



# Australian War Memorial

## Sound Collection

### TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

**S01547**

**Colleen Ann Thurgar (néé Mealy)** as a lieutenant nursing sister 8th Ambulance later 1st Australian Field Hospital, South Vietnam 1966-1967, interviewed by Lynn Hemmings

#### **Recorded**

**at:** Canberra

**on:** 19 September 1991

**by:** Lynn Hemmings

#### **Description**

Joining army; in the first group of four nurses to be posted to 8th Field Ambulance in Vietnam; description of accommodation and hospital facilities; hospital upgraded to 1 Australian Hospital; uniforms; sexual harrasment and discrimination; friendship between the nurses; relations with other medical staff; attitude of medical orderlies to the arrival of nurses; handing over patients to RAAF nurses for evacuation back to Australia; description of patient "Jock" Sutherland; emotional stresses among medical staff becoming evident after about nine months in Vietnam; recreation; return to Australia; stayed in army for five years after return from Vietnam then resigned when pregnant; effects of service in Vietnam on attitudes to life; became civilian nurse working for the army at Royal Military College, Duntroon in Canberra; took position as Triage Sister at Royal Canberra Hospital. Australian troops with Venereal Disease; setting up VD clinic for Vietnamese civilians; attitude to Vietnam War; became involved with the Vietnam Veterans' Counselling Service in the 1980's; joined a number of welfare committees for Vietnam veterans; Agent Orange; personal effects of service in Vietnam; "Welcome Home Parade" in Sydney; building of Vietnam War Memorial in Canberra; comparison between Australian and American casualty treatment procedures.

**Transcribed by:** Susan Soames, February 1992

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## **Transcript methodology**

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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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Identification: This is Lynn Hemmings. I'm interviewing Colleen Thurgar in Canberra for the Oral History Project of RAANC nurses who served in Vietnam. The date is 19th September 1991. The interview is taking place in Canberra.

Just to start, can tell me about your nursing background, where you trained before you went into the army.

I trained at Port Augusta Hospital in South Australia and from there I went to St Andrews in Adelaide and did my staffing. From there I joined the army because that's all I'd ever wanted to do.

Why did you join the army?

I'd always wanted to join the army. I don't know. It's like: why did you go nursing? It's just something you want to do.

How long had you been nursing before you joined the army?

Straight after I finished my staffing.

So only a year after you registered. At that time did you think that you might be sent to Vietnam?

Vietnam wasn't even thought of then.

And how long were you in the army before you went to Vietnam?

I was in for two years before I went to Vietnam.

And did you volunteer to go to Vietnam or were you asked to go?

No. I had an unusual way of finding out I was going to Vietnam. I came home from a function one night and it was late and I put the radio on and I heard the late news and I heard that there were four nurses been chosen to go to Vietnam. And I thought, 'Oh the lucky devils', and they gave the names and mine was the last name. And I thought, 'Oh, was hearing right?'. So I raced down, woke matron up and said, 'I just heard who was going to Vietnam. Is it true?'. She said, 'Yes, but it's a secret'. I said, 'Well, it's not any more, it's on the radio and my mother's most probably heard that'. She said, 'Oh yes, you are'. I said, 'When?'. She said, 'In ten days'. I said, 'Oh that's nice. I haven't got anything to wear'. And she said, 'Oh well, you've got to have your shots and everything now you know'. I said, 'How long have you known?'. She said, 'Oh, for a little while'. I thought, 'Oh you rotten sods. They'd most probably known for months', because there'd been rumours that you might go and the girls might be going and others might not be going. So I rang up my mother. I said, 'Mum, I'm going to Vietnam'. Dead silence on the end of the phone. You know, she ... then she put me on to Dad and Dad couldn't talk and, oh, I couldn't work out what all the problem was. I was really excited and they weren't at all. So then it was a real rush to get ready because I was posted to Kapooka in Wagga at the time and you're entitled to seven days pre-em(barkation) leave. So I got my car home and got everything sorted out. And because I'd trained in a small

country town everybody knew I was going. And I'd worked with the Flying Doctor before a little bit and the pilot there said, 'No bird from Port Augusta's going off to Vietnam without a good send off'. So they flew my parents and myself down to Adelaide to catch the flight out which was good. I mean, the town seemed to be behind me to send me off which was good.

And so you went across with the other three girls.

Yeah, we met up in Sydney.

Did you know any of those beforehand?

No, no. We stayed at RAAF barracks on Mosman Heights there for a night before we went and got to know one another.

Did you have any preparation other than having some injections? Did you know what to expect when you got to Vietnam?

Not really. But before that I'd done a couple of major exercises up north at Barrowina and I think because I passed the test with the Second World War sisters up there that I got selected. I really think, although they've never said, I really think that was the testing ground on who they were going to choose for the position. Though the other three weren't there. They also chose people because of their theatre experience too because there was a theatre sister. I was one of the first four. There was Terri there was Amy, Maggie and myself. Maggie and I were the theatre sisters and I think that's why I won one of the caps.

Some of the other women have said that it was a privilege to be accepted. Was it like that for you?

Well yes, because I was the youngest one and the most junior. When you're looking at captains that had been in the Service for ten to fifteen years and here was lowly little old me getting a chance at this, you know, it was really great.

Can you describe the hospital? Because being one of the first people, you weren't in the 1 Australia Field Hospital first of all, were you?

No. We were at 8 Field Ambulance. When we first got there it was tin huts. When we first arrived they didn't know where they were going to put us and they'd started to build this building for the padres because everybody else was still in tents. So they kicked the padres out - well, they hadn't even moved in - but they decided the padres couldn't have a wooden hut any more, that we could have this wooden hut. It was just one wooden hut, long wooden hut. It was surrounded by canvas up to the roof-line and no windows ... oh, windows but no shutters or anything like that on. It hadn't been finished. They put partitions up between each of the beds but only up to about six foot or something. Absolutely bare, nothing else, you know. A two-hole toilet and a shower that only had cold water. That was the accommodation we sort of arrived to. And I know I thought we were going to a little bit more pleasant accommodation because all this was in sandhills. Up in the desert there's sand in your ears, sand grits in your teeth, gets in your bed every night; it just gets into everything.

The hospital was four tin huts with doors and sand. When we first got there there was no running water. We had to ... to scrub you had to fill the basins with water out of the jerry cans and scrub up that way. There was no drainage and no running water. We had electricity. Our choofer was run on petrol. Our sterilising machine was a portable job that ran on water ... kero or something. You know, it used to explode now and again, so they had to put that outside in between the two. You had the theatre block here in between where you could go down to the chopper pad and the ward over here and we had to put the steriliser outside because she used to blow up now and again. And then we had the wards.

From the time we were there we went from very primitive conditions to semi-primitive conditions.

Was that when you went over to 1 Australia Field Hospital?

When we became 1 Aus Field Hospital our equipment scale went up and therefore we were entitled to more equipment. We also by that stage had painted cement paths down, we even had lawn planted so the patients could sit on the lawn - very important to make them all feel at home. We had white railings, you know. People thought we were mad but it was a good morale booster. It's the same as our uniforms. The American girls wore their greens around and what-have-you, because our sisters from the Second World War had taught us and they said that you must always look like a lady at all times and you'll be treated like a lady and you must wear your veil so the boys will know who you are. So we wore full starched uniforms, starched veils, stockings with seams in them and shoes in the middle of the tropics. There were the Red Cross girls walking around in sandals and little light dresses, you know, and here we were. But whenever the boys came in they knew where they were and they knew we were the sisters and we were very very well respected by the ... well, I still call them the boys even though they're getting on now.

You still call them the boys.

They all call me bonkers. The boys, you know, respected us and knew as soon as they got there that they were safe. And even though it was a hardship having to wear that type of a uniform, it certainly paid off in the long run and I can only say thanks to the sisters from the Second World War who'd been through it who said, 'Look, go as ladies, don't go as soldiers'.

Some of the articles that are coming out about the nurses who served in Vietnam - not from Australia because there is not much that comes out - but from America, talk a lot about things like sexual harassment and discrimination and the problems that the American nurses had. Did you have any experiences like that?

None at all. As I say, we were treated as ladies, always in the Service we were treated as ladies. But we also, you've got to remember - I don't know if any of the others mentioned this - but before we went overseas we'd already been in the army. You were trained as officers and you were an officer. We couldn't go to a mess without another female to accompany us so that this innuendo couldn't be put into it. And you had to do things in pairs.

When we got to Vietnam, of course it was very hard to do things in pairs, but we had had it pretty well drummed into us. 'You are the first four. If you screw up' - it wasn't put in these words but - 'If you screw up you will ruin it for every other nurse who wants to come to

Vietnam'. And it was a big thing to have to, you know, you'd think, 'God, if I do wrong I'm going to muck it up for everybody else'. So there was a lot of pressure to do the right thing, which we did. But, see, our guys looked after us too. I mean, if we went out we didn't walk around like the American girls for a start. We didn't wear ... we wore our bathers on the beach but we certainly didn't run around in shorts and, you know, hardly anything on or ... I'm not saying they brought in on themselves, I'm just saying that the four of us were fairly strictly controlled and it was self-control because there was no ... there was a barbed wire fence around us but there are ways and means of getting in and out of there. But, no, we had no trouble at all.

Can you tell me about the relationship that you had with the other three nurses?

I think Terri and Amy and Maggie all knew one another. But we were all very close. Terri and Amy were very close and Maggie and I got fairly close. But we were all very close because we all lived in such close confinements. But we had no problems. We had no big fights or anything like that, not that I can remember anyhow.

And what about your relationship with the medical staff over there?

We became very close to them as well. Once again, the surgical side of things I got to know them whereas Amy and Terri seemed to know the medical chaps as well. But I've met up with them all again - I don't know how long ago it was now - when our anaesthetist came out from England we all had a get-together and it was really great. But, unfortunately, Mick Boyle ... the two I got the closest with were the two that came to meet us in Saigon when we landed at Saigon they came down to escort us back to Vung Tau and took us out for a night out on the town and they were very good. But Mick died about three weeks ago now of cancer. So that was a bit of a shame. He married one of the Red Cross girls that was over there.

I was surprised how many of the nurses seemed to marry somebody over there or somebody they met over there.

Yeah. There was quite a few.

Before you went to the hospital presumably the care was done by the medics, the routine care. How did they accept the arrival of the sisters?

They did not like it one little bit. They felt ... I don't know how they felt but they were very angry that we'd arrived. They'd been doing a good job but they weren't ... like Mick once said to us, 'Thank God you're here', you know, if they had to give a suppository they'd have to go and do it themselves, that type of thing or explain how to do it. When they were on night duty they used to just shut the door and go and have a sleep somewhere. It was just professionalism. They were doing the best they could with what they had and they certainly were good. I mean, I would not damn one of those medics in a minute but it was just the little feminine touches and the touches of a trained nurse that was missing.

And how did you manage with the medics when you first went? Presumably you were more senior, weren't you, because you were officers?

We were officers, yes. Well when they changed over it was easier. Like when the ones ... 2 Field was there when we went and 8 Field came. Gradually it got easier because we were there before them and when you're a short-timer, as they used to call it then, everybody, they're older and wiser than you are. So it didn't take long.

How many medics would you have had? If you've got four sisters there, how many medics would you have?

I wouldn't know the number, the exact number. But with the theatre team we would have had ... the medics would help with the anaesthetics, help the debriding, help with the suturing. Because we had two beds in the theatre, we had two theatre tables going at the same time in the same room. Unlike the Americans who had about ten in the same room, we had a big two, that was enough. I wouldn't really know the number.

But many more medics than sisters ...

Oh, a heck of a lot more. We had a Kiwi sister came. I don't know how long after we got there she arrived and then we were replaced with twelve. So we must have done all right if they could send twelve over after the four of us had just been there for that time.

Are there any incidents that stand out in your mind at the time that you were there?

Yeah, quite a few. Actually I was only talking to one of the chaps today. You know, they're all different types of incidents. You know, the funny ones and then there's the ones you don't like to talk about, the real serious ones, the ones that keep coming back at you. The RAAF girls used to bring ... it wasn't until the Welcome Home Parade that I had a chance to tell one of the RAAF girls this. They used to come and take our boys away from us and bring them home. That was fine for the guys but we'd worked on them so hard to get them to that stage and you put your own sweat and blood and emotion into it and if you've ever worked in the tropics most of the time ... the boys used to take their theatre skivvy off and just wring it out and put it back on. You know, you sweat like that all the time. And our grey uniforms would have big sweat rings around them and no matter how much perfume you put on you were always a bit iffy. And in the wet season one side of the veil would drag down and off the plane would come the RAAF girls - beautiful permanent-press slacks, clean blouse, hair set at the hairdressers, make-up immaculate, perfumed - and they'd take our boys. And I used to get so angry in myself, you know, I used to think, 'How dare they come in here looking like that'. And I was talking to this RAAF sister and she said, 'You know, we used to work for two days before we'd go. We would try our hardest to look as best we could so that we could look nice when we came home'. And I said, 'Well, it's a wonder you weren't murdered because I was going to kill you a few times'. She said, 'Oh no, look, we would have traded places with you any day'. And I said, 'Well that's what we were thinking'.

Were you able to follow through any of the patients? Did you get much feedback as to how they were going?

None, none. Because some of them used to stop off in Malaya and then progress on and of course by that time you'd turn around and you got another load. Some you followed through when you got back to Australia. I mean, there were some you'd never forget. I mean, I had Jock Sutherland. He lost - what did he lose - a leg and an eye, he nearly lost his arm but we



saved his arm. But he got gangrene and we kept opening his leg and he was delirious most of the time he was there. I came back here, it would be in the eighties, and I seen this old man, this really old man out at Duntroon when I was working out here, and I thought, 'Why did the army let such an old man - it looks like he's had a stroke - in'. And then he came in one day and it was Jock and, oh, he looked so terrible. I really thought to myself, 'Why? What kind of a quality of life has he got?', you know. But then he gave up the drink and he was looking really great and doing very well and things like that, doing really well, and then - this year it was - he asked somebody to ask me would I go over and see him because then I'd kept in touch with him. And he said, 'You know, this time I'm really dying. I'm going to die this time'. And I said, 'Oh Jock, you'll be all right'. And he said, 'No, no. I'm on the way out now', he said, 'I'll be gone'. He was, two days later. But he just wanted to see me so he could make sure things were finalised and say thank you and it was terribly sad. So you don't chase up too many of them because, you know, sometimes you see what you've brought them back to, what kind of a life they have, and it really worries you. Others, you know, it's easier not to think about them.

You were there for twelve months - the full twelve months?

Mmm.

What were your feelings when you left Vietnam?

To get out of the place. I think ... did Terri come first? Did Terri leave first?

I think so, yes.

I think Terri left first. We were due to be relieved but nobody arrived. Then the plane came and Terri got on it, just like that. She had to go. Maggie the same. And we didn't have much time to think about leaving. By that stage we'd had the replacements and it's terrible but I can't even remember who they were. I guess I was so glad to be getting out of the place. All I thought was: 'You can have it, I'm going'. And I couldn't wait to get on that plane to get home.

Did you have those feelings for a long time or was it towards the end that you really wanted to go home?

I think it must have been at about nine months because I can always remember thinking they should never make them go for twelve months. Nine months is long enough. I remember the team was starting - the team I'm talking about, the theatre team - to feel the pinch of it. The boys were drinking more than they should; they were getting into trouble for little things.

When you say the boys, do you mean the medics?

The medics, yes. Maggie and I just about had enough because no matter what you say and even like at the Welcome Home Parade because you're a woman, you're the nurse, you're the one that's got to be strong. You're not allowed to cry; you're never allowed to cry or show any type of involvement or emotion because if you do, you know, the boys used to look up at you and you'd know they used to say, 'Well, look at Colleen, she's standing up to it. Maggie, the

big red one, you wouldn't crack Maggie', you know. And then they didn't ... they built it all up and measured themselves against us.

Then one day we had a couple in who had through and through gunshot wounds to the head and a couple killed I think. And we used to just put the - because in the days when we were there we had nobody to check the bodies except ourselves - and we used to just quickly check the bodies and their ID tag and just pop them in the room. But this day they hadn't sort of told Maggie they'd put in a couple of bodies in the room and the guy (in theatre) was still talking, he was still making sense, and he was talking about his wife and his children and it got to her - it got to us all, you know. And she didn't want to cry in front of the others, so she went into the little theatre and of course there was some bodies laying in there and she just burst into tears. As soon as she burst into tears, everybody. It was like a pack of cards and it took us a couple of days to get back on our feet again after that. And we pulled ourselves up and we went and got on with it. But that's when things started ... we started to think it's time we went home. We've had enough here.

How did you relieve stress over there? It seems like the boys drank, or some of them did.

Mmm, we used to party pretty hard ourselves. Amy and Terri didn't. Of course Terri had her now husband there from day one. I mean, God, if I had a husband like that it would be all right. I mean, he used to iron her uniforms for her, he'd polish her shoes. Every time we'd go home there'd be Max in there doing all the chores for her. I couldn't believe it. And he'd be there for her all the time. So she had, you know, it was like a little ... although he never slept there or anything like that, you know, but it was Darby and Joan. So she had that. Amy, unfortunately she was in charge so she had nobody because she was the boss. And Maggie and I, well, we used to just go out and party and we'd catch choppers, go for rides, do ... you know, sneak out.

Was it all stuff that you were allowed to do or was it pretty much ...?

Oh no, we weren't allowed to do too much of all this stuff. But, no, we used to sneak out and go to different hospitals and party.

Did they have the officers' mess when you were there?

Yeah.

What did they call it?

Up at the Hill. We didn't go up there very much mainly because they used to bring ... it wasn't ... we'd go up there for a happy hour but it wasn't ... that's like when the other girls were there, you know, we were terribly alone. I was adopted by the diving team - underwater diving team - and they used to live up on VC Hill and they'd come down and get me and they'd treat me just like their sister and it was great. I could go up there for a Sunday barbecue and sit down and read the papers and have fresh Australian water that was brought off at the Sydney, you know, and just relax and not be only one of a very few women because they used to just treat me like their sister. And I could get away up there. So I enjoyed that.

What was your homecoming like?

I came home in a Qantas plane with a plane load of chaps. We landed at night, went through all the ... we didn't have much warning we were coming home but I sent a telegram to my parents. And just went through the normal customs and everything else but it was at night and I was lucky that my parents were there to meet me. Although I will always remember they looked about five years older than when I'd left. And because all I wanted over there was to have a bath, just to be able to get in a bath and soak, they'd got a hotel room with a bath and put roses in it and had lots of chocolates there and cream puffs and all the ... you know, I pigged out. All the things you couldn't have over there like chocolates and lollies and things that you just didn't get. So I had a good homecoming as far as that went. And I had no problems with the RSL or anything like that. I mean, the first time I went back to work I went back to work at Liverpool and the boys came over and dragged me out of bed and said, 'Come on, you've got to come to the Dawn Service, you're one of us now'.

So you stayed with the army when you came back from Vietnam?

Yeah.

How long did you stay with the army?

Five years on and then I got married. And you had to leave the Service in those days when you got married ... not when you got married. No, I got married and then I fell pregnant and that's when I left. Yes, they were changing all the time.

And what sort of nursing - or not necessarily nursing - but what sort of jobs have you had since leaving the army?

Well, I've mainly moved around a lot because I followed my husband who was in the army and they've all been in theatre, intensive care or casualty.

Do you think you're experience in Vietnam has had an influence on your nursing career?

I think so. Maybe because on triaging you have to make your decisions a lot quicker I tend to be able to make the decisions quicker and not worry too much. That just comes with age and experience. I don't think it's hardened me a great deal. I do know that I have lost the compassion that I think I once had.

Because of your experience in Vietnam?

Mmm. I still have a lot of compassion for the people and everything but I don't tolerate the fools of the world or the users of this world because I know what the genuine people have gone through and that's a failing in me. I'm really not very good with drug addicts and people like that. I don't tolerate them very well and that's a failing on my part and I know it's a sickness but I just get very short with them.

Did you feel that as soon as you came back from Vietnam?

Well when I first came back from Vietnam of course I was still in the army and I was still working with the army. And then when working in intensive care and theatre you don't get to meet that type of people because people in intensive care, you're only talking to the relatives, and as soon as the patients start to be able to talk to you they shift them out and I was beginning to think that I closeted myself in this world where patients never talked to you, you know, because when they come into theatre they're just a leg or an arm or a hernia or whatever they are and you never get to say anything because they're put to sleep and wheeled out again. And in intensive care the same: as soon as they start to recover or regain consciousness they're gone. So it was a bit of an eye-opener to go to a surgical ward. In fact, I went from there to a neuro-surgical ward which I thought was a bit silly in hindsight. I was going from the fat to the fire.

Then I went back in as a contract worker to the army and that was nice out here at Duntroon looking after the boys, thinking, 'My God, they're so young'. And then I worked at the Joint Services Health Centre. But it was a real brain-drain - I thought it was a brain-drain. There was nothing happening. I suppose I needed the action. And the triage job came up at Royal Canberra and I thought, 'Oh, I'll give it a go'. So I applied for it and I got it. And I'll tell you the first two months I kept saying to myself, 'Why have you done this to yourself? At your age you don't need all this. Why did you give up a lovely comfortable job and take even a pay cut? To put yourself through it, you know, you must be a fool'. Now I wouldn't give it up for the world.

How long have you been there?

Six years. Six years this year.

This is at Royal Canberra, is it?

Yeah. I've moved over to Woden and they'll be open in October. So I'm sort of the forward scout.

The VD ward was a very large ward and that was Terri's domain. I don't know whether she mentioned them or not. A very big ward, all double bunked. Mainly the medics ran that. We didn't have very much to do with them at all except that they painted our quarters for us once. Our painter came in with VD so he painted our walls for us. In those days when you had VD it was supposed to be strict bed rest which I could never work out but it was ... So we decided that a clinic should be set up in Vung Tau and the girls given certificates to say that they were clean and that they would be checked like they are today and be issued with a certificate. So I said, 'All right, I'll go down one day and I'll check out some of these girls and teach this Vietnamese girl how to give the penicillin and do the swabs' and I don't know how many women later - I'll tell you, I was beside myself afterwards - two days of this. We taught her and we left the penicillin there and everything for her to give the women. It was going all right until the penicillin turned up in VC hands, because it was all marked, so that was the end of that little clinic. It didn't get off the ground too well.

Then we ran a Medcap (Medical Civil Action program), and I forget the name of the village, but it was a Catholic village and it was on the river and the Catholic Father and the nuns had walked from Hanoi down to Vung Tau and had settled in this village. So we used to go out there once a week and treat them all. And we didn't have a Vietnamese interpreter but we had

a French speaker. So we would interpret from Australian to French to Vietnamese, from Vietnamese to French to English. So a whole big speel of about five minutes would turn out to be a gut ache after it got all the way around there and back again. And we used to go there with the kids and check those. And one day I scared them all, I scared myself. We'd drive up. We'd never go on the same day, we'd never go at the same time in case the road was mined and, you know, don't jump out the back of the ambulance and jump in the gutter because that's mined or that's where they first can get you. You know, don't do this and don't do that. Okay. And then we'd get there and the boys would all go in and search the village and they'd search the little room where we used to do this while we'd sit in the back of the ambulance with flak jackets and what have you on thinking, 'Oh yes'. Then after a while we got a little blasé about this and the boys had done their search and then they were outside chatting with some of the Americans who'd pulled up. Because as soon as they'd see a woman - a round eye as they used to call us - convoys would pull up for a chat. So they were out there chatting so I went in to set up a bit and I opened the cupboard and there was a whole nest of mice in the cupboard and they ran all over the floor. So I screamed blue murder and jumped up on the desk. Well, there were rifles poking in the door, rifles poked in the window. The men came from everywhere, you know, rifles cocked. And they said, 'What are you doing? What's the matter?'. I said, 'There's mice'. And they said, 'We'd seen that in Tom and Jerry but we didn't know it was for real'. I said, 'Well, when you see about twenty mice running over the floor, what do you expect me to do?'. And they said it wasn't too much the mice but their hearts nearly stopped when I screamed because they thought we were in trouble. But I used to enjoy going out and doing those.

When you came back from Vietnam did you follow the progress of the war fairly closely?

Yes, I did, mainly because I would have liked to have gone back I think. I used to think, 'Oh well, one day, if it goes on long enough, I'll go back again'. And I think if I had have done I would have got back and would have thought, 'Gee, I want to come home again'. But then my husband went to Vietnam after me, he went over in seventy ... sixty-nine, seventy, something like that. So then I had to follow it. I did, I followed it fairly closely because still serving in the army of course, you know, a lot of your friends went. Not so much the women. I hardly ... I knew them but, you know, they weren't close friends.

Were you politically active at all or did you have strong political views about Australia's involvement?

No.

And was that both before and after going to Vietnam?

Yeah. I went with the sole thought that I was going to look after the boys.

Some of the nurses have said to me, or the women have said to me, 'We were nurses first and we were army second'. You were in the army for a few years before going to Vietnam, what are your thoughts on that?

Even in the corps today, as I'm sure Jan would have said to you, you know, nursing is first and the corps comes close. But nursing ... and that's what the corps is, nursing. And this is why

we've never ... and we've fought so hard not to be lumped in with the rest of the army and we're the only corps that are still separate in the women, although we've got the male nurses now, but I mean it's a nursing corps. And I think that's where it comes and you've got to give your patient care. And though the girls of today have to get out and put up their tents and draw the equality, even though I wanted to be in the army all my life I had never wanted to or had the need to carry a gun. And I know it's changed today and there's different wars and people think differently about women but I never felt the need. I never felt that I was going to be raped by our own men. It never occurred to me because we were always treated as ladies and we came across like ladies and that's how they treated us. And we never had any incidences at all that you wouldn't ... it would never have occurred to them I don't think. And even now, because I am involved with a lot of the veterans and what have you, no matter how drunk or whatever they always excuse themselves and say, 'I'm sorry, sister', and they revert back to ... and they still call me sister. And when I go to the RSL they all call me sister ... God.

When did your involvement with the veterans start?

Yeah, that is an interesting one. I was working ... I had nothing to do with veterans at all for years and years and years. In fact, until about - I don't know when it was - in the eighties anyhow. And I was working in casualty and this chap came in. I'd received a call from the ambulance and they'd gone out to get a cardiac arrest from a phone box down town. They brought him in and I went in and he had army shoes on, he had army trousers on. I think by the time we took his top off I saw he had shrapnel scars over his body. And I mean, shrapnel scars you can tell - well I can tell what are shrapnel scars. They are instant to me and it comes back to you. And this guy had shrapnel wounds over him; quite extensive shrapnel wounds. And when nurses talk and doctors talk amongst themselves it's a mechanism that I suppose to be brave, they say, 'Oh this idiot was in only two days ago with an overdose as well'. And I said to them, 'Well why didn't someone help him?'. 'Oh he's only one of those bloody Vietnam veterans'. And of course I hadn't mentioned to anybody I was a veteran at that stage because people didn't come out and say to me, 'Were you a Vietnam veteran?' and I never volunteered it. I didn't think it was worth the effort. But I said, 'But there's got to be something that could have been done'. He was in hospital and he was discharged and he went straight out and overdosed again. There's got to be something that somebody could have done for him.

Then I thought, 'This is stupid. I'm here in a position to know when these guys come in' and that really worried me, this poor guy. He died, I mean we didn't save him. And it worried the life out of me. So I thought there's got to be something. So I looked around and I found the Vietnam Veterans' Counselling Service had been established. So I called them up and I said, 'Look I'm here so that if any veteran comes, can I refer him to you or I'll let you know that they're here', and from there I sort of got very involved in the counselling and I started to look around. My eyes were open to what was really happening to the veterans.

So I started to see a lot of the post traumatic stress that was happening to some of them. Some of it, and most of it I feel was brought on by Vietnam and I know some of the character assessments weren't done properly before they went to Vietnam and it could happen to them anyhow. But I'd been through all that before this incident and I said, 'Oh these veterans ...'. 'It's got nothing to do with me, I don't want to know'. And as I say, after that, I don't even remember his name, but his death threw me right into the middle of it all and I joined the

Veterans' Association and I turned out to be the only woman going to these things. And I thought, 'This is not right. There are other women here that should be standing up and being counted'. Not only to help but to receive the thanks. So many functions I go to the boys would come over and say, 'I don't know whether you were one of them that looked after me but I've always wanted to thank the nurse that looked after me in Vietnam. Can I shake your hand or give you a kiss to say thank you on behalf of the girl I didn't know?'. And there are so many of the fellows out there that want to do that and still do it. I mean, I'm on a lot of committees and they all protect me, like not say too much wrong about you and you're not allowed to say that about their girls. And I think that's ...

But then having the phone calls at night from the veterans, going through their problems and their marriages, it was getting me down. And I thought, 'I can't do this any more. I've got to look after my family'. So I decided to not do that any more and then I went to Wollongong for Veterans' Day and got involved with a group of people, or a group of the men who were talking about the Welcome Home March in Chicago. So they said, 'Well why don't you come on that committee?' and I said, 'Oh, all right'. And from then we organised the Welcome Home Parade, the big Welcome Home Parades in Sydney.

So were you on the committee for that Welcome Home Parade?

Yes.

It must have been a lot of work.

That was a lot of work there. Then we decided to build the memorial. And I'm the secretary of that. So there's a lot of work there. And I feel that when that's built then I can sit back and relax, hopefully. But I'm also on the National Committee, we've set up emergency accommodation and housing for veterans throughout Australia. We've got a house in every capital city now and Melbourne has just come in line now. So I'm pleased to have been able to help establish those and get those off the ground. And I'm Chairman of the Agent Orange Trust Fund here in Canberra and we allocate money to veterans, and their families, in needy and necessitous circumstances. And it's the same as the emergency accommodation. That is for the families as well as for the men because the families are left out a lot. And I think a lot of the families now ... a lot of the veterans are on their second wives and they are having younger families again. It seems to be the way of the world, I don't know for what reason, but it is. Whether it's a general trend in the community, I mean I don't have figures, but it just seems like a lot of the veterans remarry and have very unstable family lives.

What were your feelings about the findings of the Royal Commission into Agent Orange?

I think it was just a big cover-up. They couldn't afford to pay everybody. Too many of my friends ... They're doing this Dapsone study at the moment, where you got your list of names from, and there's specifically questions there for the nurses which I think would be a very interesting study when it comes out. Although, as far as I know, we haven't had any nurse die of cancer since the war. We did lose one just after Vietnam but it was other things.

But I have lost too many friends and I have too many friends who have had something wrong with their children - birth defects and what have you. I really don't know about the women,

how many of those have had problems with their children or not but I nearly lost my second son. And my first was a very difficult birth. But my other friend, although she wasn't a nurse but her husband was there, all her children have been born deaf. And with another friend her children had spina bifida. It is just too much of a coincidence and they just cover it up.

Do you think that you suffered physically at all when you came back or in the period since coming back?

Physically, no. Headaches. But mentally, yes, I'm sure I did. I think it took me a long while to realise what the problems were because I think being a professional you're not allowed to have those feelings. You are not allowed to be like that. And my husband said to me, 'Why don't you ever talk to me? Why do you switch off and you won't let me in?'. And it took us, oh, a long time to work out. My husband and I are separated, we live in separate houses but we're the best of friends now because it took something like that, it took a catalyst to get us both to talk to one another. He'd talk to me but I could never talk to him and I could never tell him. Now we bounce off of one another. If I get down low, you know, and I think this isn't worth it. What am I doing? And he'll build me up. And I do it for him and it's good to have somebody like that. But if I didn't have him as a good friend, I don't know what I'd do. Sometimes it just gets just too much for you and I think, you know ...

You said, when you were at the hospital up until 1980- you didn't ever tell anybody that you went to Vietnam. Why was that?

I think it's probably because of the bad publicity surrounding it and nobody was interested. Nobody really cared. I suppose I must have once or twice tried to tell somebody about it and nobody most probably was interested or listened so I just never did it after that. In fact, I don't think I even put it on my resumé sometimes.

Really! Did talking about Vietnam help you, do you think, when you started counselling veterans, did that help you at all?

Yes it did because you'd tend to ... they'd bring up an incident and 'Yes, I remember now. I did this', you know, so it worked both ways. But now, unfortunately - I don't know whether there's a published study - but a lot of this stress that the men have gone through is rubbing off on the children now and the children are suffering now. I mean, there are just so many of the kids out there whose father is suddenly violent or doesn't cope or is an alcoholic and it's rubbing off on the children and the children are acting in the same way. You know, sudden outbursts, just hard to manage and it's terrible. So I don't know where it's every going to end.

Do you talk to people now about your times in Vietnam?

Well, sometimes. Like when I said yes to your study, I get a lot of - because my name comes up in a lot of things - most of the time I just put them in the drawer and I don't answer the questions. And then I say, 'Yes' and then I think, 'What did I do that for?'. I intend to go down to ... I go down to Sydney often for these memorial meetings but every time I see Trish - Trish and I are very much alike, we're very into it at the moment ...

This is Trish Gibbons?



Yeah. And I say, 'I'm going to sit down and talk to Trish woman-to-woman because Maggie's in Brisbane and I've only seen Maggie once since Vietnam and she has aged something shocking, so she must be going through hell but I can't talk to her because she's not here. And I've often thought I must sit down with Trish with no interruptions from children, from ex-husbands - because her husband's a bit like mine, they're never out of sight, they're always there - and just sit down and have a real yak about it, you know, and I'm sure we'll come up with the same answers and the same problems and things like that. But I haven't got around to it yet. It takes a few years.

Can you tell me about your feelings with the Welcome Home Parade?

Well, yes. Having worked at it from the very beginning we didn't know how many people were going to turn up. We really didn't know how many people would turn up. We thought, oh, maybe 7,000 top, you know. And I'd arranged to go down and stay. Jack and I weren't getting on too well at that stage and he was on the committee too, which didn't sort of help too much. But I'd arranged to go down with a very dear friend who was in the engineers over there at the same time as I was over there and he wouldn't go unless he went with me. So I said, 'That's fine', and I said to my two boys, 'You've got to come with us. I'll book you into the hotel'. We worked and made all the signs and, you know, worked and worked and came out on the street and the kids said, 'Mum, look at all those people. They look like veterans'. I said, 'Yeah, they sure do'. Having had been around veterans with me a lot, my children understand veterans very well. So I had no problems with them, they just say, 'Oh, it's a veteran'. And we got down there at the Dawn Service and there were hundreds of people. And then at the Parade, they were all just thousands of them and I thought, 'Oh God, this is unreal. Did we really do this?'. And Maggie, Terri, Amy and I were together for the first time since the war. We didn't have enough time to talk because we were trying to talk to six other million people all at the same time.

And once again it was the same thing. The boys had said, 'The nurses have got to be up front'(of the march). Mind you there were a couple that said they shouldn't be but the boys said the nurses have got to be up the front of the Parade. I thought, 'Fair enough, that's pretty good'. I wanted to cry as soon as we left the Parade but I can't be seen to be crying, I'm a nurse, you can't do that. I didn't realise until somebody told me after we'd finished that the men were crying. I mean, we went up and turned around and then we were clapping the other men up and realised how the men were crying. And I thought, 'God, I was so close to it it didn't matter'. I was twenty years younger, I was floating on air, I think I could have conquered Mount Everest on that day. And we all had our lunch together - yak, yak, yak, yak.

The night before I'd met up with Maggie and we'd gone to a smoko of 8 Field Ambulance and all our old medics were there and they were looking after us just like they'd looked after us before. A lot of mucking around and carrying on and I met a few patients that knew me. I didn't know them but they came up and they were all talking and I don't think we got to bed, I don't know. Then after the Parade we went to more reunions and everything when the medics took us and we just went from venue to venue. I don't even know where we went half the time but we were just sort of floating. I think, you know, it was so exciting and everybody wanted you to have a drink and everybody wanted to say, 'Good on you nurse and good on you sister'. It was wonderful.

And then on the Sunday we had the big concert in the Domain and Frankie Hunt who's in that song 'Only Nineteen', I'd never nursed him in hospital but I'd been through a few of his problems. He's had a lot of problems since he's come back - he had triplets and his wife ran off - I used to have a few long sessions with Frankie. Anyhow he was there and he was bad that day and he was in the wheel chair and he wanted me to push him out on the stage. So I'm standing up there and he said, 'Now don't you leave me here. You've got to stay here with me', so I said, 'All right'. Johnny Shoeman started singing 'Only Nineteen' or 'Behind the Wire' or something and I thought, 'Oh my God', and I started to cry and I thought, 'Frank, in front of bloody 30,000 people you decide to do it', you know. And I buried my head in Frankie's shoulder and he said, 'Look up, just look up', and I looked up and everybody in the audience was crying. All these big brave men, you know, all were in tears. So I thought, 'Oh I can cry', so I thought that was all right. So since then I thought, 'Well, if I can cry in front of 30,000 people I can cry in front of anybody'.

Was it been therapeutic for you, the Welcome Home Parade?

Oh very, very. Then we put the Welcome Home Parade book together which took another lot of effort and going through and so. Well, I haven't stopped. I don't know what will happen when I do stop so I keep going. And when we get the memorial and that big wreath in, that will be another big weekend.

Why did they choose that weekend? Was there any significance?

Yes, that will be the fifth anniversary of our Welcome Home Parade.

Oh, of the Welcome Home Parade, that's right.

And it comes on the long weekend and it's five years.

And are pleased with the memorial?

Yeah ... it was between the two. I really would have liked to have had a woman on it and, as I say, I tried my very best to get a woman on it. But I think and I hope it will have a feeling that you will be able to go in it and you will feel ... a feeling will develop like The Wall in Washington. I know as a veteran that they will walk in there and they will be totally overcome by emotion because as you walk into it you'll have the rippling water around the three sides. You'll feel encased in it with your one big picture up there on the wall. You'll have the ... it's not an alter but it's a stone on one side. When you look up there's going to be metal strands holding up a halo. And it's a big, it's a big memorial. It's going to be the biggest one there. I mean it's very tall and I think when you stand in that as a person and feel enclosed by those walls I think it's going to be one awful gut-wrenching feeling for a veteran to stand in there, and that's what we want. We don't want them to be frightened about or fear going in there but we'd like them to feel like it is a special place for them. And hopefully we've captured that.

Well I think so. I mean, just when I saw the plans and when it was described to me it just seemed really powerful even to somebody like me who wasn't involved.

That's right. And that's what we want, you know. And that's why there'll be no ... the words 'For those who served, those who suffered and those who died' and that is for the ones who are still suffering now. For all the ones who are committing suicide and their families that have suffered. So it covers everybody. It's not just for the people that were killed over there, it's for those who are still suffering now. So I think it will be something that will be worth looking back on and saying, 'Well I was there. I helped and I can ...'. You cannot lay back on your laurels though because, I mean, there'll always be something else going up. You know, we've got the trust, we run scholarships too. We have a lot of people who come up to us and say, 'Why are you building a memorial? Surely you could put the money into a scholarship. You can do it in this and you can do that'. But I feel that we've got emergency accommodation now, we've got the Veterans' Service, we've got scholarships, we've got the Sir Colin Hinde's Scholarship in New South Wales specifically for the New South Wales children. We've got the Trust Scholarship which is a national scholarship which we give twelve full scholarships out a year. I'm not too sure how much more we can do. But a memorial is something that's tangible that people can go and look at. And especially a national memorial. A lot of towns are getting their own little memorials but (we need) a national memorial I think for visitors and everybody can have a look at.

The American women, they have a lot of problems too with getting a woman on their memorials. In fact, they've had to change an Act of Congress and everything to have a female statue put at that memorial. Did you notice there's three men coming out of the tree line heading to ...

Yes, I heard they're putting a woman there.

Yeah, but she's going to be on the path, across the path, and they have to have a competition for that and they're hoping in '92 that that will be on and I'm in close touch with them over there because I'll be going over there and some of them will be coming here. There was one girl coming over and she wanted to come out three months before and help with the office work and everything here but she died. Another one that died this year. I've lost so many friends this year. She just didn't make it but she was trying.

So there'll be a group of them coming out. But they were never distinguished. See, we have F in front of our regimental number which designates female. The American numbers, they were never given any separate number so they don't know how many females served in Vietnam - the Americans - they just don't know. And their girls that went in over there were a bit like ... and they had an animosity between career officers and other nurses. And we were all career and towards the end, I don't know, it might have slacked off a bit, but in the beginning, the first few years, we were all career army officers before we went to Vietnam anyhow. We'd all served a fair amount of time in the Service before we went so we knew what was expected of us. We knew how to behave and what was expected of us as far as discipline and things like that went whereas the American girls, the regular girls knew that, but then they were taking in people, as soon as they finished their nursing they were taking them in, sending them to Vietnam with hardly any army training at all. Dumping them in the midst of hell, taking them back out, discharging from the army and 'Thank you very much, Ma'am, that was lovely. Good-bye'. Never see them again. We didn't have that problem.

One of the other women also said their system of triage was back the front from your system in that they had to leave a whole lot of men, the very seriously wounded men,

they had to leave whereas it was different with the Australian nurses in that you were able to look after the most severely wounded first. Is that correct?

Not in the beginning. Maybe when they got there. Head wounds were always left till last and always sent off because you couldn't do anything with a head wound and maybe that's where she's getting it. The head wounds were always left with the Americans too because the quality of life of course. And if you can't ... see, this is where I suppose people don't understand. When you have a lot of casualties coming through and you have a head wound that you know is going to be a vegetable no matter what you do for him, then you have to just pop him to the side and hope that he goes straight off. We never put them in a room and closed the door or pulled the curtain. We sat with them; we never left them. And if you had somebody who you knew, no matter how hard you worked on them, you weren't going to save you couldn't afford to work on them and have somebody that had the possibility of being saved. I mean, we went chest, abdomens, amputations and then the heads. Although most of our head wounds they would take anyhow to the big American hospital when we were there. Gunshot wounds to the heart, very high amputations, we had to leave them because there was no way we could physically save them. And I think that that most probably was where they thought that the Americans were like that.

But their volume coming through was a lot higher than ours. And the noise factor. When our boys came in they were very quiet. They'd say, 'Thank God we're here, round eyes', you know. 'Look after me now, doc', or something like that. They'd be in a lot of pain and there might be a few low moans. And I'm talking about boys with their boots facing their heads and, you know, they used to strap the rifle on and their leg would be pointing up this way and they'd say, 'Oh I won't be able to go dancing any more will I sis?' and things like that. Then you'd go to the American hospital, and I went to a few when casualties came in, they'd be screaming and the noise. Just the different attitudes but, okay, it was bigger but they seemed to just scream and call out an awful lot more than our boys did. I always used to think, 'Oh, thank God for our boys, so much better and braver'. But that always stuck in my mind that the screams from the American casevac system.

Whether ours got a lot more pain relief on the way in, I don't know, or whether it was just their attitude. It would be hard to gauge. But the noise level was phenomenal.

Have you seen any of the movies like ... 'Good Morning Vietnam' is not a very good example but 'Born on the 4th July'?

Oh, that stressed me right out, that movie, mainly because I've been to America and I've talked to a lot of the American girls and I've talked to a lot of the veterans especially some of them who have been at VA hospitals, and that is exactly how they were treated in VA hospitals when they first got back. And I came out of that movie with such a tension headache knowing that that's how they were treated because they'd told me. They'd told me how terrible it was because I was saying, 'Oh we had our repat system and we did this and we did that' and then to see that and to know that that's how they really were treated.

The American veterans, we might think they're a bit odd, but when you sit down and you listen to why they do this, why do they walk around in part of their army uniform. I mean they always parade in all this mix-match, and they said to me, 'Well, we've still got 2,000 of our men over there. Until we get them back we are not going to discard our uniform'. I thought,

'Well, that's something I didn't know', and you find out that they're very deeply worried and stressed about the bodies not being returned. And they had so many prisoners and we didn't. You know, I mean that's ... they just suffered just so much more than we did. And because they were taking out all your nurses and your medics for the war, that's why the VA hospitals were staffed by people that weren't even trained and the boys were coming back to that type of thing.

It's horrifying. I found that horrifying. I hated it actually.

Wasn't it awful. Whereas the first movie on 'China Beach' was very realistic and I knew a couple of the girls that gave the stories for that so it even made it a little bit more realistic for me and she worn the same dress that I owned over there, too. So you know, that was realistic but then after it got on a little ways, it was just garbage.

Like a soap opera.

Yeah, yeah. I don't remember any prostitutes working out of (inaudible). But that was the Americans, of course. They all had a lot more than we did. We slept in our sand hill and had sand and everything, and they were living in hotel accommodation with refrigerators and electricity and toilets that flushed and things like that.

Is there anything else you want to talk about?

No, I think that I've done too much already. It's been good.