

Australian War Memorial

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TRANSCRIPT
OF
ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Christine Elliott Carson McMahon (neé Buchanan ~~(McMahon)~~) as a captain nursing sister, 1st Australian Field Hospital, South Vietnam, 1970-1971, interviewed by Lynn Hemmings

Recorded
at: Wagga Wagga
on: 3 July 1992
by: Lynn Hemmings

Description
First dustoff, relationship with other Australians in Vietnam, attitude to war, compassion, image of nurses, leave in Bankok, willingness to return to Vietnam, caring for Vietnamese civilians, leaving Vietnam, arriving in Australia, effects of war on people after they returned to Australia, "Code of Silence" about acknowledgement of service in Vietnam.

Transcribed by: Susan Soames, December 1992

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Transcript methodology

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It is strongly recommended that readers listen to the sound recording whilst reading the transcript, at least in part, or for critical sections.

Readers of this transcript of interview should bear in mind that it is a verbatim transcript of the spoken word and reflects the informal conversational style that is inherent in oral records. Unless indicated, the names of places and people are as spoken, regardless of whether this is formally correct or not – e.g. 'world war two' (as spoken) would not be changed in transcription to 'second world war' (the official conflict term).

A few changes or additions may be made by the transcriber or proof-reader. Such changes are usually indicated by square brackets, thus: [ ] to clearly indicate a difference between the sound record and the transcript. A double dash (- -) indicates an unfinished sentence.

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The way I usually start is to ask you about your nursing before you went into the Army - where you trained and what you did.

Okay. I trained in Scotland back in the dim dark ages when we were able to start when we were sixteen, and I started in 1954: that dates me a little bit. I was a cadet nurse for about six months or so - I was sixteen and a half. I started fever training first: I did that first.

What's fever training?

Infectious diseases. I trained in infectious diseases.

Oh, you didn't go into general ...?

No. I trained in infectious diseases first: that was because infectious diseases allowed you to start a little bit younger as an apprentice,so to speak, which was invaluable really. Especially at sixteen and a half, you weren't quite sure what you wanted to do; so I did that. And then I went on and did general in Glasgow; then I went to Dumfries and did some midwifery; then I went back to my training hospital and took a job as a sister in a gynaecological ward, and I was there for a while. And I left there and I went to do some infectious diseases and geriatrics. Then, in 1962, I left and joined the British Army. I was in the British Army for ... oh gosh, it wasn't 1962 - it was 1964 I joined the British Army, and I stayed with them until 1969. I got a bit tired of traditionalism and all that was happening in Britain, and the way the Health Service, etcetera, was going, and so I decided that it was time for me to leave.

So I decided that Australia was the place for me, and I wanted to come to Darwin. I don't know why Darwin, but Darwin was the place for me. So I went along to Australia House in London and I spoke to them. 'Oh,' they said, 'you don't want to go to Darwin.' I also wanted to pay my own fare because I didn't want to be attached to any particular person. So we hummed and ~~harred~~ hawed and carried on. Anyway, I came to Melbourne - my girlfriend was there, in Melbourne - and I went to work at ~~one of the hospitals~~the Women's (Hospital) for a while. Then I decided civilian life wasn't for me - I was going back into the Army, so I joined the Australian Army in 1969. I left for Vietnam in ... oh, I think it was May 1970, and came home again at the beginning of June. I went straight home from Vietnam to Britain and had a holiday, and came back. Worked at Watsonia, Puckapunyal, Brisbane, Papua New Guinea; met Bill - he'd decided he'd had enough so we retired.

Why did you initially go into the Army? What was the attraction?

I don't know. I think ... I'd always, even as a child, being born in 1937 - it was the beginning of World War II - I wasn't quite a 'baby boomer', but just prior to that. So I'd been brought up with a diet of war, soldiers, heroes and blood, and nurses, and sort of ... and I think that had something to do with all this, plus my father had been in the army and he had been an RSM. And I think that sort of influenced me a little bit. And, of course, my uncles were all in the army: it just sort of progressed from there. And then, as a child, we were encouraged to join cadets of some sort - army, navy or air force. Of course we had scouts, but it was all sort of war orientated, or defence force orientated. I think that had something to do with it. I never regretted it though.

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When you were in the army in Australia, did you apply to go to Vietnam? Did you make it known that you were interested in going?

I made it known that I was interested. You see, when I left the British Army, I already had a commission: I was already commissioned as a captain so I couldn't reduce in rank to lieutenant, so I had to be a captain. But I still had to go to school in the Australian Army and be taught - and there's quite a difference between the two. But I did let it be known, plus I was older than most: I would have been thirty two or thirty three, I think, when I went to Vietnam. I'm fifty five this year so that's twenty one years ago. Yes, I would have been thirty four, so I was a bit older than most, and I'd had a bit of experience in the British Army. I'd served with the Army of Occupation in Germany. So, you know, I'd had a bit of experience with army and with defence forces.

Do you know how they picked the nurses to go to Vietnam?

I've got no idea.

Nobody does.

I've got no idea. It was never discussed. They could have thrown numbers in a hat for all I knew. I knew deep down that I was going though.

Why was that?

I don't know. I just knew that if I was patient I would go.

Was it sought after? When you found out that you were going were the other nurses envious?

I don't think so. I certainly didn't detect any envy or jealousy, or 'why is she going and not me'.

But was it something that people wanted to do, rather than thinking ...?

The girls who were regular army, those girls certainly wanted to go. The older regular officer was very keen to go but they had reached the stage where they were starting to get a bit of problems with health, one way or another. Also, I think, psychologically you had to know what you were doing - it wasn't a sort of war game - it was dangerous and you had to come to terms with that, and I think you had to make a conscious decision that this is what you wanted to do and try and weed out all the other stuff that was going. I don't know, at that stage, in 1970, people were starting to back off. No-one wanted to know, and that horrified me really and truly: I couldn't understand it. Even when I came to Australia I couldn't understand why people weren't talking about what was happening. So maybe that had something to do with it - probably. That a lot of people just didn't want to be associated with it - Vietnam.

Did you get much preparation before you went in terms of what to expect in Vietnam?

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I knew Barbara Black. I had met Barbara at Watsonia just before I went. Barbara had come back and she was at Watsonia, and I was the ... and things had been pretty rough for her and for the people who were early. I think we were, perhaps, very fortunate. Preparation, no - perhaps a little bit of discussion with Barbara. Nell Espie had been there, of course. Nell spoke, but no-one really spoke a lot about what went on - I don't think you do. You talk in generalities, you never really talk about what's happening and what you're feeling and whatever: no, no preparation.

And when you were there was it different from your expectations?

No. When I got there I was ... I wanted to get this dust-off out the way as soon as possible ...

~~Given~~ Do you mean your first one?

... and that was policy. The first dust-off you were there and you did your thing. I was a bit anxious, a bit nervous, and I didn't quite know how I was going to react, or how I should react, to this. When it happened ... I don't know - I think I had mixed feelings. I wasn't sure what was going on, and there were lots of things happening. I did what I had to do and then left: and then I was right then. I think I probably buried it then and put on a front, like most of us did and just went about our business. And we never were allowed to talk about it then, for one reason or another ... not in Vietnam, but when we came home you sort of ... people didn't want to know.

So when you were in Vietnam if you had feelings, or you were feeling confused about what you were seeing, or upset, or whatever, did you talk to the other nurses about it then?

I think so. We had a tremendous camaraderie there, not only with the women you worked with and the men you worked with and the doctors, but everyone in the Vung Tau area. We'd have 'happy hours' they were called, but you got involved in lots of things and you were able to talk to certain people and they were able to talk to you. And a lot of the men used to talk to us about their problems they were having with whatever. But you could select who you spoke to, and you had a particular girlfriend; like Beryl Hogarth and I ~~was~~ were always friendly; Shirley Southwell and I were friendly. I was more friendly with the older girls than I was, obviously, with the younger girls. The younger girls could, perhaps, live it up a bit more than I could - I don't mean that derogatorily, but I mean that they had more stamina. So I always gravitated to the, perhaps, older person, so in that way I got lots of relief, yes ... but never really letting on what was going on deep down.

Some of the women have said to me that they had to be strong for the men: that everybody looked to the nurses - that they were the strong ones and they couldn't let their guard slip.

Oh, you had to always to be smiling, you had always to be there. But I think the strange thing ... (became distressed)

(Break in interview - 10 minute break)

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Do you mind me asking ... a lot of the women do find it a bit distressing to talk about their experiences, or when they start talking about it. Is there anything in particular that distresses you, or ...?

I think, probably, in hind sight now, at the time I really believed in why we were there, and I believed - and I still believe - that the boys who died up there didn't die for nothing. But I also believe that a lot of what we did up there was never told to the people back home, how we helped the people of South Vietnam in so many different ways. Okay, there are orphanages and what have you, but that happens in all wars. I mean, Europe was riddled with orphanages after the Second World War - Malaya, Korea ... it doesn't matter. But I think we did a lot of good there, particularly we Australians, and at that stage ~~only~~ having only been in Australia for a short time. Not knowing the Australians terribly well I was very impressed, not only with how they conducted themselves, but the compassion they felt for these people. They didn't really want to kill anyone or destroy anything. They genuinely believed in what they were doing, particularly young men and the young New Zealanders.

Where I worked, I worked in the casualty out patients department, if you will. I kept records for blood donations. I used to call them in for blood and bleed them and what have you. I also used to give them inoculations before they were due home, and coming back, or whatever. And I used to see a lot of the AATV ~~-~~teams (probably AATTV – Australian Army Training Team Vietnam)that would come in from the scrub. These big, so-called macho men that were tough guys, they would come in with bandol~~i~~eros round their necks, guns ~~corked~~ cocked and grenades taped with, you know, with just tape - pins out - and all this. Great big tough guys. And, of course, being small, I would just tell them to go outside and pin their grenades and check their weapons and all this sort of stuff. And in no time, you know, they were back to normal. It was if they were in a sort of make-believe land - I suppose we all were. And we would have some rough times with them, particularly when they came down for a bit of R&R. And they would go into town and they'd come back drunk, and I'd get a call in the middle of the night and come down to casualty. And there'd be a young fellow there really having terrible nightmares, and people trying to restrict him and all sorts of stuff: and all he needed was a mattress on the floor and just left there, hold his hand, give him a bit of a cuddle, let him dream his dreams, and then he was fine in the morning - well, superficially fine - and away he would go.

I regret the limbs that were lost, and the sight that was lost. And I don't know why; I've always had, since Vietnam, I've always had a soft spot for the Maori. They seemed to sustain such horrific injuries, I think because they were gung ho - they were always up the front - strong, warrior type men. And they had the most horrific injuries, and they were always the brightest, and they seemed to be able to overcome their injuries. I did lose a friend: we only saw each other twice. He was a young corporal up at Nui Dat - young boy McFarlane - and we used to talk to each other on the radio. And he'd let me know what was happening up there, and what was coming down, and what he needed up there. Of course, he went out on a chopper and never came back. And I don't know why - someone must have been sick - but I was working in the ward that particular night. We had Viet Cong in the ward that we looked after: we also had a lady Viet Cong; and we also nursed some children that had limbs off and had been caught up in this. And I don't know that I've ever experienced hate like that. I've never experienced hate, I don't think, ~~before,~~ but I really felt intense hate when this young fellow was down. We knew he was dead but nobody would say ...

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When you say 'intense hate', was it intense hate towards the Viet Cong ...

It was the Viet Cong.

... including the people that were there in the hospital?

Yeah. I just felt this intense hate for these people. I wouldn't go near them. I don't think I would have done any harm, or I wouldn't have looked after them. But I really hated these people for what they had done. And by this stage I had been in Vietnam for some months, so I was used to the goings on, but I had never really come face to face with my true feelings for these people. Oh, dear! I hated them that night - I really hated them. But that wore off after a few days: I wasn't really hating them, I was hating what had happened, and it was the outcome of hostilities. And that was just part of war I suppose.

But getting back to the fellows, yeah, we had to be up front, always - smiling and gay - always available when they wanted to talk, usually because of 'Dear John' letters - their wives had got about such-and-such. Gee, women can be really nasty you know, can't they? But these poor men, their wives were getting nasties, and usually unfounded - but they would be in all sorts of strife because they were getting these 'Dear Johns'. So I used to sit down and listen; be happy when they were happy and sad when they were sad.

And a strange thing happened when I came back - I never realized. I met a fellow in Papua New Guinea that had been with me at Vung Tau, and he was an officer, RAEME . And oh, I had to go and meet his wife and so forth. So he invited me to dinner and round I went, and oh, a bit chill. And I thought, okay, we'll see what happens here. So we reminisced and tried to involve this lady in the conversation, but she wouldn't be drawn in - she stayed way back. So eventually he had to go out - he was on duty or something or other - and we sat talking just about nothing and then suddenly, out of the blue, she told me what was troubling her. I had been part of his life that she knew nothing at all about, and she wasn't jealous of me, but she was jealous of what I knew about her husband that she would never know. And I never thought about that before. So after that I was always on guard if I ever met any of the men, or their wives or girlfriends, I was always on guard for this: but it never, ever happened to me again, but it really surprised me. And I just hadn't thought that wives and girlfriends would feel like that about other women who had been there, you know. And I thought, gee, but I suppose I would feel that way too. And they could never share in what was happening there, or how their husbands felt. But the Maori survived, which I was happy about, and we became good friends after a while, yep.

You were in Vietnam for nearly a year?

Twelve months I was there, exactly.

What were your feelings towards the end of the twelve months? Were you pleased to be leaving?

Yes, I was happy to leave. I'd only had seven days off in twelve months: I had been on call for twenty four hours a day, seven days a week - and seven days off. I went to Bangkok - I must tell you about that.

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The strangest sensation. We have been used to helicopters and guns and planes, and just a limited number of people, really. And I went to Bangkok, and we arrived there in the middle of the night, of course. And we went to our respective hotels: and I think there was two diggers, myself, and the rest were Americans - but they were very friendly, very polite - and off we went. And I got up the next morning and went outside and I froze - the noise, and the masses of people - and I didn't know how to cope with this. Suddenly here I was in this huge city with this noise, no restrictions, no barbed wire, no guns, no uniforms - just people. And it frightened the life out of me, and I must have stood there for at least two minutes and just couldn't move ... I didn't know what to do or where to go. And I thought, come on, you know, because I'd been here for about seven months before I took R&R, and I thought oh, look, this is something else, this. But I have never forgotten that feeling - it was dreadful. No, when my time came I was happy along with everyone else. It was turn away (inaudible) and that was me. I was ready to come home. I would have gone back.

Would you?

Yes. I would have gone back.

For twelve months?

Yes.

Why is that?

I don't know. I think I enjoyed it. I enjoyed what I was doing, I enjoyed being part of the Army machine, perhaps, or perhaps it was because I felt up there I was doing something that was worth while. I could see the end result of what I was doing. It wasn't like the girls in the theatre, or the girls who worked in the wards, but I got involved with going to VD clinics at the local hospital, doing inoculations for children. I got involved with what was happening to these women: why they were doing what they were doing, why they were prostitutes, why they were selling themselves, why their husbands were selling them. So I got into that a little bit, but I really thought, you know, I could do something, achieve something. I am probably wrong but that's how I felt. It was all worth while. But I still suffered the same stresses and strains as everyone else.

How did you fit in when you came back to Australia? Did you have the same sensation you had in Bangkok?

No. I left ~~for~~ from Vietnam and went to Changi. The RAAF gave me a lift to Changi, and I left from Singapore to go home to Britain for a holiday. So I didn't come directly back. So I went to family. I went to a country that didn't know much about what was going on - weren't interested. And I wasn't really ready to talk about it, and no-one asked about it so it never came up. But then, when I came back - after six weeks I came back to Watsonia - I just went back to work and that was that. Again, you wore your ribbons, but no-one really asked you.

Was that because of the feeling against Vietnam at that time, or do you think it was just that ...?

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I don't think it was fashionable to become involved. It was better to say nothing than be seen to be in support. And I think it was all highly political, and as you probably realized, in the military things are very, very political. Not only political in the sense of politics, but also in the sense of how the hierarchy are feeling at that particular time. And as officers you have to be so careful about what you say and who you say it to, so I think, for that reason, people were not interested. Privately you could discuss with the people who had been ~~with you~~there what it was like to be back home, how you missed the camaraderie, but you couldn't say it to anyone that you didn't know, or hadn't been there. It was as if you were part ... you were a member of a little club, and your club was the twelve months that you were there with the people that came and went with you, that they were part of your club. And that happened for a few years, you know. You sort of met these people as you went the rounds, and you'd get into huddles and say, 'Remember when ...', and enjoy the laughter and the crying and the heartache - but only very, very privately. And when I did come back my girlfriend and her husband never asked.

How did that make you feel?

Well, I was like everyone else that came back. We came back in the dead of night and we went in the dead of night. I mean, I left Melbourne for Sydney and I lived at WRAAC School, and for two days before my plane was due out, no-one asked me where I was going. They knew where I was going; they knew I was RAANC. I was at WRAAC School ~~B~~but they did not ever ask when, where, how or why. And it's only in recent years that I've started to think about this - but no-one ever asked.

Helen Adamson came to say goodbye. She came to the airport, and I was taking up meat pies as medical supplies - the girls wanted meat pies. And she, and one other - I can't remember who it was - there was only this physiotherapist and myself with the diggers - but it was in the middle of the night. No-one else at the airport but us - us chickens. And we had to take cardigans to wear - so stupid - and the boys had to take shirts.

To change into?

To change into before we got off the plane in Singapore. So we sort of left at night and came home at night: no-one ever asked us how we felt - not even our own people. I mean, our own directors of nursing or our colonels or whoever - they never asked us - they never debriefed us - they never asked us how it felt. So we all lived in our own little private section unless you spoke to ... Of course, I was fortunate because I always had Beryl around and ... Gosh, I can't remember this red-haired girl that worked at theatre ... it's Shirley Southwell of course. And a couple of times Beryl and I went from ... Beryl was in Melbourne at that stage, and I think I was at Puckapunyal and we drove up to Canberra and we had a sort of get together, the four of us - chat and laugh. But it was never outside that circle.

Has there been a time since where you've actually talked about it, where you felt comfortable enough to talk about it?

Well, Bill has been to Vietnam, so I am fortunate. He never talks much either. I think we've probably spoken more ... oh, perhaps in the last six, seven years, than we have in the rest of the time. For some reason or other we've met young men - oh, they're not so young now - men who went there in their twenties. We've listened to what they have had to say, and the

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problems that they have had: and some of it is not very nice. And Bill, now, is a counsellor for Vietnam veterans for this area. So he hears what's going on. I've read a couple of publications about, supposedly, what has gone on. I'm not really convinced that a lot of it is genuine: I think some of it is, but a lot of it is stuff that probably would have happened anyway. I've never really sat down and discussed how I feel, or how I felt, but of late it has been coming up. I think because of the work I'm doing at the moment: it's a lot of soul searching and a lot of 'whys' being asked. And I think ... in fact it was Annie ~~[a colleague],~~(inaudible), a year and a half ago ... But oh, no, something happened and ... I think I can become very angry sometimes about some things, and it was Annie who said to me, 'Chris, I think your anger has to do with Vietnam. The anger that you feel you're still feeling. It's the anger you suppressed in Vietnam.' And I think she's probably right. And I think from that point of view, yes, I'm coming to terms with it. And I think she ... No-one had ever said that to me before, but I think that's what it is.

What do you think made you angry?

I think the anger of the waste, and the carnage, and the unnecessary stuff that went on, and the degradation of men; the drug addiction; the alcoholism; the venereal diseases; the whole hotchpotch of what was going on around me. And perhaps I knew more about that because where I worked the men sort of came to me before they went to the clinic. And the people who didn't come via the clinic, that came via the back door for one reason or another. And I think, because of all that stuff that was going on, that made me angry because a lot of it was unnecessary. But I don't know that the Australian public would have accepted brothels, you know, they just wouldn't. I mean, their son would never do such a thing. And that was understandable, but a lot of it could have been controlled if it hadn't been a political no-no. And a lot of men could have been - and women - could have been helped. Perhaps a lot of marriages would have survived if only we'd helped that little bit more. I think that's where the anger came from.

I notice that a lot of the women that I've interviewed, most of them are still nursing, but a lot of them are working with the terminally ill or working with people with AIDS - you are working with the terminally ill. Do you think there's any connection between ...?

I think the women in my age group, we naturally gravitate towards palliative care, because we are no longer interested in the drama and the dramatics. And I think, as we get older, we get wiser: and a lot of us don't agree with what's happening now, and what they are doing to people in the name of medicine. I mean, I don't know that that's just restricted to my age group: I think probably the younger ladies are feeling the same, that perhaps we're doing a lot of stuff that really we shouldn't be doing. And perhaps we should let people have a little bit more dignity. No, I don't think it's associated: I just think it's part of getting old, you know. I mean, let's face it, there are not many fifty five year olds or sixty year olds who could run around ~~busy~~ acute surgical wards these days. I mean, physically I don't think it's ... Mentally a lot of us are able to - I think so - because we are still alert and we can still learn, even if it is slow. I think we have a lot to give, but I don't think physically we're able to do that. So we sort of gravitate to the slower pace. And also, I think a lot of that experience, through our lifetime of nursing, is of value when we are looking after someone who has been told, you know, "Finis, ~~fine~~, that's it". I don't think Vietnam has anything to do with it - I don't think so. I do believe that perhaps a couple of the girls who were in my time, I think they probably left

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nursing because of what happened there. I think a couple were the wrong choice: that was no fault of their own. The fault lay with the powers that be, that didn't get them out of there when they knew that it wasn't right for them.

> In terms of the choice of people who went, when you said 'the wrong choice', do you think people who were 'the wrong choice' were those who were lacking in nursing skills or those who were lacking in survival skills?

I would have thought that, probably, their nursing skills, because they were relatively young, let's face it. I mean they were what, early twenties.

> Yeah, some of them were very young.

They had had very little experience, even in a busy casualty. I mean, Vietnam was very like what a big city hospital will be at the weekend, after a gang fight: there was no difference except the trimmings with the trappings - the body bags and the like, or the triage or whatever. We didn't have that sort of thing in Australia when we went up there. This was all pioneer stuff - triage and whatever. But these girls, they hadn't lived themselves: they didn't know a great deal about people, and they certainly didn't know a lot about the digger as a soldier. See, a lot of us looked upon the digger as a ... just a soldier. The digger is not a soldier: the digger is a unit. He's a man and he has a family and he has children, and he has his career prospects. This is his job, but he can never be isolated from his family or his job. And a lot of these girls didn't have these understandings of the digger. A lot of them they were only joining the army to go to Vietnam - they weren't career nurses. And I think yes, skills but I also think perhaps ten per cent survival. Deficiencies created problems. But, to my knowledge, there weren't many of those forty three who didn't survive. Now whether they have survived over the years I don't know.

(Dialogue largely inaudible at this point)

> ... and it interests me that the nurses that went are coming across as being survivors. One of the things that is coming out of America is that some of the recent literature is portraying the nurses, the American nurses, as real victims of the war. There's articles on 'forgotten veterans'. But that feeling isn't really coming through with the Australian nurses.

We were certainly not forgotten. The diggers looked after us - they looked after us extremely well in that nothing would have been allowed to happen to us. It wouldn't have mattered whatever happened, they were always aware that we were up there on that hill, and the fence was around us. If there was ever any intrusion we would be safe. I think where we differed from our American colleagues - the number of casualties that ~~those~~ these women cared for. They are talking about ten, twenty casualties every five minutes. I mean that ... I'm not surprised they are not survivors. But I think they also suffered from lack of recognition for the work they did, and they have to go and come dead of night, and they had to survive with no help from anyone.

> The other thing the American literature pointed to was the sexual harrassment the American nurses experienced. Was that your experience?

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It certainly wasn't my experience. I didn't experience that at all. In fact, I would have said the opposite. It was certainly available if that's what you wanted. We had a couple of peeping Toms around the barracks but I think that was only ... they only wanted a bit of comfort - they only wanted a female - it wouldn't have mattered - not sexually. It must be terrible for them living in their trenches. In my time there I never knew of any harrassment. Oh, there was a couple of fellows would make advances ... there is something wrong with you if you're not [made advances]. You couldn't dress up and not expect some sort of advance. No, I don't think that applies to Australian nurses, certainly not in my time.

(Dialogue largely inaudible at this point)

~~END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A~~

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