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TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: this is side one of tape one of an interview with Irene Woodward, recorded on 1st November 1990 about the 2/4th AGH.

Irene Woodward, where and when were you born?

I was born at Biddulph in England on 10th July 1912.

Tell us something about your parents, and what they did for a living and so on.

My father was an electrical engineer and my mother, of course, was just a - she didn't work (laughing) before she was married.

What were they like as parents? Were they strict and authoritarian as was the case in the times, or - ?

They were like the parents of those days. We had lots of discipline and we were brought up to have faith. They were good parents. We were brought up to high standards.

When you say 'we' ...

There was seven in the family.

And where did you fit in?

I was the second.

What sort of environment were you living in? Were you in a city?

I was only eleven months old when I came over to Australia.

So your earliest memories of where you started to grow up, where did you grow up?

In Maitland, New South Wales.

In a country town?

Well, it's about twenty miles from Newcastle. It's quite a large town.

There were a lot of people out of work during that period and it could be a rather difficult time. What about your family, how were they off?

You mean during the Depression?

Mm.

Yes, well, my father, he was an engineer of a mine and he wasn't out of work. But of course there wasn't any money. And I acquired my matriculation during the Depression and went nursing.

During the very early years, when you were quite small, what sort of childhood was it? Is it a happy period of your life that you recall?

Very, very happy period. In those days we did the simple things in life, like going for walks on Sunday after Sunday School and Sunday School picnics - quite a different time. We had a very happy life.

Was it a religious family - church going, and that sort of thing?

We were brought up to have faith, and I'm very pleased that I was brought up to have faith, and my mother was a very wonderful woman.

Did you go to church on Sundays, that sort of thing?

Yes, always went to Sunday School and church, oh yes.

Was it also the sort of family where your father would talk about the social issues of the day, or politics, or was it children not to be seen and not heard, sort of thing?

We were allowed to .... My mother was a very well-read person and interested in everything, and so we were brought hearing about everything in the world. Oh no, it was discussed in the home. But we were disciplined, very much so.

What about your early school? Where did you start to go to school?

I went to school at the - Maitland - and I went to the Maitland High School.

They were state school and primary school?

State school, yes. It was a big state school - Maitland High School - a boarding school as well.

Did you board, or - ?

No, it was near home. We walked there but we thought it was near but it was about a mile and a half.

How did the idea of studying nursing come to you?

Well, when I acquired my matriculation we couldn't afford to go to university in Sydney and there were no scholarships during the Depression, so I just decided I'd go nursing.

Incidentally, was it a family that had had an involvement with members during the first world war - people gone off to war and so on?

Yes, I had, apparently, I suppose they'd be, great-uncles, no uncles, killed during the first world war.

Was it one of those sort of things where you grew up as a child conscious of the first world war and the service of other members of the family?

Yes, we were brought up knowing all about everything that had had happened in life, and about the war. We were brought up knowing all about that.

So where did you do your early training in nursing?

At the Royal Newcastle. I was there for nine years.

What was the tradition of training like there? In that even up until quite recent times it was not uncommon for junior nurses to be treated rather badly and bossed around and given a difficult time.

(5.00) Yes, we had very, very harsh discipline but we accepted it. We worked very hard. We used to work twelve and sixteen hours a day to get our work done, often with no days off, for twelve shillings a week. We worked very, very hard. We went for our lectures during our time off. We'd be work all night and be called on during the day or during the night if we were in the theatre. We accepted it all.

What sort of cases would you get in an area like that? The full general range of community sickness and so on?

This was at Newcastle. Newcastle Hospital is a very, very big hospital, and very well-known - Newcastle Hospital.

Did you have any particular outbreaks of particular illnesses that you can remember, like polio, or any of those sort of things?

Yes, I was a sister during the polio epidemic and some of my friends and colleagues went up to be with Sister Kenny in Queensland. But I was a senior sister on the staff and I stayed at the hospital.

Just how widespread was polio at that period in the country? Were there many families touched by it?

I don't think of Newcastle as country. Oh yes, many patients at that time. It was very widespread.

And what about in Queensland, what did you do there?

I didn't go. Two of my friends went. The hospitals were asked to send staff to Queensland and two of my friends went.

With the approach of the second world war, when did you become aware it looked like there was going to be war that would involve Australia?

We all knew that the clouds of war were there, but it was very difficult for me to get into the army because Newcastle didn't want to lose their sisters. So I kept ...

When you say it was difficult, what happened?

Well, they didn't want to lose us. You know, there was no help for us there to get into the army, and I kept applying.

Where did you do that? How did you go about that?

I wrote to Sydney, to the headquarters, and of course Matron - er, what do they call them - Principal Matron said I was a long way down the list. Well then I kept on trying and trying, and our superintendent, he became the Deputy Director of Army Medical Service, so I wrote to him.

Why were you so keen?

I wanted to do my bit, and I was young and I was interested in nursing and, oh, I wanted to go - very much.

So when you wrote to this ...

Well, she kept .... Then I even rang her up when I was in Sydney and she said, 'Oh, not you again. There are many more to go before you'. Well then I wrote to Ken Starr - he was Sir Kenneth Starr, the big plastic surgeon - I was just theatre sister. And I wrote to him, and I was on duty at the hospital and received a cable to say that I was chosen for overseas - in an overseas unit. But I wasn't even in the army.

So what happened from there?

Well, I went in to Sydney the next day and they told me I was on sea transport, but they said I was to go into camp at Ingleburn.

And did you have to do a medical? Was there a general check and so on?

Oh yes, you had to have a medical. And then I went into Ingleburn and I was there for three months and ...

Well, tell us a bit about Ingleburn. What did you find yourself doing there? What happened?

We were nursing, you know, all the usual conditions the soldiers seem to get - infectious diseases and the usual influenza, as we called it then, and all sorts of minor little accidents. We were kept quite busy in camp.

Did you enjoy it? Was there a particular nature about, in the army?

Oh yes, it was enjoyable. It was living in a camp atmosphere and everyone's bright and happy even though it's a dire time. And I found our soldiers all terrific people. No, we enjoyed the nursing.

Did you stay in a nursing home at the hospital? What sort of quarters did you have?

No, we were in huts. In huts, but it was all clean and comfortable and we had hot showers.

What sort of rank did you have then, as you went in?

In those days we were supposed to be lieutenants but of course we didn't have the pips or anything.

(10.00) Did you get any army instruction as such, any introduction to drills and those sort of things?

Some.

Like what?

We didn't have much drilling but we were informed about the different ranks in the army and what was expected of us and so on. We were more interested really in the nursing, I suppose. We were nurses, and that's all about it.

With the army side of it was it explained that you were expected to salute officers and that sort of thing? What was the attitude towards saluting?

No, we didn't have to. We were officers ourselves and soldiers would salute us if we were out, if they met us outside, in the city, or anything like that.

Did it seem odd at first? Was it something that was sort of quaint?

No, we were young and interested and we just accepted it.

So after the three months at Ingleburn, where to then?

I went home for Christmas leave and on Christmas Day my father came up to say that there was a telephone call from Headquarters, Sydney, to say I was to go back immediately. And I went back on Boxing Day to be told I was going overseas on transport duties. Nobody knew what transport duty meant.

Were you excited at the prospect of going overseas?

Oh very, yes, I was always interested. I've always loved nursing and yes .... But it was very busy. We had to find everything ourselves, buy our camp bed and buy everything.

Were you given a certain amount of money and then you had to go off and ...?

We were given £40, it was then.

Quite a lot of money.

Yes, but that .... I got ten shillings left. We had to buy .... This was before .... When we first went into the army, I was given that. And that bought our suit from David Jones, it was £9. Oh, it soon went.

Well tailored?

Pardon?

Was the suit well tailored?

Yes, well tailored, grey suit. And we had to have a grey cesarine mess dress and grey cesarine safari suit. So the £40 didn't go very far. So by the time it came to Boxing Day - didn't have much. But we had to buy our own sheets, our own camp beds.

Were you given particular specifications as to what sort of size, or the type of beds you could buy, and that sort of thing?

Oh no, it just had to be a bed with sheets. And then we were leaving the next day, on the twenty-seventh. That's right, twenty-sixth. I had to get everything and of course the shops were closed. It was very difficult.

So what did you do?

I got some sheets from somewhere. I can't quite remember, but I know I was weary and worn. We were able to go .... Apparently there was places that we could go to, to get our sheets and what have you. We had to buy everything ourselves.

Were your parents alarmed at you going overseas?

No, I rang Mother and my mother and sister came to Sydney with me. It was a hectic day. And Mother said to me, 'What is transport duty?' And I said, 'I don't know. It must be carrying the tanks'. So Mother said, 'Oh, they're the ones Hitler wants'. So every time a ship went down of course it was 'My Rene's ship' (laughing).

What was the attitude in the stores and that, at that time when you were getting your things? Was there a feeling, 'Oh, good on you. You're doing your bit' or would people just take it in their stride?

I think people do, when something happens, I think people do take it in their strides.

So having got all your kit, what happened then?

Then we embarked on the *Mauretania*, and of course we didn't get the privilege of the officers. We had about seven in a cabin. But it was a beautiful ship.

Had you had a chance to previously meet any of the other nurses you were being billeted with?

I hadn't, but there were four of us - two others from New South Wales and the one in charge. She was from South Australia.

How did you get on?

Very well. Well, I think people do when it's a time like that. They were very nice. They were tremendous. And then we had thousands of troops, of course, and we were crowded into the cabins. And we didn't quite know what was happening or where we were going, but first we went to Trincomalee and we used to ...

You left from Sydney Harbour, did you?

Sydney, and then went to Adelaide.

At the point you were leaving, I believe word had got around that, although it was all supposed to be very secret, that a lot of people turned out to see the ships off. Did that happen in Sydney?

No. I can't remember it. Well, I know my mother and sister didn't, so they couldn't have come down to see the ship off, I don't think so.

Did you come round to Melbourne then, from Sydney?

We went from Sydney to Melbourne and then Adelaide and Perth.

(15.00) What sort of traveller did you turn out to be? Did you get seasick?

The only time I'd ever been on a ship was to go over to Tasmania and I was very seasick because there was a storm. But I made up my mind I wasn't going to be seasick, especially being sea transport. So I made sure that, I just really made sure, that I wasn't going to be seasick, and I wasn't.

So aboard the ship you were going to be looking after any illnesses.

Yes, and plenty - all sorts of things happened.

What was the hospital area itself like in the ship? What did you have available?

Well, just makeshift. We just had to, you know, we were soon able to fix up a ward, the patients. That's not difficult to do.

Was it large?

No, because there were so many troops, but we managed.

About how many beds could you have handled?

We had quite a .... You see, it's very hard to remember in detail now, but see, I was on .... That *Queen Mary* was the one that was really terrible. I suppose there'd be, say, twenty beds on the *Mauretania*.

And how many staff to look after that?

There were only, the first time .... See, when we first went over as sea transport, the four of us, we were to go over and come back and keep going over. We had members of AGH going over. You see, the first few had gone over, and the 2/4th, the 2/6th, and the AGHs were taking their staff over. And we were the four transport sisters so we had whatever sisters were going over to join the AGHs over in the Middle East - we had that staff as well.

Was there to be a doctor who would stay on the ship?

Yes, we had a transport doctor, a CO, and he .... And then there'd be other doctors going over to join the AGHs over in the Middle East and they would assist. They had a theatre. They organised a theatre and so on.

So as you left Sydney, how long was it before you first started to get some patients?

Oh, it didn't take very long because almost the first day they got all sorts of conditions. And of course the injections upset them. Mostly in camp there'd be a bit of mass hysteria through injections.

Were you still giving injections?

Not on the ship, no - in camp. They got all sorts of conditions. We even had them with pneumonia.

What do you mean by - with the injections - mass hysteria? What would happen?

In camp when they were all having these injections - we had to have tetanus and cholera, and all the injections - they used to get very, very upset and high fevers and would be very sick.

Do you feel it was more psychological than reaction, or - ?

Well, I met some of the soldiers over in the Middle East and they were badly wounded and they were magnificent. And I think it's often when they have something small happening to them - it's like going to the dentist. That's what I found. I found them very brave over in the Middle East. They even joked about, you know, they'd have a limb severed, but they were wonderful. But when it came to having injection, and in camp - they'd just injure their finger slightly and be upset.

Would you get some big men who would even faint with an injection that would surprise you?

Yes, exactly. As I say, yet they were very, very brave when they were badly wounded. I've got nothing but the greatest admiration for them.

What about seasickness, did you regard seasickness as a matter that you would attend?

We didn't have a great lot of seasickness really, because those ships are very stable. I realised that it was when .... I decided that when we were close to the shore that's when you felt the movement in the big ships. See, the *Mauretania*, the *Mary* and the *Elizabeth* - I was on them all - and after all most of the waters are smooth. It's just near the coast. So I used to make sure that I didn't have to - that I had everything, you know, eye level sort of thing.

So you entered Melbourne. Had you been to Melbourne before?

Yes, once before. Then we went Adelaide, Perth.

Sorry, while you were in Melbourne, I gather there were people in Melbourne anyway who ...

Yes, then they got on at the different ports.

And people turned up to wave goodbye in Melbourne.

I can't remember that part about people waving goodbye. I don't think there were many people waving goodbye.

I gather also the ship got stuck on a mud bank somewhere in Port Phillip Bay for a while. Do you recall that?

I wasn't on that ship. I can't remember ...

[Inaudible].

No, I don't think so. And then we went over to Trincomalee.

(20.00) You went to Adelaide. How long did you spend in Adelaide?

Well, each time we'd spend just time to get - I suppose whatever they had to do. And also to take on more troops.

Did you get any shore leave during those stops?

Yes, it was very good. Yes, we got shore leave.

What sort of things would you do?

Wander around. And people were marvellous, you know, would come up and talk to us - and just wander around and have a look at the city.

What were the rules as far as fraternising with the men? Were you allowed to fraternise with the rank and file, or were you told that no, you should only fraternise with fellow officers?

Yes, that was strict, and also we were not treated as officers. We didn't get the privileges that the male officers received in those days. Not that we drank in those days but we weren't allowed to take alcohol - the sisters.

Did it irk a bit? Did you feel ...?

We didn't drink in those days.

But apart from the drinking, did it irk you a bit that you didn't get the same privileges?

No, we didn't worry about those things. If we were travelling on a train the officers would get first class - but we didn't worry about those things in those days.

What about Adelaide, was it your first visit to Adelaide?

No, because I'd gone to Tasmania during my training - when I finished my training, and I'd been there.

And then from Adelaide to Perth?

Went to Perth. That was my first time in Perth.

When you were finally leaving Perth was there a sense, well now this is it, now you're really going?

It was all very, very interesting, and I felt it was great being part of it. And the convoys were magnificent. I don't think I'll ever forget seeing all these ships in convoy - wonderful.

Describe it. Can you recall how they looked?

Well, it was just, you know, gliding along and of course there were no lights allowed, and it was just a wonderful sight. And I'll always remember on the Sundays, it'd be a beautiful day and the sky blue and the sea blue, and the beautiful church services. It was absolutely magnificent. On the top deck, and all the soldiers and nurses, all singing hymns. It was really wonderful.

What about anxiety about submarines?

We didn't think about it. And I know, I was on the *Mary* and we used to go up .... We'd zig zag all over the place, getting out of the way of submarines, but it didn't worry us.

Apart from the services on that first trip, on the *Mauretania*, were there recreational activities?

Oh, yes, lots of recreational activities. The usual deck games and there was the pool we were able to have a swim in. No, it was very good. And they had all sorts of wonderful concert parties. Now, the young soldiers organised .... They were magnificent. And there was always something on. Oh no, we were very well looked after in that way.

Were there any romances, or would it have been thought that that would be out of order?

No, well, we were different in those days. No, not really. We didn't have time really.

What about special purpose training? Were you being introduced as to the notion of war wounds in particular as such and how to prepare and do special things? Anything of that sort?

No, in the hospitals we sort of, especially at Royal Newcastle Hospital, in those big hospitals, you have all sorts of training. So we wouldn't have to have any special training as regards caring for any sort of wounds.

So you put into Ceylon?

Then we went into Trincomalee. And disembarked the troops.

By that time did you have a number of people who were in the sick bay?

Yes, but they were able to .... We didn't have anybody very serious. The only time was on the *Queen Mary* when we got to Port Tewfik, we had - of course we didn't have the antibiotics in those days - and we had three patients dying with pneumonia.

But on the *Mauritius* [sic], on that first trip no particular problems?

On the *Mauretania* ...

Sorry, the *Mauretania*.

On the *Mauretania*, no, I can't think .... I know on the *Queen Mary* we had seven appendicectomies, you know, that was amazing. And I was on duty with 400 patients with heat exhaustion. That was a terrible trip because the *Queen Mary* hadn't been prepared for the tropics, and we weren't allowed to have any air, and it was absolutely boiling hot, and all these patients with their temperatures of 104 with heat exhaustion.

(25.00) How did you manage?

Well, I had to do it on my own.

Could you get soldiers to help you with things?

The orderlies - they were exhausted. And they used to .... They'd say, 'We're not going to stop up all night' and they'd just sort of get themselves into bed - because they were all exhausted.

Did that leave you in charge even during the night?

Yes, I had to look after all these patients and we were absolutely packed because we had thousands of troops on the *Queen Mary*.

What could you do for heat exhaustion other than just keep up the fluids?

Couldn't do anything. I know after night duty I just wrapped myself in a damp sheet and turned the fan on. We had seven in our cabins and you could imagine the size of the cabins. I'd get up in the top bunk, moisten a sheet in water, wrap it around myself and turn the fan on.

Did any fellows get critically ill with dehydration?

No, they were marvellously brave and coped and there was a jovial atmosphere. They were wonderful. And as I say, we had these seven appendicectomies on the *Queen Mary*. It wasn't prepared for the tropics. The *Elizabeth* was. When we came back it was prepared.

How well were you equipped to carry out the appendicectomies?

Oh, right down the bowels of the ship they had the theatre - makeshift theatre. Of course they had expert doctors and theatre sisters.

You didn't have any burst appendix, or anything?

No, fortunately, no.

What about infections then? Did you get any infections after those operations?

No, there again I suppose, it was carried out by expert people and we didn't get .... No, we didn't get any infections.

Anyway, so going back to your first arrival in Ceylon, what did you do there?

It was interesting. We had leave. We were there, I suppose, for about - we didn't stay long the first time we went there. As soon as we got all the troops off we'd come back to get ready to go over again.

And from there?

Then we came back.

So it was an empty ship apart from the crew?

That's when we had, we had a wow (laughing). We had a cabin to ourselves and we had, just the four of us. We used to bring back internees and refugees. And on the *Queen Elizabeth* we brought back prisoners of war and refugees and internees.

What about that first trip on the *Mauretania*? You came back on the *Mauretania*?

We came back on the *Mauretania.*

So what sort of people did you bring back then?

Well, the first time we only brought back a couple of civilians. One had tuberculosis, and we brought him back. The first trip we brought back, as I say, a couple of civilians, one with tuberculosis.

These were Australians, or - ?

Australians, yes.

What about your relations with the crew? Was there a strict division that again you oughtn't fraternise with crew members?

No. The officers did ask us to have drinks before dinner and so on, and of course we didn't drink and I used to get near a sink and tip out the gin and water (laughing). But no, it was a friendly atmosphere. And the captain .... They'd have little functions before dinner, as I said.

Would you dress formally to go to dinner and that sort of thing?

We had our grey cesarine mess frock with a little muslin collar - uniform.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

Identification: this is side two of tape one of the interview with Irene Woodward about the 2/4th AGH, recorded on 1 November 1990.

Did you call in at Perth on the way back then?

Yes, we called in at Perth and we were allowed ashore, and as I say, the people were wonderful. They'd come up and ask us if we wanted to go - have a car. They'd even put a car at our disposal and we'd be there, I suppose, for the day. And then Adelaide.

Actually, Perth used to have, up until quite recently, a very different, more country-like friendly sort of feeling. Was it also apparent then it was a much friendlier place?

Very, very friendly and the people were wonderful. They'd come up to you and speak to you in the street, and offer to take you anywhere that you wanted to go.

So where did you go? What sort of things did you do?

We didn't really have time because we were only there for the day. We were just liked wandering around, looking at the city.

And from Perth, did you go via Adelaide again? The same route again?

Yes, went to Adelaide. And we always disembarked in Melbourne and then we were sent home for three weeks and then had to report back.

Now, during that period that you'd been away had you any correspondence with your parents?

No, and of course everybody cried when I left, and when they saw me they said, 'Oh, I thought you were going away', and by the fourth [inaudible] they all stopped crying, they said, 'Not you again' (laughing). No, they didn't, we didn't know what was happening. You see, I didn't know we were coming back so soon.

Were you instructed that you mustn't talk to people about the movements of the ships, that you couldn't even tell your family, or that sort of thing?

Yes, but I know .... I know I'm going forward a bit now. When we came back on the *Queen Elizabeth* with the prisoners of war and so on, we didn't speak to anyone but there was a lot of reports in the paper that we had said things but we hadn't. We hadn't interviewed. They said not to speak to any reporter, but however, they sort of made up a story.

Anyway, on your second trip out, where did you start to bring people again?

Went back to Melbourne and took more troops, of course - thousands of troops - plus another AGH group going over to join the AGH in the Middle East. That time we went to Bombay. And for some reason we were delayed for three weeks, so we went ashore every day.

What did you do then?

It was rather nice. It was like a three weeks' holiday. We went ashore and of course we ...

Could you stay ashore, or you had to return to the ship each night?

Oh no, returning to the ship. It was very exciting, a very exciting time.

What do you mean by exciting?

(5.00) We were young and it was very exciting seeing Bombay and wandering around. That's when I bought my table. And going to all the interesting places. And it was the Governor's Cup Day and we were guests.

Were you briefed about relations with the Indian people? Were you told that you should or shouldn't, again, fraternise with the local people? What did you understand as to what was correct in those terms?

I think everybody .... We were trusted. In those days we were trusted. They knew that we wouldn't say or do the wrong thing.

So it wasn't felt that there were particular customs you should be made aware of so that you wouldn't offend people or anything like that?

No, we weren't briefed in anything. As long as we were back. We had to be back at the ship on time - that's the main thing.

With that three week period where you stopped at Bombay, you had troops aboard there?

No, we disembarked the troops.

Where had they got off?

At Bombay.

I see.

And then they'd be taken further. It was the third trip we went right over to Port Tewfik on the *Queen Mary*.

So Bombay, you're still in the *Mauretania*?

Still in the *Mauretania*. Two trips on the *Mauretania*. And we were there for three weeks which, as I say, was very nice and very interesting. And then we came back the same way.

Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne.

Perth, Adelaide and Melbourne.

And the next trip you went on a different ship, did you?

The next trip ...

Incidentally, what was the reaction the second time when you got home and then were to leave again?

'Not you again.' Everybody had given up crying (laughing). And then the next trip ...

Had you a boyfriend at that time that you had said goodbye to, say, the first time you went?

No, we didn't have time for boyfriends. We didn't really. We were too busy at the hospital. We used to work long hours and I just didn't have time.

So the third trip out, what were you going on?

Went on the *Queen Mary*, and we were told it was the first time .... It was going right over to the Middle East.

Where did you board it, because it was such a big ship?

At Melbourne.

At Station Pier, was it?

Yes, must have been. At Melbourne.

Had you seen it before?

No, but it hadn't been prepared and we had - I've forgotten how many thousand - but it was absolutely crowded. And it was over-run with cockroaches. I couldn't drink tea for six months afterwards. There were cockroaches because we couldn't throw any rubbish overboard and the cockroaches were absolutely - they were everywhere.

What was the notion of ...? It would give away the position of the ship if you dropped rubbish was that it?

Yes, that's it. And the galleys were just piled with food refuse and so on. It was dreadful. And boiling hot. But still, I mean, it didn't worry us, as I say, we were young and eager to do our bit.

What sort of quarters did you have on the *Queen Mary*?

Very, very crowded.

How many to a cabin?

Seven. Very crowded. And of course we had all our gear. And they used to have ship inspection, and we'd have all our clothes hanging and we were reprimanded.

This was clothes that you'd washed and were drying?

Yes, washed, and where else could we hang them.

Who reprimanded you?

Oh, they'd have this ship inspection, you know, a great, about ten marching all round the ship, the *Queen Mary*, and checking everything and saying that the sisters' cabins were untidy with their washing (laughing).

Were you angry, or - ?

There again we just laughed. We said, 'Where else are we going to put them?' We said, 'Why don't you go and look in the galleys and see all the rubbish?'. Rubbish there, you see. There was all this pile of rubbish ...

So did you persist, or did you just - ?

See, we didn't let it worry us. We just laughed about it.

So you still hung up your washing?

Of course we did, where else would we hang it? You see, it was so crowded.

How did they manage with the meals and so on? Were there groups would take it in turns and so on to go to - ?

Yes.

Where were you eating?

Well, there was - what do you call them - dining rooms - yes, places with tables, but we took it in turns.

So you had shifts.

Mm.

What sort of crew did they have?

(10.00) They had the English crew. And I always remember when I was on night duty, and with all these patients with heat exhaustion, and you could cut the atmosphere with a knife. And you couldn't have any air anywhere. It was dreadful. Wondered how you'd live. And the only part that was air conditioned was the barber's section and that's where we kept our very ill patients with pneumonia.

How did they get pneumonia?

I don't know but they were very, very ill, because we didn't have the antibiotics [inaudible] in those days, so it was very serious. So one of my transport friends, she was chosen to special them. And there she was in this air conditioned barber's saloon looking after these patients. Well, near the ward where I had all these patients there was the lounge and it was semi-air conditioned but the stench! The stewards used to sleep in there with their socks on, and their socks hadn't been washed, and it was terrible (laughing). They used to sleep in the lounge room.

About how far out was it when you got to the point where the heat really became a problem?

Soon as we got near to the Indian Ocean it was very hot. The heat was excessive because, as I say, only the saloon and the lounge room were semi-air conditioned.

About how many troops aboard were there?

Thousands, but I can't quite remember now, whether it would be eight thousand but we were absolutely crowded with troops.

Now, I don't mean to be indelicate here, but VD was a major concern with the army. Did you have VD cases then?

Oh yes, used to have their injections. And they weren't allowed, we weren't allowed, off the ship at Bombay because of this VD scare and so on.

What about on the way out, were there fellows who came aboard who were cases that occurred?

Yes, there was a VD clinic. And when we got to Bombay, of course, they were told they weren't allowed to go ashore but of course they did. They went into those little boats but the next morning there was a long queue at the VD clinic.

What would they do? What were the forms of treatment they were using?

Just giving them the injections they had at that time.

There was one method of treating gonorrhoea that involved a primitive arrangement of using almost like a little umbrella device that was inserted and then opened up as it was removed. It sounded more like punishment than treatment.

Well, I wasn't .... I know at Newcastle Hospital they just gave injections. And as I understand they had the men in the VD clinics on the ships so I don't know what method .... The only method I know of is the injections.

Would the fellows look a bit shame-faced?

Oh yes, we used to laugh at them. Well, laugh because, you know, you always laugh at those times. And we'd laugh to see the long queue outside after the - Bombay.

Would they be embarrassed?

They'd be scared. Even though in those days we were very modest - I know when we had to get ready to leave the ship in an emergency we'd always make sure our pyjama trousers were rolled up (laughing).

In case of a torpedo, or ...?

We were modest you see. Now they'd jump in anyway (laughing). No, well, they said that they trusted us - there was only the nurses. I don't think they would be embarrassed with it as far as nurses were concerned. They looked worried.

What about security for the nursing staff aboard with so many troops? Were there any special security measures? Did you have guards on corridors, or anything of that sort?

No. I'll always say they were magnificent. I've been in the pitch dark in the Middle East and all crowded like sardines, crossing El Kantara Canal and never a word out of place. We had no worries at all, ever. You could go any which way at all, they were magnificent. Not a word out of place. Wonderful. We needed no security.

From Bombay where to then?

Then we - we're back on the *Mauretania*, aren't we?

No, we're on the *Queen Mary*, the third visit.

Well, the *Queen Mary* went to Port Tewfik and at Port Tewfik we disembarked all these patients and by then there were twelve transport sisters, and we were the only ones on the *Queen Mary* for all those patients. That's why, you see, we're out of ...

Were you run down? I mean, did it affect your health and ...?

No, because I'm saying we were young. I used to wonder how I'm going to breathe because it was so hot. But we came through. At Port Tewfik we disembarked all our patients and there were the twelve - they'd added eight more transport sisters on the *Queen Mary*, so that there were twelve of us to all these troops.

(15.00) With those sort of conditions on board, were there any conflicts between the troops? Did tensions break out or ...?

No. No problems at all. And the concert parties on the *Queen Mary* were just absolutely magnificent - superb. And there was just a lovely atmosphere.

What sort of things would occur?

We all worked hard because, as I say, there were twelve sisters to all those troops.

What sort of things would occur at the concert parties? What kind of entertainment?

All sorts of musical instruments, singing, a choir's chorus - wonderful. And these lovely young men, and the next time I saw them they'd been in Syria and were wounded, and they were like little old men. It was really sad. But wonderful spirit.

What about amongst the nursing staff, again, when there were so few of you to so many men, and with that sort of heat? Was there any tension there? Did you have any ...?

No, there was no .... We took it all in our stride and were quite happy to be able to do things. As I say, I was on night duty on my own with all those people. I had 200 patients that time. Most of them had heat exhaustion, but they were terrific. They all helped. And I know when they came up from the theatre, I'd be fanning them and they were really no trouble at all.

At Port Tewfik you unloaded all the men there?

All except the three patients with pneumonia.

What became of them?

They were - transferred them in a different way. All the other troops - because there were thousands.- they were disembarked and put on to troopships. Well, they had special conveyance for these three men.

Was it touching - in that going to the Middle East you were closer to the notion that there these young men would be at war - and to see them all leave?

Very, very sad. And these lovely young people, and waving to us. And as I say, the next time I was in the hospital at Gaza and we were told there was a contingent of wounded coming in to the tents - they were just tents, the wards were. And when I went in on duty to see all these, and their eyes lit up and they recognised me, but they were like little old men. And

they had very, very serious wounds - some of them just young boys, eighteen, nineteen - but they were wonderful. They were really brave.

Did it affect you at the time?

Yes, it affected me very much, but it was lovely to feel that they were so happy to see us again. Oh yes, naturally, it affected, but you know, when you've been in hospital for years you weep with them but you have to accept it and carry on.

So anyway, that first arrival with the *Queen Mary*, did you have time ashore in the Middle East?

That's when we got lost. They lost us then, lost us for three months. So we ...

What do you mean, they lost you for three months?

They didn't know where we were here and nobody claimed us. We got lost on the way, the twelve of us. So there we were in different hospitals. I finished up being a tutor sister for a while in Gaza.

Just explain the state of confusion. There you are, you've arrived in the Middle East. You're on the *Queen Mary*. You were told, 'Alright, you're disembarking'?

We thought we were coming back but we were disembarked. All the AGH - no, there were no AGH - there were just twelve of us. So all the troops were disembarked and we were told we were going ashore. When we got ashore we were told we were going to Gaza. Well, we didn't really know where we were going really, but we finished up in Gaza.

And when you arrived in Gaza?

We were put into different wards.

When did it become apparent that nobody knew who you were or where you were supposed to go?

We realised that nobody .... They didn't know what to do with us in the Middle East and they'd lost us in Australia. So for three months we wandered around the Middle East.

What sort of things were you doing?

As I say, working in the wards - but nobody really owned us.

Did that mean if, at a whim, you could decide, oh well, you're fed up, you'll go and do something else? You could go and work in a different hospital?

No, we were directed what to do but nobody would claim us. And my parents, of course, they thought my ship had .... They thought I was lost - that the ship had gone down. And I finished up tutoring the orderlies in Gaza at one stage.

Was this before the nursing staff was withdrawn from Tobruk or after that?

See, I'm not with the 2/4th now, I'm sea transport. Well, I suppose it would be about that time.

(20.00) What about, again, going to the Middle East, were you briefed in any way about the customs of the people or anything of that sort?

No, we just had to carry on ourselves, best we could. No we weren't briefed about anything.

So what about recreational opportunities there?

As I say, we went there, but I always remember at Port .... When we came back to come back to Australia after we were claimed, and we were going back to Australia, that was when we came on the *Queen Elizabeth*.

Well, while you were in the Middle East did you have time off? Were you able to get out and do things?

Yes, during that three months, yes. I was on duty at the hospital at the Gaza hospital and then I was a tutor sister there - tutoring the orderlies. And we were given leave and so on.

What sort of things would you do? Could you travel around and look around?

Yes, travel around. Went to Jerusalem and all around. There were plenty of places to go to.

Was that exciting for somebody who came from a religious family, just to be at those biblical sort of places?

Wonderful. Terrific. I'm so glad I visited all those places, especially then.

What about your accommodation arrangements during that period? What was the standard? What sort of facilities did you have?

Seven in a tent, and my bed was - we scrounged whatever we could scrounge - my bed was about eight bricks ...

How did you set about scrounging things?

I don't know. If you just saw anything you just picked up a brick - I don't know how we got the things. But my bed was .... There were seven in this tent and we had a straw floor. I was just frightened of scorpions - and that's the only thing that worried me in the Middle East, the scorpions.

Do you know anybody who got bitten by them?

No, but they were around. And snakes. One time we had a snake in the tent. But there was seven in the tents and my bed was eight bricks and three planks of wood.

Did you have any sort of mattress?

A funny little - we had straw palliasses some places - funny little mattress, that I had bought - one of those little thin ones. And we had nets. And many a time when I got into bed it collapsed (laughing).

Were fleas a problem?

Pardon?

Did you have fleas? Were there fleas in the area where you were camped?

No, I don't think .... No, we didn't have any fleas, no.

What about dust and the heat?

Oh dreadful. My first day in Gaza there was a *khamseen*, and I've always been very strong and healthy and I thought, 'Oh, how are they alive? How have they existed?', because it was terrible.

Sorry, there was a what?

A *khamseen*. You know, a dust storm.

Sorry.

They're called *khamseens* - a dust storm. It was absolutely dreadful. And they all looked quite healthy and well. And I thought, 'How am I going to live through this?' but the next day it was absolutely calm. So you know, the weather was reasonable really.

Did you have access to hot water for bathing and so on?

No, we didn't have .... Showers were out in the open and the water would go off.

What would you have - a canvas screen sort of tent area, or something?

Just an area - planes going overhead but we didn't (laughing) worry about that. Just about six showers outside, and as I say, the water would go off. Very rarely did we have hot water. My first bath after a long time was at Port Tewfik and they had wooden tubs with hessian around. And they had the Italian prisoners of war coming to the side of the hessian and tipping water into the tub. And of course being small I was able to fit into the tub - so that was very good (laughing).

What about just common things like a bit of make-up, and lipstick, and eyeshadow? Were you allowed, or did you have those sort of things?

No, we could buy a lipstick in the Middle East. You could buy a Wedgwood vase that was quite valuable and pay, well anything, for it - just nothing, we'll say a shilling. But to buy a lipstick, which would be at that time a shilling here in Australia - be equivalent to ten shillings there. I used to save many of the soldiers - they'd come and tell me what they'd paid

for their toothpaste - and I'd go in and tick the salesman off for overcharging these soldiers for toothpaste.

How would the salesman react to your ticking him off?

Oh, 'Me no like women. Me no like nurses' (laughing).

Was it important for the morale of the nursing staff to have at least some make-up?

Oh well, women are like that. You like to feel you've got some make-up on - oh yes. I don't think women ever lose that.

(25.00) Were there pleasant places that you could go to in the evenings? Sort of open, outdoor cafés, or where there was music or that sort of thing?

Yes, there was one near Gaza and we always went in the dark, and of course you couldn't have any lights, so it was always in the dark. And I can always remember - I still love jasmine - it would have this beautiful scent of jasmine. And they used to have the open top floor, and we had the stars as lights. That was when we had, you know, it was romantic. And they had this same tune playing all the time. There were two tunes.

Do you remember what they were?

I've forgotten now, but when I hear it it makes me nostalgic. That was always romantic - you know, dancing on the top of this sort of stone, little café. Then just before we were coming back ...

Were there any serious romances there where people were, say, heartbroken if somebody they'd become fond of went off, and that sort of thing?

Oh yes. There'd probably be more now, you know, but, yes, there were some sad ...

What about you? Did you form an attachment to anybody and then had to see them go, or ...?

No, I met lots of people and had a happy time but I never let myself become serious. Because in those days, you see, you'd be sent home.

How do you understand that to be? In what way was it made apparent that you'd be sent home if ...?

Well, for instance, if you did have a serious romance and so on, and, say, you became pregnant, well, you'd be sent back home. Your whole nursing career was ruined because of it. You see, in those days it was very, very strict.

And it would be a matter of considerable shame, I suppose, to be ...?

Yes, exactly.

Did that happen? Did you know anybody who found themselves in that position?

Oh yes.

How would you deal with it? Would you ...?

I don't know, and you don't hear about it until afterwards.

But if you knew somebody, would you try and pretend it wasn't happening, and try and ...? Was it thought that it was better not to sort of even mention the matter, or would you try and comfort them? How would you deal with it?

It was always very hush-hush. I know when I was nursing, you know, you hear a whisper. But, see, we were brought up in our home, too, not to gossip and talk, so we wouldn't say anything. We'd just listen - and you'd hear these things.

Did you have any good friends - people that you knew - who had that happen?

Oh yes.

Was it sad for you to ...?

Well, you didn't know about it till afterwards, of course, until almost after the war.

Did you know what became of them?

They came back to Australia.

Was the climate such that they would have the children, or would they have abortions?

Oh no, you wouldn't in those days, goodness me! No, they came back and had the child.

Would the child tend to be brought up by parents, or go to an orphanage, or what would become of it?

The parents would bring the child up.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: [this is side one] of tape two of the interview with Irene Woodward about the 2/4th AGH, recorded on 1 November 1990.

Of those people you knew who'd had children, what became of them in terms of the way their children would have been seen at the time? Was it the sort of thing where the mother would ...?

I didn't know about it until after the war, but the person concerned, she came back to Australia - naturally you'd be sent back to Australia - she had her child, and she married somebody else.

And the child remained with her?

Yes, and she had other children.

While you were in the Middle East did you get to meet, or have much to do with the British?

Yes, and they were terrific. The 'Tommies' and our soldiers were absolutely magnificent.

On the other hand, the 6th Division people fell out with British MPs and there was quite a lot of hostility between at least British MPs and Australian soldiers. Did you see anything of that?

No, I didn't see any of that. We just, when we were being transferred from place to place, we found the British - the Tommies and the soldiers - all so helpful. I can remember being on a train in the Middle East going somewhere and we didn't have any food, we were hungry because we didn't have much food over there, and we were hungry, and we were all crowded in this carriage, and we had ...

When was this? How did this fit in?

This was when I was .... See, I went over and stayed over there.

This was later on.

I decided that the fourth time I went over I was attached to the 2/4th, and I went over - because I'd met them going over and I liked them.

Anyway, so you were on a train and you didn't have much food.

Yes, I'm in the train and we didn't have any food, and we were hungry, and we had one blanket, there were about ten of us. And along came a little soldier and he had a tray as big as himself with a plate with several slices of thick bread and butter and all these big mugs of tea. And he said, 'Sisters, I've got some tea for you'. I don't know where he got it but, you know, they were like that. They couldn't do enough for us. They were wonderful.

The British Army tends to be very class conscious. The officers are a class apart. Did the Australians, how did the Australians see that aspect of the British Army?

I just saw the Tommies - they're the soldiers, the general rank. For instance, we'd be asked to the mess - just the sergeants' mess. Well, they were the same as we were really. And I don't know about the officers. I remember in Ceylon when we stayed on the way back to Australia. When we were in Ceylon we had to get this filthy home ready for a hospital, and the British colonel came around and he said he'd never seen women working like it, that it was wrong. And he told us to stop working immediately - we were scrubbing and cleaning - and he got

the Tamils. Well, they were no good at all. We just didn't take any notice. We just got rid of them and still carried on. He thought it was dreadful to see women scrubbing and cleaning.

During that three-month period, the first time you were in the Middle East, what was your impression as to the adequacy of the facilities available in the various hospital areas? Were there good supplies of everything?

Not really, but we sort of made do.

(5.00) Were there ever shortages of a sort that made you feel angry? That it just seemed wrong that here was a service meant to look after the young soldiers who were there and they weren't being properly - their needs weren't being properly addressed? Or was it just a matter of the complexities of war and, again, you took it for granted?

No, I think we more or less took it for granted, and we were used to going without. I can remember the food was .... But we accepted that the food was very badly cooked. And I can remember the porridge used to be very liquid, and the Egyptian waiter used to have his thumb in it when he served it. And we didn't want to go to breakfast because we didn't like it anyway and he'd be - as we went on duty in the morning - he'd be calling us to come in, beckoning us to come in to breakfast, but of course we didn't want it. And I can remember being on house duty and I went into where the cooks prepared the food and there was the meat on a big block of wood and there were more flies than meat. But I still ate it because you had to eat something. You just got used to it. There was nothing you could do about it.

Now you said at the end of that three-month period you were claimed, what happened?

Don't know, we were just detailed that we were going back, and that's when we embarked, and it was the *Queen Elizabeth*. And it was prepared as a hospital ship. It was terrific - all air conditioned. And we had German officers - prisoners of war - and several others, and they were very, very arrogant.

What were they doing? Where were they going?

Coming to Australia.

As wounded officers, or ...?

No, as prisoners. And we had many prisoners and we had refugees and internees. And it was very sad. You know, German families and lots of deaths - civilian deaths - we had on the ship.

From what sort of things?

Senile conditions.

Who were these people? Where were they from?

They were German refugees.

They were from the Middle East?

From the Middle East. And as I said, it was very crowded. And the officers - they were very arrogant. They had ...

In what way? How were they?

Very, very arrogant. One patient - and we had to treat them as we treat our own patients if they were sick. The German officers were - the doctors - were not very nice to their own patients. We were kinder to them.

Why was that, do you think?

I don't know. They were just arrogant people. But if you detailed them to do anything, if they were detailed to get ready for a church service, all the prayer books were in perfect line. They did everything in a most efficient manner. And of course the *Elizabeth* was a huge ship. And when they were taken for exercise - the prisoners - the prisoner would be leading them back because, because our [inaudible] had lost his way. And at night-time, when you were on night duty, the soldiers were asleep on their bayonets. But they used to say to me, you know, the patients, the German patients, 'This is the *Queen Mary*' - but of course it wasn't it was the *Elizabeth* but they didn't know it was the *Queen Elizabeth* - 'Hitler's going to get the *Queen Mary*. We'll get it and sink it to the bottom of the sea.' They told me that many times.

What would you say?

I just said, 'Is he?', I suppose. And one threw a glass of mixture in my face. But you had to accept it - there was nothing you could do about it. We knew very well who were going to win the war anyway. But no, very, very arrogant. And of course they were allowed all the privileges and the officers were marched into the dining room, with their heads high, to dine.

Were they offended that people that they might see as rabble because of the lack of apparent discipline, and who weren't as efficient, that they were prisoners of these people? Was that part of why they behaved that way, do you think?

Oh no, I don't think so. I think it was just that they were .... And of course it's like, we get arrogant people in our world. I think you get all types of people anywhere in the world. I think it just happened. These people were just arrogant people. And as I say, they were unkind to each other, that's how I found. They seemed heartless.

Were there some who weren't of that mould, who were friendly and more human in their relationship?

Yes, some were just lovely young soldiers, patients. But as I say, there were the arrogant ones.

Did any of the guards get impatient with this and knock them around at all?

(10.00) Oh no, there was nothing like that. As I say, there was a .... No, there was no problem there. I remember once, one of the German officers - he was quite a well known one too, I can't think of his name now - and he apparently had a light in the cabin which he shouldn't have had, but I don't think he was punished very much for that. But one of the sad parts, I always think, is we were told to go and - it was refugees and the prisoners of war - and take away any scissors or knives, or anything sharp that they had, or matches. And it was very sad. They'd bring out their photographs and - they'd all tried to save something from the family heirlooms.

Were those sort of things being confiscated?

Yeah, we had to put them in a big pillowcase, and I don't suppose they'd ever get them back. I felt very sad because - especially the German refugees, their cabins were spotlessly clean, and they told us about their sons in the war and so on.

Was it crowded? Were there lots of prisoners?

Lots of prisoners. But it was prepared for a crowd. There was more space, and it was all air conditioned.

Were you bringing back Australian wounded?

Yes, SNLR - Service No Longer Required - and that was difficult because .... It was difficult. We were used to night duty and stopping up all night, so we had to look after them because we were used to it. When you think of it, those orderlies, they weren't used to night duty.

Were there amputees coming back, and so on?

Pardon?

Fellows who'd lost limbs coming back?

No, on this ship, the *Elizabeth*, it was just - I think they were just bringing back to Australia the refugees, internees and these prisoners.

So where did you go when you got back?

We disembarked in Sydney. That's where we were told - because it was the first time the *Elizabeth* had come to Australia and I suppose they heard that we were bringing prisoners of war and so on - that's where we were told not to speak to the reporters. But the front page was full of what was said.

Were there people at the wharf waiting for the ship? I mean, was there a crowd turned out, or ...?

Yes, a lot of reporters. I suppose they'd heard that we were coming.

So having got back how long ...? You had some more leave?

Yes, and then I asked to go to the 2/4th. I realised sea transport was finished, and that's when I went over ...

Why was sea transport finished?

Well, I realised they wouldn't be taking any more troops over. Well, Japan had come into the war, so I realised ...

Where were you when you heard about Japan's entry into the war?

I can't quite remember. I think probably at sea - I can't remember.

Were you alarmed?

Yes, alarmed, but it's like everything else. You just realised something else had happened.

What about with the bombing of Darwin and then the push down at Papua New Guinea? Was there a general sort of sense that, 'Good heavens, the Japanese might actually invade'?

Yes, we wouldn't have been surprised about anything happening. I was in Ceylon when they had that big air raid in Ceylon.

What happened there?

As a matter of fact I saw the matron yesterday at the Returned Nurses' Club and I told her about this episode. We were there for six months and they had a ...

When was this?

This was when we were coming - the Japs came into the war.

But which trip was this? The third trip, or ...?

This was when the 2/4th were coming back to Australia, when the Japanese came into the war.

But in relation to your trips. We've had two on the *Mauretania*, ...

We've finished with those three trips. Now, I'm coming back with the 2/4th.

Oh, I see.

On the *Athlone Castle*, and we stopped at Ceylon for six months. They knew there was something going to happen in Ceylon and so ...

When you say they knew, who knew and how?

There was a rumour going around there was something going to happen. And a few of us from the 2/4th were asked to go to the 2/12th in Ceylon, to help. And we were told that we

had to have our tin hats on - take them on duty. Well, we'd been used to - in the Middle East - getting into slit trenches and so on, and we got sick of that. And we were told we had to, at an air raid siren we had to go to the slit trenches, but we had to take our tin hats. And it was very scattered, the wards at the hospital, 2/12th. Great open fields you had to go over. And this particular morning I heard the drone of planes and I looked up and I said, 'I thought it was said we didn't have any planes'. And I saw all these planes, and then we heard the intermittent noise, and I realised that they were the German planes, because the Japs had the German planes. And then the matron appeared. I met her yesterday in the club. I told her about it, too. She appeared.

Was this Jean Hanna, or ...?

No, she was our matron, 2/4th. She was wonderful. No, this was the 2/12th matron. And of course she had a CO telling her what to do, too. And she said to me, 'Where's your tin hat?'. By then the air raid was on, and you could see the planes dropping in the air and breaking up. And she said to me, 'Where's your tin hat?', and I said, 'I haven't got it'. She said, 'Well, go and get it'. Well, I can remember now, and it will live in my memory. I wasn't scared or anything but there - I told her yesterday - there she sent me all across these fields with planes breaking in the air to get my tin hat (laughing). And so she laughed about it, and said, 'Well, you see, how we were told that we must have our tin hats'. But that was a horrid raid.

Were there many casualties?

Yes, quite a few casualties, and our hospital was bombed. And that's where I met a lovely group of Spitfire fighters, and they knew they wouldn't survive. And there was one ...

Tell us about them. What do you mean?

The Spitfires.

You said they were a lovely group - what was it about them?

Well, we knew them. They were only young ...

These were Australian Spitfire pilots or English?

Australian. Australian and English. And we knew them. We used to go to the mess, and they were delightful young people. And they knew they wouldn't come out of it. There was one left, eventually.

Out of how many?

Quite a big, quite a crowd.

Twenty? Thirty?

Oh no, there'd be more than that. But they were very brave. But fortunately as regards this air raid, they knew there was something and they'd cleared the port so they didn't lose many ships.

Anyway, we're back in Australia with the end of your third trip, this was on the *Elizabeth*. What happened to you then?

Then I was able to go home.

You said you realised there was no more sea transport.

Yes, and then - actually I get premonitions about things - and I thought, well, I don't want to give up now. I still want to go away so I asked to go to join the 2/4th.

How did you go about that?

Just asked.

And what happened?

Well, I said I wanted to go to the 2/4th. I think it was Miss Sage at the time, she was the matron in chief. I've never been shy about asking for what I want. And so she allocated me to the 2/4th, and I went over ...

Where were they then? In the Middle East?

In the Middle East, mm. I'd met them on one of the ships and I'd liked them.

Why? What was it about it that you liked?

Well, they were very friendly and I've always been very fond of Jean Hanna, and they were just a lovely crowd. I liked them all really but there was something about the 2/4th - I don't know what it is - that I liked and I decided I would like to join them.

How did you go over?

Over on the - can't remember which ship I went over on, now. I can't remember the ship that I went on.

Anything eventful about the voyage?

No. The *Queen Mary* was the most eventful, I would say. There was a time on the *Queen Mary* when we were being chased by a submarine, and we were zig-zagging all over the place. And a couple of years ago I heard a German submarine officer, the one in charge. What do you call the - ?

The U-boat commander?

The commander, the U-boat commander, a German, and he was being interviewed. And he was saying that they were always after the *Queen Mary* because it took so many troops over to the war zones. And he said - I was really quite excited listening to it - he said that they thought they'd got the *Queen Mary* on the radar signal, and they sent the torpedo and it missed. And I was on the ship that time because we were told to be ready and there were messages they were sending over. You know, a ship would come near by and they'd send a

message by a cable. And so I was on the ship that time, and we were told to be ready. But that happened many times that we .... We knew we were being chased by submarines. But the *Mary* and the *Elizabeth* were so fast that they just kept zig-zagging out of the way.

(20.00) When you then went to the Middle East to join the 2/4th, where did you catch them? Where were they?

At Gaza in a tent hospital. They were at Gaza. Then they went to Jerusalem but ...

This is after they'd evacuated Tobruk, was it?

Yes, that's right. I joined, you see, they'd just been evacuated from Tobruk, the sister said, and then they working at Gaza.

How did you find the morale there, at that time, when you finally caught up with them?

I found .... What you have to remember is that we were all young people and, you know, eager to work and there were, tremendous interest and everything. I think the morale was very good.

Was there any sense at all that you were an outsider and had to prove yourself, or were you just immediately accepted as somebody who would fit in?

You mean ...?

For you personally.

Oh no, they greeted me .... Oh no, they were very happy to see me. I fitted in .... It's always easy to fit in with nurses.

What sort of things did you start to do?

Worked in the wards. And that was the time that our boys came from Syria, from the battlefields.

Were there air raids while you were at Gaza?

Pardon?

Air raids while you were at Gaza?

No, when we were at El Kantara - we were at El Kantara for a while, too - and there were air raids there.

Were they alarming?

There again, you see, we didn't worry about them. We were supposed to go to slit trenches and we didn't bother. Not a matter of being blasé, but it went on and on and on, and then we

said, 'Oh, we're not going to the slit trenches'. Well, I know I was thrown out of the bed so I went to the slit trench. You just sort of, 'Oh, it'll be over soon', and you didn't worry about it.

Did you have a raid during the night when you were thrown out of bed, or you were off duty on a roster?

Oh no, off duty. And then we took ourselves to the slit trenches. But it was a bit of a bother running off to the slit trench.

Did it give you a shock to suddenly make you think you weren't immortal after all?

No, we didn't think about it. I can truthfully say that I wasn't worried at any time, even all the time I was at sea. I think there was too much to think about, too much to do.

Was there anybody you knew who was injured or killed during the air raids?

No. Because it wouldn't be at El Kantara at the hospital, but you could hear the bombs falling and so on, but we had to be ready.

So who did you report to? Who did you work to, as it were, that said - worked out what you would do and your responsibilities?

Whatever hospital we went to, whoever was in charge - they gave us orders.

Who was in charge there at ...

Well, it was different matrons, you see. It was the 2/2nd at El Kantara. We were there for a while.

How long's a while?

Be quite a few weeks. And we were allowed one water bottle of water for the day - we had to do everything. You had to wash, and drink.

Was it a busy period?

Yes, hospitals are always busy. There's always something, apart from the wounds. If you were near - for instance, at Gaza when the Syrian war was on, we got a lot of wounded.

Were you in Jerusalem when they had the white Christmas?

Yes, wonderful. Never forget it. The old city - the snow was brown (laughing) because there's so much dirt and dust. No, beautiful. First snow for twenty years.

How did you celebrate Christmas and New Year?

Usually we made the best of it. We'd decorate our mess. And I can always remember though at Christmas time we'd be waiting for our meals but the cook would get drunk, so we wouldn't have any food. That often happened. He'd get an extra ration of beer and he'd drink it all.

So what would you do? Make your own or ...?

Just made do with what we had.

Were you in the habit of giving each other little Christmas presents?

No, I don't think we did - but Christmas was lovely. We made it a happy time.

And would you see in the New Year with song and dance and that sort of thing?

(25.00) Yes - and we had happy times. We had parties, even the .... We used to go to the different messes in Gaza. And we also, we even had a donkey race once and Sir Thomas Blamey was very angry with us because some of us got on the donkeys.

Did you?

Mm (laughing) and they were betting them.

Why was he angry?

Because he said it was not very nice for nurses to do that. And it was such a happy time. And the soldiers - they were betting on us - and they had carrots to lure our donkeys on - I was a jockey (laughing).

How did Sir Thomas Blamey express that, did he go and say it directly, or just ...?

Sent word, in Gaza, it was the 2/4th, too. And he said that we had to have drilling instructions, so every morning - I don't know whether it was punishment because we went into this donkey race, but it was wonderful fun, and very happy. And then he had this young red-haired sergeant drilling us every morning for about two weeks.

Was it serious?

Serious until - of course we were all different sizes - and he'd say, 'Keep them lines straight'. Well, you can imagine how it was difficult with women to keep a line straight, and he'd go red (laughing) - red as his hair - because in those days we were all very modest. But no, it was just amusing, we just laughed about it. I've got photographs of us all marching.

Were they arduous drills? Would you finish up exhausted at the end of them, or not too bad?

No. This was the first time we'd had any - well as far as I'm concerned - I'd had any serious drilling. He made us drill every morning.

You managed to march in step?

I suppose we did for a while (laughing).

What about birthdays? Would you remember each others' birthdays, or did you let that kind of thing go?

No, I don't think we really [inaudible]. We didn't get a great deal of mail. And of course I didn't, because being on transport duties and no one knowing where I was going or where I would be, I didn't get very much mail at all. I don't think we had .... We might have sometimes remembered birthdays but I don't think they were a big occasion - didn't have time.

Did you get homesick at all, or you were just too busy and had to much to do?

Didn't have time to be homesick, and it was no use becoming homesick. You wouldn't go away if you .... I left home, as I say, during the Depression, from school to go nursing, so I was used to being away from home.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

Identification: this is side two of tape two of the interview with Irene Woodward about the 2/4th AGH, recorded on 1 November 1990.

What was the feeling when it came time to leave the Middle East? Were you pleased to be going?

I suppose I realised we were needed back in Australia and, of course, I understood we were going to New Guinea. And then on the way we stopped at Ceylon for six months and then came back, and then went up to Queensland, to Redbank. Then I joined the plastic unit in the 2/4th. And when they went to New Guinea I stayed with the plastic unit because we were going later but then the war ended and we didn't go. But that was interesting, too, the plastic unit.

What were the sorts of things you were doing?

In the plastic unit? First, before the war, they didn't know anything about plastic surgery. I can remember, I was a theatre sister at the Royal Newcastle before I went into the army, and I saw unbelievable, crude plastic surgery - they didn't have any idea.

What do you mean? Describe some of them. What sort of things?

Well, for instance, there was a little boy with just a raw leg. They were trying to save his leg. So the surgeon put little clumps of tissue from another part of his body. Well, it was just a [inaudible] condition, it just died. I can see it quite clearly now. Well, of course, it takes a dire happening for something big to be discovered, and the way plastic surgery advanced was unbelievable. I've seen soldiers come in with ghastly disfigurement as regards their facial features - from burns and from wounds - and they've gone out with, after plastic surgery - tremendous - advanced very rapidly.

What sort of things were being done, say, with those sort of things?

They made a pedicel, like a sausage of flesh, and kept it attached so that a blood supply would be established.

Where would that be taken from?

From the abdomen, where there's plenty of flesh. And then after about three weeks they'd detach one end and attach it to the wrist because the wrist's mobile. And then leave it for about three weeks. And then the blood supply had been established. And then they were able to use it as they wanted to.

How thick would that flesh be?

Well it depended on what surgery they had to do, how much they needed, required. It would be I suppose, the biggest one would be about three inches in diameter - right across the abdomen.

Would you find yourself in that situation with some cases where, as men came around after having suffered some appalling injury that was very disfiguring, and would ask you how they looked and what was going to happen?

No, that's what I say, I think they were very brave. And we'd steel ourselves so that we wouldn't recoil or look horrified. You see, we were used to it. And of course it's advanced more rapidly now, but it was tremendous the work that was done with regards to plastic surgery. I was very, very happy to be in the unit. I finished up in charge of the plastic surgery unit when they went to New Guinea. David Officer Brown was our plastic surgeon.

What about with regard to badly injured limbs? Were there major advances in terms of what could be saved with bad injuries on the limbs?

Yes, they were used to that in hospitals anyway, before the war. It was just, as I say, about plastic surgery and pneumonia cases - you see we didn't have the antibiotics then. But it takes a dire happening for all these wonderful inventions to come out.

(5.00) So you went to Redbank?

Yes.

How did you find conditions at Redbank?

Our wards were huts. They were just big huts and our living quarters were just huts. And when the Americans came in and took over they were all lined and heated.

To that point had you met Americans in Australia?

No, the first time I met Americans was when we first came back. And I was a bit surprised at their attitude - carefree attitude. They'd say things that, as I say, we were a bit prudish and we weren't used to it.

What sort of things?

Oh, I can't remember now, but our boys were always so courteous and they wouldn't say anything out of place.

Were they vulgar or crude, or ...?

To us, then, it would be because, as I say, we were very modest. And then when we were invited to the mess for a party we went there for the apple pie and ice cream. We put up with their ....

It sounds like bait.

We could cope, it didn't worry us, but I'm saying they were a different attitude to our soldiers.

Did you have any friends who developed relationships with Americans?

No, I didn't.

Because I ...

We didn't have time and we used to become .... When we were hurrying, in Queensland, when we'd been out and we were hurrying, had to get back on duty, we'd all hire a taxi and suddenly it would leave us. And he'd say, 'Oh, no, the Americans, they pay us more', so we were a bit browned off. Not in a silly way but .... No, I didn't know any Americans.

What about hostilities between Australians and Americans - the troops? There were occasions, of course, and some quite notorious ones, where there were very big brawls. Did you see anything of those sort of things?

No, I don't think so because we were in hospitals looking after our patients, and I didn't know of any relationship at all.

You didn't see MacArthur, at all, while you were in Queensland?

No.

So how long did you spend at Redbank?

Until they went to New Guinea and then I went to Greenslopes with the plastic surgery unit - was transferred to Greenslopes. We had a section of Greenslopes for plastic surgery.

You didn't go to Borneo then?

No, because we were going later. I stopped in Queenlsand with plastic surgery. I was still 2/4th but the plastic surgery section stayed in Queensland and we were transferred to Greenslopes.

I think you said you were in charge of the plastic surgery unit with the nursing.

Yes.

What did that mean? What were your responsibilities?

I was the sister in charge.

What did that mean? What was involved?

I was in charge of the ward. It involved everything - the staff, the patients, everything.

What about discipline in terms of the number of nurses in your charge and so on? Did you ever have to pull rank or ...?

I had no problems with the nurses, 'cause after all we were all trained people. We had no problems with discipline there.

What about relations with the orderlies? How did you get on with the orderlies?

There again, they were only young boys, and they were eager to do their best.

Of course, in the Middle East those who'd been in Tobruk had had to take over a lot of the kinds of responsibilities that trained sisters had. Did you get the impression that some of them had become quite skillful in areas beyond ...?

Yes, I think it depended on the person, yes. And of course it's quite different now. They graduate now - orderlies. They're male nurses now - male sisters, male matrons.

Incidentally, when you were in Ceylon, apart from the bombing which you survived, what other things were you doing there?

In Ceylon?

In the six months you spent there, yeah.

Very busy. Many tropical diseases and I know we were always searching for a tapeworm - that was terrible.

Tell us about searching for tapeworms.

We had to search for the head of the tapeworm.

How would you do that?

Horrible.

Well, describe it, tell us about it.

We had to - it's unbelievable what the tapeworm does to the intestine.

What does it do? Describe it.

(10.00) It's hard to say. It's like piles and piles of macaroni (laughing). And you have to look for the little head which is like three little pinheads.

Is this an anal inspection, or where? I'm sorry, where?

I had to find it.

But where?

I'd have to get the deposit and strain it to try and find the head of the tapeworm because that was the only way you could cure them. But the patients were marvellous. They called it 'Roger, the lodger' - this horrible thing. And we had all sorts of tropical diseases and the usual.

Look, I'm sorry, was this an anal examination to try and find it. When you said you had to strain the deposit, this was an evacuation?

Yes.

But if the tapeworm had been evacuated then you wouldn't have a problem?

No, but still, the head usually just clung to the wall of the bowel, the intestine. And if it happened to come away with the treatment they had, well, then you had to find it to make sure it was there - that it had come away.

So if it was there then you knew that you could set about ...

You're right, exactly.

So what sort of treatment was involved once the tapeworm had actually been evacuated?

They'd know that once it was completely evacuated and the head was detached well, all was well. It was very difficult to do that.

I can remember as a child hearing stories about a method for supposed getting rid of tapeworms of starving the patient and then putting food outside the anus. Now, that's true ...?

No, I think they had some sort of mixture they gave to evacuate, but it was quite horrid really.

Was the effect of the medicine itself rather debilitating?

They seemed to cope with it all right, the patients. As I say, they were very jovial about everything.

Well, what other sort of tropical problems, were there?

All the usual complaints. The usual complaints that you get into hospitals - fevers ...

Malaria and dengue fever.

Malaria and dengue, exactly, all the fevers.

What about amongst the nursing staff and the hospital staff, were there people who got any serious effects with any of those sort of tropical problems?

No, we were fairly healthy. I know people from New Guinea and the 2/12th from Ceylon, I think they got tropical problems. But we were all right. We just got sandfly fever, was the usual thing in the Middle East.

Did you get it?

Mm.

With what effect?

It was rather nice because I had three days off (laughing).

When you were at Redbank, was that at the time penicillin was introduced?

It was just coming in. Just when I first came into the army was when penicillin - and that made a big difference.

I believe it was pretty expensive so it had to be used sparingly.

Yes.

So what sort of things were you using it for?

When I was on the ships we weren't using it, because I remember we had these .... What would have happened to those three patients with pneumonia, they'd probably received it - the treatment.

Was it an impressive drug? In terms of the response you ...

Well, then it was, too, because it was the only thing. I mean, at Newcastle Hospital pneumonia patients died. And they had various treatments. Some stimulated the heart, some rested the heart. I know in one ward at Newcastle they had about ten desperately ill patients with pneumonia, and we didn't have penicillin.

While you were at Redbank occasionally, I gather, there'd be VIPs visit. Did you have any important politicians or other notable people who visited?

No, I don't think so.

Or formal parades, or anything?

No, I don't think so, no. I think it was too busy at that time what with the war with the Japs and so on.

Did you have anything to do with the fellows who came down from the Kokoda Trail?

Yes, while we were in Gaza we had the wounded coming through, and they'd stay, and the very badly wounded ones would be in the wards for a while.

From the Kokoda Trail?

From New Guinea.

They were sent to the Middle East?

Oh yes. Oh no, I'm talking about Gaza now. Not Gaza, I'm sorry, I'm mean Redbank.

Sorry, when you said Gaza ....

I'm sorry, I'm getting mixed up. Redbank I mean. Oh no, we got lots of patients there.

Because some of those fellows were in pretty poor shape when they came down off the track, I gather.

Yes, there were some badly wounded, too. I can remember one poor little soldier and he had a ghastly gaping - this was at Redbank, he came back from New Guinea - this ghastly gaping abdominal wound. Well, then they had to transfer him to make room for more and he died on the way because they were bringing him down to Sydney or Melbourne.

(15.00) What about the effect of so-called war nerves, did you come across many ...?

SNLR, Service No Longer Required - on the *Queen Mary*. As well as refugees, and prisoners of wars, and so on, we had several soldiers, a lot of officers - Services No Longer Required, SNLR - and nerve conditions, [inaudible] neurosis.

Just how bad ...?

Oh, very, very, very serious. You couldn't leave them, you see, because they'd go overboard.

They would suicide.

Completely deranged, yes. Exaggerate neurosis [sic], they called it then, but they were very deranged.

How well equipped were you to deal with those sort of problems?

Not really. As I say, we could at least stay awake all night to make sure they didn't jump overboard.

Were some of them physically restrained?

No, we just watched them. Made sure they couldn't get out .... Well, at least the cabin's not difficult.

They'd be locked in.

Oh yes, they'd be in a little section where they couldn't get out easily.

Did it distress you, or weigh you down, or depress you, as you just saw this continuing flow of badly wounded young men whose lives were going to be forever changed by the war?

Yes, naturally, you'll always be affected by it. It was like in hospital. I always wept at every death, but I still comforted the relatives. You see, it doesn't change you when you see all these, but you are able to cope with it. You're able to cope and carry on.

Were you ever taught how to cope?

No, in our time we didn't have counsellors, you had to find out the hard way.

Were there any for whom that that just got too much, who couldn't cope?

Oh yes. I don't think we had many sisters, but we've had a few that later on, have had anxiety neurosis, but not many.

With war's end, where were you?

I was in Queensland when the war ended.

At Redbank, or ...?

At Redbank.

Do you remember where you were at that moment?

I can't quite remember where I was. I was probably on duty but I can remember it was very wonderful to have the war over.

Was there a celebration?

I would say so, yes, I'm sure we celebrated. I can remember when the first world war ended I must have been six and I can remember they used to have - you wouldn't remember, you were too young - those kerosene tins. People were going up and down the streets banging kerosene tins after the first world war. I can just remember that because I'd be six.

And for the second world war?

I'm trying to remember. I can't remember. We must have had some celebration.

What about returning POWs, Australian POWs? Did you have anything to do with those?

No, I didn't. No, as I say, I was in the plastic unit at Greenslopes and there were people sent over to greet the prisoners of war but, as I say, I was with the plastic unit.

So how long after war's end before you were demobilised?

We had a points system and I demobilised in March 1946, down here.

Were you pleased to leave?

Yes, because the war was over and, you know, start life again.

So where were you going to do that?

Well, I decided to marry, married a Victorian.

Where had you met?

We actually met on the second trip but I didn't see him again until I came back ...

Was he a serviceman?

Yes. And I didn't meet him again until I came back from Ceylon.

So having finally left the army did it seem odd at first, no longer wearing a uniform and being part of it all?

No, that was rather exciting to be able to get into civilian clothes and .... It's like everything else, you just accept it - a change, another change.

There were various sorts of benefits that were intended for ex-service people like low interest loans and educational opportunities, those sort of things. Did you avail yourself of any of those?

That was fortunate because when I married we were able to get a loan for our home. It was three and a half per cent and it eventually became three and three-quarters per cent. But single women couldn't.

So you couldn't have on your own.

(20.00) No, on my own I couldn't have. But I know when I was secretary of the Club after my husband died, and army sisters who - in one instance a matron and the other one was deputy matron of the Ballarat Hospital. And she came to me and said, 'Can we get a loan for our home?'. And so I went down to the secretary but it wasn't through. We'd been putting in for loans for female personnel - but no. So they had to borrow, which was about six and a half per cent, which was a lot. And about two weeks afterwards it came through that female personnel, army personnel, they could have - or service personnel - that they could have a low loan.

Could it be made retrospective for those who'd already taken ...?

No.

So they were stuck with it.

So it was very unfair really.

What about educational opportunities? Were there any special sorts of opportunities that you might have been able to pursue, in further medical studies or anything of that sort?

Probably, as I said, when I acquired my matriculation I couldn't go to university but I went nursing. Well, after the war, you could have.

You didn't though?

No, because I married.

Did you then leave nursing for a while, or did you ...?

I left it completely. And then when my husband died I went to the Club as secretary, and I was there for nine years.

Sorry, which club was that?

Returned Nurses' Club, ANZAC House.

What about the association with the 2/4th and the reunions and that side of things? Has that been an important part of your life?

Yes, very much. And they also belong to the Returned Nurses' Club at ANZAC House, and we have reunions there. 1939-45, the Corps birthday, because we started in 1902, and we have our Corps anniversary and all the AGHs .... For instance, I was saying, yesterday the 2/12th had their reunion at ANZAC House. That's when I was able to remind the matron that she made me go out into the open to get my tin hat.

Did you meet many former service people who felt - not necessarily hospital people - but people who felt maybe they'd been cheated or let down? They'd served their country, they felt that the country would do right by them and in one way or another they were left?

What you have to remember is, as far as nurses were concerned, we were always used to being pushed back. Now for instance, nurses in my time, you couldn't get compensation for anything. I've known people who have died of tuberculosis due to sheer neglect and hard work at the hospital. And they couldn't get compensation or anything. So we were used to always being pushed down. And the same after the war, see, we didn't get the treatment that officers received. We wouldn't get a first class on a train - an officer would. You get used to it. We didn't worry about those things. We accepted it. Not because we were weak, but what else could you do?

Did it finally change? I know in the general area ...

It's changed a lot now, yes. I know, not that I'd ever smoked, but at Royal Newcastle you'd be expelled if you smoked, or drank - which we didn't do either. But when I came back from transport duty I could see the change. They had a room for smokers. A dire happening changes everything.

For a lot of people who've served and gone through the war years, it's left them with a very special sense of relationship, almost a bonding to other people. They feel that in many respects they've had something that otherwise they would never have had. Have you been left with that feeling?

Oh yes, I'm very, very grateful that I had the experience. I think it was a wonderful experience and I've got very many wonderful memories of the brave young soldiers and the way you would laugh in adversity and you'd laugh at funny happenings. Oh no, I wouldn't have missed it for the world. I think it was wonderful, even though there was a lot of sadness.

END OF INTERVIEW