. And this continued until well into the 1960s.

When you say 'thrown out', that implies that they got absolutely nothing in the way of any financial assistance or social welfare assistance or ...

As far as I know, no. Unless a church authority or something like that came to their aid. A lot of them were country girls whose parents wanted nothing more to do with them. They were considered to be quite immoral.

Did you know any young ladies who became pregnant at all during that period?

One or two.

How were they regarded by people around them? Was there a tendency at all to ostracise them?

Not really; not to my knowledge.

Was it difficult for them?

I think it must have been, very difficult for them.

So until .... How late in the pregnancy would they be expected to continue with their active service as it were?

Well, as long as they could go undetected and, of course, eventually they'd be detected. In fact, one young woman went so far that she had her baby under the counter in the canteen.

What happened with that, do you know?

I don't know, I don't know.

Were there men about the camp at all?

Yes. There was invariably a general duties man whose job it was to stoke the boilers and chop the wood and that sort of stuff. He probably came from a nearby male camp. He'd be allocated to go over to the female camp and do that sort of duty for a specific time.

How nearby was 'nearby' in terms ...

Well, in Bonegilla, of course, we were surrounded by male camps. We were the only female unit for about 200-odd women and some thousands of men.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

Identification: This is side two of tape one of the interview recorded with Gwen Mann on 23rd January 1 90. It resumes in five seconds from now.

One might suppose that the women's camp must have presented a terrific temptation then to the surrounding male camps. Were there attempted forays after hours and that sort of thing?

Oh yes. Yes, I remember very well, one of them. A girl in the next hut to me, a big horsy looking girl - I can see her now - woke up one night and felt her great coat slipping off her bed - it was winter time and she'd thrown her great coat over the blankets to make a bit of extra warmth - and she could feel it just moving off her bed and she put her hand out and she put her hand on a man's head. And so she let out a great shriek which waked everybody else and they set off in hot pursuit of this fellow whom they could see quite well. They chased him out of the camp. They didn't catch him unfortunately, and he was naked. But the funny part of it was, the next day, that whole hut full of people had gone off on shift work and some of the other huts knew nothing about this because they were either on shift or between shifts and the next day a fellow turned up in the camp and said he'd left a pair of sandshoes somewhere and he was the man apparently. He'd taken his shoes off so he could sneak in, or his boots presumably, and he'd come back for them.

And was he arrested or chased?

No. The people who saw him didn't know he'd been involved. Anyway, after that we were given some male guards and they used to march around the huts armed and on every corner they'd do a ... clap, clap, clap ... and clanking with their boots and the butts of their rifles and they made such a noise we asked for them to be removed because they kept us awake.

Still people will persevere. Were there other attempts to get into the camp or any successful rendezvous inside the camp that you know?

Well, not that I know of. There no doubt were other attempts and on one occasion our underwear - our army issue underwear - which we called 'passion killers', they were rather

voluminous type of bloomers that buttoned at the waist so if you lost the button of course you were in dire distress because the damn things would fall down. So most of us made sure we pinned them as well as buttoned them. And you'd find a whole line full of these clothes - women's clothes - hanging on the clothes' line. You had to mark them with indelible ink so you knew which were yours. And one morning I remember some male came along with a large pair of scissors and cut the gussets out of every pair. So there were some strange people around.

Were there any nasty incidents sort of on the approaches to the camp? Were women ever attacked?

Not to my knowledge but that doesn't mean to say they weren't. When we went to pictures and church parades and things like that we always marched in threes, a couple of hundred of us, or 150 or however many, and if it was night time the front rank, someone else would be carrying a lantern and in the rear rank someone would be carrying a hurricane lantern so that any passing traffic could see that we were on the road because it might be pitch dark - no street lights or things because it was a blackout if you remember. But to my knowledge, no, but quite likely those things did happen.

Later on, of course, there was the infamous Yonski was it, the American serviceman?

No, that wasn't his name. Agnosti[1].

However anyway, the celebrated ...

The American serviceman, yes, and who committed a few murders around Melbourne. That was quite a terrifying time.

When was that do you recall off hand?

Oh, it was later in the war. I don't quite remember exactly when it was.

You were in Melbourne at the time?

Yes I was. Yes.

What was the mood? What was the feeling at the time?

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[1] Probably referring to Edward J Leonski.

Well, people, women especially, were very worried because they didn't know who was going to be next. I think he committed three or four or five murders.

Would people take special precautions then?

I don't know. I suppose if they were sensible they didn't hang around in dark areas.

There were no special guards put around the camps and that sort of thing?

Not to my knowledge, not to my knowledge but that doesn't mean to say there weren't.

Anyway, going back then to your early days in the service, having got into the camp and found your accommodation is on, what was the food like?

(5.00) The food was excellent. I can never complain about army food and I had twenty-five years in the army. I've always been well fed, and in fact in many instances, young women were better fed in the army than they ever had been at home especially in wartime years which was just post-depression.

What would you get for breakfast?

Cereals of some sort; toast, eggs, coffee or tea, plenty of jam. You might have the same sort of jam for the next six months but it was there.

Lunch?

Lunch, we had soup of some sort perhaps if it was winter and it would be a light lunch because the one meal of the day depending if you were on shift work, one meal would be a three course meal and the other meal, apart from breakfast, would be a lighter meal. Perhaps beans on toast or some sort of hash.

Dinner?

Dinner at night or - depending on ...

Yes. What was it like?

Yes. Oh, that would be a roast. You didn't get grilled steak. I don't mean that for one minute. Stuffed pumpkin, lots of stews but good stews.

Were there good and bad cooks? I mean, were there people who you could discernibly appreciate they had cooked it well or cooked it poorly?

No, I can't say that that was so because we trained our own cooks. We had female cooks where I was and they were very good and they had pride in their job and they were very essential people. Oh no, the cooks were marvellous.

What was the attitude towards people then having their own little food caches, were you allowed to keep sort of special things in your hut and eat them when you liked? Were there rules about that?

Well, there wasn't much room to keep anything for one thing and in a place like Darley and Bonegilla, especially Darley where there were possums, it was difficult to keep anything much. You could buy Violet Crumbles and bars of chocolate and things like that from the canteen but only in limited amount because they were only made in limited amounts. So you couldn't sort of stock up with a great stack of stuff. I usually had a round Willow tin with some sort of a fruit cake in it my mother or someone would send me and that would be rationed out over the weeks.

Was there pilfering at all around the huts?

Not, not in the units I was in. Occasionally it did happen and invariably the person would e caught. One thing you didn't do was steal from your comrades.

Did it happen? Was there anybody you recall ever having been caught stealing?

In wartime, no. In peacetime, yes.

What about alcohol, what were the rules there?

Well, in the first camp I was in at Bonegilla we didn't have alcohol, it wasn't permitted in the privates' mess. The sergeants probably had a bottle of beer a week. When I became a sergeant I had a bottle of beer a week too. No spirits.

What about out of camp, were you allowed to - were there any rules about being allowed in or out of hotels?

Well, you had to be over eighteen to be in the army anyway and, of course, six o'clock was closing time and your time off was very limited. Certainly a few people I am sure had the first alcoholic drink of their lives when they joined the services.

Did you?

Not exactly because on Sunday nights as a special treat we were allowed to have a small glass of sherry in my house.

Were there any rules though about women in uniform not being allowed into hotels or anything of that sort?

Oh some hotels were put out-of-bounds in some areas because they had a bad name and we did have an army women's police force, so to speak. They weren't called police, they were called supervisory personnel and they used to go out on the beat looking for any of those sort of problems.

What sort of people serviced that unit? Were they chosen because they were big and strong or ...

No, they had to volunteer and then they had very strict interviews to make sure they were the sort of people they needed. They weren't bully girls, they were far from it.

What were they? What were they like?

Well, the person in charge of them who was a friend of mine had been a music teacher for years and she was a gentle soul but she could certainly enforce discipline in a very sweet and charming way.

Was discipline then much of a problem? I mean, were they kept busy?

Generally speaking discipline wasn't a great problem because we had a motive to be there in the first place. None of us were there in any way but voluntarily. It was a voluntary organisation. We weren't compelled to enlist in the army. We all went because we wanted to be there.

But occasionally people might get homesick. Would people disappear away without leave and so on?

We had people who were homesick and used to go to bed hugging teddy bears and crying quite often - quite often.

Cases of people going without leave?

Oh yes, there were always a few people AWL.

How were they treated? Was it ...

Oh, they were disciplined. They were brought back and told they'd have no leave for a month or they'd be docked a day's pay or if they were too much of a problem they were discharged because they were too much of a problem and we couldn't afford to waste time on people like that.

(10.00) There was a bit of a tendency, I suppose, in the men's services if fellows got into trouble to make them do all sorts of onerous duties at great length. Did they do that in the women's service?

No.

Why not do you think?

Because I don't think it applied. I don't think the women got up to all the sort of tricks that the men did on the whole.

So as you were being trained in signals, what was the process like? What was the method of instruction? Was it effective?

Oh most effective. The unit was an interception unit - very effective.

What does that mean, interception unit?

Well it intercepted enemy signals which was very effective.

How did you train for that?

By learning the code, learning Morse code, and then it would be sent elsewhere to be deciphered because a lot of the stuff we got came through in a code of that country and that had to be broken, which it was.

So you were doing this sort of work in Melbourne?

Yes.

So, explain, what did you actually get? I mean, what were you given to work on?

Well, this is a rather tender point because under the Official Secrets Act I don't know that I can tell you much ... truly.

I thought there was a thirty years' rule or something and ...

I don't know. Even if there is it came through in code which had to be sent elsewhere to decipher.

But I mean physically, was it on paper or ...

Oh, on paper, yes, on paper in those days, yes. Now they send it about 5,000 letters a minute. We were getting about twenty or thirty words a minute and that's quite a task to keep up with if you are writing and having to decipher what comes into your ears and write it down as a ... not necessarily an ordinary alphabetical thing.

So what was the routine for the day? I mean, what was a fairly typical day in terms of the hours you'd put in at different duties and so on?

Well, apart from doing your signals work, which was the main reason for being there ...

Let's start at - you'd had reveille you'd be woken up by a trumpet or ...

Oh, in recruit days yes, but recruit training is quite different from training and from doing the actual job you are there for in the signals unit.

Well when you first joined up then, what was ... how did the day start?

Well, the first couple of months we did training to be signal women and thrown in with those signal duties ...

But let's start right at the beginning. Would there be a trumpet call?

No.

So how would you know to get up?

I think we had a gong or a PA system, some sort of noise. It certainly wasn't a trumpet, not in this women's camp anyway. It might have been in male camps but not in this women's camp.

How long would you have to turn to?

We'd have about half an hour to be up and showered and have our roll call to make sure everybody was there and on their feet and then we'd have our breakfast. Then we'd do some duties. It would be my hut's turn to scrub out latrine block number one or the next hut would be scrubbing out the showers and some other hut would be down setting the tables for breakfast and some other hut would be doing some other task, sweeping out the orderly room or something like this.

And then through to lunch and the afternoon spent much the same way?

No. After we'd had our breakfast we'd be marched off to the signals area where we had all the set up of keyboards and all that sort of stuff and charts on the wall. We had ordinary lectures, about how to identify different aircraft; we had a bit of first aid; we had military traditions and customs; we had a bit of how to make beds properly; a bit of army history; some current affairs. But most of our instruction in that unit was in signals work but thrown in with that was the ordinary recruit syllabus had we gone to a recruit training school.

Was it interesting?

Oh very, very.

Were you encouraged to ask questions? Was it informal or very strict?

Oh yes. Oh no, we were instructed in that unit by young men who'd come back from the Middle East and, of course, they were quite horrified to find this whole swag of women and it took them a while to get used to us.

What do you mean, 'they were horrified'?

Well, they didn't - some of them didn't even know there were women in the army. You see, this had all happened since they'd been away and they came back to find their girlfriends and their cousins and their sisters had all become soldiers.

Did they feel it wasn't proper or something?

Oh, some of them did, yes. Some of them were very resentful. Most of them took it very well. Many of them married servicewomen.

How were you briefed about the nature of the war and the nature of the enemy? Was it a propaganda process or was there an attempt to impart to you, if you like, a fair understanding as to the realities?

Yes, I think that's so. Your last statement would cover that well.

So what sort of impressions were there in that early part of the war as to how things looked like going?

Well, we were kept up-to-date with what was happening and we did have newsreels, they were no doubt a few week's old by the time we got them, of various actions going on overseas and, of course, we wrote letters and received letters from brothers and friends and boyfriends. We were very interested in what was going on. And the motivation was kept up well to keep people interested and enthusiastic. And when things were going badly overseas we all felt a bit glum about it.

(15.00) How long did this training process take?

In the signals area, three months.

During that three month period you'd have some leave. What was a fairly ...

No, we had no leave at all. We didn't get out of that camp at all for the first three months.

Would you get a day off?

Occasionally we had a half a day off and we'd play softball or we'd do our washing or someone would be up in the rec[reation] hut playing the piano and playing table tennis, those sort of things. But we were confined to that camp for three months.

Did you have films?

Training films, yes.

But not other films?

No.

Did people ...

We had church services, church services.

Did you rankle at all about being so confined?

Oh yes, some people were a bit cheesed off about it.

What was the point of it? I mean, in retrospect, did it make sense?

Oh yes, it did because they wanted well-trained signals people and they wanted them then and there to be working. To get the training into people was the main thing so they could be made use of because there was a need for them.

Had you been issued with ration cards to give you access to goods of any nature other than what were part of army fare?

Yes. We got some clothing coupons, about fourteen I think, and with those we had to provide our own pyjamas and dressing gown, although most of us had them as civilians of course, but they do wear out and we had to provide things like our brassieres and things to keep your stockings up because the army didn't provide them.

What about cigarettes?

Oh, we had a little special card for cigarettes and every time you bought a pack of cigarettes from the canteen it'd be clipped. I think you could buy about 100 a week, something like that.

Did you smoke?

Yes, I did. And if you didn't smoke of course someone was only too willing to use up your cigarette ration for you. Sometimes they were traded i.e. 'If I give you my cigarette card and you can get forty cigarettes, you can give me a block of chocolate', that sort of thing, you know - barter system.

Was 100 cigarettes enough for most people?

Oh, that I don't know. It was certainly enough for me.

Well, at the end of the three month period which is a fairly long time to be confined, was it a mood of celebration to ...?

Oh yes. We all went into Albury and went to the Albury Hotel. (laughs) And we had a meal, or several meals of course, once we were able to get leave at the Cookery Nook which was, sort of, pre ... came before McDonald's, sort of place.

Would you get say a group who were a bit more boisterous than others who gained a bit of notoriety for that?

Oh of course, of course, of course.

Any unseemly behaviour going into the pub and drinking it up and get ...

Oh, of course, of course. But they were checked up on. Someone would dob them in or someone would tell them off or a sergeant would walk in and pull them together.

There were no special repercussions of ...

Not really, not really.

At the end of your three months, what happened then?

Well, then people became allocated to shift and were put onto shift work and then they worked. That was their job then to just intercept signals. And eventually that unit was broken up.

Were you still at Bonegilla?

Yes. But eventually that unit was broken up and some were sent to Queensland and some were sent to west Australia and some occupied the Mornington Racecourse for the rest of the war.

How long did you stay at Bonegilla?

I left there in ...

For the duration?

No, no. I left there in February before that happened. Before that happened.

But that's near the end of the war though was it?

No, no. February '43.

Oh, I see.

Yes.

Where did you go then?

I'd been instructing in signals during that period and once the unit was fully instructed then I went elsewhere. I came down to Melbourne and I was to go to the training battalion. I was found to be a round peg in a round hole as far as instructing was concerned. I had to wait.

You were good at it, do you mean?

Yes. I'd always wanted to be a school teacher, probably an inherited characteristic. I was sent first of all for a few weeks to a search light battalion in Braybrook. This was situated in what looked like an ordinary house or what had been an ordinary house but it had a search light in the back garden and it was manned by women. And then after a few weeks there I was in charge of that group and then after a few weeks I was sent to Sunshine to a predictor unit

which predicted ... I don't quite know, I never quite worked out because I was not a technical person there, I was just in charge of the twelve or fourteen females who were there. By this time I was a corporal. And also there were a few men there because this was quite heavy equipment and a few B grade or C grade healthwise men were there in charge of a very snooty young second lieutenant whom we had great pleasure in reducing.

How?

(laughs) I won't tell you.

No, no. Do because I'm sure this sort of thing will be of interest. Tell us.

Well, he was a very pernicious sort of young man; very full of his own importance - rather a horror. Fortunately I don't remember his name. He used to spring - I think he was sexually troubled - he used to spring unwarranted checks on the girls and he'd call them in and he'd say he wanted to inspect their kit and he made quite a thing of this in a rather unpleasant way.

How? What do you mean by that?

Well, he'd finger everything and people don't like their, even their army equipment, their army underwear being fingered by silly young men. He was probably younger than any of the females there. And so we cooked him. He vowed that we'd always leave our kit which was in its tin trunk in that camp - everything had to be packed in a tin trunk - and all the blankets had to be folded in case you had to evacuate in five minutes.

(20.00) Beds were not left made up, they were left 'barracked', what is called barracked. And so we decided we'd always leave our tin trunks with all our sanitary towels all singly spread out right across the top - the ten of them, you see. So the next time he ordered a kit check and we flung open our tin trunks, he was met by this and he never again asked for a kit check. He was so embarrassed and we all laughed out aloud (laughs).

But a moment ago you were talking about this prediction ...

Predictor.

What was ...

It was something to do with anti-aircraft. I think it predicts the flights of planes.

So it was some sort of measuring device to measure speed and ...

Oh yes. A large piece of mechanical equipment that focuses on something. But I was not trained to be a predictor operator so I really don't know.

Now where was this?

This was at Sunshine. And I was marking time waiting to go to Darley to the training battalion.

How many people in this particular place at Sunshine?

Oh, twelve or fourteen people there.

Surrounded by houses or ...

Oh yes. It was a house ... a bit like housing commission houses. A whole house of fibro-cement, a whole street of fibro-cement houses all looking the same. And one or two of them the army had commandeered and knocked all the inside walls out to make more sleeping accommodation and one kitchen and the girls were billeted in these two houses. And the predictor - this was the same at Braybrook too - the predictor was in one of the back gardens, the same as the search light being in somebody's back garden, in one of the house's back gardens, and there we lived.

Were they secured by barbed wire or was there a sense of security?

No, nothing, nothing ...

Should they have been, do you think, or was it just that ...

Well, I think if they'd had to be it would have been ... it would have meant that Melbourne had been overrun by the enemy.

This kind of environment after the camp must have seemed a rather more or - less formal and freer lifestyle, was it?

Oh, it certainly was. You see, in this little group I was only a corporal. The young man was a lieutenant. I think the same applied in the other couple of houses. It was a very minor show. I don't know what we'd have done if an enemy aeroplane had come over.

Would people take advantage of the situation to slip out at night or to ...

No, I don't remember that happening. Oh no, we were all so keen. We had such a motive. The attitude was quite different I think perhaps to what young people would be prepared to put up with today.

You said before you felt you were a good instructor. How did you assess that? What was the basis on which you felt that you were good?

Well, for one thing I enjoyed it. Well, I instructed again for another twelve or fifteen years after that in the army so that rather proves the point I would imagine.

It would suggest ...

I feel that I'm just a good teacher.

So after this particular stay at Sunshine, where did you move from there?

Then I went to the training battalion at Darley where the women services trained their recruits and that included the Australian Army Women's Medical Service, the AAMWS, who grew out of the Voluntary Aid Detachment, the VAD people, when the army set up an extra medical service for other ranks. They already had the nurses, the Australian Army Nursing Service, who were all commissioned officers because of their professional ability. But they needed lesser people so they raised a second medical service whom they called the Australian Army Medical Women's Service as they went through the same recruit training and the Australian Women's Army Service did. They did their recruit training together and then they went about their medical duties, the medical people. They did medical training.

So what were you doing in this new place?

I was instructing.

In signals still?

No, no. Nothing to do with signals. These are people who just joined the army and they went to all sorts of jobs. They became all sorts of things after they did their normal, in those days, four weeks recruit training where they did lots of marching and drill which they seemed to enjoy, lots of physical training, lots of training films and the same things again. First-aid, army health, army history, military law, all those - the sort of the roots of the army.

Were you instructing on a variety of topics then?

Yes. Yes, yes.

Did you go on long marches, bivouacs, all that?

Oh yes. We went on lots of long marches. Every Monday the whole battalion would march, three or four hundred women. We'd march right out of the camp and right almost into Darley some miles away as a big march.

Carrying packs? Would you camp out?

No. No, no ... this was just a Monday. Monday morning, start the week, a long route march. We'd be away, perhaps, a couple of hours.

(25.00) How far was long? How far would you march?

We'd march twenty minutes to the mile. We might do about five miles. It doesn't sound long but it's a good way to start the week. We wouldn't march to attention. We'd march to attention leaving the camp and then we'd be given the order to march at ease which meant you didn't have to ...

You were hiking in effect?

No, we still had to keep step but you could talk or you could sing providing you retained your rank and your dressings, one behind the other in threes, and we ...

Would you get a cheer? Were people sort of responsive to the sight of ...

Oh yes, I think Bacchus Marsh was rather proud to have us there. We were only one unit in that camp. There were Americans there; there were Netherlands East Indies there. There was a VD hospital there behind high barbed wire and there was a Provost corps training school there. We were the only female unit but we were a big unit. We were a battalion sized unit, not a company.

You were saying before that matters to do with sexuality were dealt with in a rather coy way. What was the attitude towards the VD place then, was ...

Oh, we didn't know anything about that.

Officially or in fact?

Both. We knew it was there but that was all.

Were there not sort of stories and rumours about ...

Not that I remember. I don't remember ever seeing anybody there.

What about other marches? Were there recruiting marches through the city to raise the spirit and all that sort of thing?

Yes. Lots of recruiting marches and lots of bond raising marches for money. I remember playing the drum right down Swanston Street.

How did you feel on those sort of marches?

Oh good. Yes, good, good. That's when people used to cheer, the bystanders would cheer. And I know my mother, if she knew we were going to be marching in the city - it only happened three or four occasions - she'd make sure she went and gather all her friends around and they'd all go and sing out to us. Of course we weren't supposed to look left or right but we did.

Would they get a good turnout for these sort of things?

Oh yes, indeed, mmm.

Ticker tape from the city buildings?

No, not ticker tape, no.

Were you, by this stage, beginning to hope you might be able to go overseas to some theatre of war?

Ah, yes. Although nobody went overseas until almost the end of the war when a small unit went to New Guinea. But then you had to be single and I think by that time I was married. But no, I think we knew right from the beginning our chances of going overseas would be very minute because there was so much to do here in the country here. See so many women really did physically take over from men and those jobs had to be maintained all the time and women were leaving the services to get married. If you married, generally speaking, you went out.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

START OF TAPE TWO - SIDE A

Identification: This is side one of tape two of the interview with Gwen Mann recorded as part of the special history series for the War Memorial and it was recorded in Melbourne on 23 January 1990. It begins in five seconds from now.

When you were at Bacchus Marsh how well were you kept up-to-date with what was going on with the nature of the war? Were you getting newsreels and those sorts of things?

Yes, occasionally we'd get newsreels. Also I was trained as a projectionist whilst I was there and I hated that job because I'm not a bit mechanically minded. But I was sent, or brought down from Melbourne newsreel and training reels to do with the progress of the war. Some of them were interesting, some of them weren't very interesting for women because they were about guns and things mechanical that really had nothing to do with us. But there were quite a number that were of great interest. Also, occasionally, we'd get a male officer who'd come in and give us a run down on - I think they were called intelligence details. Intelligence that had been gathered and we were more or less kept up-to-date. We could buy the newspaper. Every mess had two or three newspapers each day. I think there were a couple of radio sets in the camp. We, ourselves, didn't have radios as personal property.

Were you not allowed or ...

I don't think it occurred to us to have them.

Were radios expensive in those days?

Oh yes. You'd only find one in a house.

What was the projection equipment like?

Umm, sixteen mill[imetres] if I remember.

Was it difficult equipment to work?

Well, I found it difficult because, as I say, I am not a bit mechanically minded and I used to sweat every time I had to use the wretched thing.

Would they tend to get jammed and burn holes in the film and ...

Oh things like that, yes. Thinks like that. And especially if the film you were putting on had been badly wound by the previous user it became a bit of a problem.

And pretty scratchy sort of prints at times I suppose.

Yes. Some of them had been used many, many times, especially training films, they'd been shown hundreds of times perhaps.

When one sees replays of films of that time there's stirring music and a bit of a propaganda feel about them. Did .... On the other hand, did they ever convey adverse information that was stunning, that actually made people sort of set back?

No, they weren't meant to. These were morale boosters.

Did you get any of Damien Parer's footage from New Guinea, the so-called 'fuzzy-wuzzy angels' and that sort of stuff?

Oh yes, yes. But you were more likely to see that in city theatres when you were on leave at some of the little theatrettes that showed nothing but newsreels.

Well, if the intent was to make everybody feel that things were going well and build morale, what about when Singapore fell?

Oh, that was a very gloomy time because so many of us had friends or relatives or boyfriends who were in that division who was trapped there and they were prisoners-of-war from then on of course.

Was there an attempt to somehow or other put a good face on it?

Not that I remember. It was a very gloom and doom time because they lost all those big battleships there much the same time and everything seemed to be dead against the Allies at that time.

Was there a sense of disbelief or did it undermine morale in the sense that, well, to that point you'd be encouraged to think everything was going well that you'd mistrust what you were being told?

I don't know that we felt that we could mistrust stuff but I think that we were just amazed to think that those enormous battleships from the invincible British Navy had just been sunk so easily apparently.

How long did that mood prevail before people started to sort of pick up again and feel, well, perhaps there'd none the less be a turn-around.

Well, probably until something good happened. Until Britain won a battle somewhere.

What about information then about the behaviour of the Japanese and atrocities? When did that first start to get around?

Oh, I just don't rightly remember. I know there was no love at all for the Japanese and, of course, they were caricatured in every newspaper and on posters everywhere as little men with round glasses and buck teeth and very bandy legs. You never saw a good looking Japanese in that sort of stuff.

Russell Braddon had written in at least one of his books that, I think it may have been the *Naked Island* that when they were instructed about the nature of the Japanese as fighters before the reality was driven home that they were hopeless pilots and they flew paper aeroplanes. Did you get that sort of misinformation?

(5.00) Yes, yes. That seemed to be and I think one of the reasons was that, if you remember, although you're a post-war person, anything that came from Japan pre-war was usually made of sort of matchbox stuff and very cheaply made and badly made and if they used dye the dye ran. Cheap and nasty Japanese products and I think it was assumed that their aeroplanes and their fighting morale and their soldiers would also be cheap and nasty. I think that was something we were brought up with.

As the war continued on did your feelings begin to flag at all about your sense of commitment to the services? Was it starting to drag and you were wanting to get out at all?

No. No. I think as long as the war went we all had that motivation. We wanted it to end certainly but it was a feeling all through the war years, there was a feeling of excitement.

You were one of those people who married during the war years. Where did your romance, if you like, begin? Did it begin while you were in the services?

Oh no. I'd known this lad since I was about ten. He was a local person. A friend of my brother. His parents and my parents were great friends and the families were very pleased when one son and one daughter decided to marry.

Well, at the point that you joined up, had you been going out with each other?

Not very often.

Well, then how was it possible to develop the relationship while you were in the services with so much time taken up?

Well, we'd known each other so long anyway, thirteen or fourteen years I suppose. He was an officer in the Australian Army electrical and mechanical engineers. He was at the university when the war started and he was compelled to finish his degree. He tried to join up beforehand but they wouldn't accept him because they said he'd be of much more use as a qualified engineer and he was compelled to finish his degree which he did and then he went straight into the army with a commission. He was posted to Bandiana in charge of a workshop there where they repaired tanks and all that heavy equipment brought back from the Middle East. And we were married.

Well, how often were you able to see each other before that?

Oh, half a dozen times or so. Lots of letters, telegrams and letters.

So what, once in - literally once in a blue moon you would see each other?

Not very often, certainly. Not very often.

What was the attitude towards young ladies having young men at the time? Was there a sense that it wasn't quite proper because the war was on and this was much more serious? Were you discouraged at all in effect?

Well, if people became engaged and they were in the same camp, invariably one of them would be posted somewhere else. That's what happened. But he was at Bandiana ... he was at Bonegilla ... at Bandiana and by this time I was at Bacchus Marsh so we were a fair way away. He had a motor bike and used to ride down when he had a chance which wasn't very often, about once a month.

Was it hard?

Oh yes, it wasn't easy. We used to go ice-skating and things like that.

Where would you ice-skate?

In the Glassy ... no, no. The one in St Kilda, it's since gone.

Above the esplanade there overlooking the bay?

Yes, yes, yes. We became quite good skaters.

What was it like in those days? Roller skating in later years had a rather sort of rough feeling.

This was ice-skating.

Sorry, ice-skating. Ice-skating even had a rather rough feeling. It tended to be rough young kids go in the '60s. Was it a more genteel period?

Oh, I don't think it was rough. I don't remember it being rough. No, it was very enjoyable.

So when did you decide to marry? How did the proposal come about?

I think he went and saw my father in the old age custom and my father said, 'Yes', so we became engaged and then we were married a few months later in the church I'd gone to all my life in Brighton and we went to Apollo Bay for our honeymoon.

How long did you have?

A fortnight. And there were two other married couples there - service couples - and both the other girls were called Gwen. So there were three Gwens and one of the other fellows was Bill, so there were three Gwens and two Bills and the other boy was Brian. And we hired a two-horse buggy thing, because we had no cars and no petrol, and we used to go along what ... the bit of the ocean road that was built in those days in this horse and buggy every day almost with a picnic.

Were they service people too?

Yes, they were all service people.

Made a fuss of by the locals or did they not know that?

Oh no, no. They were used to this sort of thing I think. See it wasn't very far from Melbourne, you could get there in a coach, and I think they were used to catering for honeymoon couples and we used to do a lot of cray fishing. The boys used to catch lots of crayfish and take them to the local fish shop who'd cook them. Cook me a steak - because I don't eat crayfish - and that's how a lot of our evening meals were.

How did they catch the crays, by a ...

On a long stick. On a long stick with a dead, very dead fish tied onto it and another long stick with a net and you put the long stick with the fish down and the crayfish comes out from under the rocky crevices to eat the bait and then you slip in the long net behind it because the crayfish always backs away and it backs into the net. Yes.

(10.00) You could, in fact, leave the army I take it as a woman if you married?

I don't remember exactly if you were given the option. But if you became pregnant of course you left.

Oh, I see. It wasn't automatic that if you married you could choose to leave?

No. I don't think it was automatic. But you were not posted in the same camp. My young sister married a man from our unit and they were I think separated because ...

Did you ... sorry?

... because of the fact that they were married.

Did your friends back at camp give you a party after you returned from your honeymoon?

They gave me one before I went. I don't think I got one when I came back.

Were there married quarters as such?

Oh, heavens no. Good heavens, no. No, no, no.

So it was back to camp. Did you consider leaving the army or applying to leave?

No.

Why not?

Well, because what would we do? We had no house to live in. Neither of us had .... We didn't own a house. We had a cabin trunk full of wedding presents, that was all.

So how often were you then able to see each other once you were married?

Oh, two or three times because he died within a year. When he was ... he was in this workshop at Bandiana and they had a plague of mumps went through that camp - mumps are very bad for young men - some of them were very ill and he died. He was the only one who died.

The almost bizarre nature of such a mishap must have really made you question what life was all about.

It did indeed; it did indeed.

What was the attitude of those around you at the time? Were people understanding?

Oh very. Very understanding. In fact I was then commissioned myself, I was an officer, and I used to travel to the barracks in the train from Brighton Station, get out at - I forget - [inaudible] or somewhere and go by tram and one girl got into the train whom I'd gone to school with - and this is after Bill had died - and saw me in uniform and came and sat next to me. And she must have known I was married because she asked me how he was and I said, 'Oh, he's dead', and she burst into tears and got out at the next station and I knew she didn't work there. She just was so upset at having asked me and having not known herself I suppose. Oh yes, people were very understanding.

Was there a military funeral?

Oh yes, quite a big one. He was the only one in that unit and he was OC of the unit. He had a hundred or so men under him and young women too. Oh yes.

Were you given leave at the time?

Yes, I was given leave. But the funny part of it was in those days, of course, women didn't go to funerals so it was an all male funeral. The army was very good at the time.

You went though?

Oh yes. I went to Albury. My parents and his parents of course.

How was the service conducted? What was the nature of it?

I don't know, I wasn't there.

So you weren't able to attend ...

I wasn't allowed to attend the funeral.

Did you resent that at the time?

I didn't because I don't think women did attend funerals in those days. It was most unusual for a woman to attend a funeral, most unusual.

So were you able, shortly thereafter, to visit the grave?

Oh yes, and I do any time I go through Albury, or most times I go through Albury. It is quite a big war cemetery at Albury and he's buried there.

Now how long did it take you before you - you said you got leave - before in effect you recovered and were able to resume duties without feeling burdened?

I don't think I was given any time off. I was just expected to go back to work again.

Was it difficult?

Not really in a way. It gave me something to do. I suppose in a way it had it's good points. If he had to die at least we didn't have any common property. We owned a block of land and a cabin trunk full of wedding presents and that was all. We'd never gone shopping for furniture or decided on house plans or any of those things which made it easier than it would otherwise have been had we gone through all that part and we had no children of course.

It may have also made it also seem a bit unreal in a way.

Oh it did. It took me a long while to know that it was really me that it had happened to. I seemed to be away somewhere and this was happening to somebody else whom I was watching.

If people at the time were generally a bit disinclined to show emotions and feelings, were people uncertain as to how to deal with you, those around you?

Very, very. Yes. They were more embarrassed than I was.

Would people sort of almost avoid you because they ...

Yes, that's true.

How long did that continue for?

Oh, a few weeks, a few weeks. And then the word got around of course that this had happened because a lot of them didn't know. A lot of them were overseas or in other states or just hadn't read the newspaper so it took quite a while. The army was very good though. They reserved a carriage, or a compartment, the day we went up for the funeral and it was very hard to get on trains in those days. You had to have a special reason for travelling. But they reserved us a compartment for his parents, my parents and myself and they really took a lot of strain off my parents and his parents by ... well, it was a full military funeral and that was all arranged by the military authorities.

(15.00) If you weren't actually able to attend the service though, what did you do? Where did you go during ...

Well, his aunt and uncle, he was a bank manager in Wodonga and we stayed there.

For how long?

Oh, a couple of days. And then came back and went to work again.

What was the feeling in the house at the time? Was it one of people acting out a role of ... or was there a strong feeling, emotional feeling?

Oh yes, there was a strong feeling of great grief. He was only twenty-three and nobody expected that to happen. He was a six foot four fellow, university cricketer and never had a tooth filled or never been ill in his life and just for this to happen, it was very, very distressing.

How long then before life became normal for you, as it were, where the events of that moment were able to slip away enough for you to proceed with as you'd been previously in a way?

I wouldn't put a time on it.

Later you were to be commissioned. How long after ...

Oh, a few days. I was ... When Bill died I was doing the officer course. I was commissioned about five days later, it was the end of the course about five days later.

Was there any impediment in the process then because of the death of your husband?

No, no.

What did the change ... you became a sergeant, was it?

No, I became a lieutenant.

Sorry. You were already a sergeant at the time, weren't you?

Mmm. I became a lieutenant.

What did the change mean in terms of your army life and your responsibilities and those sort of things?

Oh well, I was given a different job. I became a personnel officer in the Ordnance Corps working at the barracks in Albert Park, the barracks have since been pulled down, behind the St Kilda Station. And I stayed there until I was demobilised or I was posted to the reserve of officers in 1946.

Was it exciting for you to become a lieutenant?

Not really. I got a raise in pay of about two and six a day and a different uniform and a couple of stars on my shoulders.

Any different accommodation?

No, I was living at home.

Was there a noticeable difference in the way other ranks respond to you as you're passing? Do you get more salutes or more deference or that sort ...

No, it was the normal thing to salute in those days. It was like shaking hands really.

Did you ever have to use your rank in a sense of having to assert your authority for any particular reasons?

On occasions but that's what I was there for.

What sort of occasions?

Oh, you might have to pull someone in line for not putting their hat on properly or going out without a hat or some minute thing like that but was considered important at the time.

You said your job changed?

Yes, yes it did. I was posted into a personnel job which had a male major, and myself, and a male warrant officer and we kept all the records for officers in the Australian Army Ordnance Corps and there was some thousands of them at the time. And we had a detailed sort of history of every officer in the corps. We knew who was due to be posted, who was due to be retired, who was due to go on courses. We had to keep all that sort of stuff up to date and see that these things happened.

Just how detailed ...

It was a cut and dried clerical job really. It was interesting; it was interesting.

How detailed were the records? Were they of a security nature as well?

Not really, not of security nature but you knew enough about a person to know that he had five children and they were at such and such a school and perhaps it wouldn't be a good idea to post him to x position when there was a man who had no children who could do the same job and who would be easier to move.

Did religious life play any particular role in the army in the sense that you had groups who were Catholic or non-Catholic or was there any attempt to take into account religious affiliations that emerged in any way?

Well, as I remember there was a church parade on Sundays especially in camps and you all marched off to your church or the local padre came or an army padre came and turned on a church service in the hop-in hut or some such thing and the Catholic people would go off to another part of the camp and the local priest or an army priest from the chaplain's department would come and people who didn't want to attend church parades, and there were always a few, they'd be given duties. They didn't go and just sort of sit on their bed and read a book, they'd be sweeping something or raking the parade ground or picking up papers or doing something.

Was it of a nature that would almost press them to go to a service? Were the duties unpleasant enough that it would be easier to go to the service?

Well, I don't know about the male camps but the female camps you pleased yourself really. Most of us went to church because we liked to sing. It gave you a chance to sing, even if it was hymns.

In this ...

And you could eye the boys off too. (laughs)

In Australian public life, there were some sectors of the public service that might tend to be Catholic or non-Catholic. The Australian Customs was apparently an area where many Catholics went.

And on the railways.

Did that happen in the army? Were there areas that people ...

Not to my knowledge, not to my knowledge and I would say, no, generally speaking, no.

(20.00) So how long did you continue then in this personnel area?

Until I was posted to the reserve of officers in 1946, about May 1946.

Where were you when war ended?

At Albert Park Barracks.

Can you remember the moment?

I remember the day war ended because I was on my way to Spencer Street Station to collect some rail tickets for some of the senior officers to travel somewhere and the news came through that war had ended and people started jumping up and down all round the railway station and up Swanston Street, yelling out and screaming and cars were hooting - the few cars there were about were hooting and tooting.

What did you do?

Went back with the tickets.

Did you jump up and down?

Oh, probably, yes. Yes, it was a great day. And yet it obviously was the end of an era because a few days later everything seemed very flat and yet things had to go on of course just the same. For some months things went on. You can't just get rid of a peacetime or a civilian army overnight so for months and months things had to still be run while people were gradually demobilised.

Was there any deterioration in the nature then of discipline? The feeling that well this is dragging on, there's no real need for me to be in the services, why should I even bother? Was there at all that feeling?

I suppose there was; I suppose there was with some people. I don't particularly remember it being very obvious but no doubt it did happen in some areas with some people.

So there was no apparent breakdown of relations between the ranks or anything?

I would say, no, not an obvious one.

What made you decide to stay on then?

I didn't stay on, I was demobilised.

Oh sorry. You were demobilised. When did you rejoin?

In January 1952.

Why did you rejoin?

Well, I'd had four years in Germany and I came back with no specific thing in mind and when I got back here I found that they were reraising an army for women or a women's section of the army and I thought, 'Good, I enjoyed those four years. I'll rejoin'. So I did.

And remained in the army until?

1974.

What had taken you to Germany?

I was working in displaced persons' camps and concentration camp areas with those sorts of people.

How did that come up?

I had the opportunity to go so I took it.

How did it happen?

Through the Girl Guide movement.

What was the job that you were offered?

I was one of twenty or thirty young women who were selected to go into the British zone of Germany to work as a welfare officer in camps where they were holding thousands of displaced persons.

How did you go? How did you leave Australia and so on?

I sailed first class on the *Orion* with evening dresses and the lot.

It was quite a trip, was it?

Yes, it was the first time the Orion had sailed as a civilian ship. It had been used as a trooper through the war and it was reconditioned, or whatever they do with these ships, and it was absolutely beautiful. But we had to go as first class passengers so we had to have evening dresses and things and dress for dinner. It seemed all very strange.

Take your turn sitting at the captain's table and so on.

Yes, yes.

Was it a smooth voyage?

Yes, it was a good voyage, very good.

And then, when you arrived?

I arrived in London. Was briefed and outfitted in London and then went by train across Europe which was in a hell of a mess. It took us about two and a half days to do it ...

How good was the briefing? I mean, what did they brief you about?

Oh very good, very good. We'd had people working in Greece and in Malaya - this organisation - and in Germany and I was one of the people who went and assisted.

Were you shocked by the impact of the destruction that had taken place in Europe?

Yes, terribly, terribly. It was still so obvious in 1947.

And you were dealing with people who had been in concentration camps and so on?

Yes, and displaced people. Mostly displaced persons. Most of the concentration camp people had either died soon after they were liberated or been repatriated.

By then had you got an understanding as to just how grim the concentration camps had been?

Oh yes, because I went to several of them, they were still there.

Did that touch you at the time?

Oh yes, indeed. I've never been the same since.

People were still being kept in the camps?

Yes, they were being dispersed gradually. Some of them were too ill to be moved. They were still dying of all sorts of conditions. They weren't being killed of course. It took a long while to dissipate the whole lot of them and then the camps were either burnt down or closed.

Where were you staying during this time?

I was in the British zone. I was in a little town called Einbeck which had been a great stamping ground for the Hitler youth. I was in a number of places. I was in Osterode for a couple of years, that's up in the Harz Mountains where I saw people ... I saw a woman and an ox harnessed up to a plough in 1948.

(25.00) What were your feelings about Germans at the time? Was there a sort of legacy of feeling they were a bad people or an evil people or ...

Well, we used to have a meeting in our house, about once a week or a fortnight, and we used to invite young university students in.

German university students?

Yes. And we were all English or Australian girls, women, and we had great old talks about how Nazis came to be as they are and what these kids thought about the whole thing because some of them had been in the Nazi youth. It was all very enlightening. I had no great love for the Germans. None of them ever admitted to me that they knew anything that was going on.

Was there at all then still a process of self-justification as to why it was necessary for Germany to go to war?

Yes, with some of them. But most of them just had, they said, no knowledge of any of these dreadful things happening.

What about accounts from the survivors of the concentration camps? Did you get to know any people in particular?

Not really well. Not ... the displaced persons, yes. I got to know them very well.

Which camps did you visit?

Well I worked in the camps. It was my job.

Which ones?

The camps in my particular area. They were displaced persons' camps that you would never have heard of. Places called Middlesex, Moringen, Osterode, [Harnenclay?], [Hannoversmun?] ... not Hannoversmun ... various camps.

And of the concentration camps?

Ah, Dachau. I didn't work there; I visited there. Belsen, Bergen Belsen, I visited there. I didn't work in them.

Was it a shock? Do you recall ...

Oh yes. Indeed. I didn't think humans could be like that or could be treated like that or could survive like that. I have a g eat admiration for the survival of some people.

END OF TAPE TWO - SIDE A

START OF TAPE TWO - SIDE B

Identification: This is side two of tape two of the interview recorded with Gwen Mann on 23rd January 1990 and it resumes in five seconds.

What sorts of displaced people were you dealing with there?

In my camps I dealt mainly with Hungarians and Pols and Yugoslavs.

And what were you actually doing?

Well, we had a good source of supply of clothes and shoes and school requisites and the sort of things that the British authorities, the British Army occupation of the Rhine in the first place, couldn't provide. They provided basic food, shelter in that the people were all under cover, and medical attention which was mainly provided by the doctors of those nationalities anyway. After the British occupation of the Rhine passed over to the Control Commission Germany which was then a civilian organisation, the other having been a military organisation, we still did the same job but under the auspices of the Control Commission.

To begin with, if you remember, well, you wouldn't remember, the UNRRA went in at the end of the war and ...

That's United Nations, Health and Refugee Association?

United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation. And they gave things to everybody whether they needed one or half a dozen they got half a dozen. Then PCIRO came in after that. That was the Preparatory Commission for the International Refugee Organisation. And while they set things up we still did our same job and then the IRO took over from them. It was a sort of series of steps where they sorted things out better and sorted people out better. So the International Refugee Organisation was the umbrella organisation really and under their control were people like ourselves, the Guide International Service, the Quakers, the Catholic Organisation, the Boy Scouts had a few, the Salvation Army and one or two other organisations who did all the welfare work in the camps in the British zone. What went on in the American, French and Russian zone I don't know. We only worked in the British zone. And our particular job was to provide and assist where we could with the sort of things not provided by the official authorities.

So what kinds of things?

A lot of clothing. A lot of stuff for school children and for nursing mothers. Art and craft sort of things so that people could be occupied. They had nothing to do. They were all sitting in their hundreds and thousands in these camps which were mainly had either been occupied by German soldiers, they were either old barracks or factory workers' houses which had been camps which had been commandeered. So their living conditions on the whole were very poor anyway. And unless they could be given something to do to give them some sort of reason for living they were in a sad state and by degrees of course the migration thing came in and people started to be sorted out and different countries took them by the hundreds or thousands or whatever over a period of years. But in the meanwhile the people still had to be sustained apart from very basic food rations, very basic, and just the minimum of clothing. Most of them only had what they stood up in because they'd fled their own particular country

as the USSR came through and they didn't want to remain and become under communist rule so they just kept moving and they ended up in Germany and then the war ended. So they were caught there. They didn't want to go back to what had been home and they had nowhere else to go but just to sit in that camp. They were swept into camps by the British authorities - sorted them out and shoved them into camps wherever they could find a place to put them. Because apart from that they were just roaming the countryside so to speak.

What about time off? Recreation? What sort of things were you able to do?

What, for myself?

Yes.

Oh heavens. We had ... we lived in a marvellous old mansion for a couple of years and we used to skate on the swimming pool in the winter and swim in it in the summer. I don't know that we thought much about recreation. Life was too busy.

Did you enjoy it as such?

Oh it was a totally different outlook on life. I've never been the same since.

(5.00) What do you mean by that?

Well, people play so much importance on things that don't matter.

What kinds of things?

Oh, the price of cabbages and who won the last race as though it's really important, in this country.

A Jewish survivor of Buchenwald that I interviewed some while ago said that when he first met Australians in Europe after the war, he said, they were like a breath of fresh air. He said they were like angels. He felt that Europeans were still imbued with the traditional sense of hierarchy and authority and power. Was that discernible to you?

Yes, always, and I've been back to Europe several times since. But we're so informal here. We frighten them. We horrify cultured European ... they can't understand that we can be so [inaudible] gay.

On the other hand, were you offended or taken back at all at the manner in which displaced people were being regarded or handled by those in authority?

No I wasn't because the task was so enormous. To be faced ... as an ordinary common soldier, imagine yourself as an ordinary common British conscript after the war - this is post-war and they had national service training, trainees who'd never been to the war anyway - and to be landed to help shepherd or look after all these hundreds of people, they didn't know where to start. I was sad for some of those young soldiers and I think it was much better that

people like myself who'd had a little contact with, especially my own sex and families, could help out in a sort of different way.

> Having been affected by the visit to the concentration camps, what were your feelings then when Australia indicated that it was now going to be begin taking German migrants to Australia? How did that seem to you?

I was a bit sad about it to begin with. I'm sure we have a lot of good German migrants here.

> But at the time, you would have felt that it was a wrong decision?

Yes, yes. But you see, at my age and stage, so are those people of that time and now they are powerless, those who remain. We've got a younger generation coming up who don't know those days and that's much better.

> Going back to the war years, for many people it provided a sense of purpose and almost a sense of adventure in life. Was there a difference, do you feel, in the attitudes, the morale and the tendency with which people would get together and do things in a common cause during the war years than compared with, say, life in the army after?

I don't know quite how to answer that. I can only say that in post-war Europe and in England especially as I knew it, people had time for each other. I've been back several times since and they don't have. They seem to have lost that spark. That's not answering your question.

> Well, how were the years for you? If you look back at your army life and thought what you felt about it all, was there a special quality to the war years?

Oh, yes indeed there was. It was exciting; there was a motive for being there and doing what you were doing, you felt you were doing something of worth, of value, and there were so many hundreds and thousands of us with the same mind all working for a purpose, I think we've lost all that. There's no motive these days. Only self-aggrandisement these days.

> A former wing commander that I interviewed recently who after the war went to Malaysia, where he was involved with the confrontation period or the emergency period rather, observed that it seemed to him that Australia always tended to do things in a second rate way, always hanging onto the boot straps of others and he cited as an example that if service people were overseas for twenty-four months they could have their families with them so they would send people for twenty-one months. What was your impression then as to the standard and the quality of recompense and service facilities provided to people after the war? Did you have any particular feelings?

I think Australia has always tried to do things on the cheap. They'll always take the lowest tender in the services anyway. The lowest tender, well, its almost as good as a better tender but it's good enough, we'll have that. I've seen that happen very often because I was in the department that dealt with those sort of things.

Did you know of people who you felt were treated rather shabbily as a result of this reluctance to make a commitment?

No.

You know, return servicemen who had to struggle to get benefits or whatever?

Oh, I think there have been plenty of those people, certainly. But then I also think there's been a number of people who have got themselves bonuses that they haven't earned or deserved.

Well, overall, how do you view your service life? Were they good years?

Oh yes, excellent. I often wonder ... well, I don't often, but I have wondered what would have happened to me personally had the war not occurred. I'd have had a very mundane, ordinary life. And I've had anything but as a result in the end of the war. The war was a great thing for women if you can put it that way. It was a breaking out of a shell really, especially for service women or women of service age who went into things quite unlike anything they'd ever imagined and they've never been the same since.

(10.00) I think it put women on their feet more and the result of course is this great feminist movement. I don't go along with that. I've never felt the need for it. But women led very ordinary lives before the war, ninety-nine point nine per cent of them.

END OF TAPE TWO - SIDE B