



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

Accession number S00758

Title (N392272) Taylor née Millgate, Amy Katherine (Corporal)

Interviewer Thompson, Ruth

Place made Castlecrag, NSW

Date made 15 December 1989

Description Amy Katherine Taylor (neé Millgate), as a corporal in the Australian Women's Army Service, serving in New Guinea, interviewed by Ruth Thompson for The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45.

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Identification: This is Ruth Thompson recording an interview with Amy Taylor on 15 December 1989 and we're sitting at her home.

I would if you could first of all tell me, Mrs Taylor, just a little bit about your background - where were you born and where you grew up and so on?

I was born in Annandale in Sydney and then I went on to Adelong Beach, Woy Woy, to go into primary school. Followed through to Gosford High School to do my secondary education and when I completed that I came back to Sydney and I attended the Metropolitan Business College for twelve months.

That was doing a secretarial course, was it?

That's correct, yes.

And did you get work, full-time work, after you'd finished your course?

Yes. The business college arranged for me to have an interview and I got a job as a bookkeeping machine operator. And from there I went on to secretarial work and I rather favoured the typing more than the shorthand so I was at Sydney Snow as a typist and then I joined the WANS, which is the Women's Australian National Service, a voluntary organisation that we used to attend on Wednesday nights and Saturday afternoons.

What made you join? Was a friend of yours going or did you just decide to go?

Well, I think it was because, you know, war was very predominant at the time and they had a big rally in the Sydney Town Hall and they said they wanted the women to come forward and do their training because, probably in the future, that they would be needed to help out in the war effort. And being only seventeen at the time and - not that I can remember now but I guess there were some girlfriends about who joined - so we decided to join and we joined at Leichhardt which was close by.

And what sort of things did you do? You'd go along on a Wednesday evening and what sort of training did you get?

Well, we learnt air-raid precautions; we had to sit for our first day at examination. We learnt signalling, morse code, all the things that, you know, applied to war time situations. And of course, you know, you had to learn discipline and drill and that's where I got my basic knowledge before I joined the army.

Just to recap a little bit, you would have been sixteen when you joined the business college ...

That's right.

And that would have been in 1939.

That's right.

And then, 1940, '41 you were in the workforce ...

Yes.

And you would have joined the voluntary service at the end of 1940?

That's right.

Okay, right, we've got that straight. Just sort of recapping a little bit on your leisure activities, what sort of things did you enjoy doing?

Oh, mostly swimming and I played hockey.

And you were living at this point in Sydney or up in Gosford?

In Sydney.

Right. And had your parents come down as well or ...

Yes.

So you were living in the family home. Have you got brothers and sisters?

Yes, I'm the eldest of six.

And did they join ... no, they wouldn't have joined up, would they, they would have been too young.

That's right, yes. The brother next to me eventually he joined the merchant navy when he was old enough and then I had another brother who was in the Korean War.

Was there much talk of the political situation within the family at the time?

No, no, not at all. No.

So how did your family feel when you decided to join up?

Well, I think because I'd gone into the WANS and sort of did that it sort of broke the ice and when the time came to join up, you know, I had to have them sign the papers and they didn't seem to worry because they didn't think that I was going to be doing anything different to what I was doing. They just thought I was going to be in the army and I wasn't going anywhere.

(5.00) But strangely enough that's what happened, of course, I was one of the ladies that when I joined the army I used to come home and sleep at home. I was working in Grace Bros. in the showground in records office and came home every night. So it was no different and it was only until I went away and did my training and then my NCO's course that I really got away into barracks. And then, of course, when they asked for volunteers to go to New Guinea I volunteered for that and that's when the parents weren't terribly thrilled. But I was very, very lucky because there were only five of us selected from the records office and being one of

those and having lived at home all the time, I was so glad to have the opportunity to go and serve.

Have there been any members of your family who had served in the first war?

Not that I can recall. I wouldn't say that they'd served in a military force. I had a grandfather that served on the troopships, he was a chef.

And did you think of yourself at that time as British or Australian? What was your sort of perception of the war?

I always felt that I was Australian and that I took pride in doing something for my country even though we did respect the King at that time and we all knew that our roots were in England. We were very much Australian all the way through.

Before you actually joined up and you were working at Sydney Snow's, et cetera, what were your ambitions? How did you see your life panning out when you were a young girl of seventeen, eighteen?

When I was seventeen, eighteen I always thought that I might have been a nurse but then when the war came I sort of didn't think I would like to do that and I got so involved in the typing and the office part of it, I felt that I could be better served in something I was qualified for. Because to have gone in as a nurse, see I didn't have the training. But that was the only ambition. I think I just sort of had a happy life; I lived from day to day.

Okay. Now, you joined the WANS, that was the Women's Australian National Service, and you must have been fairly young when you did that, you would have only been say, about seventeen when you did that?

Yes. That's right.

Can you tell me a little bit about the organisation, what it aimed to do and how it contributed to the war effort?

Well, I felt that the WANS was formed to prepare the young women for the war that was there and they needed to have training and to be prepared. So we had to learn, you know, number one, first aid, air-raid precautions, then they'd advance us into signalling and morse code because I think that the leaders there envisaged that they hoped that they could form some sort of a women's army and it would be the basic training for us.

And where was the training held?

We used to go to the Leichhardt Girls' High School and then we graduated to Burwood Girls' High School because when you finished the courses you then were promoted to what they called Burwood Defence. And it was from there that they asked us would we like to join this newly formed women's army.

And how many girls would be in your group on a Wednesday evening?

Oh, we would have had about sixty girls.

And how many people training you?

Oh, we had a number of leaders who were specialists in their different fields. So I can recall, you know, that I would have had about five trainers.

And was there any sort of feeling amongst the girls and the women who were in the voluntary organisation that they were training men in skills that were needed in the services and yet women weren't allowed in the forces?

We realised that it was really a man's world but we were hoping that they would see that there were jobs the women could do so that the men could go to more forward areas and that is basically how it all happened. When our leaders explained that the girls could do certain jobs to allow the men to go forward - the war was really getting to its peak and they needed the men - so they found that the jobs that we could do did just that. It released the men for more forward areas.

(10.00) And why did you first decide to join up? I mean, you were very young.

I was very young and I think it was just the set of circumstances, the situation in the country. I think we all had that pride. We all wanted to do our bit and at the same time I felt it would have been interesting and exciting and joined up with my girlfriends.

Can you remember any of the - do you still keep in contact with them? Can you remember any of them?

Well, a lot of those girls joined the army and I have seen them at our various army reunions which is rather nice to catch up with the ladies that I knew all those years.

And did you actually enlist as a group? I mean, did you stick together as a group?

No, because we had to fill in forms to join the army and they were forwarded into Victoria Barracks and then you were called up independently. So we didn't actually come together again till we were called up and perhaps we might have been in the same training camp, or when we got our posting I might have found that, oh, one of the girls was over in the showground in another group. But there weren't too many that we caught up with. I remember vividly one girl and she went to Victoria Barracks and where I used to catch up with her was at Central Railway waiting for the tram to transfer and we'd say 'Hello', and 'What are you doing?' and 'How are you getting on?' and from then on we remained friends and I still see that same person sometimes at the golf day.

And how did they react at your workplace when you told them that you were going to enlist?

It was an accepted thing because they were used to the men going and when it came for my time to go, they just said, 'Good luck, good on you'.

Were they going to hold your job open for you?

It wasn't an understood thing for the women at that particular time so I didn't have any worries about that.

So you didn't mind that, you know, you might be coming back from the war with no job to go to?

No. I didn't think of that. I just wanted to get on with it and I felt well that part of my life, well, it will all happen.

And how about your friends, how did they react to the news that you were going to enlist? Did you have a special boyfriend at the time?

No, no. I wasn't allowed out with boys. (laughs)

And you were going to join the army?

No. We lead a very quiet and sheltered life and, well, I did have a girlfriend - now I've just remembered - I had a girlfriend in Sydney Snow's, that's right, and she joined up too and I used to see her quite often because she had the same situation as I did. She used to go home and sleep at her home every night. And I eventually ... I became bridesmaid at her wedding when she married a soldier who came back from the Middle East and we just automatically were so glad to be in it and I think we were glad to know one another.

Was the - AWAS, was that your first choice of the services to join?

Yes.

That was the one you wanted?

Well, actually, that was the only one that was offered through this WANS Burwood Defence. It was just an automatic thing: 'Would you like to join the women's army?'.

So you hadn't had any thoughts about joining the navy or ...

No, didn't think of anything else, no.

Okay, now let's just talk if we could a little bit about the enlistment. If you can take yourself back to the first day, you presumably got your papers.

Yes.

And so can you sort of describe to me, you know, you leave home, how did you feel? Were you very nervous?

Leaving home nervous and excited and I can always remember my parents standing at the gate and, particularly my grandmother, looking very sad. And in those days you got the tram and I went into the showground and had to go through the process and ...

Lots of other people there?

Oh yes, a big line up of ladies and it was hilarious because you'd see ladies in big picture hats, other ladies in these fancy dresses and they all had a different outfit which was rather comical, some of them. But then we had to line up and have these horrible injections and then go and have a medical and have an eye test and all of that and it was the first time that I would be with a lot of women in a room and having to get undressed and that's where we all felt very shy.

(15.00)But we learned to overcome that when they put us out in our rookies course and I was sent in the army bus to Killara and that's when I really got down to knowing what it was like living with a lot of ladies and young girls.

And what was it like?

It was very strange particularly going to have your showers. I thought it was very difficult trying to be prim and proper but we all accepted it in the end and didn't take any notice afterwards. And then sleeping in a dormitory with so many women all at once and then having to all jump out of bed at the same time. But it was all a new experience and I don't think it really worried us to a degree where it worried us. I think we were just sort of glad to see what was going to happen next. Lining up in the mess hall with these tin dixies to get your food, that was different, but we never complained. We just accepted it and did it.

What about a uniform? It was sometime before you got a uniform.

It was, yes. We had an armband to start with with AWAS on it but we always used to have to carry our tin hat and gas mask over our shoulder and when I finished my rookies course and then I was told that I was going to be posted DRO I used to have to wear the tin hat and the gas mask over my shoulder for quite a few weeks before I got into a uniform and then I was given a summer dress to start with then I eventually got a jacket then I got a greatcoat and then we had to be fitted out for a winter uniform. So it all came along in bits and pieces. But it wasn't long before we were well and truly in the army uniform.

How did it feel to be wearing the uniform?

I think I felt very proud. I just sort of felt that then they would know that I was in the army and that I was doing a job. It was like the girls who were in the munition factories, you know, they had a job to do and we had a job to do and I didn't find it any trouble at all. I just accepted it.

What about the hat?

Oh the hat was rather good; it was the brown felt hat or the khaki felt hat. And I had that long hair that I used to have to roll around over an old stocking or get some stuffing to make a roll, so the hat sat on there very nicely.

Can you tell me about the rookies course, what did you learn on that course?

Well, the rookies course was really like going back to school. We had to have the notebook with the pencils and we had to learn a lot on hygiene, we learnt marching, drill, we learnt about discipline, we had to learn about - further our knowledge on air-raid precautions because, as you could appreciate, not every girl had been in the WANS before that, so there

was a little bit of a repeat but I found it an advantage having been in the WANS that it made it easier for me. We had a lot of training: you had to learn all about the army and the insignias and we had to learn to salute. You had to learn to respect your officers - when to speak, when not to speak. I felt it was a great training for building character.

Did you find any parts of the course more difficult than others?

No, no. I think I just took it all in my stride. The only thing that I found difficult, it wasn't actually the course, it was the duties that you had to perform during the course like you would get like a bit of duty to pick up papers or clean out the grease traps or the burning off of those things. Those were the jobs we never did like, it was awful. We used to have those big bass brooms and having to clean out the laundries and the showers and they were the jobs, because let's face it, it's like running a tight ship, isn't it? Somebody had to keep it clean. And I just didn't like those jobs. But we did it and I guess it did me a lot of good.

(20.00) Did you find the discipline hard to take?

No, not at all. My father was a policeman and he used to dish it out at home so I was used to it. (Laughs)

You weren't ever sorry that you joined up?

Never. The best thing I ever did.

On the rookies course, did you have male or female instructors?

We had both. We had a male instructor to do our drill and we had female instructors for lectures and we had male instructors for lectures, so we had a bit of both.

And did you find a problem with the men at the rookies course?

No, not at all. We just took it all in our stride.

What about the opposition? There was quite a lot of opposition to women joining up. Did you ever feel that opposition?

No, I didn't have any indication of that at all. I just sort of felt that we were there to do the job and accepted it as such.

It didn't worry you that in general women weren't allowed to serve overseas? I mean, I know you did serve overseas eventually but

Well, it didn't worry me at that time but I think deep down we all hoped that we would get the opportunity and we were very envious. I can remember when the VADs, the first ones went over to the Middle East, and I thought they were very, very lucky, little dreaming that I would be one day going on a troopship.

Where were you first posted to after you'd done your rookies course?

I was posted to the District Finance Office in the showground.

And what were your duties there?

I was a typist in the typing pool.

Did you have to type any confidential material?

No, I mainly typed routine orders there for the first couple of years.

And did you find that interesting?

Most interesting because it really gave you the movements of all the troops. So in lots of ways, you know, it was confidential but most interesting.

Did anybody ever ask you a favour and want to know where a friend of theirs - when they were going off?

No, no, I didn't have any of those requests. I was very fortunate I think. I would not like to have been in that position.

So at the end of the day you would just travel home again and you would sleep at home?

That's right, yes.

Okay. Can you take me through a day in the life of you going to the showground, say, what time you'd get up, how you'd get to work and so on?

Well, I lived at Five Dock and I used to leave home at half past seven and go in the tram and then I'd travel from there to the railway and change trams to go out to the showground and we used to have to commence duty at eight-thirty.

Did you have a special pass?

Yes, we had an army tram pass and that would take us in the tram for nothing.

And what were your first duties of the day?

Well, we used to have to fall in on parade in front of the building where we were working and we would have to go and do a route march down to Centennial Park and that's where we would sort of still keep up our marching training and I guess learning your discipline. And then they selected me to be a corporal so that I could lead the girls and do the training in the drill.

How long did the drill go on for?

Only for about half an hour, that's all. Then you'd go back in and do your duties in the building.

And did you have a break during the middle of the morning?

They used to bring the trolleys around to serve you tea.

Do you remember the tea lady?

Ah, very, very vaguely.

And then lunchtime, what happened at lunchtime?

We'd go out for lunch and between the buildings, like the Hordern pavilion at the showground, there was a little bit of a park and seats, so we'd sit out there and have our lunch and I used to always take my lunch from home.

And who did you used to have lunch with?

Oh, there'd be three or four of the girls that I was friendly with and we'd always meet out there for lunch.

Was there much mixing amongst the ranks at lunchtime?

You mean male and female?

Well, male and female and officer and ... you know, the officers and the NCOs.

We weren't allowed to fraternise with the officers but we could with the NCOs and the privates and that is when we would probably meet some of the boys out there because we were with men in the records office and they were there also at the showground in other offices. So we'd get to meet them and no doubt we made dates then to go to the Trocadero, dancing.

(25.00) Can you remember any dates that you had with any of them at this period?

Oh, I guess I could remember one particular boy. I used to go ice-skating with, that was a regular but, no, I think I just used to like to go dancing at the Trocadero but I never got really involved too much.

So did you go with other girlfriends?

Yes, oh yes.

So a group of you would go?

Yes.

So, and after lunch more work and there'd be an afternoon tea or

No, we wouldn't have afternoon tea. If you got morning tea there was no afternoon tea and then we finished at five o'clock.

And then, what was your routine then?

Well, basically well then I'd go home because I was the sort of person who had to go home for dinner and - with my family - and then I was allowed to go out to the dance. I used to either ... eventually we'd go to, like the Women's Weekly Club, they had built that and we had Surreyville, that was a Sunday night we'd dance there. It was mainly going to dances or you might go out to a movie.

Did you meet any Americans?

Yes, yes.

What did you think of them?

Met some nice ones and met some fresh ones. (Laughs)

How were they fresh?

Oh well, that's a long story but they didn't last long. (laughs)

Can you remember what your pay was as a typist?

I would think ... if my memory serves me right, I was on four and sixpence a day.

And the women were paid less than the men, about two-thirds, what did you think about that?

Well, I think we just accepted it because, you know, in those days the men always got more than the women. But because I lived at home my parents got a living allowance. I think it was about two guineas a week. They called it a sustenance allowance. But I managed all right on the money.

How did you spend your money?

Well, you'd have to pay your fare to go into the dances or the movies unless you got somebody to pay for you. But I didn't have a lot of money to spend and I didn't have to spend it on much because being in uniform you didn't need any clothes and basically, I guess, it was just our pocket money.

Were you ever disciplined in any way?

Oh, when we went from the showground they moved the records office then to Grace Bros at Broadway because they needed the showground for more troops which meant that we'd have to go back to the showground to the dentist. And I can remember there were four or five of us and we went out there to the dentist and the dentist couldn't see us. So because we were only out there for five minutes we all decided we'd have a cup of coffee in town before we went back to Grace Bros and we got caught. So we were paraded before the colonel and I was fined ten shillings. Because I was the corporal I should have known better so I was made an example of. But that was the only time. From then on, that horrified me, I was so

embarrassed to think that I'd have to be paraded before the colonel. But I didn't have any problems after that.

Did you tell any one?

Oh, everybody knew. It was the first time it had ever happened in there.

Did you tell your family?

Oh yes, I told my father. I always told my father everything and he just said, 'Well, you learn by your mistakes, girl'.

So you never did it again.

No.

And what about your hair, there were regulations about what you had to do with your hair?

Oh yes. Very strict on having the hair above the collar. The regulation was an inch above the collar. So we used to have to be very careful with our rolls to make sure we rolled it up very tightly, or the girls who wanted to have short hair had to make sure that it was cut short and they were very, very strict on that. Very strict on a smart appearance. You were instructed to have your summer uniform freshly starched and ironed, clean tie and I did every bit of that and I always felt that I was well groomed.

This is the end of the first side of the first tape.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

This is the second side of the first tape of the interview with Mrs Taylor. Can you tell me now a little bit about when you were promoted to corporal?

When I was in records office and then they had tried me out as an instructor for the drill it was automatic then that you would have to have stripes to be able to do that job so I was promoted to corporal which was rather exciting particularly when they handed you the two stripes and you have to sew them on your jacket. And I remained a corporal for the rest of my service.

Did you have to do any special training?

I went to what they call an NCOs course, here again at Killara, but this time we went under canvas and that was a much more strenuous course than our rookies course. But it was all part of the training and it was to prepare you for your future in the army.

And can you tell me a little bit about that NCOs course, what training you received?

Well, we had a lot of route marches and a lot of training and lectures on army law and army routine and, you know, the same story on drill formations but I can't remember a lot of what happened then.

You never had any rifle training?

No, I didn't have any rifle training in my service.

But some of the other girls would have done?

Yes.

How were women selected for promotion?

Depending on the job vacancy that came up, if you qualified in as much that you had proven yourself as being able to do the job, if the vacancy was there and they felt that you were there to do it well then you were recommended for promotion.

Did you have to go for an interview before a panel of officers?

No, I didn't have to, no. But if you were selected to go for an interview to become an officer well then you had to go to a panel and it was up to the panel to decide whether you were suitable for a job that would be coming up that would have officer status.

When you were promoted to corporal, did this affect your relationships with any of the other girls or the men?

With my special girlfriends, they were very happy for me, but there were certain girls who felt that they were also qualified and naturally they were upset about it. But, eventually along the track, they became corporals so it evened itself out. But I had no problem. It was just accepted that I was the corporal because the job was there to be done and I was able to do it.

How did the men react when the women arrived on the scene?

Well, I felt that the men were pleased to see us because there was some men there who were itching to get away and when they realised that we were going to do these jobs it meant that they were going to be released to go to the more forward areas and I think they were glad to see us.

Can you tell me a bit now - we'll jump over - if we could talk a little bit about your overseas service. How did that come about? Did you volunteer for this?

Yes. They called for volunteers from my unit to serve in New Guinea and I was one of the lucky ones. There were five chosen out of about 300 women. And once we'd had the interview and then they confirmed that we were going to be part of that contingent we were then sent to Burwood and fitted out with our tropical kit and sent up to Brisbane for training.

(5.00) Why did you apply to go overseas? What prompted you?

I think because I felt it would have been a wonderful experience and I wanted to get away. See, I hadn't had a lot of time in barracks like a lot of the other members of the women's army. Some of the girls went into barracks straight away, particularly those girls who were sent away from their home town, and I didn't have that great opportunity so, to me it looked like a great challenge. And I also felt that I was really going to do something for my country and I think the loyalty that came out there, that's what I joined the army for in the first place was to do my bit and this to me seemed another step forward in achieving that.

You said earlier that your family's reaction to your going overseas wasn't quite as positive.

That's right and I can always remember my grandmother who objected about it but she realised that by that time I was twenty-one, because you had to be twenty-one to go to New Guinea, so that she couldn't interfere with me going because I was of age. And that's another step forward for me. I felt that I'd attained that age and going away was really going to be an experience.

So from the course that you went on, you went up to Brisbane - how did you get up to Brisbane, by train?

In a troop train.

Right. What was that like?

Oh, that was unreal. We slept in these horrible bunks with no mattress, they're just canvas, and a lot of the girls played cards but it was quite an experience and I was always grateful to my parents because they were allowed to come and see us off and they gave me a lunch box and so we were more than pleased that I was able to share my lunch box with my friends because it was a very - a dirty trip. Because you could imagine in those days they were those coal trains and we arrived in Brisbane very, very grubby. Then we went to this camp at Fraser's Paddock and were put into huts and we were staged there for six weeks. And that was what they call ... I supposed you'd call it the orientation of going overseas because we had to do a course of taking atebrin because of the malaria and we had to learn all about tropical kit and get all our equipment. And we had more lectures on living in the tropics.

Did they tell you much about New Guinea?

Not a great deal but it was just that we had to be very careful that we wore our long trousers and gaiters and long-sleeved shirts particularly after five o'clock in the evening. And it was just a period of adjusting you to that particular life and also they wanted to tell us about going on the troop ship because we had to have a bit of knowledge of what was going to happen there.

And what was going to happen there?

Well, they knew that there were going to be 300 women go on the *Duntroon* with about 1,500 men so we, you know, there were certain rules and regulations that had to be adhered to and - we were certainly allowed to mix but as you can appreciate we were all twenty-one year old girls and there were a lot of very healthy young men. So there were certain things that we had to abide by and also you had to be given your sitting for meals. You had first, second and

third sitting because there were so many of us. And then we were also made aware of the black-out because it wasn't long before we went up that the *Centaur* was sunk so it was, again, discipline; obeying the rules, knowing that you had to observe the black-out and also what you had to do in case of emergency.

(10.00) Just taking you back a second. Did you have a tearful farewell with your family or

No, my family were all tearful but I think I had the excitement of adventure.

Now, okay, you've got your tropical kit, et cetera, and the various tablets and so forth. Your colonel, Colonel Irving, she took the salute at Fraser's Paddock. Can you remember that parade? It was on 26 April.

Very vaguely; very vaguely. I can remember that this was going to be the parade for our chief to say farewell to us but I haven't got a lot of recollection of it.

Do you remember the following day when leave was cancelled and no-one was
...

Yes, I remember that and ... because we were allowed to make one phone call to our families and they said that you wouldn't be able to make a call after that and I can remember ringing my parents in Sydney and saying 'Goodbye' and to say that I wasn't allowed to use the telephone any more and that I thought that this was going to be it.

And how did you feel then?

Excited, very excited. No fears, no worries. It was just a job that was going to be done that I was looking forward to doing and I had some lovely friends with me. I made some great friends in the army. I always look back on that and so the camaraderie was absolutely wonderful.

On the following day you had to attend church parades, is that right?

That's right.

Can you remember those?

I can remember the church parade and that is the only time that I felt - we all felt a little sad. It was a very sombre and quiet occasion and I think this is where we realised that, 'Gee, we're going overseas. I wonder if, you know, we'll get near a war zone?'. A lot of the loved ones had been killed, a lot of the girls' husbands and boyfriends were prisoners-of-war and I think that sort of made us a bit more aware of what we were going into. Not only an adventure but something very serious.

Did you come from a religious family?

We observed the religion, yes. I was always trained from the beginning, like the Sunday School and my parents always went to church.

This is Anglican or Catholic?

Well, my parents were Catholic but my grandmother had a lot of rearing to do with me and she was a Protestant, so I had a mixed religious upbringing but I was always made to observe that.

So what religion did you consider yourself to be?

I considered myself a Church of England because of my grandmother's influence.

A chaplain, I guess, would have gone with you?

Wh...

A chaplain would have gone with you to New Guinea?

Well, they were already up there. See, the church was already established in Lae and they had the Catholic church and the Protestant.

And did you ever attend services in Lae?

Always. That's something I always did in the army, I always observed Sunday and I went to church parade.

And that was the Church of England?

Yes.

And did you write Church of England on your army papers?

I wrote Church of England on my army papers but my father found out and had it altered to RC. So I must admit that on a couple of occasions I went to the RC because I felt it was my duty to my father.

Did you find religion a source of comfort at a time that was fairly stressful?

I Religion was very important to me. Although, as I said I had a mixed thing, it was still religion and it was still a belief and I always found that it was necessary. It did give you strength.

Did any of the girls feel they were pressurised to attend church?

Well, it became an essential thing. I don't think it was a choice; it was church was on and you took the one that you belonged to and I think that because of that a lot of the girls became more observant with their religion and we always looked forward to going.

And what made it a thing that you looked forward to going to?

Because I can always remember when I was a little girl I looked forward to going to Sunday School and I loved singing the hymns and I've always ... very up to date with the Lord's Prayer

and it was just something my parents had made me do. It was a way of life for me and I was really glad that I was able to do it in the army.

(15.00)Okay. Embarkation day, this is 2nd May 1945. That must have been a very exciting day for you?

It was very exciting. We had to get up very early and we were loaded into the army trucks and taken down to the wharf in Brisbane on the Brisbane River and we had the embarkation numbers put on the front of our hats and I can always remember watching the newsreels of the boys going away and looking at those numbers and thought, 'Will that ever happen to me?'. And I can still remember to this day walking up that gang-plank with that number in my hat and thinking, 'Am I really going away after all?' and it was just a sense of swelling up in your chest, you know, and I felt so great. And then we went up on deck and then we were allocated our cabins.

Were there lots of streamers, lots of big farewells?

No. No, no, all very low key. See, whenever you went on embarkation it was supposed to be very secret, nobody would know you were going. So it was all very, very quiet.

And so - I am sorry, I interrupted you - you were allocated your cabins?

That's right. And also when you were going to ... what sitting for your meals and basically it was a very easy trip. It only took us about four days to go up to Lae.

Can you tell me about your cabin? Can you describe that to me?

I can remember there would have been six bunks and a port hole and a basin to clean your teeth. If you wanted to have a bath, it was a salt water bath, so we had what call 'a lick and a promise' and I can always remember though going to bed at night, it was so hot in the cabin, that a lot of us would sleep with just our pants on. But I can just remember the six berth cabin and the nice bunch of girls I had with me.

What was the food like?

Oh, very, very ordinary; nothing outstanding at all.

Any other vivid memories of that voyage?

No, no, I can't remember anything much more than sitting up on the deck and getting to know my fellow travellers and having our sing-songs and just virtually doing what we had to do.

So about four days later you disembarked?

That's right.

And then where did you go?

We landed in Lae in landing barges and we were loaded into trucks ...

Was it difficult to get you from the ship to the shore?

We went down ... we were fortunately, we went down like a side gang plank, it was on a slope that took us into the landing barge and we carried our - we still had the tin hat and the gas mask and a suitcase and we managed to get down all right. The landing barges were rather exciting. Here again it was something that I never thought we'd see the women doing and you can imagine the men on the shore when we arrived, they were all eyes and ears. And we got onto the trucks amongst all the whistles and they drove us through to our barracks and it was 71 AWAS Barracks and it was located on Butibum Road - I'll always remember that - and we were in huts with thatched roofs. And we all congregated in the recreation hut and we were introduced to our officers who then allocated us our huts and then we were told where we were going to do our duties. And where some of the girls were given postings outside of the barracks, I was told I was going to be on the barrack's staff and I was allocated to the Q Store where I stayed all of my service in New Guinea.

Can you describe the barracks to me, your particular one?

Well, the hut itself, there were, what, three steps into the hut. There were two beds in the front with a partition and that was where the sergeant or the NCO slept and then we were down in sections and there would have been six beds per section. Now each section was separated by wardrobes so we were given a wardrobe each and we had a shelf behind our bed and we lived there. There would have been about twenty-two in the hut.

(20.00) And next to the hut is what we used to call the ablutions and that was showers and tubs and ironing rooms and then, of course, up the back were the latrines which consisted of holes dug in the ground - pits - with a wooden seat over it. And we didn't like that; that was very unpleasant.

And did you have a garden or did you create a garden?

We created a garden, yes. We had a garden in the front of our hut eventually and out the back.

Was there much competition for ... amongst the gardeners?

Well, I wouldn't say it was competition. I think it was that some were better gardeners than others and if you were lucky enough to have a green thumb, well, you know, you made the better show. But we made an effort to have it looking attractive and all our huts were numbered. And we found that, you know, we adjusted quite well.

It must have been fairly strange surroundings after Five Dock. Can you recall any of the special things that made it seem different?

Well, I think the hardest thing was the heat. It was very humid and very hot and it was the sort of heat that when you perspired you always had a wet patch on your back and you were very conscious of that. I think waking up in the morning, then having to line up in front of the hut at seven o'clock then we'd all have to stand there and take our atebrin, then we'd go back in and get ready for breakfast, then we'd have to go down to the mess hut and you'd get that horrible powdered egg and if you wanted toast you had to put it on a stick in front of the fire to try and get a piece of toast. But the meals weren't too bad really. And then when you

finished your breakfast you went off to your various duties. Some of the girls got ... they had buses to take them to their units or some of them marched in formation down the Butibum Road to wherever their unit was or I just went over to the Q Store and that's where we kept the stores and outfitted the girls. We looked after the stores generally.

You had your anti-malaria tablets issued to you every day. Did anybody ever get malaria?

Yes. I was the first one to get it and I think the reason for that was that I developed tropical ears in both ears so I had a terrible time with that and that's when my resistance went down and the next ...

And ... sorry, can you tell me what tropical ears is?

Tropical ear is an infection in the ear and it basically comes from the coral when we were swimming in Malahang Beach and you should really plug your ears with cotton wool. And it's a germ in the ear which gives you a terrible earache and you get a lot of discharge and it's a very painful thing. So it was only a month after I had tropical ears that I got malaria and I was very, very ill with that. Actually I went into hospital two days before Christmas. So I had Christmas, my birthday and New Year in hospital.

Was this a military hospital?

Yes. It was the 2/7th AGH, I can always remember that, and more so because of the Christmas period.

Can you remember anything of your stay in hospital?

Umm. I think what I can remember was the course of treatment particularly in the early stages I used to have to take quinine and it made me terribly ill and it took me a long while to get through that course. And then once I got onto the plasmoquine and back onto the atebrin I started to recover. But I think what I can remember mostly about my time in hospital was because I had a birthday was when they set up a special table and tried to make it a happy birthday for me and that sort of brightened the period. But basically you're very sick with malaria and it takes a lot out of you. So that when I went back to the barracks I was lucky that there was a convalescent camp over on an island called Salamaua. So they sent me over there with another girl to convalesce for a week and that was ... it was very pleasant and did help me recover.

(25.00)So your first Christmas on ... in New Guinea was in hospital?

That's right. Yes.

Can you remember anything about that first Christmas?

Well I can remember my friends coming in to see me and saying they were going off to all these Christmas parties and here's me sitting up in hospital as sick as a dog.

Did you get news from home fairly regularly?

Yes. We got news from home and also the Salvation Army were very good. I can remember in hospital the Salvation Army coming around with a Christmas parcel and in it is the usual, the toothpaste, the toothbrush and the soap and the powder. But it was very, very well received and I don't mind telling you I appreciated it very much.

There were several visits by various notables during 1945-46, can you remember any of them? [inaudible],¹ for example, he visited on 28 June 1945, do you remember his visit?

I remember that because we all had to line up inside the recreation hut and he walked down amongst the ranks and I couldn't believe that I was actually in the same room as one of the royal family.

And what about Colonel Spencer?

Oh, Colonel Spencer, she was our colonel at the barracks in any case. I can remember her vividly because she went up to Lae, she flew up before us, so that when we arrived up there in the *Duntroon* she came out on the barge and met us on the ship. So she's always a lady that I'll never ever forget. She was a wonderful colonel.

And General Blamey?

General Blamey, he was the highlight of my whole trip because in the Q Store he actually came into the Q Store with our officer from the barracks and came in and spoke to us and shook our hand and there were just three of us in there at the time so I felt that that was quite an honour to meet, of all people, General Blamey. That was the really highlight of our trip.

And what about Colonel Irving, that was in January of '46 just before the first draft returned?

That's right. Well, Colonel Irving came up there and the only way I can remember her was because we had to go out then onto the parade ground and we had a march past and she took the salute. And that was quite, you know, an exciting day to have the chief of the AWAS there.

Amongst your other duties you were also the entertainments officer and the second prize winner at the fancy dress ball on 8th November as Carmen Miranda.

I'll always remember that because when it was first suggested that we have some entertainment I asked for suggestions, you know: How could we have it or what would we have? And somebody said, 'Let's have a fancy dress dance', and some of the ladies said, 'But what would we wear? What would we get?' and I said, 'Well, if we don't try it, we won't do it'. And it was the most amazing thing. I had an idea about Carmen Miranda because I can always remember that lady on the movies so I got an old parachute and I got some pineapple and fruit and put on my head and I borrowed beads from one of the entertaining ladies who ... there was an entertainment troop there. And some of the ladies came in the most incredible

¹ Refers to visit by the Duke of Gloucester.

outfits: ballerinas in mosquito netting; one lady put a sheet round her and got dressed as a nun; another one put a towel around her with a tin of Johnson's Baby Powder and put a cap on her head and went as a baby; one of the officers made a complete suit out of hessian bag. And it was incredible. One of the ladies went as an old world lady and we had been given these lovely floral bedspreads and little covers for the stools, so out of the floral bedspread she had it in such a way it looked like an old world dress and the cover on the stool she made into an umbrella and it was incredible. And we had a jolly good night. And from then onwards, then we started our Saturday night dances and we had an entertainment group there called the Islanders Concert Party and in that concert party were George Wallace Jnr, Michael Pate and they had this band. So I asked them would they like to come and play at our dances and they not only came and played, they came and put on a show for us.

This is the end of the ...

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

START OF TAPE TWO - SIDE A

Identification: This is the first side of the second tape of an interview with Mrs Taylor recorded by Ruth Thompson on 15th December, 1989 at her home at 135 Edinburgh Road, Castlecrag.

We were just talking about the Saturday night dances that you used to hold in Lae and you were talking about some of the men who also went along.

Well, we were allowed to invite a special partner if you had one or we used to invite some of the men from the nearby units. But they used to always have to be signed in and - when they came in - and they also had to be signed out when they left. But we served supper. We had the kitchen staff put some supper on so that was ... it was quite a good night and the band were terrific so we had a very good dance. So they used to finish about half past ten and then when the entertainment unit came in we had a special night for that and we had all of those top entertainers, as I said before, like George Wallace Jnr and Michael Pate and they put on some good shows.

And were invitations to these Saturday night dances much coveted amongst the men?

Oh yes. There was a lot of competition and we were only, you know, could only allow a certain amount in. And, see, the initial Saturday nights were in great demand and then it sort of eased off a bit. But then we were also allowed to go out of the barracks. Now on Sundays we could get the bus and we'd go in a group down to Malahang Beach for a swim. But if you wanted to go on a picnic well you had to have at least six in the party and the men used to have to carry two rifles and I can always remember we used to have to sign a D2 form to go out but we always had to go out in a group.

Can you remember any particular outings that you had?

I can always remember that I was told that it was much better to go out with a member of the air force because if you wanted a barbecue he could fly in the meat.

Did you have any leave while you were in New Guinea?

No. The only, if you call it leave, on the first occasion I had that week at a convalescent camp and then they decided that they'd give all of the girls a week and they called it a rest week. And I was fortunate enough, six months later, that I got another week at the rest camp at Salamaua. But that was the only, what you'd call, leave away from barracks. It was there to give the girls a break.

Did you have much contact with the local people?

Very little. Being in the Q Store I had an occasion that the chief of the New Guinea Highlanders, he came down into the barracks one day, he heard about the white marys that had come into Lae and I got very close to him. But not a great deal of contact on my behalf. But I do believe that one of our girls who worked for army education, she had the job of going out to one of the schools out there and there was some Chinese children and some mixed blood and she was out there teaching them songs and nursery rhymes and spelling and they put a show on for the girls. They had like a Christmas show. But, you see, I was unlucky, I missed on that one because I was in hospital.

Were there any weddings while you were in Lae?

Yes. We had one wedding. I can remember she was a signaller. Her name was Betty Millard I think, if my memory serves me right, and because I was recovering in the camp hospital from tropical ear, Colonel Spencer invited a couple of the other patients and myself to go down to her headquarters to see the bride who was being dressed down there.

(5.00) And I can always remember this lovely white gown that was made for her and the white mosquito net veil. And we saw her go out in the staff car to be married. She married an air force boy.

And was the dress flown in from Sydney?

No. It was made up there by one of the girls. It was really something to be seen.

That was fairly unusual to get married then.

Yeah. I was quite surprised that one of the girls would have been ... you know, had permission to be married but it happened. I haven't got any of the details but I can remember it vividly and thought how lucky she was that she'd met 'Mr Right'.

Did many of the girls meet other people serving in the forces and subsequently married them?

Yes, yes. That was quite interesting because a group of girls that I became friendly with up there, when we came home and were discharged, we started to meet once a month and we have been meeting once a month since 1946 and out of those girls I would say there would be four of them who had married boys they'd met up there. And we meet the husbands every Christmas and it's a wonderful relationship.

Can you remember the day when it was announced that the war with Japan had finished?

Yes.

What were you doing?

We were in our huts at the time and we heard ... the word came through 'it's over' and I can remember one of the men coming in and handing out the ... there was a little local paper called *Guinea Gold* and we could see big letters 'It's Over'. And there was great excitement and they had to shut the gates of the barracks because, as you could appreciate, some of the girls who had boyfriends there, they all wanted to come in to celebrate but our colonel kept them out. It was quite a stirring moment for all of us and it was also a big moment for those girls who were married to prisoners of war because they were waiting to hear news of them and to know when they were coming home.

And how did you feel personally?

I felt excited. Immediately thought, 'Oh, now they're going to send us home'. But I was just glad that the war was over because, particularly, you know, that the war with the Japanese, we heard a lot of stories about that and I was just glad to see the war had finished and that we'd be able to get back and get on with our lives.

And were you amongst the first or the second draft that went home?

I was the second. I was on the girls amongst the second draft, we came back about the end of February.

And that was on HMAS *Canberra*?

That's right.

Can you remember much about the journey home?

We were all very excited about coming home but there were, you know, a couple of girls were taken on board on stretchers with dengue fever and one was a very close friend of mine so we were quite concerned for her. But it was just like the trip going up. We didn't have much activity. We just had to amuse ourselves and it didn't take long before we were coming down Brisbane Harbour once more because the first draft went into Sydney Harbour. Now that's one thing that I was disappointed in, we were all hoping that the *Canberra* would come into Sydney Harbour but it didn't. We came into Brisbane. So then we had to go to the Fraser's Paddock again and we staged there for about two or three days before we got the troop train from Brisbane down to Sydney.

And your family were in Sydney or ...

Yes. And my mother and father were there to meet me and I had a new baby sister because she was born whilst I was up there. So it was all very exciting.

And how did you feel to be home?

Thrilled to be home. Loved ... you know, I enjoyed every minute of my service overseas but then, you know, there comes a time when, you know, the home roots are very strong and when my mother had had another baby I was rather anxious to get home to see my new sister and my other brothers and sisters and it was just another phase of the life I was going into.

(10.00) What welcome was there for you in Brisbane?

Well, when we disembarked from the ship they put us into the army buses and we went right through Brisbane streets and I'll always think how exciting it was. We had a ticker tape welcome home and everybody clapped and cheered and we felt very proud and thought it was just one of those things that I never thought would ever happen to me and it was just such a wonderful feeling to feel that everybody was so glad that we'd done the good job and glad that we were home safe.

It must have been a terrific atmosphere.

It was magnificent. It was wonderful to think that, you know, we went away with the clouds of war over our heads and we came back with that wonderful feeling that peace was on.

So what happened when you got back to Sydney?

My parents met me at the train and then we had to go onto army transport out to the showground and then we were given our leave. I think it was about fourteen days' leave just to settle down and see our families and then I decided that I wanted to take my discharge. Some of the girls didn't get discharged straightaway. They decided to go back to their various units and stay on but I decided I'd like to be discharged and so I left the army.

Why was this?

Ah, well, I just felt that the war was over and I felt that I wanted to do something else and I had great ideas of opening a coffee shop until my father made the suggestion that perhaps I'd like to join the police force. And I thought, 'Oh, I didn't think I'd be any good for that', and he said, 'Well, having had the experience of going overseas and being in the army that I would slot into it quite well'. So I went for the various interviews and I was accepted.

Just backtracking again, what sort of relationships did you have with the other women in your group?

I had very good relationships. We came from, you know, different walks of life and different parts of Australia but we formed a great bond of friendship and that's one thing about being in the army and living in barracks, you get a lot closer than you would normally and that's where I felt that the character building of the army prepared us for this and you knew which were the friends you wanted to make and those friends you made, they're the friends you still have today; it's cemented a friendship for a long, long time.

Colonel Irving was very keen that the women in the AWAS should retain their femininity, what did you feel about that?

Well, I felt that this is what was most important that we do. That although you're in uniform you were still a female although sometimes, you know, you were doing the man's job. But by retaining your femininity I think you had more respect from the men and it was most important for all of us.

And what were your impressions of Colonel Irving?

Well, as far as I was concerned, Colonel Irving was the boss and she showed a wonderful example and I think for her to have taken on that job, which was originally the sixteen hundred women and then it turned out to be 24,000 I think she was a great lady.

Was there a difference in the treatment of single women and married women?

Not that I would say, no. No, I think we were all treated the same.

'Cause married women with children weren't allowed to serve overseas, were they?

No. No.

You mentioned You mentioned that you decided to join the police force. How much do you think that your army training affected that decision? Had your self-confidence increased over the time?

Oh, I would say, absolutely. I felt that the confidence that I gained during my army service and the fact of working with a lot of women and a lot of people really gave me the grounding to be able to accept that position in the police force because I was able to speak to anybody on any level and I was able to take interviews and I think it was the confidence and the character building that the army gave me that let me do the job.

(15.00) Was it difficult for you in that immediate post-war period to sort of re-establish your contact with your friends and family? Did you find that hard?

Well, I didn't find it hard but I found that my friends that I had left behind me here, it was a wonderful return to that friendship and I still retained them. But I still had those friends that I served with in New Guinea that we still kept together. So, actually, I made more friends and I've retained them all which was another good thing about your army. Whenever you made a friend, you made a friend.

And when you look back on those war years now, how do you think of them? Do you often think about the war?

I think about it often and I think of all the good times and you think of the bad times but the main thing, I think, it was the best thing that ever happened to me. I felt my war service made me a better person; I think I was more understanding; it made me more tolerant; and I just feel that it's been a stepping stone in the life that I'm leading today.

Can you tell me any of the sad times that you had?

Well, I think the sad times would be when I was in New Guinea and when peace was declared and those ladies that were up there who had loved ones, POWs, and when some of them got word that they had died, that was upsetting because I think at that age group we hadn't come across death as close as that and that would be about the saddest thing that I had in my army career. And I guess, in lots of ways, I was rather sad, you know, that the army finished. But I was lucky that by going into the police force after two years in plain clothes they wanted a volunteer to start the uniform section and having had that experience I volunteered straightaway and in which case another policewoman and myself, and incidentally she was an ex-WAAAF, we were the first two policewomen in uniform and we were the only two in uniform for a year and I think I handled that job only because I had army training.

Did you join an ex-service association?

Yes. When I returned from overseas I was then eligible to join the RSL so I became a member of the Returned Services League.

And you're also in the ... and what women's organisations did you join?

Well, in 1948 I was asked to go on the first committee to have an AWAS reunion and that was the birth of the Australian Women's Army Service Association and I'm actually ... I'm president of that at the moment and I have been for the past fifteen years. So I've actually been a member since 1948.

And you hold regular reunions?

Yes. We have a reunion in October and we have an ANZAC Day lunch in April.

And are there army men present on the ... at the reunions?

Not ... not every reunion. There are occasions that we may ask a guest to come along who perhaps have helped us through the year and of course we've had previous governors come with their lady but basically it's all of the ex-AWAS.

Have you got any funny stories you can remember?

Well, I can only ... I can only remember a funny occasion in the barracks up there in New Guinea. It was right at the end and we were ready to come home and a couple of the girls decided they wanted to see their boyfriends and one of these girls was twenty stone. So she decided to hop over the fence and, of course, being barbed wire on the top she got stuck. So you can imagine seeing this twenty stone girl stuck on the fence and along the road the jeep comes our commanding officer. So everybody made a scatter and they left this poor girl on the fence. So she had to eventually crawl down and so she saluted Madam and walked back in through the gate. (laughs)

(20.00) What about your post service rights? Did you take up any of the things like education grants or allowances or housing loans, et cetera?

No, I didn't take any grants but I did take up the offer of law books which would help me in my police work and that was, you know, quite a good thing. And then when I got married, being a returned ex-servicewomen, I was then eligible for a war service home loan. So we

had bought a block of land and I made application in my own right for the loan which I got so we built our first home at Pennant Hills.

Did you meet your husband in the army?

No, I met my husband when I joined the police force.

So he was a policeman?

That's right, yes.

So the wife of a policeman and the daughter of a policeman and a policewoman herself.

That's right, exactly, yes.

This is the end of the interview with Mrs Taylor by Ruth Thompson on 15th December 1989 and we have recorded one and a half tapes.

END OF TAPE TWO - SIDE A