Australian War Memorial

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TRANSCRIPT
OF
ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

S01581

Pamela Helen Barlow (neé West) as a captain nursing sister 1st Australian Field Hospital, South Vietnam 1969-1970, interviewed by Lynn Hemmings

Recorded
at: Keperra
on: 20 December 1991
by: Lynn Hemmings

Description
Joining army; selection for Vietnam; departure; arrival in Vietnam while airport under attack; first impression of hospital; relationship between male army medics and nursing staff; off duty activities; meeting husband in Vietnam; returning to Australia; anti-war movement; nursing skills applied; shift responsibilities and duties; first dust off; injuries dealt with; "Killed in Action" room; contact with field medics; memories of particular patients; reunions; personal attitude to Australia's involvement in Vietnam war; discrimination; coming home; health problems caused by service in Vietnam; sexual harassment; leaving army; post war traumatic stress syndrome; nursing career after leaving army.

Transcribed by: Susan Soames, November 1992

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Transcript methodology

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Identification: This is Tape No. 1 of an interview with Pam Barlow. The interviewer is Lynn Hemmings, and I'm interviewing Pam on 20th December 1991, at her home in Keperra, Brisbane. The project is the Oral History Project of RAANC nurses who served in Vietnam.

Could we start by talking about your nursing training and your work before joining the army?

Yes. And I did twelve months postgraduate nursing, after my training, at PA [Prince Alfred Hospital]. Always wanted to ... always had an interest in the Service I think, probably, because my father being in the Air Force in the Second World War: but was very much aware that Vietnam was going on at the time. And, in fact, I tried to join one of the PA surgical teams that was going, but you had to be thirty, and have had so many years experience. So, not to be outdone by this I decided to go and see what the Army was all about, for that purpose of going to Vietnam. So I joined the Army Reserve, which was the CMF then, for a couple of months - three months - just to see what it was like. And I was at the military hospital at Ingleburn: then I decided yeah, that's what I wanted to do, and so I joined the regular Army.

Did some people from the CMF go to Vietnam?

The doctors - specialists - were seconded for three month tours up there.

But not nurses?

But not nurses, no. It was a full twelve months or a couple of months longer sometimes, depending on what time of the year it was that you were going back.

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

I was in ... I joined in the October of '67 and I went to Vietnam in the May of '68.

And what sort of work did you do in the Army as a nurse?

Back here in Australia?

Before Vietnam, yes.

I was in the medical ward, in the surgical ward, casualty, and did some theatre work.

Did you apply to go to Vietnam?

Yes, I asked to go.

Do you know how you were selected - why you and not somebody else was asked to go to Vietnam?

I think they might have been looking for volunteers anyway (laughs). No, I don't know, no. We had to be approved - we weren't told the reason as to why. But I think Jan, our matron who we went over with, probably did have the final say as to who she was taking over as part of her team. We were never officially told that, but I would imagine, looking back, that's probably what did happen.

> How much notice did you get, between finding out you were going, and actually going?

About six weeks. Sort of had an idea that we probably would be going, but officially notified about ... Actually, the Matron in Chief, who has died just recently, she was the Matron in Chief, and she was the one who actually told me. She came over and informed us that we were going.

> Other than having your injections, did you have any other preparation for going to Vietnam?

No, none. I was part of the second team that went - there were five others that had gone in the first contingent in 1967, so we were replacing them. So, not a lot was known other than through letters from people. There was no preparation like the guys who went to Canungra to do their jungle training and all that sort of thing. But no, we really had ... No, I had no idea what I was going to expect.

> Do you remember how you felt before you left for Vietnam?

Before I left, oh ... I suppose, at twenty one it was an adventure to some degree. You felt very different. I think, sort of getting around and saying 'goodbye' to everybody, and realizing, when you were doing that, you weren't sure if you were going to be back home again or ... I mean, never having left Australia before anyway, it was very different. I know mum was terribly upset at me going, and that was very difficult - saying 'goodbye' to her - because I think she probably felt it the most because my parents were not long separated. And it was just my brother at home - he was a lot younger than me. I found that very difficult. I think the most unusual experience because we all had to go sort of in a ... it was clandestine. I was the only female on the plane of something like a hundred and seventy-odd fellows. And I don't know if the others went through it or not - I can't recall talking about it - but I ended up, on the day before, going to North Head, in Sydney, which was the military establishment there. And I had to be in there and in barracks, and unable to ring anybody, even locally, until I got to the airport the following night.

> Was that for fear of protests?

Well, we never really were told. It was said that it was for security reasons and I assumed it, at the time - I didn't have a lot of fear of protesters, I guess. At the time, you know, learning from history books, and all that sort of thing, I mean there's always that sort of security about who is going to go and who isn't going, and all that sort of thing. Whether we were given certain information then, that night - a short briefing about the trip over and that. You were sworn to secrecy then, so I just felt it was something to do with that. But I do believe, looking back now, later, that yeah, there was a lot of ... if the protesters were aware that that was what was happening at North Head, that that's where we were assembling, maybe something would

have come from that - I don't know. I mean, that's all hearsay. But that was interesting. And then being ... we had a bus trip out to the airport with a few of them. And we had to take civilian clothes with us because we had to get off the plane in Singapore - had to stop over in Singapore, which was quite ridiculous. We actually had to get changed into civilian clothes for a stopover in the airport. And it was quite funny because all the guys had their polyester trousers on and their polyester shirts, and they just took their shirts off and put T-shirts on. Here's all there guys, I mean - you could tell we were all military, and we were all going somewhere together. So, that was an experience.

What was it like being the only woman with so many men?

On the plane? Ah ... very privileged I was. I sat between the Anglican chaplain and the Movements Officer. I was very well looked after, actually - it was great. It really didn't phase me at all. I just sort of felt like one of them, anyway, and we were all going for one purpose and we were all in it together - it didn't really matter all that much. But they were all great. I can remember walking, getting out of my seat to go to loo in the Qantas jet, which was sort of down the back, and walking down the isle with all these guys on either side. It was ... the whole thing was an unreal situation. We actually had a bird hit the windscreen of the Qantas jet, just over central Australia, and we actually had a stopover in Darwin overnight until they flew up a new screen the next morning. So we were delayed some twenty four hours - so that was interesting. I was to be billeted out at the RAAF base, but fortunately I had relatives in Darwin. I rang them at two o'clock in the morning, when I landed, and they came and got me. So that was good - so they didn't have to worry about me, which was alright. One less thing for them to worry about.

Do you remember your first impressions of the hospital?

Probably, if I can say this, that was important too: but nothing could have been more astonishing as landing at Tan Son Nhut for the first time - in Saigon - 'cause we then had to get a Caribou down to Vung Tau from there. The Qantas jet landed, and Tan Son Nhut was under attack at the time we landed. And I looked out the window of the Qantas jet and I thought, 'Oh, my God; what have I got myself into?'. And I thought ... just about the first thing I thought was stay on the plane and go back again. You could see gunfire and the ... they were rocketing the far side of the ... Anyway, they wouldn't let me off the plane.

Were you frightened?

I also had the privilege of being on the Qantas jet with just the pilots - it was so awful. They let all the guys get off because they all had weapons. Was I frightened?

It's funny: I don't even believe anything was ever going to happen to me anyway. I suppose that's what ... you know, we were invincible sort of feeling. I think the full impact of it hit me when I realized what l was seeing - that what was happening out there was real. I think that was the first understanding of reality. I was on it ... it was about an hour I stayed on, and then they eventually allowed me off, and we had to wait then - I think it was about lunch time - we had to wait. It was about three or four o'clock before the Caribou came. You're kind of stuck with your own ... some of the guys were going down so I stayed with them.

The first impression of an asian toilet was something to behold. I went looking ... I needed to go to the toilet so I went back in to the terminal at Tan Son Nhut and - because I couldn't speak any of the language, and they couldn't speak any English, so I was doing all these hand gestures about wanting to go to the toilet. The little guy on the gate sort of twigged to what I wanted and he pointed in that direction. So I immediately went in to discover a guy coming out. I thought I must be in the wrong one - he must have pointed me in the wrong direction. I had a look round and I couldn't see ... So I went back to the gate again. And he said, 'Nuh, nuh, nuh'. He was shaking his head; 'Nuh, nuh, nuh', he was saying, 'In there, in there'. So I went back in there and I looked, and I thought ... and then I saw this woman coming out. And I sort of did some more hand gestures, and one thing and another, and she's saying, 'In there, in there', and she went in and opened the door for me. And there's this little hole in the ground. Of course, I'm all done up in my uniform, stockings and everything. So I went into the toilet, and there was this hole in the ground. So here I am, in my uniform and everything and, oh dear, oh dear - what an experience. Nature being very strong I had to find ways and means of relieving myself, which I did do: but I tell you what - I hung on until I got to Vung Tau.

Are the toilets in Vietnam the same - just the hole?

The asian toilets, yeah, mostly, even when I lived in Singapore later on, in our married life. You'd go into restaurants, and things like that, most of them were just holes. In the older part of Singapore.

But in the hospital they had ...

In the hospital, no. We had the old thunderboxes, yeah - the hole in the ground with the ... and they used to burn them out. But these were actually tiled floors, and they just flush them with the buckets and things, so it was unreal. Compared to what was happening in Australia, it was something else. It was like a bad dream, but anyway ...

We flew down, then, to Vung Tau by Caribou and the matron, who was the first matron there, was there to meet us - Amy - she lives in Western Australia, Amy, and it was marvellous to see her face. I'd never met her before, but the uniform and everything was great, to see her: and the Commanding Officer of the hospital, Bill Watson, was also there to meet me. I was actually the first relief to come in, to relieve one of the other sisters. So the impression of the hospital was, you know ... Despite the way that it looked, you could see the high standard of care was just unbelievable. I mean, there was no running water or anything like that: you used to have to ...

That was still in the old hospital?

That was in the old hospital, yeah. They went from tents - they had tents first - and then they had the aluminium type, woodened framed things. And then we had rather a beautiful hospital built in the latter stages of my stay there - air conditioned and everything - it was great. And, you know, nothing was spared for those guys in the hospital, even in the days they just had the tents and the older buildings. There was no shortage of equipment. You might have had to wait a little while for it, but it came through. And I think that was something that ... the high standard of nursing care and care in general, and the care given by the medics was just unbelievable. You know, those guys: we just never would have - the nursing sisters there

would never have survived without them. There's no way in the world five of us, and two New Zealanders, could have run that hundred-bed hospital on our own.

> It seemed with the first group that came to Vietnam - the first group of nurses - there was a bit of tension, initially, between the medics and the sisters. Had that resolved by the time you arrived?

I never, ever found that. I did never have any - I personally - have any problems, and I think that Jean O'Neill is one of the people who is responsible for that in lots of ways, apart from our own individual personalities in handling people, and communicating with people. But, I mean, we were very young - Jean had had experience before. Jean used to talk to us a lot about how to handle that sort of a situation and certainly, what I learnt from that stood me in good stead in dealing with the opposite sex in later years. And those guys - most of them were National Servicemen - whom we still see today. Still got some very good friends amongst them, and they were very fine young men, and nothing was a trouble to them. To me everybody was equal in that situation, and it's something that has stayed with me throughout the years in that it didn't matter who you are, or where you were ... We even had the guy who had the menial ... the tasks of emptying the rubbish bins and starting the 'chuffer' fires for the hot water systems and things like that. When there was a dustoff come in everybody just stopped and they all had their job to do, and they all did it, and nobody said anything, and nobody said they were working too long, or too late, or they wanted more money, or anything like that. I found that difficult when I came back to Australia to work - even back in the military system where you were fifteen minutes overtime, you know.

Yeah, sometimes when I came back to Australia if you didn't finish the shift, and they'd say, 'I'm fifteen minutes overtime', and yeah. Adjusting to working in a nine-to-five type environment was quite difficult because for twelve or fourteen months there was no time, and you ... You know - why couldn't it be the same back here in Australia? So that was one of the difficult things.

> You were saying the relationship you had with the medics. What about the medical staff?

Great, yeah. We all got on very well together. I mean, we were restricted to a particular area - we weren't allowed to move around terribly much - so you made your own fun and the time off that you did have you either slept or you partied. That was pretty important, you know: or we'd invite the Americans over, or maybe the other units that were there might be having a party and we'd get invited over. There was always 'happy hours' and I became a very good dart player over that time that I was there. You know, you made your own fun, and apart from that and sleeping, that was about all you did.

> What did you talk about? Did you talk about hospital related things in your hours off, or did you talk about the war, or talk about home?

I guess there's probably a mixture of everything, but I don't think we dwelt a lot on what was happening in the hospital. Like, the hospital was sort of down the hill and our living quarters were up the hill. I mean, no matter where we went in those living quarters we were always within sight of the hospital. And there were always choppers coming in and out for varying reasons. You were always ... you were on edge, I suppose, most times, because you didn't

know when the dustoff siren would go to summons you all to your particular positions. So I think probably most of the time we ... See, it was very, I think, very little time devoted to social time. So you were working most of the time, so when you got off you did try to talk about other things, and write letters, and what was happening at home. Alcohol was very cheap, and cigarettes were very cheap, so there was a lot of that consumed (laughs).

Had you smoked before you went over there?

No I hadn't, and I have never.

And you didn't in Vietnam?

No, no I didn't.

Because most of the nurses I have spoken to did smoke.

Yes. No, fortunately, or unfortunately, I have never smoked, no. My husband did when he was over there.

Did you meet your husband in Vietnam?

Yes, I did. He was the pharmacist there: he was the fellow who supplied all the medical equipment - was responsible for that.

Did you get together over there? Was there any problem in terms of protocol or whatever?

Protocol? Well yeah, I mean the ... I didn't like him at first, you see: I thought he was quite arrogant. As it turns out he was quite shy, you see, and wondered what on earth I was on about, I think. I used to, naturally, see him in the course of my work and, of course, if you wanted any equipment or stuff you did it all through him and ... The Army was renowned for their stocktakes, even during war: and I always remember the first time I really took a lot of notice of him was he came to do a stocktake. And he was counting ... this day he was counting bed pans, and he came up to me and he said, 'Sister, you're one short'. 'That,' I said, 'Lieutenant is because a patient is sitting on one. Would you care to count it?' He said, 'Oh no, no, no', and sort of went off. So all these little things were going on in the mean time, you know. We mainly went out in groups. As I said, there was no where to go - there was curfew. The female population there, being very small, was very well protected, and there were areas that we were restricted to go into too. So we got to know each other much more on a social level, and we realized that we were, for the latter part of my stay ... Jeff had been in Vietnam six months prior to me, and he actually came home three months after me, which was a bit of a ...

That's a long time for you, isn't it?

Yes, he did have a long stay over there. His brother was also in Saigon - he was a solicitor with the Legal Corps - the Army Legal Corps in Saigon. But to the latter part of my stay in Vietnam we realized that, you know, we were a bit more serious than what we thought we were, but we didn't want to ... I was what, twenty three or something - twenty four, twenty

three - and Jeff was thirty, so ... almost - well, twenty eight, twenty nine - and we realized that because it was such an unreal situation that we didn't want to make any lifetime commitment in something that was so remote, so we decided that we wouldn't get engaged until we came home. He left in the February of '69 to come home, and I left in at the end of May of '69 to come home. So it was the other way round. I flew home on a RAAF Herc, via Butterworth into Richmond in Sydney, whereas he flew on a Qantas jet into Mascot in Sydney. So his experience of coming home was different. They had to come in under cover of darkness so that nobody ... The protest movement had heightened in twelve months that we had been away. In fact, so much ... the first indication that we got in Vietnam was the unions put a ban on sending our mail from Australia to Vietnam. Some ingenious soldier in the Postal Section in Vung Tau, who shall remain nameless, did a poster. It was called 'Punch a Postie on Your Return to Australia' - have you heard of that one?

Yeah.

Yeah, right. Some how or other they managed to get back to Australia, but I don't know how they got there, but they got there. So we knew that was going on, so we had a reasonable understanding of why it was, you know, from the Mascot point of view ... I came in in the afternoon to Richmond. Jeff was in Melbourne - posted to Melbourne. And they posted me to Queensland, by the way, on my return. He drove all night: I didn't know that at that time that he was coming, because there was no communication, except that I managed to get a message through to my mother to say that I would be in Richmond at some particular time. And much to my surprise, there he was with mum and my brother standing on the tarmac when I arrived. And we got engaged, I think, the next day, and we were married in the December - 13th December - so we've been married twenty two years this year. It was, as he always says, it was a cheap romance - the grog was cheap, there was nowhere to go - all those sorts of things.

If your matron realized that one of her nurses was having a serious relationship, was that discouraged, or was it okay?

No, certainly not. In our situation Jeff actually went to her - in fact Jean [the Matron in Vietnam] is Peter's godmother - we are still very, very good friends. He went to Jean and said, 'I have the intention of marrying one of your nursing sisters'. She said, 'Well, what's that got to do with me?', and he said, 'I felt I should inform you'. So she then, probably, informed the Matron in Chief back in Australia.

What would happen if one of the nurses was going out with one of the medics?

Um ... I don't think a great deal would have been done - that has happened. In my day, you know, we were sort of starting to come out of the dark ages a bit, and I know it had happened several times back here in Australia; and no, there was no discouragement there. There were times in the past where, if the hierarchy knew that you were having a relationship - you were intending to get married, or whatever, you would find one of them would get posted the other end of the earth. I mean, Jeff was posted to Melbourne and I was posted to Brisbane - we were married in Sydney. I mean, that was a feat in itself. But that was by no means intentional whatsoever. But in days gone by, yeah, that did happen but ... Actually, in my time I don't know of any nursing sisters who actually were involved with any of the other ranks - not in Vietnam anyway.

Just going back to your first time - first experiences in Vietnam - was there any sort of hand over, or how did you learn what to do?

I arrived on the Monday afternoon, and was on night duty the next night, on my own. Amy was very good, and she took me and we went right through the hospital and the procedures and one thing and another. The other girls that were still there, who had been there all that time, they, too, were very good in showing me the ropes: but it was just a bit of, sort of, you found your way as you went. It was a case of survival. You just used ... you used, you know, all your basic nursing principles that you'd learnt, you know, in giving out drugs and stuff like that. You just adapted your basic nursing skills to what was there: the equipment was there - you couldn't say it wasn't - it was. It's just the geographic surrounds were quite different, and certainly we had the heat and the humidity, the mosquitos - everything there was so totally different to what I'd ever experienced geographically. But you just adapted your nursing skills to whatever was there. To me it was the greatest learning experience that one could ever have, because you could become so adaptable.

Did you work in medical or surgical?

When you're on night duty you've got the whole hospital, so you did the lot - intensive care, medical, surgical, isolation, and casualty, depending on what was going on at the time. If there was a dustoff on and you were on night duty, well everybody would just get up and come, so you weren't on your own. But as far as running the hospital between ten thirty and six o'clock in the morning, you were it. I mean, you knew you could go and wake Jean up if you wanted her. And you had a duty officer - a male duty officer - could have been one of the doctors. I mean there was a doctor. They were in hand throw from where you were, however the initial responsibility was yours. And at twenty one, twenty two, that was ... I look back now and I think, 'My God'. You probably had a medic in each ward, usually. You'd have a medic in medical ward, one in surgical ward and one in intensive care, depending on who was in the ...

Was this on night duty?

You might have had two on night. If you had a heavy time you might have had two in there. And if there was a really bad situation Jean might have to pool one of the five of us for special ... But you couldn't do that too often, because there was really only five of us.

Do you remember the first dustoff that you went to?

Yeah, I remember the first dustoff. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. I think we had about ten of them at once. We had a triage area of six litters. They'd bring them in and just put the litters from the chopper on those and ...

The litters are like stretchers are they?

Yeah, they're the stretchers, yeah. And each litter was set up with your IVs and all your tetanus stuff and your morphine and all that. Everything was there - suckers - the lot, and there would be a quick assessment done by the doctor, and they would go into X-ray or theatre in order of priority of severity of wounds. I think that you were so bound up with what was

happening that it was over before you had time to think about it. And I think that's happened with a lot of us now that we're beginning to talk about it a bit. We didn't think a great lot about it at the time. You just had a job to do and you did it to the best of your ability. I think - and I've actually written a poem about it what still stands my hair on end is a chopper. There's not a time in any place, any where, any time, that I hear a chopper that the hairs on the back of my neck don't stand up. And the smell of sweat and blood and greens - soaking into greens - I can still smell. They are the two things that really stand me on end. And, in fact, my son is in the Army Reserve, and whilst they don't wear the greens these days - they wear those 'can't see me things' with desert camouflage thing. He comes home hot and sweaty - it triggers it straight away.

Does it?

Yeah, yeah. Having to cut the material and everything, and sort of pull it apart. People say that you've worked in casualty back here in Australia - and car accidents and things like that - but its just different. I don't know whether it was because it was the continual inflow of young men. You think to yourself, well ... you wonder why sometimes. But I think that we were so busy that we really didn't have time to think too deeply about it at that particular time.

Did you feel stressed when you were over there about it?

No, I couldn't say I did. I think there were times you work most operating theatres where you have to be quick ... and I didn't have training - had very little training - in operating theatre work - very little. But I found myself in there because I had had some. Jan McCarthy was in charge of the theatre section: she'd had a lot of experience in that area. But you had to be able to put your hand to everything, you know. Without question there was an expectation that you knew what you were doing anyway. Half the time I did, half the time I didn't - we muffed it half the time, but ... That's not casting aspersions on the skills that we had. I think the Good Lord was sitting on our shoulder, keeping a good eye on us. But again, we had some very, very skilled medics in operating theatre techniques. Quite a number of them would have walked hands and feet all over me. I still remember them - Cess Gregory is one of them. They were really skilled in what they were doing, but we had the necessary expertise and understanding of the long-term health care situation that oversaw that. But we always allowed them to do that sort of work if they were skilled at that.

I think the dustoff that really set me on edge was - we had what we called a KIA room - Killed In Action - where they actually brought the bodies in. We didn't actually do any of the laying out or anything like that. There was a young staff sergeant who did that, with an officer. And we were always fairly busy in the triage area, but I had to go in one day to get something from this staff sergeant. And one of the guys that they'd brought in, he'd been decapitated: and didn't think anything about it. Went on - it was, I suppose a twelve, thirteen hour shift or something or other. I got off duty and just cried and cried and cried - I couldn't believe what I'd seen. Yeah ... some limbs and things being brought in in plastic bags and, you know, its ... When you talk about it when your ... I've been fortunate enough to be able to talk about it quite a bit over the years; not so much within the family setting, but because Jeff and I have always had an understanding anyway. We both witnessed each other in that sort of situation, so there's not a lot of talking been done about that side of it. But I've been asked to do a few Anzac Day talks for the local schools and things like that, so I started talking about it a long time ago. But I really feel for people who - and there are still people out there ... In fact I met,

only just a couple of weeks ago, I was talking to Normie Rowe - Normie was over there when I was there. I had met him. He had come in to visit one of his fellows that had been wounded, and I met him over there and had never seen him again to talk to until about a month ago. I was at a concert and he was there, and Jeff and I went to say hello. And he introduced us to a fellow who was in the audience, and who is a member of the same sailing club that we belong to, strangely enough. He just has not talked to anybody about it at all: and he was a medic in the field. I think that, they are the people, really, that really did see the sort of thing happening. At least in our medical setting we were able to do something towards bringing them back to some sort of stay of health. But these guys out there, when it happened they were shot or stood on a mine or whatever. The choppers came in and lifted them up and took them straight off. Those guys were left there wondering whether they were going to live or whether they were going to die.

Did you have much contact with the medics who were in that situation?

In the field?

In the field.

On the odd occasion, yes. They would sometimes come in on the chopper with them.

But usually it was somebody different that would be on the chopper, would it?

Yes. It was either ... we had the Americans - the Americans would sometimes come in on the chopper - or usually the Australian ... Yeah, they had their own people on the choppers, yeah, but usually the medic in the field stayed in the field. It was a very rare occasion that one came in at that time.

Perhaps if we talk about the patients. Are there particular patients that you remember?

Yeah, I suppose. One particular fellow that comes to mind - I don't know whether Jean might have talked to you about it yesterday or not - was the young guy who died about three times on the operating table. Did she talk to you ...?

Is he the one that had five gunshot wounds?

Yeah.

And walked to the ...

Yeah, that's the one, yeah. He stands out very strongly - lovely fellow. I always remember him when he came in - I don't know whether Jean mentioned that part of it - I was there when he actually came in, and he was conscious at one particular point, and he had his ... he had a photo of his - it was his wife or his girlfriend - it was his wife: I don't think he had been married very long before he came over. And he just said to me will I please take it out of his pocket, and if anything happens to him to make sure that it was sent home to her. And I remember that bit about him, and I was in the theatre, actually, when he cardiac arrested the three times - I wasn't, I was scout actually. One of the medics was doing the instruments, and ... It was incredible: they seemed to revive him for what seemed more than the normal sort of

three minutes. It just seemed like thirty minutes. He was an absolutely walking miracle that guy. And, I don't know whether Jean mentioned also he ... I happened to be in the ward one day when he came to. I was leaning over him, adjusting one of his dressings, or something or other, and he just woke up and saw me there and said something like, 'Give us a kiss, love'. So we knew then that ... Did she say something about that?

> She said they were worried he might have brain damage. She said that he said something, but she didn't say what it was.

'Give us a kiss, love', and then they all knew there was nothing wrong with him: his brain hadn't been damaged at all. So he was one.

The other guy whom I remember - we had him in intensive care - a young lieutenant. He'd only been married three months before he came over. He had both his legs blown off. I can remember sitting with him off and on for quite a few days, listening to what he was going to do; whether he was going to divorce his wife and ... she wouldn't need anyone without any legs, and things like that. He came back to Australia and, in fact, Jeff and I - this is sort of about twenty years ago now - went and had dinner with them: they lived here in Brisbane, and he went to medical school and became a doctor. He was one.

The other guy - and Jean may have mentioned the other guy too as the fellow we had done a femoral arterial graft on at the time of the tidal wave. What a day that was. So they're the three that still stand out for me.

> What were the men like as a whole?

They were great: they were fantastic. They were ... You know, you sort of read your history books about the guys, Australian fellows, who were wounded ... that vein still runs through, even then ... the comradeship between them and their tremendous sense of humour, in the face of incredible odds sometimes - not knowing, a lot of them, what was going to face them physically and mentally and emotionally on their return to Australia. You know, they were just incredible guys. I must admit, at the last couple of reunions that I've been to this year - we had one here in Queensland in August - and I find myself spending a lot of time listening to them talking about what's happened to them. Some of them still haven't got their lives together, and you can understand why. One guy I was talking to, he had been married three times in the last twenty years. He came back and his first wife didn't understand the nightmares and things that he was having and so on. It is very hard for those people to understand too unless they were actually there. To pluck those fellows out of the jungle and what they saw, and put them back into civilization where nothing was wrong and everything was going along normally must be just so terribly hard to understand. Similar things happened in the Second World War where fellows were away for five and six years at a time - might have been married for three months and come back and find they've got a child whose four or something, and having to try and start a new life. Even though Australia was involved heavily in the First and Second World War, the shores of Australia have never really been touched except for Darwin. We've never really been threatened all that much, and until your threatened you don't pull out all your resources to survive, and that's what these guys were doing: they were just barely surviving.

Did you have strong feelings about Australia's involvement in the war before you went to Vietnam?

I believe that we should have been there, yeah. I was very strong about that. I think my motives weren't politically based: I'm not a political animal by any means. I always have had a great admiration for the sisters who served in the three wars, and I guess, in some senses, we all have our heroes and our heroines. And I read, as a child, and my teenage years, things like 'White Coolies' and I have developed that sort of an admiration for these people. And when I finished my training, and I realized that I had had the necessary skills, and things like that, I felt that what more needier cause than to follow in the footsteps of those people. And that really was my motive for going - it was by no means political.

Did your feelings change at all as a result of being in Vietnam - in terms of Australia's involvement - or did you maintain the same sort of view?

My view is still the same. If somebody said to me, 'Would you do it all again?', yeah, I would do it all again. Over the years its no use saying it shouldn't have happened because it did, and we chose at the time to be involved. The Government chose for us to be involved, and I suppose, if you like, I'm patriotic to that point. War to me is futile: it will always remain that. War is part of history: there will be wars, probably ... I mean, I don't want to see them, but they are there: we've just experienced one in Saudi Arabia. And I think the thing that has changed for me is the fact that how more aware I am, because a lot more things have been opened up, of just how politically motivated it was. And if there was anything wrong then that's what was wrong. It was the political games that went on. I mean, even in Vietnam you couldn't open fire on anybody in combat until you got the word down the line from the Americans.

I can remember being in Nui Dat, and we'd been up to a party - actually at Nui Dat. And we were coming back in one of the Caribous, and the Viet Cong were on the perimeter of the air field. We all knew they were there; the pilots knew they were there because they had been radioed through, and I happened to be in the cockpit at the time. They said, 'Stay where you are - don't take off'. We were waiting for permission to open fire on them. And we sat there for an hour and a half waiting for headquarters in Saigon - US - to give the permission. Now, not that I want to see anybody killed but, I mean, you couldn't lift a finger without getting permission to do it. So I suppose that's just one instance of political games.

I think one of the saddest things for the Vietnamese people was for the allied forces to withdraw the way they withdrew, and I have a great sadness for them in that. On the other hand I feel for the troops and the people who have actually been in the fighting over there in the allied area, because you can very well stand there and say, 'What was it for?'. At least in the First World War we gained freedom from tyranny from individual people, but not so the Vietnamese people. They've really gained nothing in their way of life and their way of living is still very primitive. And, you know, that's maybe what they want, I don't know. Far be it for me to change - want to change - or contribute to change of that nature. But if anything in my view has changed, it would be the way the political game ... And it does cause a little bit of conscience occasionally, that I was part of that, but we all need to be able to do what we believe is right at the time. And as I say, if they turned around and said the same thing to me, now, then yeah, I would do the same thing again.

Did you at any time, or have you suffered any discrimination because you went to Vietnam?

Yeah (laughs). From my own female species.

Have you?

Yes. You were looked on as a bit of a weirdo if you'd done something like that.

Is this recently?

Oh no. Maybe not so recently because I'm not as sensitive to it as now, because I've worked a few things through and I feel okay about that in myself, whereas I was usually fairly defensive about it all in the early stages - one had to be. I've been known to be with a group of people who have not been attached to the Services, and sort of make a statement about something and the whole room goes silent, and the conversation would be switched immediately to something else. Nobody really wanted to know about ... You desperately wanted to talk about it, not because you wanted notoriety or anything like that, but because you believe that people needed to know what the truth was - and yeah, mainly from my own female acquaintances.

Other nurses?

I couldn't say that I'd had that experience, no. Some might write it off, but mostly I've worked ... in the last ten years I've worked in hospice areas and they tend to be a different breed of nurses, with all due respect to all the rest of the profession. So no, I've never really felt any - in myself - any throw back from the profession.

What were your feelings when you were leaving Vietnam? You were there for twelve months?

Yeah. I left Vietnam on Ho Chi Minh's birthday, and that was the reason I left. I was due to come home and there were talks of a big attack, so anybody that was going home they, particularly female, they got them out fairly quickly, and that's why I came home on a Herc. I guess I can remember getting on the plane and thinking about ... wondering where on earth it was all going to end there. Very pleased to be going home, and I suppose a little excited too, in the fact that I was probably going to get married; and seeing mum and my brother again.

What were those early weeks like when you came home?

Oh, just ... it was like being numb. Like as if everything wasn't real. You'd walk down the street ... I can remember we went to ... mum lives out in the Paramatta area in Sydney, and Jeff ... we had to go over to Randwick and Jeff said he knew a jeweller over there - and we were going over to buy the engagement ring - and I can remember the sensation of all the cars and people. Everything was so clean and there was no uniforms. In fact you weren't allowed to ... That was the other thing: when you came back to Australia you weren't allowed to wear your uniform, which was something that was very upsetting to a lot of people. You couldn't go out in public in your uniform.

Why was that?

Because of the protests, yeah. A lot of them had become violent. The guys couldn't go into pubs or anything in their uniform - it would be inviting a riot. So we were all banned. Nobody in uniform and, as I say, everything was clean. You could go into any shop and have something to eat without having to, you know, wonder what was crawling inside it and all that sort of thing. No more etherised eggs - did Jean tell you?

No.

Oh, the eggs. Eggs ... All out food supplies, mainly - unless the HMAS Jeparit came up from Australia, or the Sydney bringing troops over, brought us up all pies and steaks and stuff like that from Australia - when they weren't coming up most of our food, the major part of our food came from the Americans, and they preserved, from the Second World War, their eggs in ether. And whilst the eggs were quite fresh, the reeked of ether, so I hadn't had an egg for twelve months - the smell of these etherised eggs. And we had the local bread - the Vietnamese bread - which was very thick and very sweet. Can you imagine having that for toast for breakfast of a morning? So, you know, the food was ... we were really into the food - it was great to have a baked dinner and stuff like that.

What was your health like when you came back?

It was pretty good, really.

Did you have any problems over there - any medical problems?

No, no I didn't. I only developed a middle ear infection, that was all. I was very lucky, actually.

Do you think, as a result of being in Vietnam you've had any health problems?

It wouldn't surprise me. I had a minor heart attack a couple of years ago and, I mean, there's a lot of other influences involved in that. I've got very high cholesterol - extremely high. It's a bit hard to say ... You might say to your doctor, well, 'Do you think this is a related thing?'. It would take an awful lot to prove that. Both my kids were cesarian for reasons that may or may not be associated, but it's a bit hard to say what is related and what isn't. When people say, you know, you could go outside and get run over by a bus too, but ... It would not surprise me. See, when you come back and you're still relatively young and you get on with your life, and we married and twelve months later we had Pete and then a couple of years later we had Kate and we lived in Singapore, and you got on with your life and you brought up your kids. It's only in the last sort of, maybe five or six years that things started to slow down - the kids growing up and things - that you had time to think, anyway. So, whether or not any of that was stress related or not I don't know. You'd be flat out trying to prove that. I guess it must have had some sort of ...

A lot of the American literature about the nurses - I said this to Jean as well - they talk mainly about three things. One is that the nurses - the American nurses I'm talking about - are now complaining that they were sexually harassed while they were in Vietnam.

No, no way. We were too protected. No, never, never. You would never even ... You know, I've been out with a couple of other fellows over there and no, there was never any ... We've been to American parties and things like that, you know. It could well have been for them, their situation was so very different. I know we were always almost revered by the fellows over there. I mean, if you left yourself open to that sort of thing it might have been a different story, but no ... And nor have I heard of anybody in my time there.

> That's the sort of reaction I get from the Australian nurses. The other thing that comes out is ...

They may have been sexually harassed by us, I'm not too sure (laughs).

> ... is that the nurses feel that they were discriminated against because they were women in an all male ...

This is the American ...

> Yes.

I think I felt less discriminated against in the Services than I do in 'civvy street'.

> Do you?

Yeah. If we had an opinion about something it was pretty well listened to and accepted. I could never say that I was discriminated against. Even when you look at pay and things - we were all on the same pay rate as our male counterparts, in officer rank anyway, for a start. The only thing, I suppose, is - and that changed about six months after I got married - was that I had to get out of the Service to get married.

> So you actually got out of the Service virtually when you came back?

Yes, six months later; and we married in the December and Jeff was posted back here, and I went back into the Army Reserve or the CMF as it was then - Army Reserve now - and worked back out at military hospital where I had left, for about seven months till I fell pregnant with Peter.

> The third thing that comes out is the sort of problems that they have experienced: the post traumatic stress syndrome problems that the American nurses have experienced. And apparently it came to a head when they showed 'China Beach' in America, and all these nurses came out of the woodwork and said, hey, you know ...

Yeah, again it's the sort of situation where the female is in the minority, even with the American services, and because, I think, Vietnam itself was such a controversial issue in both countries that, again, a lot of people talked about it, and it's only over the recent years that even the American fellows have been starting to talk about it, and come out of the woodwork. And the same set of principles there, too, where now people like yourself are starting to look at what our involvement was in that war. I think it's only time that will bring those sorts of

things out, and I think that's what's happening with the Americans now, and people are starting to write things about ... Have you seen 'China Beach'?

No.

It's on tonight.

It's not on in Wagga, but I noticed it's on tonight.

Have a look at it.

I will. I saw the shorts of it.

I've got the CD of the music from it ...

Oh, right.

... and there are a couple of beautiful excerpts on it. The leading light in it is ... depicts the thing very well, and she went to Vietnam and she went home to see her father and tell her father, and he couldn't accept the fact. He could understand if his son went, but he couldn't understand if his daughter went - those sorts of things were very real. There was a lot of stuff that went on that was a bit over the top, even for the Americans, but it is very close to the bone. 'MASH' is another ... I mean 'MASH' is just beautiful. There is a radar in every hospital unit, you know. There are those sorts of doctors. Somebody said to Jean, 'You weren't hot lips were you?' - sort of carry on about hot lips. Generally around the story it's good. You look at the choppers coming in and things like that, and the reactions of the individual people, and the humour - it's all there. But I can understand because it was the ABC series which my son has just got - 'Vietnam: the History', Time Life Magazine - Time Life did it on the ABC - and it came on about six, seven, eight years ago. In fact, it was that program that started me thinking about what I was seeing. I was looking at the napalm incident, where that young Vietnamese child is ... there's a photograph that won a prize of that child: it was that and it was seeing some of the horrific wounds again in that video that I found myself sitting here, in this very room actually - the television was over there - and the tears started to roll down my face, and I had never reacted that way before. And then I suddenly realized that I really had to start thinking about what was going on. And that's when I started to write, and it was after that film that I actually wrote my first piece [poem], which was quite long but it says a lot of stuff. So I could understand that, throwing that up on the screen for people who haven't really looked at what they had seen. In fact, when I was talking with Normie Rowe the other day he said it very well, and it was a case of survival. And as he said, he saw his best mate shot down and a week later another one of his mates shot down. He said, 'Oh yeah, right. He's just been shot; we'll get the chopper in; the chopper will get him out; and off we go again.' You know? And that was survival and I guess it's very much the same thing for the nurses as well, because if you started to dwell on particular instances you would never have survived. And that doesn't mean to say that you're hard - that's called survival. In fact, I think, you know, it really did turn my life around completely. I think I became a much more compassionate understanding person because of that experience. I mean, not solely because of that, but at that particular point in my life.

What happened to your nursing career after you left the Army?

Came home, got married, worked for seven months at the military hospital, and then I didn't work again for sixteen years. I was fortunate enough to be a kept woman (laughs) - I brought the kids up. We had the overseas posting in Singapore - we lived in Melbourne and Canberra - and we came back here fourteen years ago. So, about sixteen years ago - no, what am I talking about. When I came up here, in 1979 we came up, actually - '78 - I have always been involved in the church - in care and concern groups, and things like that. But I have always been particularly interested in working with the dying. I became involved in the church care and concern group - just visiting people, initially - and I always, for some reason or another, used to find myself in that situation, with the terminally ill person at home. And I gradually became more aware that there were people who actually wanted to die at home. So I ... actually, to cut a long story short, set up a professional and non-professional nurses, and other women who had had an experience, who were willing to sit with people in that situation and support a family at home in conjunction with other services: so I actually set that up and coordinated it for about four years here, and it's still running.

Is that a voluntary ...?

Yes, yes; and it's twenty four hours, seven days a week. And as a result of that I became involved with our Hospice here in Brisbane, and it was in 1986 they asked me to go on the staff there: so I actually went back. And there isn't any hands on nursing involved in it, but it's twenty four hour support in so far as counselling and just being with people. So I did that for four years and I had a heart attack, actually, trying to burn the candle at both ends. So I had to, unfortunately, give that away and I'm now employed fifteen hours a week counselling families and kids in crisis in the two local Catholic primary schools, which is also a pilot program. It's never been done before: it's done in the high schools but not in the primary schools. I've just recently been given another five hours to set up a support group for the children within the curriculum of the school who have experienced some form of loss in their lives. So I have done a lot of work with people in loss and grief over the years.

Do you think your experience in Vietnam has influenced the direction ...?

Definitely.

Can you explain that?

I think I can. When I was there with these guys it was an incredibly privileged position to be in because I and the rest of my professional colleagues were their family at that time, if you can get what I mean. And I used to get very upset, in fact that I knew, me, why me, why somebody who's a total stranger to this person knows exactly what they are going through, exactly what they look like, before - eight hours, at least, maybe - before anybody that knows them and loves them back in Australia knows. And I've never been able to get an answer as to why I had that privilege: and it is exactly the same privilege as it is to be with somebody who in dying. And I've always carried that concern for the family with me, and I think, because of that, I have a better understanding - not a full understanding, but a better understanding - of what families might be going through. I hope to go back into it one day; I'm heading for that way, I hope. Not nursing wise - I've given the nursing away - but I'm going to do what they call a clinical pastoral care course the middle of this year, and hopefully go back into palliative care unit in that capacity, yeah. But yes, I think that that was something that really

still stands very strong for me. I'm not saying that I wasn't concerned about the young person that I was caring for at all, but it was the fact that I knew, before anybody else knew, and why (laughs).

> It's interesting because there are a number of the nurses who I have spoken to who are actually now involved in palliative care ...

Is that right?

> ... or are involved, in maybe a voluntary capacity, counselling patients with AIDS, or their families.

Well, that's the other area that I've worked in too, yeah, and that's one of the areas they are just opening up here, out at the Mater, and that's where the course is. It's a twelve week full-time course, intensive course, and I would certainly ... If I didn't have any attachments - if I wasn't married and had a family - I would have loved to have gone over to Rumania to work with the kids.

> Oh right, yes, some of the programs.

Yes, yes. It's interesting. I think it's because you are faced with a life and death situation, and the reality of that. I mean, it's not just something that you see on TV or something that happens to somebody else: it really does happen and can happen to you. I think that there is that connection there.

> Yes, I know. One of the other nurses said to me - who does a lot of work with AIDS patients - she said that she could see a whole lot of parallels between these healthy young men that she nursed in Vietnam, who were either severely disabled or perhaps, ultimately, going to have an early death, and the AIDS patients she was involved with.

Yeah, definitely. Yeah, the parallels are definitely there, and that's why I always say that Vietnam turned my life around. And I've had many other experiences that have led me to where I am today; but I would have to say that that was the springboard for it all. So often I still say, 'Well, why me?', and people say, 'Well, why not you' (laughs).

12/92