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TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

Identification: This is side one of tape one of an interview with Gwen Walker about the Australian Women's Army Service recorded on 14th April 1990 and it begins in five seconds from now.

Gwen Walker, where and when were you born?

I was born in Tallangatta on 6th November 1925.

Tell us something about the circumstance into which you were born and the nature of your mother and father.

My father was in the Bank of New South Wales; my mother had previously done her training at Corowa Hospital dur... at the end of world war one and their first appointment was in ... my father's first appointment was in Tallangatta after their marriage and I came the day after Guy Fawkes' Day.

Was your father a disciplinarian? Was it part of that period when there was the tendency for relations between parents, particularly father, to be rather formal or the father to be a bit aloof?

No, no. I'd say Dad was formal. He had a lot of interests. He was a football umpire in Tallangatta Valley and he was an athlete, he was a runner in Ararat Gift and Stawell Gift - not that he got anywhere in Stawell but he got prizes in Ararat - and he had a very dry sense of humour. Didn't say much: very quiet man, but he was very popular from what I understand in my earlier days.

What about your mother? What sort of character was she?

Ah ... yes I think that she probably ruled us children, my brother and myself. Dad was a bit lenient but Mum was, you know, very strict.

How were times during your childhood? Was it a difficult time or were you reasonably well-off?

Well, I wouldn't say we were well-off 'cause we'd be, I should imagine, what you'd call middle class, 'cause this was during the depression, but, you know, we had enough to eat and we didn't have any worries like that. It was, I suppose, being in the bank, you had a salary coming in and there wouldn't be any worries there.

Was it a religious family?

My father was, in his youth, a choir boy and my mother was ... yes, I'd say were a religious family. We went to church regularly and my father was in different church societies and my mother also in Mothers' Union and Ladies' Fellowship and father ran the church fetes and that sort of thing.

Political? Would you discuss the social and political issues of the day at home, around the table?

No, not really. Well, I was too young. But ... since - since the war mother and I would discuss things. My father died at the end of the war. And so we'd discuss politics and what we thought of the members of parliament, et cetera.

Did you have members of the family who'd been to the first world war?

My father got to ... as far as Liverpool and was waiting to go overseas when the war finished, world war one finished, and so he never got away. And then, of course, there was different services like CMF after world war one and he was in that. I think you were called up, I don't know much about that.

Was there a sense of being British? Was that the feeling?

Oh yes, yes, because my mother's family came from Wales and her father came from Wales and her mother came from Northern Ireland and on my father's side, my great grandparents came from England.

What about your childhood as far as school was concerned? Where did you do your schooling?

All over Victoria. Being in the bank we got moved about every eighteen months, two years. And I started off in Beechworth and we came to Melbourne and went to Warracknabeal and ... but I ended up in Melbourne at St Michael's Church of England Girls' Grammar School.

Was that a hurtful period in a way? You'd make friends and then lose them and have to start off all over again?

(5.00) Well, I think the packing up and that, I think that took all that away. No, the thing was our education suffered because, you know, you'd go to a new school and, you know, you'd miss, you know, perhaps what they'd learnt in the first term and you sort of had to catch up and I think that was very poor ...

What had you begun to suppose you might do with your life just before you left school?

I was going to be a sports mistress but then the war ... before the war ... well, that was before the war. But then the war came and all I wanted to do was go into the army but I had quite a few years to wait and ...

So what age did you leave school?

Ah, sixteen.

And then?

Well, I was home for a while till I sprained an ankle, then I decided it was time to get a job so I got a position for eighteen months till I turned eighteen and ...

Doing what?

I was at a manufacturing chemist in Little Collins Street doing the administration work.

And then at eighteen you were able to join up, was that it?

Oh yes, I'd joined up before that. I was all ready to go. I had to wait for my eighteenth birthday and I went in a fortnight later.

What was the process? How did you set about joining up?

Well, I went to to the recruiting office in Elizabeth Street and got some papers, when I was about seventeen. I tried to join up then but I didn't know about forging one's birth certificate or that sort of thing. I was very naive. So, ...

Do you know people who did that?

Yes. Yes, quite a few girls that are now younger than I am because they put up their age.

Were there others who were too old who also did it?

I would think so because I think the recruiting finished at forty-five, I think. I'm not quite sure. But they must have because I know there's ladies, they're in their eighties and one's just died recently, she was eighty-nine at Geelong. She was our - the AWAS longest ... or eldest member of the AWAS Association.

Sorry, anyway, you were telling me about the process.

Oh yes. And then, well, just before I turned eighteen I got the call-up to go for medicals and psych testing out at Park Royal - was it, Park Royal?

What was the nature of the psychiatric testing?

Well, there were three tests and ... I think the first two were just normal psych testing ...

Meaning what? What was that?

Oh well, spelling, putting dots in squares and that sort of thing. And the third one was more a mechanical. It was wheels going one way and if a wheel was going that way, which way would the third wheel go. You know, that sort of thing, which worked out that whether you were mechanically minded, I'd presume that was for driving because they said, oh, you know, to go into driving but I didn't think that was a good idea.

That sort of thing might tend to make you very curious about what the results mean. Did you get any idea?

No, not really, except I would say that last test - there was only a few of us had to wait back for the afternoon session to do this other test - and that's what I think perhaps it, you know, might ...

What was the nature of the medical? Was it a large group of people or just ...

Yes, yes. A large group of people and that was done in Elizabeth Street Drill Hall and that was very interesting. Being a very shy person, one wondered what was going to come next.

What did come next?

You were given a big jug and told not to fill it.

Talking of privacy, what was the arrangement? Was - was there privacy as as you ...

Oh yes, yes, up to a point. You know, I should imagine a young girl doesn't like to strip in front of a whole lot of females. I mean, I don't know, but that's the, I was, as I say, very young and very ... and not very matured at all at eighteen.

Were there any who were shocked by this process to find themselves being expected to ...

I suppose there would have been. I don't know, I just did as I was told, and ...

So how long after the tests before you heard what would happen next?

Oh I think it would have been about three weeks or so. I'm not quite sure now because it's a long time ago. But then we were called in, back to Elizabeth Street, and we were told that we were in and I think we were given a regimental number and all that sort of thing was done then. And you

got a pay book or you got a slip of paper with some pay on it. And then we came home and just had to wait till you were notified to be called up.

(10.00) And you got this notification that you was to be at the RTO at Spencer Street I think it was one o'clock on a Saturday afternoon.

RTO standing for?

Ah ... oh, transportation officer something ... railway transportation officer, something like that. And we ... I went in. You were allowed one suitcase and so off I went and ...

When you were packing one suitcase perhaps for quite a length of time, what are the sort of things you felt you needed to take?

We took some pyjamas and some underwear ... stockings if you had them - because the war was on they were almost unavailable - and your shoes ... it was no ...

Keepsakes, photographs, that sort of thing?

No, I didn't take any, not until ... I think I came home at Christmas on leave and, anyway, oh, I don't know. Sockettes or something or other like that, cardigan. But then, of course, as soon as you got to Darley, which was the recruit training battalion, you were issued with all these things anyway and what they call an overall or a coverall which was, in other words, a giggle frock because they were so long and didn't have any style about them.

Was it a bit of a shock to ... in that induction process? Was it suddenly very army or shouted orders? Or how was the manner? Or how was it done?

Yes. Well, no, I don't think there was any shouting, not like today. But we were, you know, walked - because we didn't know how to march - down to the Q Store and you went through the process, the same as what men would today, or women, and you got fitted for a cardigan, you got fitted for shirts and collars and then your uniform came last. Then that was kept till your passing out parade and in case any alterations had to be made to it, they were done while you had your month's ... did your month's rookie training. And you had your giggle frock, two giggle frocks, and so many pairs of sockettes and your shoes and your greatcoat which you used as a dressing gown. And they didn't supply ... oh, underwear: singlets and panties, but that was all.

How were you addressed if somebody were to speak to you, one of the regular army people?

I was Private.

Mmm.

Yes, Private Walker, Private Jones.

What was the overall manner? Was it stern or friendly? Or ...?

Oh it was stern up to a point. You knew that you had to do what the corporal, hut corporal, which you had the most to do with, you had to do what she said. There was discipline but even as you probably know, discipline you get from drill and even driving a motor car, that's discipline because you've got to know which foot to use on the brake and the clutch. But, oh no, they weren't what you'd call 'harsh'.

What about the accommodation and food side of things? What did you find yourself doing?

Accommodation: there was fourteen of us in a tin hut or an iron hut. And no partitions or anything and the first night we didn't sleep a wink because you had straw palliasse for a mattress and every time you turned over the mattress would creak and the wire springs in the cyclone stretcher, that would squeak, and everybody seemed to be turning over at the same time. It was a most peculiar thing. And you only had a space, a little shelf above your bed to put your greatcoat which had to be folded a certain way and put up. And also your gas respirator and cape and helmet. And then you had a kit bag to put your other bits and pieces in which went beside your bed and your shoes on the bottom of the bed on the railing of the cyclone stretcher.

Were there morning inspections and that sort of thing?

Oh yes, yes. And your bed had to be barracked every morning.

Barracked?

Yes, your blankets folded, and must be folded a certain way, your sheets and your blankets went on and then your sheets and then your pillow and then you had one blanket that you took over the top to keep the dust off you, your pillow.

Were there people who, particularly early on, didn't get it right and found themselves in trouble?

Oh yes. Well, you wouldn't get yourself into trouble but, you know, your bed would be pulled to bits and you'd be told to do it again and that sort of thing.

How many times might that happen before you really start to get it just right?

(Laughs) Well, we were young I suppose and we took things in perhaps a bit ... except perhaps the older ones may have had to do it several times before they'd get it right. But you were given a lesson in how to do it and your friend in the next bed she would say, 'I think you've got that blanket folded incorrectly'. And so, you know, you'd help one another.

(15.00) What about the food? How did you find the food?

It was enough. Yes, it was very good I found. I put on a stone in weight in four weeks. But, no, it was quite good; very adequate.

Did you begin to wonder whether you'd made the right decision or was there that sense of purpose that carried everybody on and made it all seem important?

No, I always wanted to be. I enjoyed it because I'd played a lot of sport at school and I loved the outdoor life. I didn't particularly like sitting in lectures too often but, getting out and marching. And we had a certain amount of recreation and that sort of thing which, you know, I just loved it right from the start.

What were the lectures about?

Oh well, there'd be hygiene ... ranks ... the structure of the army, like of the women's services. What else?

What about sex education? One former AWAS member said their sex education was that they said, 'Young ladies, don't' and that was it.

No, we had a Doctor Blanch from Melbourne. He came I think twice and lectured us and her saying was, 'If you go parking ...' no, 'If you drink don't park and if you park don't drink'.

A fatal combination.

Yes.

What about that first part of training? What were the sorts of things you were doing?

Oh well, you'd have so many periods in a day and you'd have ... we'd start off with your inspection and rollcall. Then during the day you'd have lectures, perhaps two lectures, morning tea, then a drill period. Perhaps another lecture before lunch and then in the afternoon a few more drill periods straight after lunch perhaps and another lecture and then perhaps you'd have to play sport or something like that.

What were the popular sports at the time?

Softball or baseball ... basketball that's because the grounds at Darley was very rocky. It was, you know, not suitable really for any sports. The Americans were there with the Netherland East Indies and they were training to go back. They were training the Netherland East Indies troops to go back when MacArthur made his big move back through the islands.

Were you briefed at all about relations with the Americans? Was there any particular concern given the anxieties of many Australian men about the advantages American servicemen had?

Camps were, you know, a huge area between and we weren't allowed to go and talk to them. But I remember after a ... a injection parade, we got a vacc or a revacc or something or other, and the staff, AWAS staff, were playing the Americans at baseball and they were couple short so a couple of us were asked to go and play for the AWAS side. But that's the only contact except they had a hall there and they had what they call an 'Amateur Hour' and I can remember this night one of the officers of the Netherland East Indies who were Dutch - he was Dutch, white Dutch - and he played the violin and he played a piece, I think it was called 'The Canary' and during the playing of it two strings broke and we didn't know until the end. He was absolutely wonderful.

You mentioned recreation. What would you do for recreation?

Oh ... well, you'd go to the rec hut and write your letters home or catch up on your, perhaps, writing up your lectures or things like that.

Did you get a ration of alcohol, of beer?

No, no. Not even ... we didn't have alcohol at all right through the army. Only the sergeants' and officers' messes.

So how long did you remain at Darley?

Six weeks I think it was altogether or five weeks because I went in in November and I was given I think three days' leave for Christmas and then I went back and I was there I think two days and then I was posted to Bandiana.

And what did you find yourself doing then?

Ah, after I recovered from my revaccs and two sprained ankles ...

When you say 'recovered', what was the effect of the ...

My first vacc didn't take so before I left Darling they ... I had a revacc and it took on the way up to Bandiana, to Albury, and I had a temperature of 104 and we had trucks, three ton trucks were waiting for us at Albury station with a ladder to get up into the back of them and I was about the fourth girl up and the ladder slipped when I was halfway up and I fell and sprained both ankles.

(20.00) So I had two sprained ankles, a vaccination and a temperature and I wasn't very happy when I arrived out at Bandiana.

What was the attitude towards these sorts of problems? Was it, 'Oh, you've got to be hail and hearty' or was there general sympathy or ...

No, they gave me time off because then it was New Year, although that didn't make any difference because the girls had New Year's Eve and I couldn't go anywhere because I couldn't walk. But, no, you went to the RAP and reported to the RAP and had your leg bound up and ankle bound and that was it.

So at Bandiana, you've started off, you're still hobbling around.

Yes. That soon got right and then I was over in the administration office in stocktaking department - internal stocktaking - and ...

What sort of things were you taking stock of?

We were writing out the discrepancy reports and that sort of thing for ... because the 1BAD was the largest ordnance depot in the southern hemisphere and it was motor spares and we ... the stocktake would be done down by men down in the store houses and then the sheets would be brought up to us and we'd have to do the discrepancies and deficiencies and so forth and write out the vouchers to correct them.

How did you feel about that? Was it boring or did you just accept, well, it was in the service of the nation and you got on with it?

Yes, yes, it was all to do with the war. I mean, so I did it. We worked hard, you know, from eight o'clock till five o'clock at night in the afternoons or later on when I went to the store house and sometimes you'd work all night, till five o'clock in the morning to get shipments off, especially towards the ... MacArthur's move when you had to get all these stores up to the islands.

By this time had you started to make friendships that were important to you?

Yes. Well, you sort of made them but, I mean, you didn't know that they were going to be so important to you. You know, you were with a group of girls, you had, you know, four or five girls and we'd all go out together or you'd say to one, you know, 'Let's go ...'.

Tell us about your group? I mean, what sort of ... often with groups you get very distinctively different types of personalities, sometimes they can all be very similar but what sort of group did you fall in with?

Mmm. Well, I think one girl her father was a Bank of New South Wales bank manager and knew my father so we became friends. Then there was a girl from, oh, up near Ouyen, and her name was Van der Veen and I've just found out her address after forty-three years. I'm thrilled to bits. And they were a nice group of girls. (Laughs) Can I put it any better than that?

Were they humorous?

Yes. Oh, we had a lot of fun. Well, you had to make your own fun. For instance, you worked six days a week and on Sunday there'd be a church parade. If you didn't go you got fatigues in the kitchen or somewhere else around the camp and then your time was your own. If you got all your washing and ironing done and so forth or, you know, your little cubicle scrubbed out, we'd go out for the day. We'd go down to the kitchen and we'd get a chop and a potato and an onion and an apple or an orange and a couple of slices of bread and a little bit of butter and away we'd go with our haversack down to the Kiewa River where we'd build a little fire and cook our chop and potato chips and we thought we were made, you know.

Swim?

Well, if it was winter you wouldn't but we'd go mushrooming instead on the way down and then somebody would have to peel the ... prepare the mushrooms and somebody else would do the potato and the onion and we used to make our own fun like that, and just sit and talk or try to catch fish in the Kiewa River that was almost impossible.

How long did you stay at Bandiana?

Three and a half years.

Now during that period ... was it then, during that period, you had something to do with Italian prisoners of war?

Mmm. Yes.

How did that ... When did you first learn there were prisoners of war in the area?

Ah, oh, I think it was given out that there'd be prisoners of war coming to work around the depots, around the barracks as gardeners and that sort of thing. They just appeared. I was in the store house at the time and they used to bring them from over at the Hume Weir where they were camped in big semi-trailers and there'd be, I suppose, about fifty or seventy-five in a big semi-trailer just, you know, all standing up, open, and I had two to help me select - I was selecting stores at this time from and ...

(20.00) How were they dressed? What did they look like?

They wore ... our old khaki uniform that had been dyed a maroon colour and black boots - I think they had black boots, not brown - and they were, you know, they were well dressed.

There'd been propaganda particularly in the early part of the year that, you know, portrayed Germans and the enemy as something sort of vicious, almost sub-human. Did you have a sense of apprehension in those terms or ...

Yes, because these men I'd say were definitely 'black shirts', Mussolini's black shirts because they'd come from the Abyssinian war. I understand that they were taken prisoners by the British and shipped to Burma and then, of course, when the Japs moved in to Burma, they were shipped back down to Australia and there were quite a large number of them. But whether that's true or not I don't know.

So tell us about that very first sighting when ...

Yes, well I was a bit frightened because I had had a previous experience of going to the dental centre which was in the Bandiana area which dealt with the whole area and I went into the dental centre in the waiting room and I'm sitting there and in comes this ... he was an Italian naval officer all dressed up with all his gold braid and so forth, and a beard and I was scared stiff. They were ... the officers were quartered over at Myrtleford in the north-east of Victoria and he'd been brought over for dental treatment and there was only the two of us in the waiting room and I was scared stiff being young and innocent you see.

Did you have occasion to speak to him or ...

No. No, I didn't think that was right.

So then this next meeting?

Yes. Well, there was two allocated to me to help me and they were quite good.

How did you ... Did you choose them or were they given to you or ...

No, they were told, 'You two, you go with her'. So I had them to help me. Then there was about ...

Just before you go on. So what kind ... what did they look like? How were they?

Well, most of them seemed to be rather short.

And the two that you were given?

Yes. Frankie and - what was the other fella's name - Dino. And Dino was a little dark, he was, you know, dark and with a little moustache. I don't think I'd trust him. The other fellow was quite nice; he was fairer and they ... it was the most peculiar feeling for a while until you got to know them. Of course, they couldn't speak much English although I think they probably spoke more or understood more English than what you thought they did. And they ... they were quite good to me. They helped me. They had them throughout the store, in our store house in the carpenters' section, where they were making crates to put parts in to be shipped off, and different

jobs around the stacks and different Australian soldiers had them as their helpers, you know, and so forth.

END TAPE ONE, SIDE A

START TAPE ONE, SIDE B

Identification: This is side two of tape one of the interview with Gwen Walker about the Australian Women's Army Service recorded on 14th April 1990 and continues in five seconds from now.

You might reasonably have had the feeling, well, I'll show them. We'll teach them, we'll give them a few lessons. Did you feel that at all?

No, I thought I might have learnt some Italian from them but I didn't. They ... I can remember one occasion where we had a bin full of little nuts to count out. Normally this was done on a weighing machine but this time they said, 'No, we want an accurate count'. So I got Duno - Duno his name was, not Dino - Duno and Frankie and I gave them a heap of these out of the ... out of the bin on a concrete floor and there the three of us were down counting a pile of these things and I got to the end and wrote my number down, 276 or whatever, and then I asked them. And they'd been counting in Italian and couldn't translate it back into English.

So did you have to count the whole lot?

No, we'd have to count again or go and find somebody that could translate it back into ... the Italian back into English as to how many. But ...

Were there any incidents where you felt that the prisoners were treated unfairly or people were really giving them a bad time to show them that they despised them as part of the enemy?

No. Mmm, everybody was pretty good to them really I think because they used to make things which you could buy. I bought a toy snake that you held it in the centre. It had, I think, canvas down it - the centre of it - and if you held it in a certain place it would wriggle. An Italian grass snake I think it was called. And others did portraits and they made lovely jewel boxes and inlaid wood trays and that sort of thing. And they would go rabbitting. You'd be missing two men and you'd go off for lunch and you'd come back from the barrack from lunch and there on your table would be a piece of your typing paper and a beautifully fried cooked piece of rabbit leg and they'd been out rabbitting. And I don't know whether you know but you don't have to have a gun or anything to catch a rabbit. You hypnotise it. You spot a rabbit and you look it in the eye and then you walk slowly around it getting closer and closer and closer and then you just hit it on the head.

Have you done that?

No, I've tried but ... (laughs) ...

(5.00) Are you sure it's not folklore?

(Laughs) No. That's the only way they could kill a rabbit because there were plenty round the piles of crates, you know, the spare crates that were out in the paddocks.

Did any of them actually try and run away?

Yes. Duno disappeared one night. I was woken up at two o'clock in the morning by the orderly officer and I had to put on my greatcoat and go to the orderly room and there was the male orderly officer from over at the depot to ask me did I know where Duno was. Now I didn't have a clue where Duno was because he knew more about Shepparton and Sydney than I had because I hadn't been to either place. I've often wondered did they ever catch up with him. But he did a bunk.

Were there ever any group escapes?

No. No. I think all they wanted to do was get home because they'd been away for ten years.

How far away were they billeted?

Oh, it would be about five or six miles.

Did you get to see the conditions in which they stayed?

No, no. Except I know that they had their own cooks because every now and then they'd bring me a pastry shell filled with the richest of custard. It was beautiful. Could only eat half of it at a time because it was so rich. And they'd bring you little gifts like that. And they were very good on a hot day. One of them might say, 'You sit down and do your knitting, I'll do that for you' and he'd do the stencilling on a case or something or other like that.

What about socially? Were there functions that they were allowed to go to in the local town or anything of that sort?

No. They had a fairly free time. They could go walking around the weir because all they had was these maroon uniforms and you could go driving around through the Hume Weir over into Albury side, New South Wales side, and you'd see them on a Sunday afternoon, you know, walking along in twos or threes.

Did any ever refuse to do things they were asked?

Not that I know of; not with me. But, no, then the only, going back to your previous question about ill-treatment, the only time that there was any nastiness that I know of in our store house was the day that Mussolini and his girlfriend were hung and we had a big overhead crane going up the store house with a crate on it and it was swinging and one of the male sergeants said to one of the Italians, 'Him like Mussolini'. Wow, the Italian took to the sergeant but of course he was dragged off but it was a stupid thing to say I suppose because being so far away from their own country I suppose they, you know, didn't know whether to believe it or not.

Were you able to actually develop what you would call a friendship with any of the prisoners?

No, no. Not in the way you mean I don't think, no.

Well, yet I gather a couple wrote to you?

Yes, did, yes. One wrote to me with the aid of his dictionary to congratulate me on obtaining my degree of corporal and 'hops to see you with the degree of sergeant soon'.

What had led you to becoming a corporal?

Well, my father died very suddenly and I went home on compassionate leave and when I came back I was called into the office and the colonel came down and put me through the ropes and the next ... two days later I was made a corporal and I don't know why but I think there might have been pressure from AHQ or somewhere.

During this period were you getting training in other things?

Oh, during my period during the war, yes, I'd been to ... after recruit school, twelve months later I to went back to Darley and did a P&RT course ...

Which is?

Recreation and physical education course which at the time was equivalent of a six week - it was six weeks - and it was equivalent of a three year university course. I loved that. It was learning folk dancing and, you know, the Canadian exercises and all that sort of thing but becoming a PT instructor.

Did you get a certificate as such or ...

Yes.

Was that ... was that one that would have value in the civilian world?

I suppose it could have. I never took it up because after I was discharged from the army I went back into the army as a civilian.

(10.00) What about discipline generally? During the period you were at Bandiana you were out of the preliminary training school, what was the nature of discipline?

Well, we were ... parades every morning and we were marched up the road. It was a mile up the road to the depot or during the winter we were on the double up the road to the area theatre and back again.

What sort of things would make you do that?

Oh, just to get warm but it was cruel because the frost, you know, was so thick on the ground and the Kiewa Valley, the snow, the wind would come down from the snow and it was bitter and your feet in boots, you thought they were going to break in half. Anyway, that was the sort of thing we had to do. But discipline lights, we only had two nights out a week to start off with. Gradually as the war progressed they got a bit more lenient but Monday night was always closed camp night and then that night you were expected to get all your ironing and washing and that sort of thing up to scratch and have an early night - ten o'clock lights out. Ten o'clock lights out most nights except if you went up to the area theatre or to a dance or something over in the - on a Friday night - over in the dental centre. But, no, discipline there was every day there was general duties had to be done and you were rostered on that or kitchen duties, you'd get rostered on that and ...

What about breaches? If you did something or didn't salute or ...

You'd be hauled over the coals. I mean, all that discipline still went on.

What would 'being hauled over the coals' mean effectively?

Well, you'd either get extra fatigues or if it was very serious you'd be charged, put on a charge sheet and have to go before the colonel and have your pay stopped and all that if you're found guilty.

What sort of pay were you getting?

I started off with three and ninepence a day which today is, what, nearly forty cents, isn't it?

Well, except it bought rather more. What could you do with three and ninepence?

Three and ninepence I budgeted and I bought a Polly Waffle - a week, this is a week - a Polly Waffle or two packets of PK, perhaps a soft drink, shoe Nugget, toothpaste, soap, talcum powder - all that sort of thing.

Were many young women smoking?

Yes, quite a lot.

Did you?

Not till later. Not till about 1945. '46 I suppose I started because I used to take my ration home to Dad.

What about gambling? Did people bet on the horses at all or ...

Yes, some did. I don't know where they put the money on though. I can't recall.

Were there SP's perhaps operating or ...

It could have been through the male staff that ... you had general duty men, usually two to a barrack, to do the grease traps and all that sort of hard work.

What about Melbourne Cup? Did you take sweeps on the Cup, was that still done then?

I think we would because I can remember one year a horse by the name of 'Rainbird' won and we had a Colonel Rainbird in Ordnance down in Melbourne. I think we would have had ... I'm sure we would have had sweeps because they - what did they use to call it - Housie, they used to run Housie in at the Catholic church in Albury but I never went to one of those sessions.

What did your pay go up to when you became a corporal?

Ah, five shillings or six shillings a day. It was quite good because my pay went up ... it started at three and nine and then you got a rise every twelve months, or thereabouts. It might be only threepence or sixpence but it gradually went up. I haven't got my pay book here, I lent it to a friend who was doing a thesis on it.

Yet I gather you were being paid about two thirds of what men were being paid.

Mmm.

Did that rankle at all?

No, no. We got two pounds one fortnight and two pound ten the next fortnight, which is four pound ten a month.

What did it mean to be made a corporal? Did it change any of the relationships you had with friends? Did you have to be a bit more formal?

No, not really, because a lot of them by then - that wasn't till December '46 - a lot of them were out of the army and ... because you went out on a point system due to whether you were married and the number of years or months that you had been serving. Because when we signed up, or joined up, we signed up for the duration of the war and twelve months after and ... so a lot of the girls, you know, the barracks was getting smaller and smaller.

(15.00) What about relationships with men during the period that you were at Bandiana? What was acceptable and where was the dividing line as to what, you know, perhaps, you know, not quite right?

Mmm. Well, of course there were a lot of romances ...

Any smuggling of men into quarters or that sort of thing?

No, I didn't hear of any in ours. You know, you're still in a hut with ... and I know the hut corporals I don't think, you know, they'd have been in trouble if it had ever been found out. But there were, I think there were plenty of places for girls to go because I was on the barrack staff at one stage and my job was to go ... in the morning the OC would say, 'There's about four groundsheets down in that paddock over there. Go down and get them', so down I'd go. And I went once and I learnt, my big experience, because I picked it up and field mice ran everywhere so next time I went down I went with a hammer. And, you know, you'd be sent out to collect the groundsheets and bring them back, somebody had left them there.

What about Christmas and New Year? Would ...

Mmm. Well, being a Victorian we usually were allowed home for Christmas. There was one year I wasn't and they put on quite a good Christmas lunch/dinner - chicken and fresh oranges and all the trimmings.

What about relations between men and women in terms of rank and authority where you might have an AWAS member who's got higher rank and would be ordering a man. Were there ever any resistances to being told what to do by a women?

I don't know because in the depot, right, there were lieutenant females and lieutenant males and captains - no majors, the captains were the highest - and they were either ... the lieutenants were ... one lieutenant she was the CO's secretary therefore she wouldn't be telling a male what to do. And then the store houses they were all males, officers.

Did you ever get the feeling that you were resented doing work that perhaps wasn't really woman's work or that sort of thing?

No, no. I enjoyed doing all that sort of thing because ... I can remember once I got up in the top of a ... I had to get a leaf for a spring, for a Chev - Chevrolet truck - down and the springs were kept on the very top part of the binning. So I climbed up the binning and got it and then I found it was too heavy and how was I going to get it down and I didn't have a clue and I couldn't get down myself. Oh, so I had to scream out and the male sergeant came along and said, 'What do you think you're doing up there?' and I said 'I'm trying to get this spring leaf down'. So he said, 'Oh wait on', so he went and got a Clarke stacker and put up the prongs and I put the leaf on and then I got on and he let me down. But, no, they were always good, you know, they ... you weren't expected to do anything I don't think that, you know, was too much for a female.

With the general shortages, all this equipment around must have presented some temptations if some people had a need for a spare or something. Was there any pilfering?

No, only by us. We'd take the glass out of the tail-lights and use as an ashtray - it made a very good ashtray. But, I don't ... oh, although, I think there was quite a few discrepancies but that would be the males. The females wouldn't have anything to do with that I wouldn't think. I mean, how would they get a crate of ... you know, out of the depot. You could take it out, nobody would be any the wiser I don't suppose when you go back to your barracks but then somebody would see it. I don't know what you ... You'd have to hide it in the bushes somewhere.

Were there stocks disappeared that it was supposed that men had taken of an order that caused inquiries?

I think there would have been. There must have been, you know, during certain periods.

But no racketeering as such?

Well, not to my knowledge. I was only a corporal, you know, I wouldn't have been in on it if there were investigations and that sort of thing.

Were you getting any weaponry training during this period?

No. No, we weren't allowed to touch weapons, they say it's the Geneva Convention, but I'm not sure about that either now. But, there wasn't any need. The men, they had a rifle but I don't know if half of them would know how to use it. But we used to draw .22's from the men's Q Store and go out rabbitting of a weekend towards the end of the war and, you know, we had Saturdays off in those days.

(20.00) Were you a good shot?

Not bad.

So you shot a few rabbits.

Yes, I could say I've shot a few rabbits in my time.

Did you ever have occasion to meet Colonel Irving or did she ever visit the base?

Yes. Colonel Sybil Irving. As a matter of fact, going back to Tallangatta, my mother was in the Guide movement and she was a patrol leader and she had to resign when I was on the way, so she had to tell Colonel Sybil Irving, as she was the commissioner for the area - the Guide commissioner for that area - this is 1925, and she was a Guide and, well, high up in the Guides all right through until the war and then, of course, she became the Controller. And every time I went to a school or a course, of course, she'd come to see us, pay us a visit, and also she'd do ... came to Bandiana. She came I think once or twice to Bandiana 'cause she couldn't go everywhere. And I was a pall bearer with Gwen Mann at her funeral.

How was she seen? I mean, do you recall what the general feelings ... there's always a tendency for lower ranks to want to take the mickey out of higher ranks but ...

Yes. No, having known that Mum knew her, I always thought she was all right. I thought she did a good job. And I liked it when she came to visit.

Did she ever brief you formally?

Well, of course, then I knew her later on in the CMF better because she was the - what was she, it's gone - but ... honourary colonel of the WRAAC and I knew her much better after the war than really what I did during the war.

Apparently she had quite strong views that women oughtn't try and be like men in the services.

That's right.

Were you present when she outlined these views?

Oh, not really, because as I say I wasn't an officer and, you know, I was just one of the 25,000 that ... She probably spoke of that sort of thing when she came visiting when, you know, when you did a course or whatever.

Being posted where you were, did that mean you'd perhaps tend not to have contact with the WRANS or the WAAAFS?

Yes. The only other service we had contact with really was the AMWAS and the nursing corps ... nursing service they're AANS.

Did you form any particular impressions about the nature of the services? Were there apparently any distinctively different sorts of attitudes about status or how they were regarded or anything of that sort?

No. Didn't think much of the discipline in the WAAAF. The WRANS, they were a small service and we didn't know very much about them. The nursing service, the AMWAS, they were good nurses but we didn't think much of their marching ability but ...

Did that mean there was a sense of pride developing in feeling that you were a good group and ...

Yes, we were a good group, I think you could say that. We were very proud of being in the AWAS and I'm still very proud that I served ... I had the opportunity to serve in the AWAS because you made friends. It was a period that will never happen again and it's something different that you don't get in civilian life. I just can't put my finger on it but it's something entirely different.

Did you find yourself at some point feeling that this has really done something for me? You could feel a sort of strength of character or purpose or something that you recognised?

Yes, well I didn't but other people have noted that ... how much I had matured at the end of that period and ... so I suppose, because after all, I was virtually just a schoolgirl and not like the girls of today. I mean, at eighteen girls - well the majority from what I can see - are very well developed and very matured. Perhaps it's the more sheltered life one lived in that period of time. I mean ...

(25.00) Did you have friends who married during their period that you were in the army?

No.

Was there a feeling that it wasn't the thing to do while the war was on?

Well, I don't know about that but, of course, a lot of them had boyfriends or were engaged to men and they were away up in the islands or somewhere else. One girl, her fiance, he was in New Guinea and she was very - we joined up the same day, we got to know each other and we're still friends - and he was a guinea pig for malaria and he, you know, still gets malaria occasionally. It takes a long time to grow out.

Were there any unwanted pregnancies at the camp?

I don't know. I didn't take much notice of, you know, scandals, all that sort of thing. We had our own group and you sort of, you know, you might hear about somebody that had been in trouble. I

know there was one girl because one of drivers and I who were friends, we had to take her belongings back to Wangaratta where she came from and that was the reason why, she became pregnant.

Was there a sense of shame attached to young women in that sort of circumstance?

Yes. Yes.

Where were you when you heard news then about the end of the war in Europe?

In Europe ... yes. I was working in the barrack, in the orderly room, and that morning I was going to paint the orderly room chairs green. So I'd been got a fresh pair of men's overalls on and I went to the Q Store and I drew the paint and a brush and I was just about to start and it was nine o'clock - I think it was nine o'clock - and the news came over that the war in Europe had finished - ended - and there was great celebrations. The girls came home from the barracks and ... from the depot and I think we were given a day's holiday. Except me, I had to ...

Was there an issue of beer allowed or anything like that?

No. Not for the ORs.

For the men?

Oh, the men and their sergeants. The men would have it in their OR's mess I should imagine.

Did it ever seem unfair?

They got a ... Well ...

Or you just accepted it?

You just accepted it. If you had enough money you went to town. Of course in those days you weren't allowed to drink under twenty-one, I think it was. And so you'd go to the New Albury Hotel and have not a brandy, a gin squash ... a gin squash.

When did you have your first drink?

I suppose I'd say at home. My parents didn't drink very much but there was always a bottle of sherry and sometimes on a Sunday we'd have a glass of sherry.

So did you go into a hotel before legally you were supposed to be able to drink?

I would say so, possibly.

Do you remember the occasion? Nervous or worried or ...

No, no. Mmm.

Were there ever any occasions when young women were turned away and they said, 'Now look, dear, you're too young'?

Not to me but I should imagine possibly. But it never happened to me.

END TAPE ONE, SIDE B

START TAPE TWO, SIDE A

Identification: This is side one of tape two of the interview with Gwen Walker about the Australian Women's Army Service recorded on 14th April 1990 and begins in five seconds from now.

With the news then about the end of the war in Europe, was there then the sense, well, any day now Japan would fall?

No. I think we had quite a way to go before that happened but it was obvious that resources would be able to be concentrated on the Japanese war.

How were you being kept in touch with what the stage the war was at and developments?

We were able to buy newspapers.

Did you get *Salt*?

Yes. That was a terrific magazine. We had a radio in the rec hut and we had, you know, the normal bulletins and, as I say, we used to buy a newspaper every day - the *Melbourne Sun* - otherwise ...

Had you been hearing about the sort of atrocities the Japanese had been committing?

No. No, I hadn't heard about those until the end of the war. Except towards the end when the men were coming home, this Jessie Van de Veen that I spoke of earlier, she had two brothers who had been in Changi and the Red Cross notified the girls in the camp that had husbands that were missing and that sort of thing, they notified them of the troop trains that were coming through from Sydney to Albury which ... who was on them, what days they'd ... and they'd make arrangements for them to be picked up and taken into the station. And I remember the morning

Jessie got the news and the next day she had to go in. And we got her up at five o'clock in the morning to get her ready to go in to meet the troop train to meet her two brothers that had been in Changi and that was more or less, you know, the first that you really realised that something had been going on.

So where were you then when the Japanese surrendered?

I was still at the barracks. I was there for a long time afterwards. And they gave us more days off.

Do you recall what you were doing again at that moment?

No, I don't. All I know is that all I did was write out leave passes but everybody went through without collecting them before I could get them signed. And I think they had two days' leave and there was only a skeleton number of us left in the barracks and one cook and because everybody blew through, but then they came back again.

Was there any sense of anxiety amongst the officers that discipline was in danger of being totally undermined because the feeling was, well, the war's ended, it doesn't matter any more?

I don't think so because regardless we had signed on for twelve months after the war and I was there for longer than that. I didn't get out until April 1947.

Had you by that stage begun to wonder what you were going to do with yourself when the war ended?

No. I was prepared to stay there at, or stay in the army, but then, all of a sudden, there was only four of us left at Bandiana and one afternoon there was a signal came through from Melbourne ...

How many had there been previously?

Ah, about three hundred.

Was it strange?

Oh, we were quartered out and the barracks were closed down and, oh no, it was quite good. There was the four of us and I was ...

Any regrets? Was there any sadness about sort of the whole thing breaking up?

Yes. Yes there was because I think you had a security and you liked the work that you were doing and, you know, and you could go out. There wasn't ..., I used to baby-sit for the sergeant and his wife that I was quartered with.

(5.00) Did they pay you?

Oh no, because she cooked the meals and that sort of thing. I was given an allowance which I paid them board, and the same with the other three. Two of them were with the adjutant and his wife and the other one was in Albury, she was an officer. And it was, you know, I still enjoyed it. When I came home and was discharged and ...

What sort of duties did you engage in before you came home, I mean with the change of ...

I was moved to a store house with one of the other girls so that there would be two of us in the store house together; we were the only two females because there were all these men, civilians from Repco and different big motor firms, spare parts, up and they were going through the ... the stores that were coming back from the islands and everywhere for disposals. They had started on getting stores ready for selling at disposals, auctions and so forth. It was going back into civilian ...

Had you seen any of the Italians around the time when, or immediately after the war in Europe finished?

Yes. They were still with us because they didn't go home till '46, Christmas '46. They hoped to get home for Christmas and the last letter I received was written on the 11th December.

Was there any relaxation in the control over them once the war ended?

Oh yes, yes. Because they were our allies. After we'd pushed the Germans back out of Italy then the Italians became our allies.

But you were saying that these particular ones you believe were quite hardened fascist. Did they ...

Oh well, they were about ten years I'd say before but they still were up to a point. Of course they were becoming old men because in the Abyssinian war they were engineers, they were Mussolini's real black shirts, his best troops, and that's probably why so many of them were captured in the Middle East where they went.

Were you at Bandiana when they were sent off?

Yes.

Did any come to say 'Goodbye'?

No, not really. No, because in their camp I suppose they'd be given their ... One thing I remember though, they knew for quite some time that they'd be going home, you know, in the next month or so and of course they earned a certain amount of money. And a friend I saw last weekend she was the driver and she used to have to go in with their shopping list of the things they wanted from Albury and one was Singer sewing machine needles. And she bought dozens of packets of Singer sewing machine needles for one of them. I don't know whether there was a black market back in Italy when he got home or not or whether there was such a big shortage or ... but it was a funny item to purchase for an Italian prisoner of war to take home to Italy.

How did you come back down to Melbourne?

On the train. Our luggage and that was sent by 3-ton truck. Of course I had a bike, two hockey sticks, two tennis rackets, a couple of big cases full of uniforms and all sorts of funny ... because I mean I've been away from home for three and a half years.

When you got the notice that you were to be demobilised, how did you feel? Did you inquire about the possibility of remaining in the service or ...

Terrible because it was on a Friday. The signal came through from Melbourne and we had to be in Melbourne by Monday which didn't give us time to go to the Q Store and get a ... you know, some more shoes and things and, anyway, that was that. So there wasn't anything you could do about it.

Was there any sort of formal process of handing over your uniform or that sort of thing?

Oh, you kept your uniforms but you had to be demobbed which meant you had to have a medical and go through all the handing back certain items and you had a book and they tore out the vouchers when you presented it and you had to get all your pay ...

Vouchers for?

Oh, just to say that you handed back certain things. I can't remember what they were now but it was quite a little booklet that you had to go from here to there to there and the pay office and medical and if you had to have - with medical - if you had to have any attention or glasses or to be sent to an optician or any specialists or that. That all had to be done before you were finally discharged.

(10.00) Had there been any special measures that had been brought in towards the end of the year of way of entitlements and benefits and so on?

Mmm. No. Right from the start we got I think it was a penny ha'penny a day gratuity pay and then threepence, I think, there was threepence a day or something or other deferred pay ... deferred pay and ... which came to a large ...

So did you get a reasonable amount on the ...

Eighty-four pounds and four shillings or something.

Did that seem quite a bit at the time?

That was a lot of money. It was a lot of money. But ...

Did you cry? Were you upset? I mean ...

No, I'm not really a crying person really. I'm more ... perhaps ... not then but perhaps I've wearied a bit.

What did you think you were going to do with yourself then?

I didn't know and so my mother, after three weeks' leave - because she was now a widow - and so she said, 'Now you've got to get, to do something. You just can't sit home here all day'. So I went into the Commonwealth Employment Centre which was in the Commonwealth Bank I think in Collins Street or somewhere and then ... so they said, 'Yes, we've got a position for you out at Albert Park barracks as a public servant in the MGO's office - Master-General of the Ordnance Office', so I was there for two years.

Did you find that getting back into civilian life that somehow or other there was a bit of a gap in the way you related to civilians? Was there something special about the nature of the services and the way you related to each other?

Yes, I think I felt as though I was a bit superior to be quite honest. You know, I'd been a corporal in the army and I'd been in ordnance for three and a half years whereas ... I don't know. Although I got on very well with the other girls but I don't know. I think perhaps I'd matured a little bit.

Had there been changes in your beliefs in any significant way with the nature of the war questioning about the nature of God or religion? Had you become religious or anything of that sort?

No, because ... I more or less kept up during the war my church habits - going to church or going to church parade. Perhaps because the boys in the band played, I don't know what the reason was there. But it was an outing. You weren't back at the barracks doing your general duties or something or other, fatigues. But, no, I kept up ... I used to go into Wodonga to church or to Albury to church and the padre ... we used to go out for tea at night on a Sunday night with him and then if he was preaching in Albury at the church but, no, it didn't make any difference.

Having come back to Melbourne, were you able to retain friendship with any of the closer friends you had been with during the army?

During the army ... no. Yes, with ... yes, with a couple of girls. They were much older and they came from the country and they got a flat in Melbourne not far from where I lived and one of them, she was one that was left - four of us were left back at Bandiana - and she had her luggage sent to my place, because she had nowhere really to have it sent to. And so she eventually came and collected it and we are friends to this day.

So you didn't suddenly feel alone and lost your closest friends and that sort of thing?

No. I did find though that the girls I went to school with, they'd all seemed to have disappeared and gone their own way. And there's only about two or three girls that I went to school with that I know today that I'm in touch with.

And then you later rejoined the army?

Yes, when it was formed because it was disbanded in '47, in May '47, and it wasn't started again until 1950 I think it was. 1950 or '51, I was in New Zealand at the time on a holiday so ... working holiday. Then the CMF was formed and I was one of four ... the first four to join the CMF.

Did it feel good to be back in uniform?

Mmm. Very good. I suppose I'd worn uniform, you know, nearly all my life. It was school uniform and then the AWAS and then the WRAAC and so I was more or less used to wearing uniform.

And you stayed in the army till 1975, was it?

Mmm.

Was that ...

(15.00) I liked ... I was CMF ... I was CMF until 1967 and then I went in on full time duty, that was during the Vietnam War, till 1973 I think it was when we all had to get out because the boys came back when the boys were returned from Vietnam.

What were your feelings during the anti-war movement and its development? Did it make you feel angry?

Yes, because I think that we had to ... we had to do something. We just couldn't let these people, you know, the communists come down because my point of view was, if they get so far then they get a bit further and a bit further and, you know, we'd be in danger. But the moratoriums and that, I think they, well my point of view, they were wrong because I had a fire bomb thrown

through my window at the depot one night at two o'clock in the morning and I had a phone call to say, 'Your drill hall's on fire'. I wasn't very pleased about that because I was adjutant out at Kew at the time.

Not aimed at you particularly?

No. (Laughs) But anyway.

You finished with the army in '75?

Yes.

Was that a formal retirement requirement?

Yes.

You had no choice in it?

I didn't have any choice because I was fifty.

How did you feel about that?

Didn't like it. But it was a funny thing, as I said I think at the time, as one door closes another one opens. And I don't know, it hasn't ... it hasn't affected me that much. I'm still on the AWAS committee, I'm on the ordnance committee and I've still got big interests. I've just had a weekend up at Mildura for the ex-servicewomen's reunion there.

What do you do at those reunions?

Talk.

(Laughs)

Oh no, it's amazing, you always meet somebody that you haven't seen for, you know, twenty, thirty, forty years and we have a dinner. We arrived on ... well, I arrived beforehand but on the Saturday you register in that you have arrived and then on the Saturday night there was a sit-down dinner - three courses - at the Workmen's Club. It took 270 females, the only males were the waiters. And on the Sunday morning they had a march down to ... from the Post Office down to the wharf area where they had a memorial service and the Mildura Band played and then we went on the motor vessel *Avoca* for a two-hour upstream and a three course meal which was, you know, we all talked madly and ...

Marriage doesn't necessarily bring people companionship and stability and a sense of belonging - for many it is a disaster area - but in a way has your continued

association with these organisations provided those sorts of things that family and marriage are supposed to do?

Yes ... because most of those girls, I suppose there's only a handful of us that didn't marry, and therefore they talk about their children and grandchildren and it's amazing the number that married men from where they served.

Does it give you a sense of belonging?

Yes, yes. You've got ... you've got something that was started during the war with your friendship and although they're not all of the girls that you served with, they're all ... they're navy and air force and land army and Allied ex-servicewomen, you've always got something in common and which makes ... you can talk to anybody, you know, which, unless you've got the gift of the gab, you don't get in civilian life.

There's a photograph up there in the corner, is that ... that's a friend? It's not you I don't think, is it?

Which one?

The top left-hand side.

Over there?

Yes.

Yeah, that's me.

Oh, you're not wearing your glasses then. Now you've got a swag of medals, what are they?

Ah, the first two are the war medals - the British War Medal and the Australian Service Medal - and then the next one is the RFD which is the Reserve Forces Decoration - that's Australian - and then the last one is the Efficiency Decoration which we got first actually and then the Government ... there's no more British decoration so they brought in the RFD and so the ED has to go to the end because it's now foreign.

Well, with that and the other mementoes you've got around the place, it seems pretty clear you have a great deal of sense of pride in your involvement?

(20.00) Yes. I think that, well, I started off as a recruit private, I became a recruit private some years later again and I went through the ranks to get to where I got to, rank of captain, and, yes, I'm proud of having been in the army and I think it's made a reasonably good woman of me.

As a postscript you were saying that there were other things, recreational activities that you hadn't mentioned.

Yes. We used to ... There was Kendall's lawn tennis courts in Albury where we used to play mostly on a Sunday afternoon and swimming in Memorial Park, although there were big swimming competitions Albury District that were held at the swimming pool. We had athletic meetings at Wodonga for the Bandiana area - army only.

Did you compete in all these things?

Yes.

Were you good?

Oh, I well won two and six for coming first in something or other. I don't think we got anything for swimming because that was civilians ...

You didn't prejudice your amateur status and future in the Olympics by ...

No, although ... Oh, that's something I did do too. Hockey, we played in the Albury District hockey fixture and one person was in the Vehicle Park hockey team was one Lieutenant Helen Morris who later became Lady Cutler and she gave me a black eye one day playing against Vehicle Park - I've never forgiven her for that.

Was it deliberate?

I don't think so, no. She just raised her hockey stick and I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Mmm, what else did we do. Yes, tennis. We had tennis courts at our barrack.

You mentioned something about tearooms that you used to go to.

Oh yes, we used to go to ... in Dean Street and we'd have scrambled eggs on toast for one and sixpence and then we'd have another ... we'd have eggs on ... or soup, tomato soup and toast, that cost one and six and that was your, you know, day's pay. That's all you could afford. But about the Olympic Games that you mentioned a few moments ago, I was very proud to - I was a sergeant in the WRAAC, in the Women's Royal Australian Army Corps, during the Olympic Games - and I was ...

This was the '56 ...

'56 Olympic Games and I was an usherette in the VIP stand for the opening ceremony and the closing ceremony. Very proud because I wore my two medals - war time medals - (laughs).

END TAPE TWO, SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW.