



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Description	Ivy Vera Isabella Matheson as a captain, 2/4th Australian General Hospital, interviewed by Harry Martin for The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45.

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: This is tape one, side one of an interview with Ivy Matheson about the 2/4th AGH recorded on 17 October 1990.

Ivy Matheson, where and when were you born?

Well, can I start with my father?

Yes.

He was a Scot, born in Wick, and I think the family moved to Glasgow for the education of the children. He was sent out to India in the civil service when he was about twenty-one, twenty-two. He met my mother on a ship going on furlough from India back to United Kingdom. My mother was French. She came from a farm in a little village near Nevers. Do you know Nevers?

No, I haven't been to France, but anyway.

Anyhow, they got married and went back to India and my mother had to go to London to have me born because it wasn't done, in those days, for Europeans or not so much Europeans but United Kingdom people to be born in India. So she had to go to London all on her own to have me born and I was born in London.

And what was the date?

Eleventh of the third, 1911.

What sort of person was your father? How do you recall him?

How do you mean?

Was he a firm disciplinarian, perhaps a bit aloof, or warm, easy to relate to as a small child?

No, he was reserved. As a small child of course he was very outgoing to me. He was just a man.

And your mother, how do you recall your mother?

Well, she was a very nice woman.

Gentle? Kind? Or firm?

She was firm with me. She was gentle and quite popular with her friends.

How many children in the family?

Me. Except she had a son from a previous marriage who didn't live with us and eventually he joined the army and he was sent out to India but this was after we'd left.

Was it a religious family? Was going to church part of your upbringing?

No, Dad was a Presbyterian. He went to weddings and funerals, that's all. Mother was a Catholic of course, having been brought up as that. So I was brought up a Catholic. Apparently Dad had said, 'If it's a boy, he's to be brought up as a Presbyterian', you know, the same old thing.

As a child growing up was it the sort of family where the social and political issues of the day would be discussed over dinner, or were those things not dealt with?

They were just taken for granted.

So where did you spend your early childhood?

Well, we came out here when I was eight. I went to boarding school about, before I was six because of the heat of Calcutta, the children were sent to boarding school and I was sent up to Darjeeling. I went there for two years, I think, and then we came out here when I was eight. I was sent to school down at Portland of all places for a year.

Were your mother and father living at Portland?

No, they were living in Melbourne.

Why Portland? It seems a long way away.

Well, I was sent to a Loreto Convent in Darjeeling and when we left Mother went to the Loreto nuns and said, 'Where can I send Ivy when we go to Australia?' and they gave her about three or four Loreto convents. To them Australia was, you know, some unknown land and the only one in Victoria that was given to her was Portland. So off I went to Portland.

How did you enjoy life at school there?

(5.00) Oh well, I quite liked it.

You weren't lonely for the absence of your parents?

Well, I was used to it you see, having been in boarding school two years in India.

And your father, what was he doing then?

He'd retired by then.

Was your mother working? Did she have any sort of independent life as such?

No. Well, she just looked after Dad and me and the house, when we had a house, yes.

Was it a family that had an involvement in the first world war with uncles or whatever?

They both came from reasonably large families and they just didn't keep in touch with those families. I think I had an uncle or something in South Africa but they just scattered all round the world like the Scots do. Mother had a brother in Paris but she didn't keep in touch either, extraordinary.

How long did you spend at Portland then?

One year.

And then?

By then they had bought a house in Mentone and I went to the Mentone Brigidine Convent. Then they bought a house in East Melbourne and I went home to live and I went to CLC as a day girl - well, they didn't have boarders there.

Around that age had you any particular thoughts as to what you were going to do with your life, where you were going?

Hadn't a clue. I didn't have a clue.

What about secondary school?

Well, that was CLC, and Brigidine, I think, was secondary.

And from there?

Well, from Brigidine to CLC. I stopped school at CLC and I went to university. I tried to do architecture. I tried for two years but I didn't have the brain or the background of physics and chemistry to get through so I took to - it was called massage then. Mother had done some work in Calcutta during the first world war and it was in the massage field so that's probably why I took it up.

Where did you study that?

Melbourne University.

Was that unusual? Were there many young women studying at Melbourne University then?

Oh yes, a lot. There were a lot doing science and there were two or three doing architecture. But all the other subjects were well staffed with women, not staff, but students.

What basically did you assume you'd be dealing with when you finished your course? What were the main areas you expected to focus on?

Oh, I thought just general. There was polio at the time and I did that. I think I did that when I first got through. I went to Austin Hospital and then there was a position in Bendigo, Bendigo Base Hospital, and that was polio because it was in the middle of the epidemic. Then I was sent to Hampton with Sister Kenny, I suppose you have heard of her. She was

creating some interest here and there and she started a clinic with the co-ordination of the medical staff and physiotherapy staff at Hampton. I was there for about a year until war broke out and I joined up.

What was the status of massage as far as medicine was concerned then? Was it an area that had a reasonable sort of prestige or was it regarded almost like an alternative therapy?

No, it had a reasonable prestige. You were acknowledged by the medical fraternity and we thought we were alright.

When did you first begin to suppose that there would be a war in Europe that might involve Australia?

I think I was playing golf out at Waverley and war had just been declared and I thought, this is ridiculous, people going all that way to fight for something that really didn't concern Australia, but then of course you change your mind after a while. I don't know whether it's propaganda or what. So that's when I joined up.

(10.00) How did you go about that? What was the process?

I don't think I remember. I must have gone to the APA, the Australian Physiotherapy Association, and said I wanted to join, and a friend of mine with whom I'd gone through she was allocated to the 2/4th Australian General Hospital and they said, 'Oh well, she's a friend of Bessie Pakes', as she was then, 'and perhaps you better go in the same unit'.

So how did the process flow?

So we were allotted to the 2/4th AGH and we boarded a ship, the *Mauretania*, just before, between Christmas and New Year of 1940.

How long between joining up and going on the *Mauretania*?

It must have been two or three months.

So in that period what sort of things did you start to do?

Just kept doing the .... Didn't go out to Puckapunyal. We just did our ordinary jobs till the day that we were called up.

Did you have any sort of training as such, or an introduction into army methods or the way it operated, or anything?

No, not a thing.

What about uniforms and those sort of things?

Yes, we had to get uniforms in that time. We had blue suits with red whatnots, épaulettes, that sort of thing.

Had you expected that you'd be sent overseas like that?

Oh yes, I wouldn't have joined up if I hadn't expected to go overseas.

What about your parents, how did they feel about it?

Well, they took it for granted, too.

When you got aboard ship what sort of accommodation did you find you had?

Well, we were in cabins of course, and there were, I think there were about four in the cabin that I was in. They were mostly this sort of cabin, you know. Well, they had to pack us all in. There were about thirty females on board. It was a fifty-bed hospital, and I can't remember how many women were on board, and there were about five thousand troops who were stacked on downstairs.

Did you have any sort of briefing on going on board as to how you were going to fit in and what was to be involved, or ...?

No.

What about relationship with the troops? Were you briefed as to whether you may or may not fraternise with troops?

We were supposed not to fraternise with other ranks, but of course that went by the board.

What rank were you then?

We were, I think honorary lieutenants. I'm not sure whether that's right or not but we were paid a lieutentant's salary.

Do you recall how much that was?

No, we weren't paid a lieutenant's salary. I think we got about five shillings a day, or eight shillings a day, something like that.

How did that compare with what you'd been earning in private practice?

I can't remember. It wasn't as much.

When you say that the rule about fraternisation went by the board, was there any attempt then to stop fraternisation: people talking and socialising?

Oh no, but the powers that be .... We had a matron who wasn't very worldly and she frowned on it quite a bit. I think she probably reprimanded sisters if they were going out with ORs, but, you know, this happens all the time, doesn't it?

Had you developed something of a freer sort of spirit, or a more independent spirit because of your background, in any way, do you think?

I think I was always independent. I still am, because I went to boarding school so young.

You hadn't travelled in the intervening years between leaving India and coming to Australia?

No, only up around, I went up to Queensland a couple of times and that sort of thing. Hadn't been overseas.

So was it a sense of adventure then, going aboard ship?

Probably.

How did the days go? What sort of routine developed aboard ship?

Well, you got up and had breakfast and you did this and that and had lunch. There wasn't much routine for us. I think the troops had to go through drills and things but we didn't have to do anything like that.

Did you have any briefing sessions about medical matters?

A few, yes.

Did you have any sense as to what sorts of things you might ultimately find yourself doing in the army in relation to massage?

(15.00) Well, gunshot wounds and fractures and I even had .... Went to Tobruk for ten days and there was a boy there in the British Army who'd contracted polio. So I had to do some re-education stuff on him. But he came out on the hospital ship that we did and he was sent to Nazareth, I think they had a hospital, not the Australians, the British, so I don't know what happened to him.

What was your overall feeling aboard ship? Was it a comfortable sort of existence? Or was there a sense of being a bit spartan and that made you conscious of now you were in the army your life has turned around?

No, not really.

What about the relationship with officers and the ranks in terms of the normal sort of military etiquette? If you hadn't have been trained how to salute or stand to attention ...

No, we didn't. We didn't have to do that. We didn't have to salute until a lot later when we became - I supppose we became officers when we got back to Australia and VADs started, you know, the VADs and the other women's services. But before that, well, you didn't hit them on the back and say, 'Hello, sport' or anything like that.

As you were travelling to Colombo were there any drills relating to, perhaps, bombing or submarines that made you suddenly think, oh, this is a bit more serious?

We had lifeboat drill. But you know, when you are young you think it can't happen to me. I don't think you do feel that way.

What about arriving in Colombo? How did you find Colombo?

Loved it.

Did it remind you of your early childhood?

I suppose, yes. I quite like natives around, mind you, I am a little bit - what's the word? I can't think of it. You know how you feel regarding natives, to me they're still natives. I know this is all wrong but that's all there is to it. I was brought up like that.

How long did you spend in Colombo?

We were there from, six months, I think.

So where were you billeted and what did you find yourself doing?

We were in an old school, an evacuated school, just on the edges of Colombo, called St Peter's. And the hospital was there, too. We were in, the women were in a very large building which had been the home of a wealthy Mohammedan, or something, because there were hundreds of rooms. Well, not hundreds but quite a few rooms and apparently he lived there with all his family. Well, we were billeted there and next door was St Peter's which was a Church of England school for boys, and the hospital was billeted there.

And what sort of accommodation did you have there?

Well, that's what we were in, this big building. We were on stretchers.

So it was a dormitory sort of arrangement, was it?

Well, the rooms were all little dormitories. We'd go over to the main building for our meals.

And what about the medical side of things? What sort of things did you begin to do?

Well, I don't think the physios did any work while we were in Colombo. We just socialised, I'm afraid.

In what way? What sort of activities?

Well, there was a swimming pool which I didn't ever get to. We went up to Nuwera Eliya and Kandy on small bits of leave, I suppose. But we actually didn't do any work while we were in Colombo.

Was it a good life, or did you find yourself a bit impatient to be doing something that you felt would be more constructive?

No, look, you take things for granted in a position like that. You just drift along.

Had you been briefed at all about relations with the local people as to whether you, again, should or shouldn't fraternise and so on?

No. But Europeans didn't fraternise very much with local people even then, did they? I don't think they did.

(20.00) Were you having any sort of army drill during this six month period?

No, we didn't.

Were there any formal attempts to provide recreational or entertainment activities? Or were you left to your own devices?

Well, every now and then somebody'd invite the unit. They'd send an invitation for ten women to go to a party, or something like that. And they weren't always very successful.

They weren't?

No.

In what way? What do you mean by that?

Well, you go into a place and you don't know anybody. Well, it wasn't successful in my case, anyhow.

What did you most enjoy then? What were the sorts of things that ...?

Well, I just like that sort of atmosphere of - it was a lovely place. You know, beautiful green trees and natives in the background. It was a sort of romantic place, but I liked it.

Were there film nights, that sort of thing?

No, I can't remember.

What about being briefed about how the war was progressing? Did you get any information about that?

No, hadn't a clue. We had a couple of bomb attacks but didn't worry me, anyhow. As I say, when you're young, you don't think you're going to be hit.

Was there any sense that the war was not going very well? Do you have a recollection of the feeling as to how things were going with that?

We did hear that the Japanese had taken whatever they did take at the beginning. I must sound awfully stupid on this, but ....

Well, it's a long time ago. Most people have lapses. Do you recall how you felt then when there was the news about Japan entering the war? Was there a sense of alarm?

No. As I say, when you're young you don't react to that sort of thing very well.

Did you think of yourself as Australian? I mean many Australians were rather concerned with Darwin being bombed, for example, and had a sense of anxiety. Did you share that sort of feeling?

No anxiety, no. Perhaps I'm a bit like a Mohammedan, you know, Allah wills.

Did you feel, perhaps, you were British as such, rather than Australian, in a way?

Yes, I did.

Did that make you stand out at all? Did other Australians see you in that light? Did they think of you as English?

No, they didn't. Mind you, when I was very small and we first came out here people used to laugh at my accent and I suppose that made me tougher. But they did, but you get used to that.

So when did you get news you were going to move?

From Colombo? I think we had about a week and the troops started to go back to Australia and we had to be ready by a certain time to get on a certain ship, and off we went.

What was the ship?

The something *Castle*. It was a British ship, *Athlone Castle*, I think it was.

How many went aboard that?

Our unit and a lot of troops. I don't know how many troops. It wasn't as big as the *Mauretania*.

What were conditions like aboard that?

Quite good.

And bound for?

We were bound for Melbourne actually. We called into - we didn't call into Perth. And in the middle of the ocean there were a couple of British Army officers aboard and one morning we slowed down, which was unheard of course - this was in the Indian Ocean - and a little boat came up to the side from another ship and these army officers climbed on to the little boat and were taken to the other ship and we sailed off. Then we came into Melbourne.

And what was your feeling on coming back? Were you disappointed that you hadn't gone somewhere else?

No. You know, you just take things for granted.

So back in Melbourne did you have leave to visit your parents and so on?

(25.00) Yes. I rang up home when we got to - A'Beckett Street there were some headquarters there and we went there from the troopship. So I rang up home, Mother was out and Dad answered the phone and I said, 'It's Ivy here' and he said, 'Oh, my daughter's overseas with the army'. And I said, 'No, it's me, Dad'. 'Oh,' he said, 'I suppose you'll be looking us up some time'. So that was it.

So where did you go after you got back?

Went to, oh, what's the place? Starting with a B in Victoria.

Well, there's Benalla, Ballarat, Bendigo.

No.

Bacchus Marsh.

Bacchus Marsh. I was sent there and I was there about .... Now, wait a minute. Sorry. I've gone along too quickly. We went to Heidelberg and we were there for I don't know how long. And then the unit started in Redbank, Queensland, and we went up to Redbank.

What about at Heidelberg? What did you begin to do there?

Physiotherapy.

But what sort of patients? What kind of treatment?

You name it - just general work.

What were the sorts of things that you found where your skills were most effective? Where you felt that you really had a useful contribution?

Well, most of the things we did. You know, there were fractures and breathing troubles and injured backs and bad knees, all that sort of thing.

Well, let's look at some of those sorts of things and the kind of treatment and results. If there were breathing troubles, what sort of massage could you apply for that?

Well, you didn't give them massage. You give them postural drainage. You've got a picture of the lung, haven't you? Well, it's supplied by a lot of tubes from your throat and you tip the patient up so that the tubes are pointing in the way of gravity and the heavy stuff that gets into the lungs is helped out by the force of gravity. And you thump them - a little bit like thumping a tomato sauce bottle - and they get up this mess and the more they get up the better it is for them.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

Identification: Ivy Matheson about the 2/4th AGH, recorded on 17 October 1990.

With a case such as that who would determine what you would do and how would you do it?

The doctor would send the patient to you saying he's got inflammation or what have you in your left lower lobe which would be down here, you see. And you'd tip the patient up so that he would be draining from that and palpitate that area and help him to cough it up.

Did most medical staff have an appreciation as to just what you could achieve?

Yes.

Would you sometimes get quite dramatic results with this sort of approach?

Not dramatic but you'd get good results, yes.

And what about with a fracture? What sort of treatments were involved there?

Well, it would depend whether they'd just come out of a plaster or what have you. You'd give them exercises. Say, it was a plaster that had covered the knee, well, the knee would come out and it would be stiff, so you'd give them exercises to increase their muscle power in the thigh muscles and also exercises to mobilise the knee.

Was it painful? Would you have to encourage people to accept that there'd be a certain amount of pain and work through it?

Yes, but not to hurt themselves to the extent where it made it more painful.

Could you have some injuries, say, where they'd been burns and skin grafts where working out just what you could do without tearing or damaging ...? Would it be difficult sometimes to know?

Not really. You just had to watch it.

How often would you find it necessary, say, then to turn back to a doctor for advice about just where you were going to ...?

Well, it might be all the time, or it mightn't be. With a serious case you'd be in touch with him quite a lot but most of them came on quite nicely.

And what about with the nursing staff? Again, how did you fit in with them and their requirements?

Quite nicely, yes. They would be in touch with us and we'd be in touch with them.

Was there ever any conflict in views about what should be done and how best it would be done?

No, because the nursing staff concentrated on nursing and we concentrated on physiotherapy.

And what about the patients, were they generally appreciative of your efforts?

They thought it was fun most of the time.

Did you have a pool? Was there physiotherapy using pools, or that sort of ...?

No, we didn't, not that I can remember. That came a lot later I think.

So from Heidelberg you went to Redbank. How did you travel?

We went up by train. I can't even remember going there but we must have got there, yes.

What did you find at Redbank? How did it look?

Oh, it was a bit bleak. It was a lot of wooden huts, you know, and we were in wooden huts and tents. Well, the physiotherapists were in a tent - EPIPs, I think they were called - which had four stretchers, our own stretchers because you travelled around with your stretcher and bed linen. It was quite pleasant.

What about personal effects? How much could you reasonably take with you of things: photographs and curios or just odd personal things?

Well, you had a trunk that you could take with you and that was it.

What was the overall impression then when you arrived at Redbank? When you said it was a bit bleak, was it depressingly bleak, or again, you just took it as it came?

(5.00) Took it as it came. The hospital itself, it consisted of these long wooden huts. I don't know whether they were built as a hospital or a barracks, I can't remember.

What about your own accommodation?

Well, we were in a tent. Some of the nursing staff were in these long wooden huts.

The hospital was already up and running when you arrived?

Yes.

What was the feeling about the hospital in terms of morale and sense of purpose and so on?

Sorry, you just took things for granted, at least I did, whether the officers in charge - Colonial Speirs, he was the CO. Incidentally, his son had the top flat here when I came here. They took all the responsibility, we were just there as cogs.

What was your general sense of feeling about your involvement? Was there a sense that you really were making a worthwhile contribution to the war effort? Or, it was just something to be endured and go on along with as best as possible? What was your feeling?

I'm sorry, I just took things for granted, fortunately.

When you arrived at Redbank, again in terms of the sort of duties that you would have, how did that come together?

Well, it was just the same as everywhere else. You were a physiotherapist in a hospital. You took your orders from the medical man in charge of the ward that you were in. You had a couple of wards to look after, for example, and the medical man would say, 'I want you to treat so-and-so and so-and-so', and you'd just go along and treat them.

Did you ever have any cases where people had so-called 'war nerves' that made the task a little more difficult?

Oh yes, well, some of them were a little bit upset but we didn't have to do any psychological treatment. I think if they were bad enough they'd be sent to somewhere else.

Did you have to take special care or consideration with some because they were easily put out?

Well, you always had to do that. With any patient you've got to have some feeling for them in that respect.

What about your own health to this point? You'd been in Ceylon for some six months. Had you any problems with malaria or dengue fever, or any tropical problems at all?

No. When we were in Kantara - this is when we first went overseas - I went swimming in Heliopolis, on leave ...

Now, is this before or after Redbank?

Oh, miles before, when we first went overseas.

Oh well, we somehow missed that.

We did.

Now, we left in the *Mauretania* and we went to Colombo. When did you go on to the Middle East?

Now, wait a minute. We didn't go to Colombo. We disembarked at Suez.

I thought you called via Colombo and that's how we ...

On the way home.

> Oh, sorry, I've mistracked you, yes. Well, let's go back to the *Mauretania*. You headed off for Suez. What did you find when you got to Suez? What were your impressions?

Well, first of all we went to Colombo. We called in at Colombo and disembarked from the *Mauretania* on to the *Nevasa* which was an old Indian Army ship. On the *Nevasa* we disembarked at Suez ...

> Now, that's where we got sidetracked. I thought maybe you'd been left ashore for some particular purpose, you see.

No, that's right. Sorry about that.

> No, no.

And we went to El Kantara.

> How did you find the *Nevasa*? Most of the people found the change of circumstance quite marked.

You mean between the *Mauretania* and *Nevasa*?

> Yes.

Well, as I say, *Nevasa* was an old Indian Army ship. But you know, you take things for granted a bit. Well, we went to Kantara which is on the Canal and we stayed with the 2/2nd AGH. The men went straight up to Tobruk and we were at Kantara for about six months I think, and then we went up to Tobruk.

(10.00) What sort of things did you do at Kantara?

Rolled plaster bandages. That's mostly what we did for that six weeks. In those days they - well, they might have had them but they were too expensive. Nowadays you can go into a chemist's shop and buy a plaster bandage that's already - the bandage is impregnated with plaster but at Kantara we had the loose plaster and the loose bandage and we had to roll the plaster into the bandages, which was messy.

> Did you get fed up with doing that? I mean, if you were just doing it day after day.

Well, a little bit, yes.

> What about your evenings and time off, what sort of things did you do?

Well, this was in the middle of the desert.

> Did it weigh heavily, time?

No, you entertained yourself more or less.

How? What kinds of things?

Well you could play cards. We played a lot of cards - bridge mostly. Do you play bridge?

No.

Occasionally troops would pass through and you'd be entertained by them. They'd take you down to the NAAFI, or somewhere. We also had some friends in a small British gun emplacement thing - unit, and they'd come over and we'd have drinks or we'd go over to them and have drinks, that sort of thing.

How did you feel with the British? Did you feel more comfortable with them? A lot of Australians found them rather reserved and so on.

No, I was quite comfortable with them. So then they said we had to go up to Tobruk. We went up on a British hospital ship. Now, we'd been used to travelling with complete darkness, you weren't even allowed to have a cigarette on the deck because that showed up for, they told us how many miles. We got onto this hospital ship which was a blaze of light going through the Mediterranean. It felt a bit uncomfortable.

Made you feel you were inviting attack.

Sitting ducks. We arrived at Tobruk but we were only there for ten days. They had us stationed in an old inn called Albergo Tobruk. I was put in the cellar with about eight other women, next to the kitchen it was. Some of the sisters, the senior sisters had rooms to themselves in the hotel. Betty Rothstadt and Mary Bateman, they slept behind the - you know the desk that you come in to sign your book, what's that called?

Reception desk.

Reception desk, that's right. Well, they slept down behind the reception desk but Bessie Pakes and I were in the cellar with about half a dozen other women sleeping on tiles on our mattresses. But we were only there for ten days and we came out on a hospital ship again.

Was there bombing during that period?

Yes. The hospital was in an old barracks and we used to march down the road every morning to do what we had to do in the hospital. And while we were there it was - what was it? It was a 300-bed hospital. And they admitted about one thousand troops from - these figures might be wrong - one thousand troops from Benghazi and places like that. They were streaming back. They didn't have enough beds - it was a 500-bed hospital. They didn't have enough beds because, well, we didn't carry them, and half the troops were on mattresses on the floor.

The water was terrible, it was chlorinated. It was horrible to drink. I remember giving a fellow who was on a mattress a cup of tea and of course it was chlorinated water and he was sick and he didn't want it. He said, 'Oh, it's chlorinated water'. That was horrible.

You'd said that when the war broke out you had this sense of how stupid it was to go so far to fight each other. Did it dismay you to see so many young men who were being badly injured and wounded in battle and so on, and being sick.

Yes.

(15.00) Did it depress you at all, or?

No, by that time I was taking things for granted.

Which you apparently did most of the way through, it seems. What about the bombing, did your first experience of a raid frighten you?

No, it's not going to hit you. I'm sure some people must be frightened but I think you just think you're impregnable.

Did you know anybody who was injured at all?

Not in our unit. Oh well, when we left Tobruk a few of the medicos were killed because they were raided for about six months after we left. At the time we were very resentful that we weren't staying there, but when the men came out I thought how lucky we were because they all looked like little birds that had fallen out of their nests because they'd had privations. They'd had to shave their heads because of lice and that kind of thing and they looked dreadful, and they were thin and gaunt. So they must have had a dreadful time up there.

What about your evacuation? How was that effected?

Well, they put us onto trucks and we were taken down to the harbour.

Day or night?

Day. And taken out to the hospital ship on one of those level sort of - what are they called?

Barge?

Yes. A kind of a barge and we were taken out to the hospital ship that way, got on board and off we went.

Was there a sense of anxiety at that point, because evidently there were deliberate attacks upon some medical facilities and so on?

Oh yes, that was why they sent us away. They thought it was no place for women. These days, of course, they wouldn't bother.

So where did you go from there?

Now, where did we go? We sailed into Haifa and from Haifa we went down in trucks to Gaza where the 2/1st AGH was and we stayed there for a while and then we went back to Kantara. I think we were there about six months.

For a lot of men the notion of actually getting to the business end of the war, as it were, was of some importance to them. To have been under fire, experienced fire, for a lot of men seemed to be an important element in the business of war. That if they missed out on that somehow, they felt almost diminished. Did it have any particular significance to you to have been at least where the action was?

Yes, I'm glad I was there. Why I don't know, but I am glad I was there.

So you're back at El Kantara now for six months.

Yes, and then the unit started up at .... The men came out and they started a hospital in Jerusalem. I think it was the old Italian hospital, I'm not sure, but it's in a book somewhere. I forget how long we were there.

Were you still the same rank at this time?

Yes. The sisters went off first and the physios, we went up at Christmas time. That must have been Christmas 1941 because I think the Japanese had come into it somehow.

There was a white Christmas that year. Were you in Jerusalem when it snowed?

Yes, we were. It was very pretty.

Did you travel around the holy places and those sorts of things?

Oh yes, we went on all that sort of thing.

For some that was very moving. It gave a very special meaning to the whole of the trip to the .... Did it have any particular value to you? You weren't especially religious.

No.

Did you not send cards to your mother? If your mother was a Catholic maybe it had more significance to her.

No, I don't think it had any significance to her, either. She wasn't terribly religious. I think you'll find the Irish Catholics - there you are, you see, it's racial again - I think you'll find the Irish Catholics would have been more that way inclined.

(20.00)Were you getting mail from home and corresponding much?

Yes, I'd write to them every week or so. My father wasn't a very good letter writer. I'd get a letter from him for Christmas and birthday, and he'd say, 'Dear Ivy, Hope you are well. Keep your chin up. Your loving father'.

Would you write back and say, 'Am keeping chin up'?

No.

After Jerusalem where did you go then?

We went back to Gaza and stayed there until we went to Suez to catch a ship. We were supposed to go, I think, to some islands but by that time it was getting a bit sticky and they dropped us off at Colombo. But I think some of the troops ended up in Malaya or somewhere like that and became prisoners of war. I'm not sure about that. I don't mean our unit but other units.

Evidently there'd been some run-ins between Australian Army people and British. The 6th Division had been involved in some troubles with British MPs. Was there any sense of hostility or tension between ...?

I didn't know about that.

And then what happened after that?

Where was I?

Well, you've left Jerusalem and ...

Oh, we started in Colombo. I think we've said something about Colombo earlier.

Yes, we've spent six months in Colombo. At this point we're back at Redbank.

Back at Redbank.

Incidentally, in getting back to Australia were there apparently perceptible changes in the feeling in the country that now, maybe here was a country at war? Did you notice ...?

Yes, they were frightened of Darwin and things like that. I think they'd had an air raid or two in Darwin.

Having experienced an air raid, in a way, did it make you feel a bit more secure that you knew what it was and you were perhaps a bit better prepared?

No. Well then, back at Redbank. They decided to send the 2/4th, I think to Japan and China. It can't be. Yes. It wouldn't have been Japan but we were supposed to go up somewhere like there but we didn't we went to Morotai first and stayed there for I don't know how long and then we went to Borneo.

Just before we go to Borneo, while you were in Redbank and visiting Brisbane had you seen much of American servicemen?

Not a great deal. I saw some in Brisbane when we were at Redbank. We went to a party at Lady Cilento's, Bessie Pakes and Betty Rothstadt and Mary Bateman and me. Mary Bateman was a physiotherapist from South Australia who was in the unit and she got engaged to a fellow in the army and her parents knew Lady Cilento from Adelaide, and incidentally she'd

been in Cairo during her early life. Anyhow she got married from their house so we went to after the wedding party at Lady Cilento's, and there were a couple of Americans there and we went out with them a couple of times that's all.

If you went out with Americans did you discern any apparent sense of resentment on the faces of Australian soldiers if you encountered them walking along the street, or that sort of thing?

Didn't notice it.

And yet there had been some quite nasty incidents. Did you get to hear of that?

We heard about them. I think it was mostly the troops. They resented the fact that the Americans were getting far more pay than they were, they had better uniforms, that sort of thing, you know.

(25.00) Did you ever see any sense of hostility between Americans and Australians?

If I did, I didn't take any notice.

What about General Douglas MacArthur, did you get to see him?

No.

Penicillin would have been introduced around the time you were at Redbank. Did that have a marked impact?

Yes, I remember one of the honoraries saying, 'We've just put the price of a Chevrolet car into that boy', because penicillin was very expensive at the beginning.

And was the result so apparent that you appreciated it?

I can't remember.

You'd also mentioned in the Middle East, marching from your quarters to the hospital. Now, where did you do your drilling?

Now, wait a minute, that was Tobruk.

Tobruk, yes. Where did you do your drilling then?

We didn't do any drilling.

So how did you keep in step?

Oh well, we had the reputation of not keeping in step.

What about at Redbank, were there drills there?

No. No drilling there. At Gaza we marched down the road a few times and deliberately there was one woman who deliberately got out of step.

And did they shout at you, or ...?

In a gentlemanly sort of way.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: this is side one of tape two of an interview with Ivy Matheson about the 2/4th AGH.

Yet at Redbank I gather occasionally you did have official guests and there were some parades. Were you having any drilling there?

We did, now I come to think of it. We marched around a bit and we also went to Strathpine[?], was it, for an enormous drill or enormous parade before we went to the islands.

There was also, I gather, a bit of training in weaponry before going off to Borneo.

Yes, that's right, I'd forgotten about that. We were taught to shoot revolvers at targets. It wasn't very intensive, I think we only went once or twice.

Did you regard it as a bit of fun, or was it very serious?

No. Fun.

You also said that you later had begun to salute. Did anybody actually say, 'Now this is how you salute' and teach you?

Can't remember. Yes, we were supposed to salute if we were saluted at.

What was the feeling then, going off to Borneo where there were still Japanese? Was there some sense of concern about that? Because the information about the atrocities of the Japanese would have been about, I suppose.

Yes, but there you are, we still took it for granted. I'm sorry, but there's no drama.

And from Morotai?

The same thing.

But you went on to Labuan, was it?

Yes. And we were there when peace was declared. They had pockets of Japanese on Labuan here and there but we didn't ever come in contact with them of course.

Did you ever see any Japanese POWs at all?

I can't remember.

What about dermatitis, which I gather was quite a problem in Labuan? Did you have any problems with that?

Well, you see, we wouldn't come in contact with that unless it was noticed on one of our patients. But we wouldn't be treating it.

Did you have any troubles at all with tropical problems, again either malaria or dengue fever, or anything like that?

Yes, we were on atebrin of course - all very yellow. And one of the lasses, I think it must have affected her because she went a little bit off mentally and was sent back to Australia. And I think some of the boys went like that, too. I'm not sure.

Apparently as a reaction to the atebrin?

Yes.

Well, what do you mean by a little bit off?

Mentally off.

But how? How would that show?

Oh, she was wandering round the lines talking to people in funny ways. I didn't come in contact with her but a couple of the sisters were worried about her and they reported her. I suppose she was medically assessed and sent home.

How did you find life at Labuan?

Oh, the same old thing. We were in tents. We did our work in the various wards and that sort of thing.

Were you beginning to look with anticipation to the end of war? Was there a sense of impatience for it to finish?

No.

So where were you when you heard that the war had ended?

In Labuan.

But can you remember the moment?

(5.00) I went to a party, I know that. There was a portrait of the Queen in the mess that we were at, and I think it was a unit of South Australians who were gunners, and we all signed

this portrait of the Queen before we went home, and somebody had put VP Day - VE Day - what would it be?

It was VE and VJ.

Yes, well, they put that. And one of the fellows the next morning said, 'Who's this VEJ Day?' thinking it was somebody's signature.

I gather then after the war finished some of the Australian prisoners of war came through. Did you have anything to do with them?

A few. We had a couple of Sikhs who came through from somewhere and we had to give them exercises and try and build them up physically.

How did you get on with them as patients? Were they responsive and co-operative?

Yes, quite good. Although there you are the racist thing again. One of the wards was very busy and I went to help her fix up with the sister. Fix up beds, they were changing beds for more troops to come in. And the Sikh, one of my Sikh patients was there doing the beds and I lost caste like that because I was helping to do the bed. Do you follow?

Yes, there was a loss of face before this man as far as he was concerned.

Yes.

Did it affect the way he acted towards you thereafter?

No, he was very reserved. I think he was transferred later. But it hit me, I could see it.

Were you there when Gracie Fields visited?

We went to one concert but I can't remember whether it was Gracie Fields or somebody else. We sat in the rain and listened.

Yes, I think that was Gracie Fields.

Was it? And also Montgomery's wife, was it? I think she was there, too.

Or Lady Mountbatten?

That's the one, Lady Mountbatten.

When then you received news that you were going back, what was the general feeling? Was there a sense of relief, or again you just moved along with it?

Moved along with it. Yes.

What about when you got back to Melbourne, what then?

That's when I was sent to Bacchus Marsh for two or three days, or maybe two or three weeks. And polio had broken out again and a position was going at the Austin Hospital and Dame Jean MacNamara wanted a physiotherapist out there so I got out of the army fairly hurriedly and went up to be a physiotherapist at Fairfield.

What were your feelings then, to leave the army? It just slipped away from you without any particular moment?

No, I think I was a little bit sad, I think.

Had you participated in any welcome home parades or marches?

No. Saw a parade of - I was still in uniform and I saw a parade of men parading through Melbourne and I think they'd just returned. We went home on a hospital ship and we went to Sydney first and then to Melbourne on the train.

What was the feeling back in Australia with the war finished? Was there a different sense to the country?

No, I think it just started all over again. I felt lost when I got home. I was used to having all these people around and suddenly I was home with a mother and a father, that's all. And that was a sort of shock.

What about the working life back at a hospital? Did that seem different, too?

A little bit because you weren't part of a unit any more. You were there on your own. The sisters slept in the hospital mostly but you weren't, you were a visiting professional.

Was there a marked difference then in how one felt as a group? In the army you were a member of a team and close-knit and ...

Yes, quite a bit.

(10.00) There were special provisions that were allowed for ex-service people in terms of access to further education or special purpose loans at fixed rates and those sorts of things. Did you avail yourself of any of that?

No, I think they gave us a little money to buy something or other and I bought some anatomy books, that's all I bought, that's what I did.

Did you have any reason at all to ever call upon the army for any particular use, or references, or anything like that?

No.

What about the association with former members? Has that association been important to you?

Yes, it has. We play - the women who were in the unit play solo every fortnight. We used to have about two and a half tables, sometimes three. Now, we're lucky to have one because some of them have died off and that kind of thing.

But in the intervening years has it been an important part of your life?

Yes. And the unit itself has a couple of reunions a year and quite a few of them still go. The men go, too.

How long before you had your first reunion, when you met again some of your former colleagues?

I don't think it was very long. I think they started having reunions almost straight off, perhaps in the first couple of years.

Did it sort of come to you that in a way these were a very special group of people that you'd perhaps never again develop relationships with people ...?

Yes, I suppose it did. And I wouldn't miss a reunion now.

Is there a sense of pride still, with your involvement?

Yes. They opened a hospital at Puckapunyal - a new hospital recently. Somebody must have told you about that. We were invited down for the opening and that was quite something. That was what? This year some time. There were quite a few there. A parade. It was a shock to see the women brandishing swords and that kind of thing, though.

Do you feel that in some respects the years for all the trouble and the cost that it caused Australia, gave the Australian people some special qualities in terms of relating to each other and a sense of purpose that, in a way, we've never managed in a sense to achieve again in civilian life?

I think this always happens with a band of people who've been through the same experiences. As far as I can see, I don't think the children of the people in these bands have any idea of what it meant to their parents. And the grandchildren certainly don't. This is what I hear from my friends.

END OF INTERVIEW