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INTERVIEWER: Sue Hardisty

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Mary White as a member of the Australian Women's Land Army (AWLA), 1942-1945, interviewed by Sue Hardisty on 7 August, 1985 at Anglesea, Victoria.

Well, I was born at Apollo Bay and lived there in the early days. My parents took up, oh, forest land just out of the township in the hills. And somehow we were brought up to feel that we lived in the most beautiful place in the world and that we were very fortunate people and we didn't pine for the cities or that type of thing at all. Both of my parents were interested in natural history and my mother used to read us stories. We had one book called "First Studies in Plant Life in Australia" and another one "First Studies in Insect Life" and those really started us off when we were quite young on natural history. And somehow my father seemed to know the names of the plants. I often wondered later on how he did know the names, but I found out that he had been a close friend of the local forester in the early days so probably that's how he found out. We used to go for long walks through our own property. A Sunday afternoon walk was roundabout our farm over the hills and down into the gullies and crossing logs over the creeks and looking for waterfalls and that type of thing. So we were always really very interested. And one day when I was going to school I found an Emperor Gum Moth caterpillar and I recognised it and one of my older sisters kindly allowed me to wait a minute and put it in a tin and take it and I took it home that night and watched it with great interested. But unfortunately shortly after

that we had the disastrous bush fire and were cut off on all sides and I'm afraid I forgot to give my caterpillar any fresh food and when I looked at it next it was dead. So I felt very sad about that. But it was a type of thing we were interested in.

Were there farms near by in terms of…?

Oh, the nearest farm was not very far away. I suppose it was about, because distances are different when you're young, I suppose it was about half a mile. There was a married couple lived there and they had a beautiful garden. And then a bit further down the road, of course, depends on whether you go by how a crow flies or around the load, but about a mile down the road the Frickies lived and there were people our own age in that family. But mostly we made our own entertainment amongst ourselves.

I was just wondering if you were used to seeing farm activities like milking and sheep work and that sort of thing?

Yes, we had sheep and shearing. Normally the shearing was done by groups. It would be the Whites, the Cantlins, the Berrys, they'd shear at one farm and then at another and then at another. And, oh yes, there were a few of the native animals. I remember a tiger cat getting into our fowl yard and having a look at it and I believe they're very scarce nowadays. I remember

though just before we left Apollo Bay there was a rabbit plague and farmers were supposed to plough furrows and put poisoned carrot down. And one day my father and one of the men working for us brought home an enormous eagle. It had been eating the poisoned carrots and wasn't very well and one held each wing tip and walked this enormous bird home. My father thought it was probably much larger than anything in the zoo and it escaped before he was able to send it to the zoo. But it really was, we checked up later, it was an enormous bird. And Mother used to see it flying over later on with a little bit of blue tag still attached to its claws.

And so how many sisters and brothers did you have?

Oh, at that time I had four sisters. A brother was born later on. My oldest sister later on had quite a distinguished career at the university. She took exhibitions every year. My father was once travelling up in a train to Beach Forest and the local Inspector of Schools was talking to someone else in the compartment and after a while my father realised that they were talking about his eldest daughter and saying that, "Oh no, she wouldn't get a chance living there at Apollo Bay". And I think that helped to decide my father to leave Apollo Bay and go up to Larpent, near Colac, where they could attend Colac High School which we all did later on.

So did your father change his work?

Oh no, he bought another farm. We had sheep and cattle at that time at Apollo bay but he bought a dairy farm at Larpent and, of course, we all helped on the farm. I liked doing the farm work. I was a good milker. We sometimes milked by hand and later on by machine. And I always, well nearly always, helped with the harvesting, you know, building stacks and carting in the grass hay and this type of thing. It was just part of the life and I liked doing it better than anybody else in the family so I normally did that. One of the others might be doing things in the house.

So could you tell us about your education?

Well, I started off at Apollo Bay Primary School and then Larpent Primary School and then went to Colac High School. After that I taught for a year as a student teacher at Colac West and then went to Melbourne Teachers College where I did a three year course. I was supposed to be assigned to a secondary school but I wanted to go to the country. So they permitted me to do my teaching practice in rural schools and go to, well, I was to go to a country school but turned out they sent me to Ballarat. I wasn't terribly pleased at the time but then later on I did relieving work in high schools roundabout Victoria and in primary schools too. And then I decided to go over to Tasmania, taught over there.

Was it unusual for, like your sister and yourself received a fairly high level of education, was that unusual for women at the time?

Oh no, people seemed to think it was but ever so many people who went through the Apollo Bay Primary School, we'd gone to Colac High School, and at speech nights the Dux of the School was nearly always somebody who'd been through Apollo Bay Primary School, over that period of time.

Can you remember before the war actually came, how you sort of saw your future, you know, you life?

I was over in Tasmania teaching when war broke out. No, I'm afraid I didn't look very far ahead. I had no interest in promotion. In this place called Forest in Tasmania where I was teaching I was kind of leader of the young people. I sort of organised a youth club there and worked with the young people in the district and we all enjoyed things together and played badminton or tennis or had gymnasium nights. There were all sorts of things. And one of my friends and I used to go, she called it exploring, and we'd follow up the creeks and do that sort of thing. And then suddenly there was a war and I decided to go back to Victoria to be near home. My brother, my only brother, joined the Air Force and I realised if I stayed over there I'd be away from the family at this time and I thought it was

better to be nearer. So I returned to Victoria. Prior to that, though, I joined the Tasmanian Women's Land Army and went fruit picking down the Huon with one of my friends over the Christmas holidays. We were picking raspberries and red and black currants, working very long hours, living in pickers huts. And I remember one day starting at six in the morning and working till six in the afternoon picking 117 pounds of black currants which was really good. You got nine shillings a hundred pounds for black currants and eight shillings a hundred pounds for raspberries. And it took a tremendous lot of picking. But it was rather fun and we came up against all sorts of things. One night I was just getting my tea when someone came running up to the hut where I lived and said, "You've got a driver's license, haven't you?" And I said. "Yes." "Well, there's a woman who's having a miscarriage, she has to be taken into the Hobart hospital, can you come?" And I said, "Yes." "The boss will drive but if he gets one of his bad attacks someone will have to take over." So that was okay and they carried her out on a stretcher made from one of those bunks, put her in the car. And one of the women who came with us had been a nurse in Germany during the First world War and she looked after her in the back seat while I sat next to driver. When we got to the Hobart hospital I went in and said, "Excuse me can you send a stretcher please." "Just a minute." I said, "Excuse me, this is urgent, can you give us a stretcher please." "Just a minute." Anyhow, when the stretcher came in dripping blood they started

to rush around. Then I found I had two of the boys that belonged to this lady to look after while the husband took the younger children to their grandmother. And one of the boys said to me, "Gee, I've got a good book, Miss White, seven murders in this chapter." And I said, "Oh yes." "Seven murders." So I said, "Would you like me, after tea, would you like me to tell you a story." "I'd like you to read us one." So they produced the book with the seven murders in this chapter. It took a little while for me to get used to the language. There was a 'hell of a this' and a something else, I can't remember it all now. But after that every night the children would come. "Could we get you your water, Miss White?" "Could we get you your kindling, Miss White?" "Are you ready to tell us a story?" And they'd produce their books. It was really very, very interesting. And it was very primitive.

If we can go back to your parents, what were their politics?

Oh, they weren't particularly political. My father, I should imagine, they were Country Party but not violently so.

What about religion?

Yes, they were religious people but they weren't in any way bigoted. They were friends with everybody and

although we sort of lived on the edge of a Protestant/Catholic area, well, everybody was friendly and there was no trouble in that way.

> Going back again to the issue of, you know, women's position in society pre-World War Two and so forth, did you feel that you had to choose at that time between pursuing education and a career, and marriage? Was that the situation?

No, I'm afraid I didn't think about that much. To go back to what you said, my mother was a most remarkable woman. She was a very intelligent person, a very practical person. And when my father bought his first car, something went wrong with the electrical system, something very small and minor, and my mother who had been a telegraphist prior to marriage knew about electric circuits and thinks like that and explained to my father. But she was careful never to take a front seat. My father was the person in charge. I remember once he said to me, "If you want to know what happened at a meeting, you just wait and Dad will say, 'Interesting meeting today' and you'll say, 'yes', and then don't show any interest and you'll hear everything." But try to get the information, no. She understood her husband and they lived happily together all their lives and it was marvellous to belong to a family like that. Everybody admired my mother as a capable, practical person. I remember once it was an election time and my mother, I was home that weekend,

and my mother and I went to the school to vote and the women who were there were saying, "Oh I've had a terrible time, the family have all been ill. I don't know anything about what we've got to vote about. Here comes Mrs. White, she'll be able to help us." She was the most remarkable woman, very capable. When she was 60, I remember Mother and I playing tennis together and I thought, well, I hope I'll be able to do that when I'm 60.

If we can go back to you being in Victoria and after you've been in the Tasmanian Land Army, you were seasonally were you?

Yes.

What year would that have been in Tasmania when you worked the first fruit season?

That would be about, I think, '39, would it be? '39, '40, somewhere about then. As a matter of fact there were a lot of rumours going around and one chap came to work on the fruit picking and one of the women said, "We call him the German spy." And I said, "Oh?" And this woman had nursed German prisoners of War during the first war. And she said, "Yes, he speaks German when he's off guard." And one of the young boys had gone and crept up to his hut and peeped through the cracks in the wall, there were plenty of cracks in the walls, and found that he had a pistol there. And he

got on to my friend and started asking her all sorts of questions. And she came down to our hut and said, "Look, that chap asked me about this that and the other and he said something about a ship being sunk in the Bass Strait and this type of thing." And I said, "Look, take no notice of him." And I said, "Don't tell him where we live because he seems to be think I know something and trying to find out something from me. And I know that he's under an assumed name because when the pickers, the grower's husband said to him, 'What name shall I write down?' He said, "Bill Smith." He said, 'I can't have a Bill Smith. I've got one of those already.' 'John Sampson.'" So I knew that he was under an assumed name, that he spoke German, that he had a gun and that he wanted to know where we lived. So one night my friend was going to a dance with one of the chaps. I wasn't going, they asked me to go and I said no. So I was in this building on my own. You couldn't lock the place up. I knew this chap was trying to find out where I lived and the boy who was taking my friend out said he'd asked him where we lived and he said, "Oh, way down the road somewhere or other". And I said, "Well, thank goodness for that." So I spent a very awkward night until the others came home. And the next morning this chap disappeared and he didn't ever cash his cheque according to the growers.

Do you think he was just avoiding being interned?

I don’t know. It wasn’t very long after that that the "City of Rayville" was wrecked near Cape Otway. I had a married sister living down there at the time and they heard the explosion that night and they didn’t know what was going on.

What was that about?

The "City of Rayville" struck a mine off Cape Otway during the war. And the fishermen from Apollo Bay went out to rescue them, that was during the war. But, of course, some of these things weren’t made very public. Sorry, where were you up to?

No, it’s fine. Maybe you’d just like to comment about, I haven’t lived through that time, I’m just interested to know what the feelings towards people, German people, people of German decent was in Australia?

Well, it depended. I don’t really think I met people of German descent. I don’t think there were very many of them about, they were apt to be interned. If you’d been in South Australia it might have been a different matter. The Italians, many of them were interned but they were often felt themselves to be Australian citizens and when they were interned they often worked on farms and worked quite happily on farms and they weren’t really, as far as we knew, a security risk.

Were you ever working with the Land Army anywhere where Italians were in that vicinity?

When we were working down at Hillside, no, not Hillside. Mossy Face, near Bairnsdale, down that way, the girls worked with Italians on the vegetable growing. I wasn't actually working on the vegetable growing, I was organising the camp. I wasn't there very long so I didn't have any experience of that. But there didn't seem to be any problems.

Were they working sort of right alongside each other?

Well, as far as I know they were. That's where I had to explain about the toilets, that the girls had to have a toilet on the field. They told me they were working with these men and they must have toilets. And I had to speak to the grower and both of his sons in turn to persuade them that that was what was necessary.

So, when you were in Victoria, you went and lived at home for a while?

No, I just had to think for a minute. I applied for a job as a fruit preserving expert in the Department of Agriculture. And while I was waiting for that job I took two or three jobs roundabout Melbourne more or less for experience and for the fun of it. I worked the Melbourne Gentlemen Club for a week as a housemaid

and Hatches' laundry starching Melbourne's collars. And Rosella, cutting and canning. I thought that might give me an idea of the commercial fruit preserving. But while working in the fruit preserving area I realised how important this was going to be for people. Because during the war, after a while, you couldn't buy a tin of peaches or a tin of apricots. All the tinned food had to go overseas. You couldn't buy grapefruit. I was visiting a farm at one stage, or an orchard, and I was asked not at any time to comment on the grapefruit or ask, you know, even if I saw them lying on the ground, no one was allowed to sell the grapefruit, they all had to go to the American Army because the American Army came in. And I was on a committee for a short space of time with a woman member of Parliament, I've forgotten her name at the moment, to do with food production and I worked on this food preservation, drying food, canning food and all this sort of thing demonstrating to different groups like CWA and Red Cross and Mother's Clubs. I remember working with the then Mayor of Ringwood and we had a big fruit preserving and bottling day so that people learnt how to preserve their product, fruits and vegetables and things like that. And then I received a message from the head of the Australian Women's Army, Sibyl Irvin, asking me to go and see her.

This is AWAS, you mean?

Yes, that's right. And she said to me that a Land Army was being formed and suggested that I should join it because I had rural experience and also experience in, you know, handling groups and camps and things like that as I had been doing in the past. So then Kitty McEwen got in touch with me and I was asked to have a look at the flax industry, sent down to Koo-Wee-Rup to work on flax.

In what way did you mean to have a look at the flax industry?

Well, it was thought that the might be an idea to have a woman kind of supervisor working with the Flax Production Commission where they were going to employ quite a lot of girls and women. However, the Flax Production Commission decided against it. Some funny things happened but they're not terribly important. There was was all sorts of rumours got around and without any foundation at all. So anyhow they decided not to go on with any of that. Then the Land Army asked me to go down to Carter Brothers at Werribee and take charge of a group of girls who were going to work on the egg production.

Before we want to move on to that, do you want to elaborate about the rumours that you were talking about?

Oh well, they're not particularly important, but when I was working at Koo-Wee-Rup, apparently somebody got the idea that I was married to some man I'd never seen, and I was supposed to be, I think, a married woman and therefore not a person who should be doing the job. I'm not quite sure what it was all about but there were all sorts of rumours and I found out these from the chap who was their field manager. Clark, his name was, he was a very pleasant, sensible sort of chap. But apparently there'd been all sorts of gossip. I wouldn't know what it was all about.

So how old were you when you joined the Victorian Land Army?

Well, I must have been round about 30 I suppose.

1942?

Yes, I was round about 32, perhaps. I was, you know, a mature person.

So you were about ten years older than say the young girls joining?

Oh yes, yes. And it might sound funny but I never got anything other than 'Miss White'. And it didn't seem, you know, that was just taken for granted. In those days we hardly ever used Christian names to people who were a little bit older unless we were really intimate

with them. Nowadays everybody gets Christian names, it's quite different.

So, we move on to Werribee and the Carter Poultry Establishment. Would you like to tell us about the set up in relation to the Land Army there?

Well, Carter Brothers provided houses for us to live in. And we went out in the morning, some went out egg collecting. You took trolleys full of buckets and the trolleys ran down past the various pens and they had what seemed like thousands of hens and you took your buckets in and you scooped up the eggs and put two hundred roughly in each bucket and then when you carried your buckets out and you gathered eggs. It sounds like a simple job but the lids of the birds nests were very heavy and you held them up with your shoulders while you scooped out the eggs. If you were working in the pens where the young pullets were it was all right but if you were in the pens where the roosters were they were apt to come up and peck you from behind while you were working on this. It was considered rather an unpleasant job and lots of them didn't like to work on this. Some of them worked on, I worked in the brooding section and the incubator section. You put up trays of eggs that were brought in. You had to select them according to side and shape and pack them a particular way up. And then they were carried off and put in the incubators. After they'd been in the incubators for the correct amount of time

they were put into the brooders where the humidity was higher and the eggs were just tipped on to trays. And when they came out from the brooders you collected your tray and counted the chickens out. Three in this hand, two in that, five, ten. 75 that side of the box, 75 this side and then they were carried out to the chicken sexers. The chicken sexers took them from there and put them into the brooding pens with hot water to keep them warm and that sort of thing. And the males were nearly all destroyed and used for blood and bone manure. The females had their turn.

Did the Land Army girls have to do that work?

The sexing was done by experts, some of them Japanese. And then the Japanese could no longer get into Australia and they had Australian chicken sexers. But most of it was done by Japanese prior to the war.

How were the roosters killed?

I don’t know, just probably thrown out. I didn’t actually see that part. You didn’t have time to see anything except what you were actually involved with. But it was mass production.

How many Land Army girls would there have been about?

Well, I think there were about twelve for a start and then we had a second house set up. And I was asked to go somewhere else when that was set up because there was someone else taking over, the job had been started. There were jobs like cleaning out the nest and putting fresh straw in. And one day we had quite an interesting time. One of the Carter brothers showed us how to make wire loops for catching the roosters and we went into the pens where the roosters were and they sat up on their perches and began to crow. And from about a couple of metres away, you just stretched out your wire hook, put it round their legs and drew them slowly towards you where their crowing turned to squawking in despair and you just handed them to the people who were carrying them out to the pens outside to go away. That was the day we got our revenge. And I often think about that, particularly when somebody stands up and crows about something, you feel like, yes, any time now.

So then you went to Riddell's creek?

That's right, there'd been a bit of a problem up there and I was asked to go there temporarily just to see things through but it wasn't…

Tell us about the problem?

Oh yes, well, it was really rather silly but some of the girls were accused of entertaining a man in their

bedroom. When I got there I heard the story from, I think it heard it from a manager, and from the girls and I'd heard it from the Land Army before I went up. But I thought the most telling remark came from a 16 year old. "Well, I ask you, Miss White, what would one man be doing in a room with four of us?" So I think the whole thing was a mistake and that was that.

So once that was resolved did you move on?

No, I was expecting to move on, but one day, when I was out in the field working, I got a letter from Headquarters saying that some of the girls had called in at Head Office and asked for me to be kept on and the Land Army had decided I was to stay there. Well, I wasn't very pleased but I didn't say anything and that was that. You didn't say things when the war was on. Except once, one day it teemed with rain when we were supposed to go out into the field. And with rain like that, I thought, we can't do picking up we'll probably had to do spreading. I tried to ring the mill or the manager to find out whether we were wanted in that direction. And the manager or the assistant manager who got on to us eventually yelled down the phone, "Come to work." Apparently it hadn't rained in the paddock where we were supposed to pick up, although when we got there it was very wet. And we worked through that day. At the end of the day I remember one of the girls looking up and saying, "Where did we leave our coats?" "Oh, down the other end." "Oh well, we

can’t stop. We started late, we’ve got to make up for that.” And although we weren’t paid for the first part when we missed perhaps half an hour in the morning, the girls felt they had to make up for that. And three of us went into the office that evening to speak to the, it happened to be the assistant manager, and the assistant manager was sitting there reading a "Woman’s Weekly". “What are you doing for the men in New Guinea.” “And I said, “Excuse me a minute. Each of us here has either a husband or a brother in New Guinea. We know about New Guinea. We’re going to talk about the girls working in the flax fields at Riddell.” And I explained quite clearly what had happened. How it had been teeming with rain at the hostel and we had thought we should go to Campbell’s paddock instead of going to the picking up. And I said I wanted to make quite clear that we knew all about what was going on and that was that. This man had rung up and said we weren’t willing to go to work that morning, but unfortunately for him, the woman who ran the hostel told them in the office that day that it was teeming with rain and that was why we hadn't set out. We had our difficulties.

What were the conditions like for girls on the flax?

For a start it was difficult, very difficult. Because it took a little while to convince people that it was absolutely essential, when you were working on the flax

in the winter, that you had rubber boots, that you had suitable clothing. If you came to work on the flax without proper equipment you were just asking for trouble, you got wet through.

And the Land Army hadn't issued uniforms?

Not in the early days. Then they issued gumboots, oh, at least I can't remember when we got gumboots or a permit to buy gumboots which was probably more likely. Because in the beginning we had our own clothing which was often unsuitable. A lot of girls who came to work were girls from Melbourne and they didn't have bib and brace overalls or gumboots or that type of thing. The first week that you worked, if you worked reasonably hard and you were not used to it, you were frightfully stiff. You walked like a horse with string halt, if you know what that is. And you've had to have a hot bath or a hot shower and then get to bed. But after a while, after you'd been working for a couple of weeks, you began to get used to it. But for a start it was very difficult and quite a few girls didn't stay very long. They just felt they couldn't do it.

Were there particular girls that they actually sent to the flax?

Well, normally if a girl had farming experience or fairly mature, she might be put on a private assignment. But if she was inexperienced and immature,

she was more likely to be sent to a group assignment would could be flax in the summer, it could be fruit picking, it could be vegetable growing, it could be poultry assignment. The more reliable types were generally sent to private assignments. Although some of the girls who worked on the flax were excellent girls and some of them did in the office season and went home to work on fruit picking in their own areas later on.

You also went to Lake Bolac. You went to all the flax areas, did you?

No, I didn’t. I went to Lake Bolac, yes. Lake Bolac had a hostel of its own and it was, it seemed to go quite smoothly when I was there. We had had a case before the Women’s Employment Board. You see, prior to this you got… if you couldn’t work for any part, whether it was your fault or whether the fault of the weather, you see, there might be… it might be too wet to work in the field and yet there mightn't be any work indoors for you to do. And no work, no pay. There was a casual allowance of three shillings a week which was trivial. One week at Lake Bolac it rained all the week and since we had our award the girls had to get, I don’t know, I think it was about two pound for that week which at least covered their hostel allowance.

Was this before the case or after it?

No, that was after it.

Would you like to tell us about your role in the…?

Well, I had explained to the Land Army what the position was. There were two or three problems. The girls came up, most of them had no money at all. Probably the average person who arrived to work on the flax had less than what is now two dollars. And the first week the pay day was on Wednesday, and if you worked, say you arrived on Monday, well, you wouldn't get any pay on Wednesday. You'd get your pay the next week on the Wednesday. And your board would be due at the end of the week. And so quite a number of girls couldn't pay their board immediately because they hadn't been paid. This was one of the difficulties. Another difficulty was that if the weather was unsuitable you were not required to go to work or a job might run out early and you'd knock off early. When you went to work you signed on at the time you started work. And you worked for that time. And it was very difficult sometimes because particularly the junior ones, say a 16 year old who was working under the award, got less than an adult wage, and it was very, very difficult for the juniors to make enough to keep themselves. And I'd gone down to Melbourne and talked this over and it was decided that we'd take the case before the Women's Employment Board. To do that we had to work with the union and the union was the Australian Workers' Union. And somewhere around here I've got my

Australian Workers' Union ticket which I took out at that time.

Did all the girls join the Australian Workers' Union?

I can't remember whether everyone did, I know I did and the other field officers would have done so. But some of the flax was worked by local people - not all the people working on the flax were Land Army people. Sometimes there were local people, not very many of them. Sometimes there were schools that would come up during the Christmas Holidays and one year we had first year med students from Melbourne University. They were not very proficient on this particular job, I might mention. I had to keep an eye on a hostel full of girls and Scots College boys and Melbourne University med students. I had to keep thinking of ways of keeping them entertained after work. Once we had a fire at the flax. Fire was one thing we dreaded. Flax contains a lot of linseed oil and you have to be extremely careful. You mustn't smoke anywhere near flax. But one day apparently the retted flax was being stacked and they had an elevator working, I think this is what happened, and the retted flax got tangled around the moving parts and caught fire. And in a few minutes there was a blaze. One of the girls working at the top of the hill yelled out to me, "Miss White, there's a fire." And there were men working further down and Smokey Dawson who was in charge of the men. I

called out to Smokey and he started walking up the hill. Suddenly he saw the smoke and then all the men started running for their lives back to the mill. Now for a start there was only the one fire on the one stack, but that night 60 stacks of retted flax went. And the fire chief from Melbourne was up and everybody was working on trying to contain the fire. Hoses had to be run from a dam near by and cross the roads and go up to the flax mill. Well, about dusk the manager sent for me and asked me to put the Land Army girls on station to guard the hoses. They weren't in very good condition and the hose would cross the road and there'd be a plank on either side and we had to divert the traffic around. And one group of us were to work, one group went home and had tea and then worked till 1am, and then at 1am the next group came on and worked till morning. They did the first hour and then went home and had tea and so forth. So I selected people I think could find their way about at night. And I went down to the railway station and managed to find some kerosene lights that I could use at the various stops and sorted out the people who were going to manage that over the night. That was the main part of our work although some of the girls worked on providing tea and coffee for the men who were working on the fire fighting. One of the things they did, they had two motorbikes with a wire stretched between them and they tried to break up the stacks by moving down on either side of the stacks with motor bikes with the wire attached. It was a bit dangerous but it was a very

dangerous fire. And practically everything that was on site was burnt.

> Going back to the, you represented the Australian Women's' Land Army to the Flax Commission.

That's right.

> Could you tell us about the basis, can you remember what the basis of what you were arguing about that time to the Commission?

I'll just have to think about that question, can you ask me another question about it? Just switch it off. The conditions for field work were laid down and the rates of pay were increased. The real problem was that people, or young people particularly young girls, had to have sufficient pay to be able to keep themselves reasonably while they were doing this work. And there was certain field conditions that were altered. There had to be toilets provided on the field and there had to be shelter. Now we didn't always insist on these. For instance, if the weather was very pleasant weather, we didn't look into the fields and say, "You haven't put up a shelter for us we'll make a fuss". But one particular day it was a very, very hot day and at lunch time I was just feeling all in myself and I was very glad to sit down. And someone came up to me and said Lou Campbell's group, gang, we called them, Lou Campbell's gang, is going home. And I said, "Why?"

"Well there's maggots in the sandwiches." So I went over to Lou's group and said, "Look, if we've got a complaint, what is it, right?" "There are maggots in the meat sandwiches, they haven't provided any shelter on the field." And maybe there was some other things. "Right," I said, "if we've got a complaint we've got to make this complaint at the right place. Now how many of you are prepared to come with me and make the complaint at the office now?" So, fortunately they agreed. We had to walk at least a mile, and it was hot, to the mill and actually when the manager or assistant manager, I forget who it was, saw me he was really worried. He thought I was going to faint or something - I really was exhausted. I said, "We've come to make a complaint". And I told him what the complaint was, about the food first of all and secondly about no shelter on the field and it was a very hot day and there was no shelter anywhere. And anyhow, first reaction, "Oh is this a strike?" I said, "No, it's not a strike. We've come to make our complaint and then we're going back to work." And the girls had agreed to that. So that matter was fixed. We went back to the hostel and collected more food and then we went back to work. And after that, particularly in hot weather, we got shelters. In hot weather or wet weather you need to have somewhere when you can sit to eat your lunch. And some of the days could be very hot. As a matter of fact we used to rather scorn people who gave up working when it was over a hundred - they just couldn't take it. But most of the girls who'd been on the job for

some time were quite happy to work with the conditions so long as the employers were reasonable.

Maybe I could move on to the herd testing. Could you tell us about your experiences there?

Well, the Land Army decided that they were going to put older people who couldn't do the field work into the hostels to run them. And those people who'd been running the hostels and were capable of doing field work were going to be put on to field work. It was going to be, it was considered to be perhaps an upgrading. Instead of getting three pounds a week you were getting four or something, I forget exactly what it was. But we were asked to do a course, I think if I remember right it was at Burnley, on herd testing. Well, I went to the superintendent of the Land Army and said I thought that it was unwise to put people who were handling the groups successfully on to this work. However, they had thought that this was rewording them, I think. So that was that. And I said, "I have no objection to doing the herd testing but I think you could use my services better." So we did the course. I glanced at the work of my next door neighbour at one stage when we were doing this and you had to do quite an amount of arithmetic. But you considered a month as occupying 30 days and you had to multiply a certain number by 30. And when I saw she was multiplying by nought and putting down a row of noughts and thought I hope to goodness she doesn't have to do herd testing

because she'll never managed the arithmetic. One or two of them found the arithmetic far too much and they didn't go on to herd testing. And probably it was a very good idea because probably they would do a much better job somewhere else. However, I went herd testing in a very fertile valley in Gippsland. However the local herd testing association was responsible for providing me with what they called a float, and a horse called Bonny, and the herd testing equipment. I went from farm to farm testing the herds. You got up with the milkers and went up over to their dairy and collected all the samples. You collected samples right first of all in the evening milking and the morning milking and then you mixed the samples and assessed the amount of butter fat and carried out all the recording which took up a great deal of time. And then you packed up and went off to the next farm. And farmers put you up for the night and fed you while you were there. The farms on the whole had excellent dairies. Some of the farm houses were not to the same standard and the toilets in that area, well, the least said the better. So, I generally tried to engage the farmer with a story about how we put in a septic tank at home and they all seemed very interested and I think by now they all have septic tanks.

Did you always get your own room?

Yes, I think I did, although, it might have been more good luck than anything else. But I remember once the

little old lady taking the sheets that I'd slept in and folding them up and putting them in a drawer, and she knew I wasn't coming back again because I'd been asked to report back to Head Office to do a different job. I didn't mind who had them next - I wondered who'd had them before me. Some of the places were rather primitive. I asked where the toilet was and I had to climb over the back fence to get to it, so I wondered if the family did the same. I had my doubts about the little old lady. But that was the worst part. I remember once finding a toilet was outside the yard and there was an enormous bull raging around in that area. And another time everybody had gone off to the dance that night, except me, and I spent quite a lot of time hunting around to see if I could find the toilet. It was very important to find out where the toilet was before darkness set in. But I found the people very cooperative and they were very interested to talk with me about farming generally.

Did you enjoy the work?

Oh yes, I quite enjoyed that. But I felt it was rather silly to put me on to that job. But I just made my protest before I did it and after I'd done one round, oh, and tattooed a lot of animals.

Sorry?

Tattooed a lot of animals. You see they had a calf scheme and you had to tattoo the calf with its own special tattoo in one ear, and the year it was born and its dam's tattoo or something in the other. I've forgotten now, but I was very proficient at that tattooing, I'm sure. It was very amusing though. The farmers all had different ideas about it. Some bailed their animals up and some threw them on the ground and so forth. And we had to tattoo all the calves in the calf scheme.

So why did Headquarters call you back again?

Oh well, they wanted me to do another job. They wanted me, if I remember rightly, to take charge of the fruit picking area up in the Goulburn Valley. I'd been up there prior to this, pruning. And you can't always say why Headquarters do things. But that I think was why they wanted me to take over. And one of the others who'd done the herd testing took over my district. She didn't stay there very long because she didn't like all the hills and it was a very hilly area, round Dumbalk North.

So can you tell us a little about Merrigum?

That's right. Well, there were about three or four farms there or orchards where the girls did the picking and the Land Army arranged for a field officer for each camp. I'd be appointed as a field officer perhaps for

one camp, but to have to look after the other camps, to keep an eye on them too during the season and perhaps they'd ring me up and ask me to go and do this or that or the other. I might be in charge of a camp or I might be circulating and doing other jobs. It's a bit hard to remember exactly what I did. But the girls would go out picking in the morning and come home, you'd give them some morning tea, you'd take out morning probably. And then you'd prepare a lunch for them and an evening meal and, oh, arrange entertainment and things like that as well as you could. Sometimes we had get togethers and people sometimes invited us out to their places. That was not very common but sometimes it happened and that was appreciated.

How did you find employer attitudes to young women doing farm work at that time?

Most of them, most of those who employed the girls realised that once they got into the job that they were just as good as anyone else and perhaps better in some respects. Perhaps they couldn't always get as much work done as an experienced… they couldn't do as much as an experienced trained man or an experienced trained woman for that matter. They were new to the jobs. But mostly they worked with a will and were happy and they were often singing as they were working. And they had all sorts of fun amongst themselves and played ticks on each other and lived quite happily together on the whole.

> Would you like to, I'd be interested in your comments about the backgrounds of the girls who joined the Land Army through your experience at different places?

Well, I'm just thinking about one camp, say Merrigum. There were various girls there that I can just think of. We had some university students on vacation. We had a little lass, who died later, from a slum area. We had a lass from one of the big estates round about western district. And you had, particularly when you were on the fruit picking, you had quite a cross section. But they all got on well together. I remember talking to two of the university students who were making a complaint about their field officer. They said, "It's not that we're snobbish. We get on quite well with the other girls. For instance, we get on very well with…", and they mentioned this little girl June, "…we like June." And June was a little lass who came from what could be considered a slum background. But they didn't appreciate something or other that the field officer was doing. So mostly if people had special interests they were more inclined to get together. And if their interests were wide apart, well, they didn't necessarily get together but they worked together happily in the field.

> Did you get the impression that there were more girls with a city or a country background that were actually in the Land Army?

Oh, most of them were city background in the camps. There were very few with country backgrounds. But Catherine, and I met her last year, who came from a western district, Catherine Ramsey was a district family, she had a country background but there weren't too many of them with a country background. They were nearly all city girls.

> And on your Service Record here you often get called back to Headquarters. What did you do back at Headquarters during those different times?

I might be telling tales. When I went into Headquarters maybe the secretary was away and I was temporarily doing her job. As I wasn't a trained secretary - we'll say no more about that. But I'd get into the office and there were several girls working in the office and I'd be there at least on time if not early and I'd start on a job and get quite a lot done. And there was a very good little typist who used to come to work and then go off to the toilet to do her hair and get herself ready for the day and come back. And well, I would get as much work done as some of these people. It really horrified me to see how office work was done. But perhaps it wouldn't horrify people nowadays. They may feel that all these things and

waste time and time for morning tea and time and for afternoon teas and things like that. After working in the field and working the hours which I did. I mean, if you're in charge of a hostel and working in the field at the same time, well, you had to see that everything was okay before you went off to work in the morning. And you went off and you worked all day and you had to work to check up on things at night and provide entertainment and think of things and write to the Land Army and do things. I mean it wasn't an eight hours day or anything like it. But when you saw office workers, you just wondered. But normally I'd be there doing whatever jobs, typing letters. I'm no first class typist, but I could type letters and get the material out. And the superintendent was always willing to use my services on all these things. I just worked flat out when I was in the office.

Did you have to write disciplinary type reports on the girls and send them into Headquarters?

No, only if they asked me how somebody was getting on they might do it by telephone because often, oh, in some cases they could telephone at night. They often worked back, the secretary and the superintendent would be working back at night quite often and they could ring me up at night about things. But they seldom asked for written reports on the girls, to my knowledge, I don't remember writing reports. I felt that a lot of things that went on in the camp were best

kept in the camp and I didn't, if they asked me was so—and-so a good worker I would probably tell them but I didn't feel anything more was necessary.

> Were any or many girls dismissed from the Land Army?

I don't think so. I think the girls decided that the work was too hard and dismissed themselves. A person who worked on the flax for a couple of weeks was likely to decide that was the end of it. In fact, some of them didn't stay as long as that. But they could either sign on for a year or for the duration. And those who signed on for a year sometimes got out at the end of the year and decided to do something else. It was up to them.

> I just wondered because I've been speaking with different people, I wondered whether there'd been any girls dismissed for either being pregnant or lesbianism, anything like that sort of thing?

Did you hear about that from anyone else?

> Yes.

Well, I can't recall anything in the groups that I was with. I know one young lass did become pregnant and I reported this to Headquarters when she came to my camp. I was in charge of a camp at the time, and I thought

rather than discussed it with her I'd let the Head Office talk to her and fix things up for her because it was someone… In Head Office we had two people who had been matrons of hospitals and I thought it was probably better for them than for me. Now, I'm not quite so sure but that was what I thought at the time.

> I just wondered if it was difficult for say young women then that had left home and they're sort of thrown into a new situation away from home and they're going off to dances and you know all that sort of thing whether, you know, that many of them did get themselves into difficult situations?

As far as I know, I can only think of two that I know about. And one of them, as I said, came to my place, my hostel, the one I was in charge at the moment. And I rang Headquarters and told them and they said, "Oh, you know, just send her up and we'll have a talk to her." I think she had every intention of getting out but I left it with these people who would have contact with her in Melbourne to fix it up. And I believe that they did. But the other one, I heard of it after I'd left that particular place. This is rather funny, I think. I had a phone call from Headquarters one day saying, "I believe the girls in your hostel are very worried about VD." And I said, "Oh well, I don't know anything about it." And privately I thought they're not worried at all. But, this ex-matron said she'd come up and talk to them. And I said, "Oh good, we'd

be very pleased." So she came up. All the girls were on their best behaviour. And I was nearly killing myself laughing at the way they were carrying on and doing the right thing and asking pleasant little questions. And they gave this lady quite the wrong impression about themselves. She didn't get very far into her subject. She said to them, "Well, as we used to say when I was a girl, no hugging and mugging." And that's as far as she went. And I could barely control myself because people are people and that's it. I'll never forget that. Oh dear, I laughed about that many a time.

> I just wondered how the Land Army Headquarters would have regarded, you know, lesbianism if you had sort of…?

I don't suppose they knew was lesbianism was at the time and it never came up and I never heard anything about it. As far as I'm concerned it just wasn't an issue. But you may have heard of it somewhere else but I didn't hear anything about it.

> Were there any other places that you can recall where you were involved in different work?

Well, the pruning was an interesting job. That was in the middle of winter, of course, and there'd be the frozen dew drops on the tree and you'd light a fire of prunings so that you could warm your hands between

times and put on your gloves and start working, sometimes before the sun was up. But once the day warmed up a bit it was pleasant. You worked up your row of trees and somebody else worked up her row and the foreman worked up his row and often you're working close together and you could talk all the time you were going. And we were living in our galvanised iron hut with wooden bunks and straw palliasses, a nice big fire place in the corner. And the girls there were a very, very good group. They worked very happily together. One night I came into the room and one of the girls was reading a story and I took it over and read it to her. She said, "Oh, I love people reading to me." And that started an evening story reading program which went on practically every night. One of the lasses brought back "Great Short Novels of the World", and one night half of it would be read and that would be discussed in the field the next day, and the next night the rest of it would be read. For a start I did the reading but shortly after that they couldn't wait till I finished getting the washing up done and the meals prepared so the girls took over and I was quite happy for that to be done. We worked very happily with the boss there and pruned the orchard. It was pretty cold. On Sundays we used to wait until the frost melted and we could hear the water dripping off before we got up.

Did you get paid overtime on Sundays?

Oh, we didn't work pruning on Sunday. But we didn't get out of our cocoons until the frost melted and the rain began to drip, the water began to drip off the roof. No, we quite enjoyed the work, I think, there most of us.

> Where there any places you were working where you felt that the work was a health hazard or it wasn't exactly safe conditions?

Not that I can think of.

> I'm thinking of sort of perhaps spraying in orchards and dust in the flax mill, that sort of thing?

I only once sprayed in an orchard to see how it went, and actually as far as I know very few girls did spraying. I wanted to know what it was like and the boss wasn't terribly keen on my doing it. I said, "Look, can I do it for one day so that I know what the job is?" He said yes so I sprayed. But you had to spray in a particular way. If you did what you were told I don't think it was a health hazard. The spray we were using was not normally considered as such. White oil it was, I think. And the dust in the flax mills, they all dust extraction plants. Some of them worked better than others and you could get a bit choked up with that. The girls did not do much work in the mills at all. I did a little bit when I first

started before I was in the Land Army, the deseeding and I did work once or twice on the scutching later on. But normally the girls did the field work and men did the mill work. Though there could have been exceptions to that. I can't think of any particular health hazard.

Well, perhaps it worked in the reverse then?

It might have effected the men?

No, that there was a beneficial effect?

Probably. The group of us who were field officers, at the end of the war we were called up to have medical examinations before we got out of the Land Army. And the doctor who examined us said that she had not seen such a, well, I forget what her expression was, such a set of healthy specimens in all her examinations. You see, the people that went right through like these field officers, were people who were fairly mature and they had a pretty good standard of health at the beginning and probably were even better at the end. I don't think I had more than a couple of days off during my time in the Land Army.

And you were in the Land Army for, what, do you remember when you joined up?

I think, from when the Land Army started till it finished.

July 1942?

Yes, well I was working a bit before that, but ‘42 to the end of the war.

December ‘45?

Yes.

Could we perhaps move on to the status of the Land Army?

Well, in many cases people in the country really appreciated the Land Army girls. Some people might be inclined to look down on them but mostly they were considered as people who were really doing a job and, in most cases, doing it well. But there were honest attempts by the people in Head Office to make sure we were well represented in everything. I just remember now I called into the office one weekend and they said, “Oh, I forgot to tell you, you have to go up to the studio tonight. There’s going to be women at work or something or other and you’ll represent the Land Army.” I didn’t know anything about this business. Anyhow, I had to go up and answer questions in some quiz session which the Land Army may or may not have won, I think possibly they did but I can’t remember for sure. And I

think the competing team was the Navy. What did they call themselves, I've forgotten. They were Waves?

WRANS?

WRANS, that's right, WRANS. But we were included in a lot of these things. But we were not really included in some of the things and we didn't really need to be. I felt that on the whole we got, after we had brought our case before the Women's Employment Board and with the help of officers like Kitty McEwen we got a very reasonable go here in Victoria. But some of the girls were probably earning more than they would have been in their office jobs or having a better or more pleasant life. Other people were, like myself, earning less, but that wasn't the main feature. And the concessions and the various things that other groups got were gradually being extended. But on the whole I don't think we worried about it. We did have a great deal more freedom in many ways and we were not subject to military discipline and I think that's pretty important.

Did you hear any discussions about the Land Army becoming a fourth Service?

If I did I probably didn't take them very seriously.

Was Kitty McEwen plugging for that?

She may have been, I don't know. When you were working in the field you didn't have much time for this sort of thing. You did your job, you were pretty worn out at the end of the day and if you were a field officer you often had to try and arrange entertainment or some diversion for the girls. At Riddell's Creek we ran concerts and community singing and various entertainments and things. We got a basketball and had a basketball team. We grew some vegetables, not terribly successfully. We had a lot to do. We didn't have a lot of time to think about things. Some of our girls wrote to one of the wireless stations asking for records and we had quite a lot of records showered upon us at one stage - the girls were very delighted with that.

You did nature walks too, didn't you?

Oh yes, yes, sometimes I'd get a group of girls who were happy to go for a walk and we climbed Mount Macedon at one stage. Another time when I was at Lake Bolac we walked around the lake and saw the beautiful bird life there. It was really very, very interesting.

And then one of your other interests was you encouraged the girls painting wild flowers.

Oh yes, we found quite a few wild flowers. See, we were working out in open fields and good deal of the time and we could find flowers growing there and one or

two of them were quite artistic and made quite interesting little Christmas cards painting these wild flowers. I brought along some paints and they got to work on that. There were all sorts of different things. You just had to keep thinking of odd things. Another time I seemed to have won a pair of ducks in a raffle so we decided to have a BBQ. This is before BBQs as such became the 'in' thing. We went up the creek and there was some stones in the middle of the creek, big platform of stones, and we had our BBQ there. It was mid-summer and nowadays, of course, it would have been a high fire danger day or something. But we had our fire in the middle of the creek and cooked our ducks, I think it was. I think probably I had them boiled up beforehand so it was mainly a matter of heating them up, I wouldn't be sure about that. And we had singing and making a lot of noise well out of the town and hiking home afterwards. There used to be, at Riddell's Creek, there used to be a bun night when the local baker would make buns and a pie night when he'd make pies. And the girls would go off down the street and stand around in the bake house which was nice and warm in the winter and then buy their pies or buns or whatever and come home and probably share them round. At one stage they took, they used to leave something on my bed at night. I'd go to bed I'd find somebody had left me some watermelon or a bun or something like this. I don't know whether they thought I was half starved or not, but I didn't ever really find out who was doing it, but different times,

probably different people. But once, though, some of them tied a bell on to by bed so that if I moved the thing rang. So I thought I'll fix that, so I got the bell and next morning I went along and rang the bell in all the bedrooms very carefully and they weren't so much amused about it after that. It didn't come back again.

What about, were you involved in any voluntary war work. I mean you were doing this other…?

Well, we did make camouflage nets, I can see, not terribly many I suppose.

Was that the Land Army girls doing those?

I should imagine it was. Our concerts and performances were always run for the Red Cross and Comforts Fund and things like that. But if you mean me personally, there was a stage earlier in the war when I was doing voluntary work as, oh, a VAD at Prince Henry's hospital in Melbourne. I did the First Aid and Home Nursing, and First Aid Medallion and then worked there in the casualty ward. I can't remember. Oh, and I did the Air Raids Precaution which we were supposed to do, do that Certificate. Just off hand, I can't remember. Oh, in most places I was in I was working for Red Cross and Comforts Fund and various things. We put on concerts and shows and it was nearly always run for the Red Cross and Comforts Fund.

Was knitting a big thing in the hostels?

No, it wasn't. I think our hands probably were not very well suited for it. But it may have been in some hostels, not in the ones that I was in.

I'd like you to comment about, you know, the fact that the Land Army didn't receive any post-war benefits, how do you feel about that?

Well, I felt that the people who were in the Land Army and went through the Land Army and went through the Land Army to the end were that capable and well trained people that first of all they, as far as I know, they wouldn't have any difficulty in getting a suitable job. Some of them went to nursing or hostel management or back to the jobs that they were doing originally. Now, that was not particularly my province, but those people I heard of or know of all seemed to go straight into a job and that's how it appeared to me.

What about the difference of the Services in relation to medical benefits? You know, women in the three Services came under Repat, didn't they and the Land Army didn't. How did you feel about that?

Well, to tell the truth I'm afraid I didn't go into this into any extent because as I say it wasn't

especially my province. If anyone was ill or unable to work, and this very seldom seemed to have happened, the person would go to the Melbourne Headquarters where there were two ex-matrons and that was more or less their responsibility to see that those people got help. But I do not know of any cases that especially needed to come under that. I can't think of anyone. One girl once hurt her knee and she was off for a few days but I can't think of any cases. We seemed to be fairly free of accidents.

> I was wondering, going back to the earlier point about say if you had, you know, your parents permission and you joined the Land Army quite young or you joined at 18 and then you were working in the Land Army for sort of two or three years, that when you got out whether, you know, that sort of particular time in your life you'd missed out on being to do a particular thing like being a typist or something like that. Whether those young girls whether it would have been advantageous to have had an opportunity to retrain?

I'm not sure that they didn't have the opportunity actually. After the war I was in reconstruction training, training ex-WRANs, AWAS and WAAFs, and so forth, working at the annex to the William Anglers Food Trade School. I suppose some of our girls might have wanted to go in for training. Quite a few of them, of

course, intended to get married. And in all, in Victoria, there weren't so very many girls involved. But maybe somebody else knows more about that. But I can only tell you the people I knew, the people I worked with, the people I knew best, all seemed to go straight into a job.

You didn't meet anyone from the Land Army going through that reconstruction training course?

No, mind you I had a group of only about a dozen or 14, as I remember it, doing a year's course. And I was in that for about a year.

What were they training to do specifically?

Housewives mainly, they were doing training in cookery and needlework and dressmaking, really. It was a kind of home management course. They did First Aid and things like that.

Were they single women or married women?

Single women, and they found out that I was my brother's sister and apparently some of them who were in the course and they admired Bill greatly. "Oh, he's a great chap. He used to treat us all like sisters and look after us and so forth." And I immediately went up on a pedestal with some of them.

How did that job come up for you at the end of the war?

Well, I was going back teaching and the Education Department. Just at the end of the Land Army we'd all had, those who'd been in for the full time, had a medical check up and we'd all passed it A-One and exceptionally fine lot as far as health was concerned according to the doctor. That's our particular group. Then I had to go for a medical with the Education Department and the doctor, who was very short and fat, couldn't, didn't say anything other than, "Well, you're too tall and too thin." Which I've considered was relative. And I found out that, I got a letter, a ridiculous letter, advising me to come in on my next holidays for another check-up before they'd put me on permanently. And I was so disgusted about this, because I knew that I should have been passed because I'd just had a pass from the other doctor, that I sent in my resignation. And I'd put in an application earlier for teaching in post-reconstruction, post war reconstruction training, and I took the job at the William Anglers Food Trade School, training ex-Service personnel in the home management line, which at one time I had trained in.

So how long were you doing that?

I was doing it for one year and then I applied for a position in New Zealand and went over there to teach.

In what way do you feel that the war affected you as an individual in terms of, you know, your life's direction?

I don't really know. It gave me an opportunity to mix with a wider range of people. It gave me further experience in organising and working with groups and solving various types of problems. I suppose it gave me a greater sympathy and understanding. As far as the course of my life is concerned, I don't think I'd sort of planned anything in particular. I'd always been particularly interested in natural history and I loved having opportunities to go in the bush and that sort of thing and explore, climb every hill I could find and follow up creeks. At school we had a very good geography teacher and that helped to give us an understanding of the earth as being formed all the time and changing. It also helped to give us an understanding of the natural world. I was interested in that and I liked taking other people who were interested and showing them things as I did yesterday. But, I know some people felt it was a scar on their lives or a block. It was a time of strain. I can remember one day working in the field and seeing a plane going over and thinking, you know, could be my brother. And then the next day hearing that a plane had crashed and strangely enough by brother had been supposed to go on a plane and a chap who'd been on leave came back and said that he was senior to Bill and

he should go and Bill said, “Go”, and the other chap lost his life as a result. But there was always this strain and my brother had come back on leave and he’d say, “Where’s so-and-so?” “Oh, his plane broke down on the way back.” He was on test and ferry. And you always had people who were close to you losing their lives. And it was just living under a kind of tension. But when you’re working and working hard and continuously you don’t have a lot of time to think about things and you just go on. But I don’t think, I don’t know that it, as I say it gave me certain opportunities and when I say opportunities I don’t mean financial ones.

> Was there any fear of invasion down here in Victoria, particularly any sort of placements, you know, by the sea?

I don’t think most people were afraid of invasion. Some people were, admittedly, but most people who were working hard didn’t have time for thinking about things like that. If you were living on your own you probably felt insecure and you worried about things more. But if you were working with a group and busy most of the time you didn’t have enough time to worry. You’d hear rumours about submarines and rumours, yes, at one time they were taking, when they were taking in recruits for the Army, farmers were supposed to be Reserved Occupation, in Reserved Occupation. But if you lived near the coast you weren’t Reserved because the coastal

areas were supposed to be vulnerable. That's just one thing that I recall now you mention it. But no, I don't know of cases. I know about the "City of Rayville" because that was down near where my sister lived. But in this area in Victoria we were remarkably free from the real danger. Oh, we had to dig air raid shelters in various places, but not in the Land Army, not in the country. In Melbourne, I helped to dig an air raid shelter at my sister's place in a sandy suburb. But, when I was working at Burnley Gardens, they had zigzag trenches dug and they were full of water in the middle of winter and anybody who got into them, really into them, would probably have drowned anyway. I think we would have been better out of them. But there was, there was tension and there was feeling and there was gossip.

What sort of gossip?

Oh well, mind you we didn't hear very much in the Land Army, but people did talk that, you know, there were spies, there were planes, there were all sorts of things. I must admit I didn't hear much but I knew people could make up gossip, particularly in some small towns and people did watch things out at sea in case and there could have been things out to sea.

When you were up at Merrigum, you know, there were quite a few detainee or internee camps in that area, nothing really close but in the Goulburn

Valley area I suppose you'd say, central Victoria, did you have any contact with those?

No, no, the only place that I know of and where the girls had contact with them was at Mossy Face. That's the only place that I know about. The Italian internees all worked on the farms. And there were no, there didn't seem to be any precautions. They were taken there by the Army, dumped, and taken home in the evening. And most of them were pretty glad, well, seemed to be pretty glad, to be out of the war and in comparative safety although they may not have considered that their families were very safe or happy.

And did you observe many American Servicemen around the place in your travels?

Oh yes, we had a couple of young chaps come to the camp at Werribee when we were there. And the next day I happened to be in Melbourne and I saw one of them and spoke to him and he looked at me, you know, sort of "Who's that?" And I said, "Well you were at our camp last night", and he sort of relaxed immediately. Oh yes, we met a few of them here or there. We didn't have much to do with them because they were mainly in the cities or travelling between cities. But I think when we were down at Hillside near Bairnsdale the girls were invited out to their camp once. We were invited to, oh no, that was an Australian one. We were invited to an Army camp from Riddell's Creek once, you know.

You were occasionally invited to some of these places. But no, you could meet an American on leave anywhere, but we didn't see many of them. Of course, but they were mainly in northern Australia.

Do you feel the war affected the position of women in society in the long term?

Yes, women just took over things quite naturally. And I think some of the men got a bit disgusted to find that the women could do things as well as they could in certain respects. And the women just carried on. They ran the buses and they managed things and when the men came back it was considered that the men had to have the jobs and women had to go back to their kitchens and their nurseries. That was the attitude, that women shouldn't take men's jobs. And then later on, of course, married women shouldn't take single women's jobs and that sort of thing. But the attitude that a man is responsible and has to look after the woman has gradually changed and quite often it's occasionally the woman looking after the man. But men are a bit sensitive so you've got to be very careful that you play up to their ego. That's very important if you want to get anywhere. Don't let them think that you can do anything as well as they can. Play up to them a bit. It's a bit like my mother with the new car. She had to be very careful. She didn't learn to drive because she felt that it would not be very

satisfactory. Her husband had to be the one who drove and who knew what was what about a car, not the wife.

How did you feel about that general attitude you mentioned that women were in the jobs that were traditionally men's jobs while the men were away at war, then once the men came back women were supposed to leave those jobs? If a particular woman found that she just, you know, really liked what she was doing, say it was a woman in the Land Army, she really liked that sort of work, do you personally feel about whether she had a right to stay on at the place or not?

Will, I think in most cases if the person who employed her wanted her she stayed. But quite a lot of girls intended to get married or intended, I don't think as far as the Land Army is concerned, I don't think many girls were displaced by men. It could have happened but I didn't see it. If the women liked a job and they were getting on well, well, they stayed there. Well, of course, there was the attitude that if somebody had been prepared to give his life for the country, you should consider him. But I don't think it cropped up in many actual cases. Do you know of cases where it cropped up?

Not in Victoria.

No, no, I don't. I can imagine it could crop up but I did want see it. If the girls wanted to stay on they normally stayed. If they wanted to get married or they wanted to go back to their original job, they seemed to do it. There weren't a tremendous number of women involved and as I say the people who were in for a few years were generally such capable and reliable people that anybody would be glad to have them. That's my feeling about it.

Do you feel that today that the work of the Land Army has been adequately acknowledged?

I don't know. I think it was important but, and if the war had gone on longer and if more people had had to be called up it would have been much or important. Or had the northern part of Australia been invaded it was, to my mind, a preparatory step. It was a platform which could have expanded had matters become more serious. And although people may have felt they were fairly serious in Victoria, compared with most other places, it was the war. Didn't affect the farming nearly as much here as it did perhaps in other places. And it could have been, it could have been much more disastrous and there could have been a need for a lot more people to take over.

I understand that the targets were never met, you know, the numbers that they tried to recruit into the Australian Women's Land Army were never met.

> I wondered whether you sort of perceived that as being due to the comparatively poorer, I suppose you'd say in inverted commas, well, the different working conditions and pay and concessions and so forth. You know, whether the young women would choose to go into a Service?

Well, some people went and tried all the Services one after the other. And if they couldn't get into the AWAS or the Air Force or this they might try the Land Army. This happened sometimes, but the people who got into the Land Army and stayed in the Land Army were people very well worth their position. But there were some people who went around and had a go at everything and if their qualifications weren't very good, well, they might be refused by all the various sources. I remember once I happened to be in the office and one of the office staff said, "What can I say to this women out here? She's been to this and she's been to that and she's been to the other. And I think I a suggestion that she might find the work a bit arduous or something or other and I think she would find it would be beyond her, or something like this, you see. I don't know what it was. And she went away quite happily. But some people just went around and tried everything. You didn't necessarily have to have education qualifications. And educational qualifications can sometimes be a handicap rather than a help in certain types of work. And, for instance, the same way people who know their rights can be a

menace as far as an employer is concerned. But depends on what you judge people by. And as far as I was concerned, I felt the girls that had stayed and worked in the Land Army work a fine lot of people, and I say people. And they were capable of holding their own, and would hold their own. And I think they needed less help than the people who were working in perhaps some of the other Services.

> You know we're making a film on the Land Army and I'm interested to know, not having lived or participated in, not having lived during that time or participated in the Land Army, just what sorts of things you would like communicated to a general audience today about what the Land Army was or what it meant to be in the Land Army?

I think the girls that I had to deal with, most of them, it was comradeship. There was work, a certain degree of freedom, working in the open air. I think those are the things. Working as a team, comradeship, working together and on something that's worthwhile - food. You could be a conscientious objector and work in the Land Army. And you were doing something for other people. Because mostly concerned with food, although it was also concerned with equipment. For instance, from the flax we ret, we're told is used for making strong web for, I've forgotten how I was going to put it. Parachute harness, it was used for hoses for war time in the Navy and in air raids. It was used

for webbing for equipment. It was intended mainly for life saving things. And as far as I was concerned I would prefer to work in that sort of thing rather than in something that was combatant. But other people might not feel the same.

> Was there anything, aside from the flax mill where you said the girls didn't work as often as in the fields, was there any other indoor work like in the fruit industry? In Victoria was there any dehydrated work being done?

I don't think the girls worked in that. There was a lot of factory work done in Melbourne but that wasn't Land Army work. The girls sometimes had indoor work. For instance, you might be working on a job that was normally outdoor, say pruning or picking, and the weather might turn very wet and you would be working indoors mending cases or preparing equipment or doing things like that. I don't think there was much indoor work. There was a certain amount of indoor work in farming, for instance milking and that sort of thing, if you call it indoor. And a certain amount of indoor work but I can't off hand think of any other work that was mainly indoor.

> Is there anything further that you'd like to add about your experiences during those years?

Don’t really think that there is. It was hard work, continuous, but, as I say the girls formed friendships and worked together and did things together and a comradeship of working together I think was important to the ones who worked in teams, in groups and that section that I was concerned with most of the time. I did have a spell as a herd tester. You can laugh over it. The Land Army had complaints from girls that they couldn’t obtain Modess when they were working on farms. And the Land Army decided to help them out but didn’t tell them this was going to happen. And a certain time parcels were mailed out to all the girls. One little lass was having dinner on Sunday at the parsonage, and the parson used to collect the mail for them and she got her mail once a week. Ah, a parcel for the Land Army, on the table at lunch time for her to open. You can imagine her embarrassment when she found what was inside. And the embarrassment of everybody present. At another camp one of the girls was collecting the mail. Parcel for the Land Army for everyone. “Oh,” said the foreman who was taking her into the town to do some shopping, “let’s see what it is”. And she opened it and to her embarrassment found it was Modess. This was one of the places where the Land Army slipped up. But at another camp, all of the girls received parcels but the field officer, who was an older woman, didn’t. And she said to the girls, “What are you getting in the parcels?” “Oh,” said Mary, “one month they send us orchids and one month they send us chocolates, it’s chocolates this month.” “Well, why haven’t they sent

any to me? Do they think I'm too old?" "Well, perhaps that's it", said Mary. And Isabelle quietly told her afterwards what was in the parcels. After that, Isabelle was ignored. Isabelle was a girl, a very quiet little lass, who said she'd been an invisible mender before the war. The Land Army girls were under no special discipline. Some of them, of course, worked on her own on a farm. But those that were in a hostel, in some cases a person in charge of the hostel tried to impose a discipline but that wasn't very satisfactory. They were free to come and go, they didn't have to get a leave pass to go home for the weekend, they didn't have to get permission to stay out after a certain time. They were expected to behave reasonably but they were not under any discipline and there was no punishment as such that you could impose. If you thought they were behaving in an unsatisfactory way you could talk to them, but you had no way of enforcing anything. If you wanted to you could report them to the Head Office and say that they were unsatisfactory and probably have them transferred. But if a girl was unsatisfactory in her work she probably wanted to be transferred anyhow and it was better for her to apply than for you to ask. They certainly seemed to have much more freedom than they would have in an other camp and the officer in charge was there to look after them. And I found myself standing between the girls and the mill management, between the girls and the hostel management, between the girls and Headquarters in town,

and the girls were my first responsibility. I think that's how I felt it, right?

> There's another question I would like to ask you about uniforms. Travelling around I've spoken with a few ex-Land Army women who were quite upset that they had to hand their uniforms back in at the end of their Service. Do you know any of the reasons behind why they had to hand their uniforms in? There's a difference actually, some did and some didn't.

Well, the officers didn't because the officers had to pay for their dress uniform and so they bought them and they were theirs. And my good uniform was mine. I had to go to a place and get it tailored and pay for it and it was fairly expensive too and I wore it a few times, not too often. As a matter of fact, the stiff collar rubbed my neck and I found it most unpleasant. But I only wore it when I had to because normally I'd be wearing working clothes. And I know that at the end we were allowed to buy certain items of uniform at a very reasonable cost. Our bib and brace overalls wouldn't have been worth anything when we'd finished with them. But I just can't recall the handing in of uniform. It just seems to be one of those technical things and if you… probably you were issued with clothing and when it was worn out you applied for more and I presume it's the sort of thing it happens in the Army, so they thought it should happen in the Land Army. But I

wouldn’t be surprised if you’d asked and made a point about something you could have kept it. It wouldn’t have been much use to anyone else anyway, if you ask me.