Australian War Memorial

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TRANSCRIPT
OF
ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

S01540

Terrie Elizabeth Ross (neé Roche) as a lieutenant nursing sister 8th Field Ambulance later 1st Australian Field Hospital, South Vietnam in the period 1967-1971, interviewed by Lynn Hemmings

Recorded
at: Canberra
on: 5 July 1991
by: Lynn Hemmings

Description

Joining army; first posting to Ingleburn then Singleton, NSW; description of hospital at Singleton; posted to 8 Field Ambulance in Vietnam; description of hospital facilities and staff responsibilities; having civilian clothes made in Vietnam for off duty wear; description of nurses' quarters; relations with other nurses; describes Vietnamese domestic who was employed to clean the nurses quarters; after six months 8 Field Ambulance was moved to Nui Dat and 1 Australian Hospital established at Vung Tau; all the nurses transferred to 1 Australian Hospital and stayed at Vung Tau; describes some of the medical orderlies; tells the story of Mot(?) a seven year old orphaned Vietnamese boy who was carrying ammunition for the Vietcong when captured by Australian troops and taken to the hospital for medical treatment; treatment of wounded Vietcong in the hospital. Memories of patients; description of treatments; friendship with footballer Johnny Raper's brother; relations with Vietnamese civilians; uniforms; returning to Australia; posted to Wagga Wagga then left the army to buy a nursing home in Crookwell, NSW; effects of service in Vietnam; sold the nursing home after ten years and moved to Canberra where she worked part time at Woden Valley Hospital; after effects of service in Vietnam; visit to hospital by US General (possibly Westmoreland).

Transcribed by: Susan Soames, February 1992

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Transcript methodology

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

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

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

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Identification: This interview is for the oral history project of RAANC nurses who served in Vietnam. The interviewer is Lynn Hemmings. I'm interviewing Terrie Ross in Canberra on 5th July 1991.

> What's easiest for me is if we start right back from when you first did your training, nursing training, and just tell me about where you did your training and what you did prior to joining the army.

All right. I went to school in Goulburn and I trained in Goulburn. And from there I went off and did obstets at St Margarets at Darlinghurst. Then I came back to Goulburn for a holiday and they asked me if I would staff up the obstetric block at Goulburn for a month to relieve. So I said, 'Oh yes, that would be all right', and a year later of course I was still ... nobody had said your month's up and I was still there. And there was a woman on the staff there called Marmie, her name was Marmont, I've forgotten her first name now because I called her Marmie for so many years, and she was trying to talk me into leaving there because she said you're going to find you're going to be here ten years down the track and the same women are coming in and you're going to say: I've done nothing with my life. And she was in Japan with the army for ten years. And she came home and she got out of the army to look after her aged mother and father and her brother lost his leg and his wife left him and she reared these two little boys. So she'd been doing night duty at the obstetric block. And she said, 'Why don't you join the army?'. Anyway she went on and on and on and I said, 'All right then' and I made some inquiries and they said it was a two year enlistment. So the next thing I joined the army and went off to Ingleburn for a year which was super there. I enjoyed it there.

And then they just opened up Singleton as a recruit training battalion for national service and I got a transfer after a year up there which was a story all on its own. They built that great big complex, it was huge, and they didn't allow for a hospital there.

> This is at Singleton?

Mmm. No hospital they said. So we had to use one of the huts in the middle of the battalion and they just put in some beds and a sink and of course we mostly got reactions from small pox because thousands had appeared, turned up every so many months, ... you know, and you give them all their injections and they get measured up for their uniform and then they get introduced to everybody around the room and our biggest time was after the injections. And we only had these few beds here in this hut. So when everybody was going down they'd take over every man's, the Salvation Army hut was the next hut, and then from there we used to have to take over some of the quarters. So you'd do a round with a box and take everyone's temperature and then there'd be the big shift. Anyone here that hadn't had a temperature for two or three days you walked down to ... and anyone there that hadn't had a temperature they were there; anyone that looked real (inaudible) got back into here and then you just sort of ... and they went home and that was ... No, it was really quite tremendous fun in a way. And well after I left they built the hospital outside the battalion, out the gates of the battalion. But anyway, that's a story on its own, isn't it?

And from there my old matron at Ingleburn wrote to me and said it looks very like the nurses are going to Vietnam and I've recommended you very highly to go and I feel quite sure - and I was quite surprised really because they were mostly theatre trained people going to war zones

and I really hadn't had ... I had very limited experience. So, anyway, she said in spite of all that I think you'll be going,so I'd get round (inaudible). And then I was officially told very shortly and they said you mustn't tell anybody. It's a major secret that the nurses are going and nobody is to be made aware. So,anyway, they gave us a heap of injections. And I hadn't got round to telling Mum and Dad because ... And the next thing I was in the shower shuddering with a fever with all these injections and one of the RAAF girls said, 'By cripes, you'd better get onto your mother and just go home before it's on the radio or it's in the paper'.

Your name?

Yes. Gosh they nearly had hysterics. So we sort of got two weeks leave and off we went. There was very little, you know, not a lot of notice really.

How did you feel about going to Vietnam?

Oh I was thrilled, yes, thrilled to pieces. So we had to go and have ... and they said we really don't know what your requirements are going to be for clothing but only take your uniforms and no civvies and they got us outfitted with jungle greens and a mess ... we had to have a white mess dress made up. And off we went with the veils and the uniforms and we arrived. And they sent us first class, Qantas too, to the Philippines. And we unloaded there and had a night in the hotel there and we had a sightseeing day the next day. And then we went Air France, I think, to Vietnam. Anyway we arrived a few days later. We had no idea what we were going to. Somebody met us at Tan Son Nhut in Saigon and we were rattled into a Caribou and off to our ... So there we were, everybody was in tents - all the soldiers - and the only building at all was in fact the ... and we were posted off to 8 Field Ambulance and nurses don't serve in field ambulances so this was a bit of a one-off. So the only constructions was the hospital which was Lysite, you know the tin. You know, there'd be a panel of tin like that and then a panel of louvred windows so they were all just Lysite couvre louvre windows and they were really just a big shed which was the ward there. And then there was some concreting here and then there's another ward exactly the same as that there. And then there was grass in the wet season there otherwise it was dirt in the dry. And then here was the theatre. The theatre was one end and there was a clearing station here and there was a corridor there. And all this was sandbagged all around so it was very war looking really. And a corridor down there down to the helipad. I suppose you know all this, do you?

No I don't really, not from the first group who went. No, it's different.

And here was ... this is the only building that was ... these weren't couvre louvred, they were built in. And this was air-conditioned. There was a little nurses' station here and four beds here and four beds here which was medical and surgical there. And really this was my little place here, I was looking after.

The medical surgical area.

Which was air-conditioned.

What sort of ward was that?

This was surgical and this was medical. And then down here was a venereal disease ward, but they really looked after themselves and we supervised with their medication. And they would fill sandbags because they were well enough to ... and if you didn't give them a job they'd have probably be gone.

So before the nurses came to this 8 Field Ambulance, who actually looked after all the men and who was in charge?

They had about four regular army people - doctors - and they had about four or five civilians up there doing six months.

Civilian doctors?

Mmm. Marshal Barr was quite a renowned anaesthetist and they had three surgeons, you know, quite eminent sort of surgeons and they had a physician from Adelaide, a surgeon from Brisbane and another surgeon was an army fellow and then they had about another four doctors. Well how this place ran was really a miracle.

Who actually did the patient care?

Well they have a medical corps in the army and all the boys sort get whatever corps you're going in and they sent all these medics. Well the medics probably had six weeks at Healesville from the street, so their experience was just non-existent. So it was only what the doctor told them to do. And of course they resented women turning up and mucking up their little happy ... you know, a bit of order coming into the place.

But in here was a big table and on the table was just masses of bottles of tablets and you'd say, 'Who owns all these tablets?'. 'Oh, that's all the patients'. So it was just by gosh or by gum. All the people on duty sort of said ... it was just like looking after forty people at home. So whether they got their tablets or not, I don't know. I suppose if they weren't in very good twig at the time they didn't get their tablets. But I think, and at that stage of course, there was about three mile down the road, there was a very large American hospital so anything they couldn't handle they sent down to the Yanks. And of course every second Tuesday the RAAF came and mostly cleared this out.

So there'd be a scuffle up the road and the helicopters would come down. They'd all be taken into this clearing. All doctors came and everybody went up on an IV. Then the team went round and assessed who goes to the theatre first, who goes second, who goes third, you know, and who's left. And this fellow might only have a few scratches and he'd go straight down here and be showered and put into his bed and, you know, he mightn't need any. But these fellows were all just assessed and they just worked until they were all ... So these two might be operated on and come in here. These fellows might be able to be looked after in the ... So Amy only really run the medical ward, Colleen ran the surgical ward and Margaret O'Hearn looked after the theatre and we had one New Zealand lass came up too.

Now this is where my memory is a bit ... We all sort of have a charge of an area but then, on the other hand, there was only five of us so one had to do night duty for, say, a week. We used to do a week - I think a week. Someone had to cover the evening so you just left your staff in charge when you weren't there. So I might do the two till eleven shift and when I

wasn't busy I'd see to my ... and then someone else came on from seven till eleven and then we'd come back. Often we did a split shift. In fact we might have given the evening shifts away and one did a split shift so you could come and see to your place in the morning and then go home and come back in the afternoon and go through till eleven until the night person came.

Were you busy? Do you remember it as being busy on the shifts?

Oh ... and we worked ten hours a day six days a week. Oh yes. You might get a bit ... see, every second Tuesday they'd come in and clear you out and that might give you a couple of days respite until the next ... but, oh yes, there was always plenty on.

This medical ward was a ... you know, after a while you only got to there and they were nearly all malarias and temperatures of unknown cause or ... it was always full. But you'd come in and you'd see four or five people with the blanket over them, so you'd say, 'Oh well, give them all a drink'. So after a while you could tell really ...

Was this area here more of the acute care area?

Yes.

Like an intensive care?

Yes. As I say, we arrived and we had to sort of start organising lists and putting people, you know, the medical there rather than have ...

So the nurses really separated that area.

Yes. We had to get some sort of a system going.

Can you remember the really early days - perhaps the first few days or the first week - the sorts of things you did when you first arrived in Vietnam?

We had to go down and have a look at all this. So Amy did a wonderful job. She said, 'You look after this area'. So this area was absolutely ... there was sort of four beds. So the first thing was, this will be your staff these five boys. So my first thing was to line them all up and 'what experience have you had?'. 'None', 'None', 'I worked at Concord for six months'. There was a couple of theatre trained fellows but on the whole they didn't have any ... So the next question is: who can build? Can you build shelves? We need somewhere to keep our linen; we need somewhere to keep our medicines; we need somewhere to... we did have hospital beds and lockers. But, you know, and they only ever worked as hard as you worked. If I didn't start sweeping and then say would you get on with this while I deal ... you know, you really had to be very gentle the way you handled them. You couldn't really be awfully bossy or you would have got zilch done. But they were superb boys once you got ... you know, they ...

So the first few days was just getting sorted out and getting the few things built.

And how did the patients react to suddenly having nurses arrive?

Well they were quite (inaudible) really and it was as hot as ... you know, the first two weeks I thought I'm never going to survive this heat but after two weeks you didn't notice the heat. You know, you got acclimatised and it wasn't ... But, no, we used to roll up in the stockings and ...

Did you mind at the time wearing the veil or ...?

No. Never ever queried it. And then meantime, and of course this is all on sand like the beach, you know, with tufts - if you've ever been to the beach there's just tufts of grass, it's not soft sand but sort of a little bit compacted, but still you're really only just missing it going in your shoe as you walk. And it was from here - I'm sorry I haven't got those jolly photos - we used to go up all these steps up onto the top of this mound and there was the mess which was a tent, a big tent. And then we used to have to walk on quite a way down here where our quarters were and our quarters were timber, concrete floor and partition. You know, there was that much fresh air between my room and your room. And in the room was a bed and a laminex, you know, a coloured laminex wardrobe - very slack - and a laminex dressing table with two drawers and this bed and a big ... So we said, oh, this is pretty basic. There was this building like this and we had a lounge room such as it was there and a corridor down there and all couvre louvre windows and a door here and our rooms - five rooms. And there was a concrete path over here and there was the toilet there - pit toilet - and a box here with sort of netting. And there was a bench along there and I think one cold shower there.

So you didn't have a hot shower?

No. No. So I used to go down ... I couldn't manage a cold shower. I could probably manage one at midday when the sun had been on the tank for a while but first up in the morning I can never manage cold water. So I used to have to boil the jug, take the jug over here, fill a basin and give myself a wash and then tip it all over you. But after a while that wasn't much of a worry at all. And they got us a mamasan to look after us. I'm sorry I haven't got those photos. She was just beautiful. She'd never seen a washing machine before. They got her a washing machine to wash. She was in charge of doing our laundry and cleaning our rooms. So into town. So the first letter home: would you send us our own linen? And then they said, 'It would be nice for you to be dressed of a evening in your civvies'. We said, 'Oh, we haven't got any'. They said, 'You'd better go into town and find a tailor' - which was an absolute riot. You should have seen the clothes. They were absolutely gorgeous. So we went to the markets and we found a tailor and we had some clothes made for our evening off-duty. Because it would be dreadful, I can't understand why they didn't think of that before we left that you'd be running around in your jungle greens for a year and your uniform. And on odd occasions we'd be invited out and we'd wear our jungle greens to go in vehicles, mostly choppers. Well you'd go to work in your jungle greens and the boys would boo and they'd say, 'Oh sister, why didn't you wear your uniform?'. And then after a while they say, you know, I haven't seen a girl for two months. 'Oh, isn't that a shame. What about the girls here?'. He said, you know, we weren't really counted as girls. We were just ... the sisters weren't girls and of course you don't fraternise with soldiers socially. So it was quite understandable.

So because you were officers, if you did something of an evening, was that with other officers?

Mmm. There's really one big rule in the army: you don't mix with other ranks.

So your husband was an officer, was he?

Yes.

So that was okay.

Yes. So that was quite allowed.

Had you met your husband before you went to Vietnam?

I did in fact meet him the day before we left but I didn't know him. Oh, and we go down into the town and we go to the markets which, oh, the smell was unmerciful if you weren't ... Anyway, it wasn't like going to the shops or ... But anyway, we found a mat, you know, one of those mats you sunbake on, so we all bought ourselves a mat for our room. And I don't think there was any doors on the doorways. I think we bought you know those flyscreens ... that's all we had as a door into your room. Anyway we got particularly fond of mamasan and she got very fond of us. And somebody gave me before we left - and in fact I look at them sometimes, they've all broken now - I just can't bring myself to throw the baby away. This little fellow was on his mother's back and I had a kookaburra and it must have been a kangaroo - they're a bit greasy.

Who gave you these?

Somebody bought them for me at the airport when we were leaving.

I see, when you left Australia?

Yes. So that was really all the ornaments I had which looked lovely on this laminex - it was really gross coloured laminex. So I used to get my room in order and off I'd go off to work, or you'd only just go to the toilet perhaps, and you'd come back and your mat would be rolled up in the corner and all the ornaments would be lying down.

Who did that?

Mamasan. I'd come back, lift the ornaments, get the mat. Out you'd go, come back.

Why did she lie them down?

She had some sort of a religion, yes, didn't have the animals standing up. And I used to think: I don't know why I bother, but I just thought well we'll just see who wins. Who's going to get sick of it first. It used to be real fun business then.

And how did you get on with the other girls that you lived with - sharing close quarters?

Particularly well really. I loved Amy, I loved Amy. I was very fond of Margaret and I knew Margaret before - I'd never met Amy before and I'd never met Colleen - I did know Margaret.

But Margaret was a red-haired girl and the most vicious temper she had. She could just do her nana, but apart from that she was lovely. I got on terribly well with Colleen but she was never a person that you'd have as your best friend if you were living ... well, you know. And I get on very well with her when I see her sometimes. But, yes, but we all got on. And there was a nice girl, New Zealand girl. She was a big girl. Mamasan never liked her for a long time because, one, she was not from our country and, two, she used to think she was very large. And she'd come in - and mamasan spoke no English - but we used to have long conversations - do you know I can't even think of that New Zealand girl's name. And on these photos I thought I'll write all their names down. And I thought, oh, that's a bit silly, as if you'd ever forget, and of course you do. But she'd talk about Margaret or Colleen or over the wall (laughs).

I see.

I mean she'd come in to tell me Michael was there, so she used to put three pips on her shoulder and say he's out there, and she'd giggle. And she called Australia 'Ookdaloy' and everything that was good was number one and it went down varying to ten and anything bad was number ten and anything absolutely dreadful was number thirty-three. And she took a great like to my radio. She used to carry my radio - it was just a nice little portable one - so she used to carry that about all day on the Vietnamese station. And I'd come home and turn it on. Well, that would be a game then. I'd walk out and it would be on the ...) oh, she was a funny little ... And, of course, if you'd been to work and come home - she stood about that ... she was absolutely minute - and she'd be that pleased to see you she used to run at you and grab you by the shoulders and swing. You'd see her coming and she'd be swinging on you. Oh dear, she was ... Oh, and she'd cry when you went away. The tears used to - if you got your suitcase down and started putting - oh, the tears would flow.

Was she with you the whole of your twelve months there?

Mmm.

So you stayed at 8 Field Ambulance for your entire time?

Yes. Now after six months - it was about six months I suppose - they upgraded 8 Field Ambulance to 1st Aust Field Hospital because there were sisters there. And they moved 8 Field Ambulance up to Nui Dat. In fact in the twenty year thing they had big parties all over Sydney, different units, and we had a lunch in the city actually and then 1st Aust Field Hospital boys then had their thing at Kirribilli RSL and 8 Field Ambulance had theirs way up the line - up the north shore line. So we had our lunch and then we went over to Kirribilli and stayed there a little while and all the travel in Sydney that day was free. So we just then went across the road, hopped on the train and went up to ... I don't know where it was but it was a long way up though. So we all arrived at the 8 Field Ambulance and at the door we said we're out by ourselves and we've turned up and they said, 'Oh no, you're at the wrong place', and we said, 'I don't think so'. 'No girls in 8 Field Ambulance, no', 'You're definitely wrong' we said. And with that one of the doctors was there and he said, 'No fear, they're certainly allowed in. They were down in Vung Tau before 8 Field Ambulance went up to Nui Dat'. So they said, 'All right, you can come in'.

Was that a good day?

Oh, it was just fantastic. It was just fantastic. I was a bit disappointed my two favourite soldiers weren't there. I've never heard or ...

Were these men that you worked with or ...?

Yes. They worked over with me in this little place and they were just wonderful. You could just give them any job and ...

They were medics were they?

Yes. And in fact we were there for several months and they said now you're getting a sergeant. And I said, 'Oh, that's going to be good', and it came to pass that he was on the grog and he was being demoted from a warranted officer down to a sergeant and sent ... and I thought, oh, that's my luck. Anyway, he duly turned up and he was just wonderful. He used to ... You know, Margaret could be savage. Someone might have some stitches to take out and you had, you know, your equipment might have been a bit ... and they say, 'Just go into the theatre and get some'. Well, she'd probably tell you to move on and you couldn't have it. And I used to say 'Oh I'll have to go to the theatre and get something or other', and he'd say, 'Don't you be going, sister, and be subject to getting abuse. I'll go and get it from the sergeant'. So he used to be very protective. If I ever wanted ... 'I'll get it. Don't you be worrying yourself'. And in fact the corporal was another wonderful ... he was being transferred to Nui Dat and it was the sergeant's birthday. So they said we really should have a celebration and I said, 'Well, we will. We'll go down to the Badcoe Club down on the beach and we'll have some drinks as a farewell and a happy birthday', and I must say we did. We really did have a celebration. I was flat strap getting home.

And off I go to work the next morning. Oh, I was so sick, feeling very sick and this Sergeant Butterworth there and I said, 'Good heavens, what are you doing at work?'. And he said, 'Oh, I'm just about on my way home. I came to work and I misread my roster. I thought I was working this morning. I'm just on my way home'. I said, 'Oh, that's bad luck' and off he went and the corporal said, 'Didn't you know, he didn't think you'd make it'. He was going to swap shifts with you. I said, 'It would be the day I didn't ever ... But I really quite ...

Yes. And they used to write nice poems and we really had a very nice time together. We were real good friends.

And did you have the same sort of good relationships with the doctors who were there?

Mmm. We lived and worked ... see, our only source ... was up on this ... and six months in at the upgrading the tent went and we got quite a nice mess. See, in the photos I've got the mess as a tent and then the mess as a timber construction so we thought we were very flash with the timber. And we all ... our dining area was down here somewhere. It was a bit away from ... but we all ate together and socialised together.

Did you eat with the medics as well?

No.

Oh right, you just ate with officers.

Yes. The other ranks had their own dining area.

But while you were actually working in the hospital ... you all got on pretty well?

We had our own dining room. You still went to your own dining room for your lunch and they went to their mess for their lunch.

Yes. I was just thinking that when you were actually working together did you all get on? You seemed to have a lot of fun with the medics as well even though there was that difference?

Oh heavens, yes. At first it was a little dodgy and there was a book. And I wonder who got that book? I wouldn't mind betting Margaret O'Hearn or Amy have that book. It was a big journal looking book, you know, a foolscap book and you wrote anything that that happened extraordinary... And it was a little bit: 7.05, Sister late for work. You know, there was a couple of the sergeants there a little bit titchy that we'd taken over their role. But it didn't last very long and we were all very firm friends. Yes. We had lots of laughs together. And then we had a very nice little ... Oh, and we had living with us ... no, they didn't live with us for the first six months. Down at our quarters, after we'd been there sometime they build another hut so apparently they were going to up the number of sisters that were there and the Red Cross moved in - Marie and Robin - they moved into this new quarters. But although we were quite friendly with them they lived apart from us and, in fact, one of those girls married one of the doctors. Oh Mike would have been over 54, he just died of a brain tumour up at Maroochydore which is pretty awful. I only read it in the paper this week.

I was telling you about Mott then. The Australians killed two Viet Cong and they had this dear little child carrying ammunition and they brought him back in and they thought, well what are we going to do with Mott? Well he was sick so he finished up at our place.

How old was he?

Seven. He was only little. Oh he was only a little fellow. So they put Mott, he was in about the third bed here, oh dear he was terribly anaemic, oh dear he was sick. How he walked about was anybody's guess. Anyway they gave him transfusions and I'd say they spent a considerable amount of money getting Mott back into the pink. And then once Mott got better no-one really quite knew what to do with him. So he lived with us. He lived in this bed and of course the soldiers were a little bit titchy about it when he first turned up and then, of course, he was such a little, they used to duck out and buy him toys and look after him. And then when the first lot of soldiers were discharged, oh, he cried and, you know, more would come and they'd look after him and of course the Red Cross were terribly good to him. And he'd been there a long time so they said we better get him started at school. So the ambulance used to take him into school, into Vung Tau to school, and he used to come home at lunchtime and have a rest. And then they used to start back at school about three and finish about five or six. So they used to all have a rest in the middle of the day. So he used to be taken in, picked up and taken back and collected again. And if you were on night duty he used to get up in the middle of the night and go to the toilet and then he'd look for you. I

might be sitting here or ... and he'd want a cuddle, you know, and you'd nurse him for about an hour and ...

Where were his parents?

Well, you see, they were Viet Cong and they were killed ...

Oh they were killed, the parents were killed.

Yes. So he was an orphan.

So what happened to him in the end?

Well, he was with us for a long long time, months and months. And an edict come down that he wasn't to stay any longer. God knows what happened to him. It was cruel really. Packed all his little toys that would last ten minutes, wouldn't they, wherever he went the next time. So I often have a little bit of a worry about Mott. Actually I was asking Maree and she never ever ... because it would have been a Red Cross thing too to get him organised. I don't know whatever happened to him.

Did you have any prisoners of war in the hospital while you were there?

Yes. In fact there's a photograph. I wonder where that is? Oh, I had to hide her [the prisoner]. The boys were very ... oh, hated them. Yes. You really had to protect them.

Protect them from the Australian soldiers?

Yes. They used to be very anti.

How did you feel about them? Did you have the same sort of feelings?

No. I used to feel terribly sorry for them. Oh, it would be terrible wouldn't it? No. We used to buy her lipstick and look after them.

So you had women as well as men.

Yes, there were women. We had a woman. We didn't have more than four all up. I think they used to go over to the Koreans and the Koreans would shoot them. We'd spend considerable amounts of money on getting them on their feet and I think the Koreans shot them. Terrible. They were cruel people.

Oh another funny little incident happened. This was very basic accommodation, you know, it was basic. And I think we had in the lounge room we had a few chairs and we had an old fridge. I think all our cup of tea stuff was here, and they'd sent us a lounge ... pretty colour it was, you know, a real pretty blue sort of a vinyl but a soft vinyl and it was really quite up-market to what we had.

This is the oral history of RAANC nurses who served in South Vietnam. The interviewer is Lynn Hemmings and I'm interviewing Terrie Ross.

Can you remember any of the patients that you nursed? Any in particular?

Do you know one died here the other day I'm sure. I work down in the geriatrics doing stats and I read all the death notices, ... and his name was Sergeant Sutherland - Jock Sutherland - he sticks mostly in my mind. He was very highly decorated and he lost a leg and an eye and he was desperately ill, oh dear he was ill. And he was delirious for a lot of the time and there must have been a fair bit of press about him back home. And he wasn't married and I don't know who asked to write to him but we used to get boxes of letters. Oh we used to have a great amount of fun reading these letters. And he was terribly afraid. I remember I was going out one afternoon and I'd say, 'Now you're absolutely exhausted, you must get some sleep', and he said, 'No, if I close my eyes I'll never open them again. I know I won't'. I said, 'You will. I promise you that you will and I'll stay here until ...'. And he said, 'Well, I'll go to sleep on the condition that you stay here until I wake up' So I really wasn't able to go out and I thought well I promised you that I wouldn't. And we were very friendly. You know, he was just marvellous. And he came home and married a sister at the Repat Hospital and they did come here but I don't think he would have ever ... I never made myself known to him because I think with his delirium, I don't know whether he'd ever quite remember. But I was surprised when I saw that he died here in Canberra. I thought, good God, ...

He wouldn't have been very old.

No. No, I really don't quite know what ... And then there was another boy I remember. He lived at Willow Tree up past Newcastle. Do you know Willow Tree?

Yes.

And he was as sick as anyone I'd ever seen and he had malarial meningitis and he was so funny. And I used to say something to him and he had this friend of his from Willow Tree sitting in the roof in his mind. And everything you'd say, he'd say, 'Just a minute. What do you think of that, d'you think? Do you think she's coming?'. Oh he used to be an absolute ... gosh he was a riot. They sent him home with ... oh dear, he was a sick boy. But every time that I hear 'Willow'-he worked at the garage there, and really he thought he was there, I think, with his friend.

But apart from that, you know, they used to come and go. But I had mostly the sick, the very sick ones.

You hadn't really used that sort of nursing had you prior to going?

No, no. No, and in Ingleburn, you know, it was internal derangements of knees and vac reactions and, oh, they did a bit of surgery but nothing terrible. You know, pilinitis, sinuses and those sorts of ... So, no. But then when you look back it's not much experience either. You know, you don't find malarias and gunshot wounds and those pyrexias from peculiar tropical things. So it really wasn't a lot of ... you know, it was a wonderful life experience but it really ...

Just a one-off unique experience.

Yes.

> How did you know what to do? Did you go to Amy if you had problems ... it must have all been fairly new, I would imagine, just being there in charge of those sick patients?

Well, the ratio of doctors of course was... and you'd go to lunch and say, 'Maurie I'm a bit concerned about ...', and Maurie would be there. So you had a very close bond with the... And this Marshal Barr put most of his IVs in the neck and I would have thought twenty-five years down the track that that would have been an accepted procedure but it never ever did. You know it sort of had hands free and it was really quite marvellous. And there's really not that much terrible movement in your head is there. It seemed to work extraordinarily well.

So, no, I think knowing what to do was... there was an awful lot of doctor help.

> So you didn't feel out of your depth in situations?

No, no. See and Amy really couldn't be everywhere so there was always doctors about and they ... See, and especially their work load, you know, their work load must have been horrendous before we turned up. See they'd have to get up in the night really if they had somebody to check up on. So whatever happened was a bit of a bonus, wasn't it? The only thing is we probably kept a few that they would have whizzed off to the Americans.

> Did you have much contact with the American nurses or the American hospital?

No. No, very little. Very little. And, in fact, I only went over there one day - who's that footballer, Johnny Raper - do you know Johnny Raper?

> Yes.

Well he had another couple of brothers that played. There were six boys in the Raper family and one of those boys was at Singleton with me and I was quite friendly with him. He must have been a patient and he had twin brothers. And it is fairly isolated up at Singleton and he'd always pop in and say I'm going to Sydney and I'm taking the twins to the zoo and, you know, we had a friendship that was just 'what have you been doing and how are you going?'. And it was quite a funny thing at Singleton being in the middle of the battalion. You got friendly with people you'd never get friendly with outside the battalion wall. You know, and if they were passing they'd pop in and say, 'How are you going?' and I was quite friendly with this boy Raper and he turned up in Vietnam. So he came over to look me up and said, 'I'm here'. And then the football grand final was on and he phoned me from ... he finished up in the hospital over at ... for some reason and he phoned me and said that he didn't have a radio and would I bring him a radio over to listen and I think he had a brother on each side really, and he didn't have a radio that would get Radio Australia, would I have one and get it over to him? So I said yes, ... And I don't know why. So there were still a few Australians that would find their way to ...

Of course they would never at any stage ever call their sisters, the registered nurses, sister. ... and he'd say, 'Yes sister' ...
So you used to say, 'Don't be cheeky with me. I'm not your sister, brother'.

And Margaret O'Hearn caused a big thing in the Vung Tau village actually with her red hair. They'd stop and want to touch it. And we had in those days seams in our stockings and if you stopped very likely someone would run their hand up the back of your leg wondering what it was.

And we used to go down to the beach quite a lot. You know, you might work a broken shift, you might spend that time going down to the beach, have a swim with the sea snakes. And there was the group of little boys, and girls I suppose, Vietnamese kids that we got quite friendly with. They used to always come and sit round you and want to talk to you. And I remember I took my watch off and left my things on the beach and of course they'd just thieve anything. And they were all sitting there when I came and one of them got my watch and went ... you know, you should never leave the thing about. We didn't take it. I mean if you ever met them in town they'd make a huge fuss of you. You know you're like long lost relations. And by the end of it we'd go in and get our hair set and that. It just took a few months to feel comfortable.

Yes. Did you ever feel frightened? Were there any situations where you feared for your safety?

No. The only time I was - I certainly was not frightened - they were sending the colonel-in-chief of the RACs up to have a look and there must have been talk about sending some women, you know, secretarial people for headquarters. I'd say the women had said, 'We shouldn't really be left out of this and we should have serving members'. Anyway she turned up to have a look and they sent me down to look after her for the week in Saigon. So there I am in my uniform and my gloves and hat. She got off the plane and she said, 'Oh my God, what are you doing with gloves on?'. I said, 'Well, it's all for you. I'm impressing you'. She said, 'Well for heaven's sake, take them off'.

What was the temperature?

Well, of course she wouldn't have been used to the heat. But it seemed to be much the same temperature every day. There was not much variance. Hot sun and just depressive humidity. But, see, you can never get acclimatised here because it's so changeable. But after a while it's not a huge worry. The first two weeks it certainly was. She said, 'I can't believe that you wear stockings and ...', 'Oh well' I said, 'we don't mind the stockings',. And she said, 'And the veil'. But I think Amy had a - I don't know whether it was a command thing - but I think the nurses that served in Japan were very big on the grey and the red cape and they feel very strongly about their uniform. So we felt it was important not to let the side down and go up there and muck it up. You know, and these were pretty heavy cotton dresses; long sleeves.

Yes. And how many of those did you have? Did you wash these each day?

Well, mamasan ... we used to wear one two days and in fact Michael used to come over every evening and it was his job really. He used to iron this one tonight and then tomorrow night - see you've got to take all those buttons off with the pin at the back and put your epaulettes on - so every night you had to iron and then the next night whip all the buttons off and the epaulettes and get your dress ready for the next day. And we seemed to manage all right ... we

used to go and buy spray iron at the American PX and keep our veils ... You'd be too young to have veils.

No, I've worn them.

Have you? Yes.

Not a lot.

Yes. You know, and you'd get caught in a storm. It used to just pelt down. Well, your veil might be hanging around your mouth after a while but that didn't seem to worry you either.

So were you in Vietnam for the whole twelve months?

From May to May.

May to May.

Yes.

And how did you feel by the end of the twelve months? Were you ready to come home?

Well, it was a bit funny really. They gave me a date of departure which I sent home and of course they were all excited at home and they were all pretty well on the way down to meet me. And Amy said, 'I wonder would it be an imposition if I asked you to stay?'. I don't know why my name came out of the hat to go home first. I don't know. I don't know whether she'd had a bit of a fall out with Colleen. Colleen wasn't really as easy to handle ... and she said, 'I'd really like Colleen to go and you to stay'. And I felt a prize rat really because I said, 'Look, if you'd have asked me last week I'd have said absolutely and completely but if I'm not on that plane, Amy, there'll be a ministerial [enquiry] because my family, there'll be every last one of them, and if I'm not there all hell will break loose'. So I really had to ... and I would have been more than happy to stay but I knew my family had left and I thought it was a bad judgment to ask.

It was so close to your time (inaudible) was it?

Yes, yes. And they would have caused all sorts of uproars.

And what was it like when you came home? Can you remember the first few days coming home?

I remember I came home on a charter 707 with all the soldiers. And they said, 'Oh no, you must sit against the window seat', and I said, 'That's very nice of you' and got settled and someone said, 'There's someone sick up the back of the plane. Would you go up?', and I thought, 'Oh hell'. I think they were just having a bit of a look really. So right up the back of the plane and he thought he had malaria. And I said, 'Well, there's really nothing we can do till we get home and you'd better tell them'. So that was a bit of fun.

And I'll never quite forget the roar - I've really never been on a plane touching the ground - the minute the wheels touched it the roar that came out of every boy's mouth. It was almost a scream and cheer and that was rather nice I thought.

And of course all my family, yes, every last one of them was there to ... and Michael was coming home the next week. He said, 'There's no way in the world I'd go home with you'.

And did you have any unpleasantness from people because you'd been in Vietnam?

Not one; not one. But then ... you know, some of these poor young boys didn't have supportive families I suppose. I know some of them put up with ... but see ... and I suppose it's a bit different for a boy too, isn't it? I mean, I would have told anyone to belt up if they ... you know, but they had mates. The whole thing was a rort wasn't it, hey? Nobody got any ... see, and a lot of those kids ... It was really quite beaut being up at Singleton where all the recruits had been and a lot of them came up with the next battalion six months along, you know, and they'd say, 'I know you'. That used to be rather nice.

So what did you do when you came back to Australia?

I went back to the base hospital for six months and a male friend of mine that I trained with was down at the psych hospital and he asked me to go into a partnership with him into a nursing home which was a huge venture. And we bought an old maternity hospital at Crookwell. Do you know Crookwell?

Yes.

And we started a nursing home; a sixteen bed nursing home.

So you left the army and started ...

Mmm. I spent a year in Wagga before I ... yes. I did a year at Wagga. That was Ingleburn, Singleton, Vietnam. I'd finished my four years and they offered me an extension of a year. You're engaged for two years, they offered me an extension for a year but I said, 'No, I think I'll move on'. And then I bought my partner out after about three years in the nursing home and I was at Crookwell running a nursing home for ten years. And then I came up to Canberra to live and I do a bit of ... I did casual relief work at Woden for a few years and now I do three days. I did two days in radiation oncology for about five years and now Professor Sinett offered me a job with him three days a week and I collect stats mostly. I don't see many patients. But that's quite a nice change. Yes. Picking up nursing home type patients at Royal Canberra and admissions and discharges in 11A and all the outpatient clinic I collect all the people that were home visits. It's really quite fun, yes. I do reference work for him. He writes books so, you know, it's really quite different.

I was wondering if you think your time in Vietnam has influenced what you did when you came back to Australia? In terms of, do you think you'd have gone into the nursing home venture?

I have no idea.

Were you different when you came back?

No, no. I suppose my life would have taken probably a different turn if I hadn't have met Michael. That was sort of a turning point.

You read a lot about people, particularly the men, suffering post traumatic stress syndrome and health problems. Do you feel that you've suffered any problems as a result of being in Vietnam?

No. I had a wonderful life; wonderful experience. But then, of course, I wasn't being shot at or I wasn't walking over mines. You know, there's a huge difference isn't there?

Yes.

And of course some of these kids were only babies weren't they? They weren't established people in their own... eighteen, you're only a baby aren't you?

Mmm.

It was all a big excitement for them and all of a sudden you're plonked somewhere that's terrifying and it's a different ball game, isn't it?

Mmm. Have you seen the series China Beach?

I've seen a couple of episodes.

And apparently after that was shown in America there were a lot of the nurses, the American nurses, who suddenly seemed to emerge out of the woodwork and say that it brought up a whole lot of memories back for them and they found it really difficult seeing China Beach and so they've started a whole lot of organisations in America for the nurses.

Yes. See, I think that we got the very best end of it going first. There was no pattern; there was no ... you know, and it was all by gosh or by gum. You really, you know, anything was a bonus there that you did and you really couldn't make any fearful mistake I don't think. So it wasn't structured or, you know, it was all just a learning pattern. So I think we were dead lucky being the first there. You know down the track ... because we used to fight for linen and fight for, you know, you might have a soldier with hardly ... you know, the second pillow mightn't have a pillow case on it for a few hours. Oh it really was funny.

We had a visiting dignitary, I don't know whether it was a Minister, and we had ... we had - oh, who's that fantastic US General - General ..., he came to visit. God, I never thought I'd ... he's gorgeous, oh, gorgeous. It doesn't matter does it? But anyway somebody was visiting and it could have been himself, the United States General. Everybody knows him. But everybody's walking in in line of importance. There was this most awful noise, bang. Everybody stops and everyone looks at each other and someone said, 'I think a light blew'. And there'd been an accidental discharge. And finished up in a pillow, in one of them, yeah.

Gee.

So there was a great amount of merriment, a great amount of merriment. Oh no, there were huge amounts of laughs, huge amounts of laughs. And although working sixty hours a week doesn't sound... there seemed to be an awful lot of time for social ...

Yes.

And the Americans, of course the French had been in before ... and it was a holiday resort Vung Tau in the good old days and there are some most magnificent villas there.