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TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

S01629

Maureen Gladys Patch (née Healy) as a lieutenant nursing sister 1st Australian Field Hospital 1970-1971, interviewed by Lynn Hemmings

Recorded

at: Queanbeyan

on: 26 September 1993

by: Lynn Hemmings

Description

Nursing training prior to joining army; joining army; difficulty of getting pantyhose in Vietnam; living conditions; food; water; toilets; duty shifts; training on the job; types of casualties and injuries; attitude to service in Vietnam; physical and emotional effects of service in Vietnam; alcohol consumption; characteristics of patients; US nurses; war service housing loans; returning from Vietnam; marriage; returning to nursing in Hobart; nursing at Duntroon Hospital; trip to dedication of nurses statue in United States; after effects of Vietnam service on nurses.

Transcribed by: C.L. Soames, May 1994

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Identification: This is Lynn Hemmings, the date is 25 September 1993. I'm interviewing Maureen Patch, whose maiden name was Healy, at her home in Queanbeyan. The interview is for the oral history project of RAANC nurses who served in Vietnam.

Quite a few people have said that they joined the army specifically to go to Vietnam.

I always wanted to join the army but I didn't know what I wanted to do. I can remember when I worked in a bank, I decided then that I wanted to join; but as I said, I didn't know what I wanted to do, I didn't want to be a clerk, and I didn't have my driver's licence so I couldn't be a driver.

And then I forgot about it for a few years because I left the bank and went on a working holiday to New Zealand. And after I came back I decided that working in a bank wasn't what I wanted to do, and so I decided that I would try nursing. But I didn't want to do my training; I thought I'd go to the local hospital and see whether I liked it or not, and my mother said no, do your training. Then, when I finished I did it at Taree, and when I finished I went to Sydney and did mid at the Royal Hospital for Women at Paddington, and Vic(toria) Barracks was opposite. And that was the opening I needed to join. So I rang the colonel that was in charge there and went straight in.

Had the war started then?

It had, yes - this was '69.

So you actually joined hoping to get to Vietnam?

Yes, I joined specifically to go to Vietnam. Well, I'd always wanted to join the forces, but when Vietnam came along, and I was nursing, then I decided that that's what I wanted to do.

How do you think you got selected to go to Vietnam?

I think it was because of my age.

Because you wouldn't have had that many years experience.

No, I was only in the army eleven months when I actually went, but I'd been selected prior to that, but my father was very ill and so I didn't go.

It's interesting. I've asked a few people why they think they got selected and not other people.

Well, that's what I think. I was chosen to go early, but because dad was so sick they decided not to send me - and that was it. I think it was specifically because I was older that I was sent over soon after joining.

What sort of preparation did you get?

None, full stop.

Did you talk to anybody who'd been?

No, I hadn't met anyone who'd been; there was nobody - I was at Puckapunyal at the time and there were no nursing sisters in Victoria at that stage who'd been.

Did you have any idea what to expect?

No, not really. I just knew that we'd be in an Asian country and the conditions were pretty primitive. We didn't know - or I wasn't told - just what sort of conditions you'd be living under, and what you'd be working under. The stupid thing was though, we were still expected to wear our veils, starched, and in the humidity that was just a no-no, you couldn't get your veils to stay nice and starched.

Did you rebel against the veils and the stockings and things?

No, no; we were there in uniform, and that was it. We ended up wearing paper veils, and we wore pantihose - seamed stockings were still in at that stage - and it was just too hot to wear step-ins or whatever.

Did you wear pantihose with seams at the back?

No.

Did they have those?

No - no, we just wore pantihose. Because we were so far away ...

I think some of the earlier ones must have worn seamed stockings.

They did, and that was all you could buy - or that was all you could get up there. You could get them issued to you - seamed stockings - but you couldn't get pantihose. I can remember there was a murder while I was up there and one of the MPs - military police - was coming home with forensic evidence. Before he left he said, 'Is there anything you want me to bring you back?' and I said, 'Oh yes please - pantihose'. So he came home - and he came from Tamworth at that stage, and his wife came down from Tamworth to see him because she hadn't seen him for a while. Just before they were ready to go back to Mascot she said, 'Now, is there anything you want to take back that you can't get up there?' and he said, 'Oh yeah, I've got to take some pantihose back'. Of course, he had to backtrack then and explain how we couldn't buy anything up there. So anyone who came home on R&R, or for any reason, was always asked to take pantihose back because we needed them, and you just couldn't get them up there - well, you couldn't buy any clothing up there.

Some of the other nurses that I've interviewed have said that they felt that the uniforms were sort of important for the morale of the men, and that was why the veils and the pantihose ...

Oh yes, yes. Seeing you in your uniform, as opposed to being in greens - yeah. And also too, another thing that they really liked was if you wore perfume to work - oh yes - as long as you didn't wear a ... You know, some of the perfumes were really nauseating, and if you are ill there's no way you can handle a perfume; but if you were very discrete and you had a nice perfume - you'd put a little bit on going to work, you know - and they really loved it - (sniff) 'Oh, a new perfume today, Sis' - they took note of everything, no matter what you did they took note of.

I was going out with a fellow who used to buy '*Miss Dior*' at that stage; and this other fellow - I'd met him a couple of times at a party, he was an American - I went to a party - or he went to one which I was supposed to be going to and I didn't go. The fellow that I was going out with said - I can't even remember his name now - he said he gave me this parcel to give to you, and it was a big bottle of '*Jolie Madame*' - (Pierre) Balmain, I think, the perfume was, and it was absolutely gorgeous. And the next time I saw him I said, 'What's the perfume for?' and he said, 'I just enjoyed meeting you'. I thought, well, great.

If you went out to dinner you might go out with one fellow, but you wouldn't usually end up having dinner with one fellow; there'd be a whole table of men and you'd be the only female because there were so few of us; and sometimes you wouldn't even speak to all of them, but they'd just sit and look, and that was it, or they'd come and say, shyly, 'Hello, how are you?' and that was it.

But basically they sort of protected you.

Oh heck, yes. Any of the ... nobody could say anything against the sisters at all - which was great.

When you went up there and you didn't have any preparation, what was the reality like? Was it as you had expected?

I didn't sort of have anything set in my mind, I don't think, of what to expect. I really think we just accepted what we were given because we knew we were in a ... you know, a long way from home, and we were there to do a job and that was it. If you had to put up with a bit of hardship, well, that's it, it wasn't going to last for ever. I don't think I was too put off by the conditions - I suppose you got sick of them, especially when you saw the white ants eating away at the rafters and that sort of thing. The food, I think, was the hardest to get used to because it was American food. There food is so much sweeter, but a lot of their meat all tasted the same - and etherised eggs! - eggs were dreadful.

No water: lack of water was a big thing. We had a bathtub, but we never, ever had enough water that everybody could have a bath and refill it each time. But at least by the time we got up there we had septic tanks and all that sort of thing - but there was only us and the hospital, and the ALSG - the Logistics Support Group - on the hill, the main officers' mess that had the sewerage; the rest of them still had the deep trench latrines.

That was another funny thing too: if you went to one of the other units and you wanted to go to the toot, you had to ask somebody to take you to the toot because it was all-men's toilets; and so rather than have somebody barge in on you while you were there you had to have someone posted at the door to mind it so you didn't get barged in on - that was funny.

What was the actual nursing work like?

I suppose, in a way, it was hard because some of the shifts were hard. Night duty, at times, was twelve hours, and that didn't give you twelve hours sleep - I suppose, if you were lucky, eight or nine hours sleep. You only got one day off a week, if you were lucky; and if you were changing from night duty to day duty you still only got that one day, and it doesn't get you back on your feet - didn't get you back on your feet properly. But I don't know, I think because of where we

were, doing what we were, I don't think it affected me.

Did you work in medical or surgical?

Surgical and ICU. And see, I'd never had any training in ICU; I only learnt it when I went over there, but boy, by the time I came back I could take a respirator to bits and put it back. We had a fantastic anaesthetist from Greenslopes Hospital.

In New Zealand?

No, Brisbane; it was the repatriation hospital at Greenslopes in Brisbane. He taught us; he could take it apart anywhere and put it together, and you were right, so when we came back, if anything went wrong with the respirator, we knew exactly what it was and how to fix it. But then, of course, while we were up there, if you needed something you just rang pharmacy or whatever department you wanted and they'd have it to you straight away; then you came home and you'd ring pharmacy - 'I'm sorry, they are out at sport' - you know. That was one of the hardest things, I think, when we came home to get used to, not being able to get things when you wanted them. We still thought we were working in the same environment, and, of course, we weren't. That took a bit of coping with.

When you were over there how did you cope with the continual stream of young men coming in, and the sorts of things you were seeing?

I likened it to working in a busy casualty on a Saturday night, and it was no worse than that. In fact, it was probably better than that because we didn't get drug overdoses, all the patients were fit young fellows before they got hurt - they were just a breed apart to nurse, you know. In the twelve months that I was there not once did anybody die when I was on duty.

Very few people seemed to have died in the hospital.

There were only two died in ICU in the twelve months that I was there - two or three - and I wasn't on duty for any of them, but the recovery rate was just so good. Also too, I think, we didn't get any really bad burns; if anyone was really burnt they went to the American hospital.

And some of the neuro went to the American hospital too.

Mm. See, they had their specialties and we didn't. Sometimes some of their specialists would come down to us if we had a particular case, and they had time for a 'swan' they'd come down. But also too, we didn't get the amount of heavy casualties that the Americans got because, I think, our fellows were better trained, and they were better soldiers, they weren't as gung ho as the rest of them - the Americans. A lot of the Americans, I think, were just gun fodder. They had the huge numbers, but I really don't think that they had the training that our fellows had.

Yes, because the American nurses, as soon as 'China Beach' came out, it seemed like the American nurses really started to come out and say how traumatised they'd been and that they hadn't really been acknowledged.

Yes, well, see they had what they call the 'basket cases' - oh, my God, they were dreadful. I watched 'China Beach' the night that they had the real people on. I think that's probably - I'd only seen one or two episodes prior to that - and when they described a 'basket case' - well, we didn't

get 'basket cases' - our fellows didn't get that injured, even the ones that got killed weren't injured like they were.

'Basket cases' were where they'd had multiple amputations.

Oh yes, multiple amputations, and head injuries, and abdominal injuries - the whole lot - and we just didn't get them.

The luckiest fellow I saw up there - I couldn't believe it - I nursed two fellows who were shot in the heart, and they both lived to tell the tale. I reckon the bullets were just at the end of their run, and that's it, they just lodged there, they weren't shot there.

Another fellow turned to say something and got shot through the side of the neck. If he'd been like that he'd have lost his life completely.

And another fellow who I'll never forget was a hindquarter amputation. The boys were taking him to the morgue and one of them noticed that he took a breath.

I think somebody else has told me that story.

Peter Carroll - fantastic. He lived to tell the tale, and we met up with him in '87.

What was it like meeting up with him?

Great. Well, see we didn't think he'd ever be a father, and he had three children, the youngest was twelve months, I think. And he'd been all around the world with a football team, as manager. Oh, incredible fellow.

Did you ever worry while you were there, or afterwards I suppose, about what you were actually sending back home?

No, never thought of it. As far as I was concerned they were there doing a job, the same as we were, and the mere fact that they were being sent home was a plus for them because they'd recover much more quickly. The biggest hurdle was the people at home - they were the flies in the ointment, the bloody parliamentarians. We were only there because the government said so, and then the Labor parliamentarians were the ones that caused all the fracas and had most people up in arms against it. They were the ones, I think, at odds with everybody, not us.

Did you feel part of the war effort?

Oh yes. I went up there specifically to look after soldiers; that's what I wanted to do and I did it.

You went as a nurse ...

Oh yes.

... rather than as a ...

Oh heck yes.

That's what I meant, in terms of the war effort. I suppose I was thinking ...

Oh yes, I went as a nurse first and foremost, yes. It was something I really wanted to do. Also too, it was something that was just so different from anything that you'd get anywhere else - it isn't now, of course, because of all the wars since around the place, but still, Australia hasn't been involved except for the ...

The Gulf?

Yes, the Gulf War.

But then I think the nurses didn't really see any ...

They didn't see anything, no. And I don't think they did anything much either because they were on a hospital ship. One of the doctors who went over was a reservist from Hobart. It cost him \$22,000 in loss of revenue, and all he did was an appendicectomy. So the Gulf War was a bit of a fizzer as far as people like that were concerned. But, they are having strife now because they are finding that people who were close to the front ... the bullets or the projectiles that went into the tanks were made of some type of uranium, and now they are having all these ... the people come up with all these dreadful - loss of memory, loss of bowel control - oh, awful things - and they are putting it down to the stuff that that was made of. Well, thank God we didn't have anything like that. So the outcome of what a lot of the American nurses and American - I suppose infantry personnel, because they have women in infantry - the things that are going to come out over the next few years will be a damn sight more than whatever happened to us.

Did you feel, at any stage after leaving Vietnam, that you had any sort of legacy in terms of physical, medical, conditions, or emotional disturbances?

I don't think we had emotional disturbances. I had one physical, and that's my veins; I got into strife with varicose veins when I was up there, but that was all, and mum sent my up the Supp-hose. I've since had to have then done, of course. That's about it. Oh, I got tinea off the beach on my back from doing the sun ... You know those white splotches that you get on your skin? I got that, but I got rid of it when I got home, so that wasn't anything traumatic.

I made it a point, always - I spent most of my time in ICU, I think - of whenever we had a dust-off come in I always made the point of going out that night, and not staying in the home, so that I wasn't rehashing what had come in because anyone who was off duty at that time would ask you what came in, and what the injuries were, and all the rest of it, and so I made it a point of not to be home, or stay at home, when we had dust-offs. There are enough fellows there that you could ring up and say, 'Would you like to take me for a drink tonight?' and they'd be straight over; you didn't have to stay at home. And I think that was one of the things I made sure I always did.

When you came home was there any, at any time, did you ever work through any of that, or is it not something that you felt that you even needed to work through?

I don't think so; I don't think it had affected me at all. I might have had a bit of an alcohol problem when I first came home, but not that I craved it, but it was just so noticeable - the drinks that we got at the mess and that were just like lolly water compared with what we had been drinking. And in one instance it was to my advantage that they did taste like lolly water because I took a group of patients down to the local RSL; and we were sitting round talking and the

president of the RSL was there and he was buying some drinks. One of the patients said to me, 'Hey, Sis, do you know what he's doing?' I said, 'No', and he said, 'He's buying you doubles' - because I was drinking Bacardi and Coke at that time - and he said, 'He's buying you doubles'. I said, 'Oh, is he?' - and it still tasted like lolly water. I thought, well, the laughs on him because he was waiting for me to get tipsy, and I was downing them as quick as he bought them - I wasn't getting tipsy but he was, so we just sat back and watched him knowing what was going on. I thought that was well and truly to my advantage.

The only reason I pushed that point is because there is sort of the stereotype of the Vietnam veteran. I guess my question is whether or not the nurses fit that stereotype.

Well, you might find some of them that do, but I don't think so.

What do you think it is about the nurses that made them survive?

Well, probably because we were used to looking after people. That's probably the main thing. See, the work that we did up there really was no different from the work we did anywhere else - it might have been more intensive at times - but on the whole I don't think we ... yeah, it was because we'd already done most of it, I think.

Also too, I think, even though some of them had awful injuries, our job was made easier because they were such fit young fellows; you didn't have any old cardiac patients, or whatever.

So you were really just treating the injury ...

Yes.

... and not any underlying problem?

Yes, that's right. The injury was just being treated, and no matter how badly they were injured it was always 'me mate', you know - 'How's me mate?' They always thought that 'me mate' was always worse off than what the person was - and they were marvellous. I only nursed one sook up there, and he was RAAF, and he'd only been in a motor accident. I think he was the only one that I thought was a sook, especially when he wasn't even injured by enemy fire or anything.

I don't know; maybe some people would tell you I was a bit twisted in some ways, but I really, in myself, I don't think that I got traumatised up there in any way.

My feeling after interviewing about seventeen people is that the nurses, for whatever reasons, survived really well - survived emotionally very well, and physically, and don't fit the sort of picture that you get, firstly, of the Vietnam veteran, but also the picture you get of the American nurses - they are just not like the American nurses, or certainly the way the American nurses are portrayed.

We met two American nurses the long weekend last year - twelve months ago next week - and they were the ones who invited us over for the opening of the memorial - that's how we got to know about it. Well, they gave us a book of poetry written by some of the nurses, and there is one person who just calls herself 'Dusty' - holy hell, she must have gone through absolute hell for the poetry she writes, it's all just so morbid. In fact, Siobhan McHugh who wrote that book ...

Minefields and Miniskirts

Yes, right. Well, she was a woman's libber out for all the stress syndrome and all the rest of it, I reckon. I went to the launching of the book and then when I started to read through it, it certainly wasn't the Vietnam I had experienced, but then she'd picked out women from different places and different types of jobs that they were doing over there. As I said, it certainly wasn't the Vietnam I knew.

We had a friend and his wife come for dinner a couple of weeks after I got the book and he was reading through it and he said, 'Oh gee, this isn't the Vietnam I knew'. Darrell wouldn't even touch it, anything that's written like that, he won't touch it with a barge pole because of the angle that it's written in.

What angle do you think she was trying to take?

Oh, she was bringing out the women's libber angle, I think - how traumatised women got from what they had to put up with. Well, some of them may well have had to put up with it, but we certainly didn't. Also too, I would never have gone up in any other capacity than as a sister in the army; there was no way I would have gone up with a surgical team or anything like that because you didn't have the security that you had being with the army. Okay, you had to toe the line, and you had to wear uniforms and all the rest of it, but that's a very small price to pay for all the security that we had. You knew that you were looked after to the nth degree; probably if you did get into strife it was only your own stupidity that did it, or got you there.

But one of the things has only come out in the last couple of years that any of the nurses who were up there - and see, you were entitled to a war service loan for your house - it has only come out in that last couple of years that you could use it - if your husband was entitled to one and you were entitled to one, you could never use it on the same property - they've only just brought it out since - or Gough Whitlam brought it in when he was in that anybody who served over a certain amount of time in the army could get this housing loan, but war service you got, regardless of how long you spent in the army, as long as you had your twelve months or over six months over there. Apparently navy people were going to take them to court over it, and they suddenly said okay to housing loans can be used on the same loan, which was great because we both put ours on this one then. And that's it, we don't owe any other money on it, which is great. So that was one thing.

I think the women of the Second World War were the hardest done by.

Yes, they probably paved the way for the women in Vietnam.

Well, probably, because I know there was the woman who was matron at Pucka(punyal) when I first went into the army; she had not been able to get a housing loan, and she'd been in the Second World War. But then I think they brought it in eventually that she could get it, but I really don't know how a lot of them survived when they weren't given much support at all. But anyway, that's them, not us.

How long did you stay in the army when you came back?

I only stayed in about eighteen months, I think. I came back in '71 - it would be just over twelve months because I met Darrell in about the November after I came home - because he'd just

arrived home then - and we got married in March '73, so it wasn't long at all.

Do you think your time in Vietnam influenced the direction your career went?

No, not at all because I finished nursing as soon as I got married; I didn't go on working at all because I was thirty-two when I got married, we decided that we'd have a family straight away or not have it at all, and so I was pregnant within five weeks of being married, and I didn't go back to nursing for fifteen years. It wasn't until we went to Hobart on posting that I did a refresher course down there, and it was so much easier doing it down there than anywhere else at that stage because in New South Wales you had to go to whatever hospital happened to be holding the refresher course to do your theory, and then you had to find a hospital that would employ you for six weeks. Down there everything was done under the one roof; they employed you while you did your refresher course, and it was great. Victoria and Tasmania came under the same type of training, and it was great, but it had finished by the time we left down there; they just didn't have the money - the government didn't have the money - to put into it, which is a pity because if you're out of nursing five years now you have to do a refresher course.

Well, I just don't think they want to put the money into it now because there's no jobs to give people anyhow.

That's right.

Do you work full time?

No. At the moment I work for SmithKline Beecham doing a vaccine trial at Duntroon. In fact, this week I will be wrapping it all up, I'll be finished it, but that was giving the vaccine and taking blood at different intervals, and that sort of thing. It was interesting but oh, a lot of work, a lot of work - lot of writing. I used to only do three hours a day most days because I couldn't write for any longer, my hand just got too sore, and my legs; but it was interesting to see how they do it. But now I worked yesterday and today on the ward ...

Is this a Queanbeyan?

No, at Duntroon. Duntroon has about a thirty-bed hospital there, and that takes care of everybody in the Canberra area. There's no high-powered nursing there; anything radically wrong goes to Woden or Calvary, and then they come back to recuperate at Duntroon. It's just the pace I like and it keeps my hand in. You have your drips, and you have your chest-tubes and that sort of thing, but there's nothing radically wrong with anyone there. Also too, they do lots of dentals - wisdom teeth - because they have so many cadets of that age going through with problems, and they do a few hernias and things like that. A surgeon comes down from Sydney each week. He's been posted so I don't know whether they'll do it next year or not, unless they can find another surgeon. But another lass and I are job sharing so we are only working a couple of days a week, which is great, because I don't want to work full time.

The trip that you are doing to America, is that something you are being sponsored for?

Oh no.

It's something you are doing as an individual?

Yes. The only one who is helping us, I suppose, is Qantas because they are giving us a decent price on the air fare; We've got the air fare for \$1,600 return, and that's great, especially when they quoted us \$1,960 - and that's right to Washington, it's not just to Los Angeles. A Red Cross lass and I are staying with friends in Washington, so for the first week we are there we'll be in Washington because most of the things are on in the first week, or it's all on in the first week. And then we are going to Orlando in Florida to do our shopping because apparently there's a great shopping area there with [Calvin Cline] and all these different ...

Even Washington has got good shops. I was in Washington about two years ago, and it's got good shopping there.

Well, it's similar in Florida, I think, but the thing about Florida is it's all under the one roof. So if you know what you want, it doesn't take you that long to get it, but also too, there's quite a lot around Washington that we want to see, and we'll only have two days to actually do it because the rest of the time is taken up with the dedication of the statue.

With Washington doing that do you think that Australia has done enough in terms of recognising the contribution of the nurses?

Oh yes, I think so. I think we'd be silly if we tried to get something like that going because just in organising the Vietnam War Memorial, that was such a hell of a job that I don't think there'd be any way anyone would take on one just for nurses.

You don't feel bitter?

No, no. As far as I'm concerned that's there for me as well as every other Tom, Dick and Harry that was over there. I think people who get bitter and twisted about it, they had something wrong before they started. But mind you, personally I think I'm in a secure position and have been ever since I came home. I've never had to worry about a roof over my head or getting a meal - looking after myself at all. Well, I got married fairly soon after, but you have your ups and downs.

The things that I felt from interviewing the women, first, that the things that came out from America about sexual discrimination and harassment didn't figure for the Australian nurses.

No.

The second thing probably that I feel is that for some of the women - not all of the women, but for some of them - I do get the impression that they sort of distance themselves a lot from what was happening, from what they saw, from what they did. I'm not quite sure whether they ever dealt with it when they came back, or if they always have distanced themselves from it.

You mean the sort of getting all upset about the people that you looked after?

Yes.

Well, when I first started training, our tutor drew a huge big heart on the board, and he said, 'Right, that's your heart', and then he drew a tiny little one down the bottom, he said, 'That's your inner self'. He said, 'Give any part you like of that big heart to your patient, but never intrude on

that small heart', he said, 'That's yours'. He said, 'If you do start giving that part of your heart to your patient, give up nursing because you won't cope with it.' And I'm sure that was ... Well, that was at the back of my mind because I didn't get close enough to anybody to let them interfere with the way I felt or the way I saw things.

I suppose the other thing that has come through a little bit is that for some people I felt that they put everybody else first rather than themselves, and I don't know whether that's something that nurses do.

I think that's a part of nursing, yes.

And I think that women tend to do it too, it's more than just nursing, it's that women do it; you do it with your family.

That's always on, I think.

But my overwhelming impression is that the women survived very well.

That's good.

When I tell people about this study they always say, oh, that must be so traumatic, those poor women, oh, what are they like. There is this picture that they are these victims of Vietnam.

[End of Interview]