



Australian War Memorial

Sound Collection

ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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SUMMARY: early life in Darwin, experiences during the Second World War, the effects of the war, and experiences as an Aboriginal person during the war period.

So Mary Lee, welcome to the Australian War Memorial.

Thank you.

If we could commence with your early life and your childhood and also your Aboriginal name.

My Aboriginal name is Mawuka Garawirritja.

And from what tribe are you?

Um, I'm actually from the Larrakeyah tribe, the traditional owners of Darwin and Cox Peninsula area. But, I've been adopted by the people of Arnhem land. Because of my work that I did I had a lot of involvement with the ladies from Arnhem land.

This is of course was later in your life.

Later. Much later.

But, with your childhood what part did you grow up in?

Well. I wasn't born in a hospital my grandmother Wigi Nelson was a midwife and I was born in a suburb, that's called Stuart Park now, but which was actually called Police Paddock - where the Police used to Paddock their horses. And I was born under a banyan tree in a Police Paddock. And that's where I grew up.

And was it a happy childhood?

As far as I can remember it was. But, apparently I must have had rickets because I collapsed and was very sick but with my grandmother being - doing bush medicines and that my leg was very bandy and she used to massage it with - she killed a goanna and got the fat and used to massage my leg everyday and strapped it with packing case - you know the boards and the inner tube of the Lyres. I used to run around on stiff legs. And she straightened my leg.

What about Western medicine, white medicine?

No none of that. No nothing at all. That was just massaging with the goanna oil every night.

Did you have access to a sort of white medicine
and white hospitals

No not at all. Not at that time.

Right. So there was no sort of government policy
to go out and administer health care to the
Aboriginals at all?

No Not as far as I can remember. Nothing like that. No. Yeah.

Right, and through your teenagehood did you go to
school and ...

Yes, we were, we used to walk from Police Paddock to the Catholic School in town, in
Cavenagh Street. We used to walk there everyday - it was Our Lady of the Sacred Heart
and the Jesuits were Priests. So we used to walk to school and walk back again.

And how far through school did you go?

I don't know to me it was miles and miles and miles. I don't know what it is in
kilometres. But we used to walk.

And to what grade did you get to?

Ah. I got to 7th grade. That was all.

Was that the average for Aboriginals of that
period? To basically ...

Yes, yes

just go through primary school?

Yes you weren't encouraged. But, but because we weren't encouraged and Darwin was
bombed. That was why. And then we continued on and they put us back a grade when we
evacuated, they put us back a grade and then I was getting older then 15 and then I didn't
have to go to school.

What did your father do?

My father was a wharfie on the Darwin wharfs in Darwin.

And what sort of house did you live in when you say you lived in police barracks.

Amazingly he built it out of - you know you chop down trees - it was just sapling trees I think with corrugated iron what they could scrape up. And my bed was made from timber - the bush timber and um and with bush slats and um we had no mattress it was just all clean rags I know because I had to wash them all - get in a tub and stomp on them, stomp on it. And that's the clean rags we had no pillows. But everything was clean.

And so this was one of your weekly chores was to wash the rags?

Weekly chores yes. And we had ant beds for flooring. And it was my rostered work to sprinkle the floor every day to keep it damp because it was very dusty. And then make my own broom. And when I was only a little tack I had to do this because my older sister was not interested in that so I was the third girl in line and I used to make my own little hand broom with sweep and then sprinkle the floor and then jump everywhere on it to flatten it down. And it was hard pack terribly out there, it was very good.

So what did you make your broom from? From the local bush?

Yeah. It was the local bush that grew about so high and it was just the right length. And I was not allowed to get the youngens the young bits, I had to get the outer bits because they were stronger. And then when that wore out I had to make another and tie it with string.

And did your mother teach you that skill

Yes,

to make those things?

yes she taught us a lot about bush tucker, um bush medicine, and collecting bush food and going out walking of course to Francis Bay, an area in Darwin, where we got periwinkles, long buns, this was a local name for a -like a cone shape mussel type of thing - and throw the net and get little fish and mangrove worms.

So that would have been like a daily activity going out...?

Weekend.

Oh right

Because we had to go to school remember.

And you were also buying food from the shops and things as well.

Yes, there was an old Chinese store there my mother used to buy flour, tea and sugar I think. I don't know I wasn't trusted with the money.

But your father's wages would have been spent on buying food as well?

Yes, just food yes.

How many children in the family?

There was nine. Alex the third eldest and six brothers and two other sisters and myself.

And when the war came were any of your brothers did they enlist in the military. The Australian Army?

Too young, my brother was - would have been about 14 - he was too young. -

And your father obviously stayed on the wharf working.

Yeah well um they heard - well Brother Howe I think from Bathurst Island you know the Japanese were coming and it was just rumours. I was too little, I did not take much notice. And, December I think it was, Boxing Day they evacuated all the women and children and they said they had to. I can remember that plainly because I had a beautiful celluloid doll for my Christmas I was given and I wanted to take it. But the army or who ever it was in Darwin said no you were only allowed to take one suitcase they told my mother for nine kids she took one case. And we had to leave all the Christmas presents behind and we were poor you know. And we looked forward to Christmas for our presents and a new hat to go to midnight mass in - you know being Catholics - and we weren't allowed to take it. My mother I think chose, my mother and father must have sat there and chose, that we would go to Katherine, which was just about 3 or 4 hours drive out of Darwin in our days but those days there was no road so we went by train on the Sandfly, that's right.

On the Sandfly? Was that the name of the train?

Yeah, a little tiny narrow gauge and rocking and toot, toot you know. So they put us on that and we went to Katherine. And other people chose to go by boat or whatever.

But your father stayed in Darwin?

Yeah. In Darwin, he wanted to stay there and work. You know he had to because to get money for the kids.

But when you were evacuated were the white people allowed to take more than the Aboriginals. Or was everyone restricted?

No, no everybody was restricted to one suitcase. You weren't allowed to take more. I don't know why.

And when you arrived in Katherine what sort of accommodation had they set aside?

They put us in a - it was some old shop it was I can't remember what it was - I think we slept on the dirt floor - what on I don't know. I can't remember but I can remember cooking on a little fire place with midori camp ovens making the damper and cooking whatever I had to cook and a little fireplace I chopped the wood myself of course I was quite expert at that and sharpened the axe and ah, that's right we stayed there - the names coming to me I forgotten - and then we went to a public school there we continued our schooling there.

Was it just your family living in the shop?

Yes, just our family. There was - no there was an old Filipino man there too - Lippio and Tony Paris. Yeah they were there close by I remember. Yes.

And so the school in Katherine would have been quite crowded with all the people from Darwin coming down as well.

Yeah it was. I think it was the public school. I'm not too sure.

So how old were you when you were evacuated?

I was ten.

Right and so did you find it hard to fit into this new school and make new friends.

Well it was strange. It was very strange, I mean the train alone frightened the life out of me because we walked everywhere.

So it was your first ride on a train.

Yeah.

Right.

Yeah it really was.

And were you actually in Darwin when the bombing occurred or had you been evacuated prior to that?

No. We were evacuated prior to that because they heard the rumours that the Japanese had bombed ...

Broome?

Pearl Harbour.

Oh right.

Pearl Harbour and somehow or other they knew they were coming. Because we had a lot of Japanese pearl livers there in Darwin at those times so I think they were the spies or whatever they call them, you know because in the one area they had a lot of pearl shells in the corner of Cavenagh and Daley Street and I think that would have been it. Then we were evacuated yeah. What did you ask me? (laughs) I lost my train of thought. What was it you asked me can you remember? What was it?

I was wondering if you were evacuated before the actual bombing of Darwin.

That's right. Yeah. That's right we got to Katherine and we went to school there and then this one day and I now know was the 19 February ah 19...

1942

1942 that there was rumour was going on around. They said, 'Darwin was bombed Darwin was bombed' well being a kid you know that did not worry me. We went to school as usual. But my mother must have been terribly worried because she got - a rumour came through - there was messages coming through - because they were that my father was killed, my Uncle Laurace was killed or my Uncle Philip was killed. It was one of those three and you know she wasn't too sure. You know she must have gone through a traumatic time. And then young, the young boys that they were leaving behind were coming on the train. They were blackened and just from open carriages sitting there and in the skyline you could see black billowing smoke and that. And actually it sometimes, if it was very quiet, you could hear bombs dropping, well it was bombs then but... I remember because they would say shh shh you children shut up we want to listen you know. In those days you had to keep quiet so we had to sit quietly and listen can you hear that? say no but you could hear it and see the black smoke because they had bombed our oil um

oil storage

oil storage yeah there in Daley Street. So we could hear that and the refugees, not the refugees, the peoples what were left behind were coming through on the train to Katherine you see.

So a lot of the injured and wounded were brought down to Katherine. What? To the hospital in Katherine?

Yes I would say so. But the abled bodied ones were just hopping off, you know, and they were coming over to my mother must have known them because you know there was food there and damper and tea and that, what ever they wanted it was there. Rumours kept coming you know that it was your husband and then it was your brother-in-law Philip or Laurace and she was not too sure. And then gradually it filtered through with one of my cousins, I think it was Leo, came over and said 'No it was ...' and she was not officially told for a long time because it was no one there in Darwin. Cut that bit out. There was no one there only the local people that was left behind. The Army and the Navy had gone. It was only ... it was not a big defence area it was only a handful of people there and they had gone. Maybe the RAAF was there, I don't know I can't remember that. But, the Japanese could have taken Darwin after the first bombing. They did not know that. And then my brother told I think the Army came and officially told my mother that my father was killed at the first hit. The first hit on that boat that was Manunda, Matura one of the chaps the wharfies who survived saw my father running after the boat and it got a direct hit.

Goodness, how old?

They never found his body he was thirty two I think.

Is that all?

Mmm very young.

And did your mother receive any compensation or pensions from the government?

Later on about 1948/49 or 1950 when they sorted it all out.

So how did you survive, your family survive without that income from your father?

Yeah, well I am leading up to when I was under attack. (laughs) By enemy attack. In Katherine it happened.

Oh right.

We were there and-I don't know we were going to school that day and we used to walk home from school because my mother did not have any money by this time. So we had to come home and there was damper and corned beef, you know the normal salty corned beef with the cabbage and the potato. But I used to scrounge for bush vegetables also. I knew where to find them um pig weed they call it now but it is really nice to eat and raw paw paw I used to eat very nice. And then at lunch time one day I don't even know the day they bombed Katherine, we were having lunch and they had this drill going that if ever the Japanese come over at the school they would pull this -sound the siren. But the siren had not gone. My Uncle Norm was there and he could hear the droning of the planes. He said, he went and had a look and we were eating this corned beef and damper and he said 'That's Japanese planes' and we said 'No, no no' the others said 'No no no'. He said, 'come out and have a look'. They were flying in formation of nine. I can remember because I looked and saw little tiny, tiny planes. And I said 'Oh yeah, no siren'. No, siren because everybody said, 'no they're not the Japanese' one said 'Japanese'. Prior to this we had to build a big ... ditches ... oh what do you call them ditches?

Air raid shelters?

Air raid shelters in the Katherine River. I don't know why it was all sand and you would have suffocated. But we dug them anyway. And we had to have dolly peg in our mouth because of the concussion I suppose or the - when the bomb fell so that you would not bite your tongue. This is all the expert telling us little kids. My Uncle Norm said, 'it's the Japs better go' and we had to run down which we weren't far from Katherine River. And the siren hadn't gone and we were down there and we had the dolly peg in our mouth and then all of a sudden it started. (Choking sound) It, like a whistling, whistling, whistling sound and down and the ground was going like that and we thought it was good fun. And there's my mother saying 'shut up, sit still you kids' and 'move back', 'put your hand over your head'. But we wanted to run out and have a look. It was such an exciting time for us. (laughs) You know it must have been frightening for her with my father just killed and she thought the same sort of thing was going to happen to us. And she had to be very protective of us kids. But what happened was that they just bombed the Devils Marbles, that's further out of Katherine. They thought it was an Army camp 'cause from the air it looks like it. One old Aboriginal man was killed, that was all. Then they went and flew around again and they dropped it again. Yes, lets run out and have a look, you know. My mother had a big stick by this time. Sit down you kids, get in your hole. And we thought it was good fun. It must have been terrifying. And then they left. And then

the siren sounded. (laughs) All clear. (laughs) So that was that. But looking back on it later, you know if we had have been older we would have been terrified. So that was that. Still we didn't - no one ever dreamed and I think they went further on to Pine Creek or Tenant Creek and bombed that. But that was as far as they got. So I don't know how long we were in Katherine after that but movement was started again we had to get rid of the evacuees that went to Katherine. So again, they put us back on this BIG train, looking at it now it is only a tiny little thing, and continued on to Larrimah which was the end of the railway line. And this was at night. And well, all I knew was that I was tired, and I was hungry. One good thing was that it was not my turn to cook. So, I don't

know my mother must be worried. There were army trucks there. There were army trucks there and we were allotted one truck. It was a gigantic thing, I mean, we had never been in a car before and this gigantic truck and we were all put on the back and it had canvas - I remember canvas with a flap they could tie up but they did not tie it up. And there was no Stuart Highway it was just a dirt road to Alice Springs.

How long did the journey take?

I don't know. It took years. (laughs) I was a kid, I don't know it must have taken a week or so. It must have. Because we went on this truck and during the day it was hot and stifling and I remember that crying and carrying on. And they gave us food, Army rations, you know the big caterers tin of pears, apricots, I don't like apricots, and the dog biscuits which you have down here somewhere, I remember them said, 'I remember that'. We had them down here and I remember them. The dog biscuit which you could not bite and the tin would not break and you couldn't jump on it you could not do anything, it just wouldn't break so that we could eat it. We were hungry. And I don't remember them giving us water.

Is that right?

No water because I was always thirsty. It's very hot in Darwin.

Were there troops

And then. Sorry

Were there troops travelling with you as well.

To ...

I don't know how many. there was a lot of trucks.

To look after ...

Yes there was someone in charge. There must have been because we stopped. That was our lunch. We used to stop in the bush. There were little camps. There were Australians with us so they must have bought troops up. But they had them all along the Stuart Highway to Alice. I didn't know this. I remembered later because we used to stop at night and the women, we had some young girls with us about 16 or 17. The Army guys loved this of course. They used to have. I remember having a shower ah a thing up there. And they told us to take a hurricane lamp in with us. Men hey. And it was just Hessian. SQ wide, and we had to have a shower and I never thought of the young girls you know because I was about, you know young then. And they used to give us something to eat and then up early in the morning we used to have breakfast. And it was all strange foods. I didn't have cornflakes, sunshine milk, I knew sunshine milk. Um, I don't know I think that's where we were introduced to bully beef - The hamper bully beef -everybody loves that. Um, corned beef yeah it was, and then it was on back on the truck again. Stifling hot with

this tinned food and no can openers. No, honestly, you could not open them. So we were hungry until we got to the next place for tea that night.

So was the tinned fruit was supposed to be your lunch?

Yeah.

For each day?

Tinned fruit and that dog biscuit.

Right.

With no can opener.

And your mother was not able to complain and ask for a can opener or something like that.

Oh well she would have been devastated at this time. My father was killed what was she to do with nine children. She had no skills she was taken away when she was ten and put on Bathurst Island. She was taken from Brocks Creek, laying in between Pine Creek and Tenant Creek somewhere and put on Bathurst Island and she was brought up there. And then she was married off when she got to the age of 16 and she did. There was a place purported to be a house girl, what ever it is, they were training them for they used to marry them off. So they married her off to my father. He used to hang around for another girl you see. So they married her off to him. But my mother's twin sister liked him you see. I don't know there was something going on there jealousies I don't know.

So anyway we did this all the way down. I don't know how long it took us honestly you would have to ask an older person who can remember. And then we got to Alice Springs and what an experience. Darwin was paradise, it was hot and that was freezing cold. We got there and I remember them giving, the Catholic nuns giving us soup with bread, with bread. We never had bread before, it used to be damper. And then we slept there, and then I don't know they must have got us up I thought I went, we just went to sleep and they woke us up. Then they put us on this train. That was terrifying, this was a bigger train it had most - you pulled the chain it went wee -it was, we were terrified we went 'Oh mum, mum, mum what's that what's that noise?' Honestly it was so noisy.

So you were only in Alice Springs for one night.

Yeah. They had to get us further away out of the N.T. Or it was the Department of Aboriginal Affairs - Native Affairs - Department of Native Affairs then - had to get move us out. We all became wards of the state when this happened you know.

And so heading south from Alice Springs where did

We went to South Australia.

Right. To Adelaide?

Yeah, we got to the railway station. What a shock, there was so many, many. Can I say it? White people. We had never seen, because the majority in Darwin at that time was all Aboriginal people. We could see masses and masses. We just withdrew and stood there. And then they gave us breakfast, and there was white table cloths and forks, knives and spoons. And we though, Uh uh and they put this strange thing in our bowl - you eat that. There was fruit on the table, we knew apple and oranges and grapes and pears but we did not know these other things because they were not tropical fruit you see. We knew mango, paw paw, guava, five corner and all that. But we did not know this fruit. And then fresh milk! It was delicious! And toast we had never had toast! (laughs) I used to make it on the fire with a fork you know, it was burnt and tasted like smoke and that, but this was delicious. They gave us that and then the Red Cross came because we were freezing we had no shoes just raggedy old clothes on and nothing else. And they came and gave us these warm clothes and that was the first time in my life I had socks and shoes. (laughs) I felt so rich.

How did that feel though, to put shoes on for the first time?

It was terrible. This heavy thing on my feet because we were bare footed. Oh, excuse me I am telling lies. To go to Church, midnight mass, which was religious, we had some form of sandal. But then we did not wear it again until the next time we went to Church. But, I felt so rich with all these clothes and so heavy. What's this thing you know. What this thing, and then we went on another train. Oh, that was frightening again going on a train.

So, you were in Adelaide by this time, when you got the shoes.

Yes they just left us at the station and gave us all our clothes. We did not go anywhere else.

So they feed you and everything at the station?

And the people that stared at us. We thought why are they staring at us. I did not think I was any different. Did not realise that the colour of my skin was dark. Because everybody in Darwin was dark. And there was the few odd people, white people there. There was the police, you know. But everybody just mixed and mingled you did not worry about the colour of your skin. Did not worry you. I mean I did not know I was Aboriginal. I knew I was a girl having a good time growing up until we got to Adelaide and people were coming over.

So it was as big a shock to them to see so many
Aboriginals.

It was a BIG shock to see so many Aboriginal people coming in on these trains. Where were these people coming from. Because the rest of Australia was kept very quiet about the bombing of Australia because, so they did not want to cause panic to the rest of Australia. It sort of filtered through. Oh yes you know Darwin was bombed but that was all. Mm.

They certainly did not know the casualties.

No. That's right.

So were people asking why are you here?

Well they did not ask me they probably asked my mother who would have gone.

Just looked down and not answered.

That's right. Or she would have tried to be as invisible as she could but making sure her children were still with her. Because, I used to get a clip over the earhole if I stepped further out, get back here. Whow, you know.

Side 2

It must have been a big job for your mother with
nine children because you would all have been
wanting to run off in all directions. Trying to
keep you all together.

No, no no. We were terrified, we would not have moved or budged and people said to us, they were very nice come to think of it, you know. ~Hello, how are you, are you cold?'. The Red Cross were lovely but we would not answer them. We just would not talk. And they used to give us things and we would go that's mine you know. We were getting all this stuff we never had before. We were rich. Well I was thinking that anyway getting the shoes.

So you spent the first night at the railway
station where you were given the clothes.

No day. We got in early in the morning.

Right.

I remember them during the day. Then we went to Balaclava which was where they were having race and that there. Um then we got off and I don't know how we got from the railway station to the racecourse. We did not walk I know that.

Possibly bus or truck or something?

It was freezing. Probably, because I was very tired by this time and I was scared, scared stiff, really frightened. This was a completely strange different country. And cold and homesick wanting to go back. You know go back home to familiar ground. I did not realise my father was dead. I did not realise at all.

But your mother knew at that stage that he had died.

Oh yes.

Had she told the children that their father had died?

No. Just my Uncles and Aunties said, 'Oh no your father is dead you know', 'oh yeah' well being a little child and not actually going to a funeral and seeing a body it was ... they never ever found his body. Mmm.

So back to Balaclava, that was set up, like a, as a transit camp was it?

Yes. Emergency. There was nothing there for us.

[Time out, time out. Can we have time out or do you want to carry on?

No, no that's fine.]

Before we took the break you had just arrived at Balaclava racecourse which was like a transit camp. How long did you spend there?

The next - we got there in 42 and we did not leave until 46.

Four years in the one location?

Yeah.

What did you do there?

Well when we arrived at Balaclava they weren't prepared for us we had to go to the stables. They gave us huge sacks I think wool bales or something, you know those huge Hessian bags and we had to stuff it with straw. That was our mattresses. We had no sheets and no blankets. They weren't prepared for the refugees they called us. The black refugees from the Northern Territory. Reffos (laughs) yeah. We had to stuff our thing. They separated the women. The men were in the stables and the women were in the grandstand. And in the tote in the tote hall you call it where you bet what's it called?

In the ring

Were the married couples. And the young boys and the older men, well they were in the stables. But this was when we arrived in the evening and it was bitterly cold. And nothing prepared for us and then we had Army eventually came or the Red Cross probably the next day

think because we were freezing there. Probably the women probably complained that the kids were cold and that and we were. We got very thin, thin army blankets too. Then eventually they got us cyclone beds, you know the Army ones that sort of you know, that went like that, with very thin coconut fibre mattresses very thin, and blankets, no sheets, no sheets. Um nothing. Then they built like a community hall there later on, with a fireplace in it where we could have our games, eat, dining room and a kitchen. And that was where my mother volunteered to become the cook because there was no work, no anything. So she could feed us, you know, provide us with food.

So the authorities had not organised sort of catering or anything for you?

No not a thing.

Well what about toilets and showers and things like that? Were they ...

They were there somewhere. (laughs) They must have been, must have been in the grandstand. Yes they was in the grandstand, not in the tote, no they were there in the grandstand and eventually in the hall they had some toilets and in the stables I think there was a building there that the Superintendent Mr McCoy and his wife - she was a nurse. She was the nurse - and he was the Superintendent of the 'blacks from the Northern Territory' - a little fellow he was, with glasses. There was toilets and that there. And he was sort of like when you are put in a compound or when they took the kids you had a Missionary person. Well he was the Supervisor there and that was sort of like a medical they had a little room there because my mum got sick so they put sick people there. I know because I ended up there um yeah. So we settled down and we had to go to school. We went to St Josephs school which we had to walk. And this was where we took a short cuts. Right across the wheat fields, wheat paddock. And we then came across sheep. It, oh, we were terrified and they stank well we thought they stink you know because animals in Darwin don't stink

and this thing, this woolly thing going baa, baa at you. Oh man, we were frightened and we used to run, run, run right past them. And eventually we had to go through the little shopping centre there in Balaclava and they had these strange, strange fruit trees. With all these fruit on it we thought, you know, we won't touch them because you could get poisoned. Then we watched the birds eat them. So we thought if the birds can eat them we can eat them. Well all the grapes went, all the plums, the cherries they had. They got complaints about these black children stealing the fruit out of the park. And the farmer put up electric wired fence wire around the top of the wheat field. I mean because we just cut, you know it was shorter to go that way than to go right around that way. So, and then we discovered magpies. And that was when we made shanghi's - we'll get back at these birds. We killed quite a few (laughs). And then of course we tried eating them and they tasted good. We were out gathering and hunting in a strange country. We had a ball. But then going to school there we got these funny things in our heads. We never had anything in the Northern Territory.

Was that lice?

Yes nits. So what the Catholic nuns did was to put kerosene in our hair and wrap a towel around it. I was lucky they would not settle in my head. Really, they wouldn't. Growing up there, there are pictures which I haven't got. There's lots of pictures around. There's one in a book its there at the resource library at unit I meant to bring it in but I did not have time yesterday.

What did the adults do in the camp?

Well they had nothing to do. Further on outside of Balaclava there was a Prisoner of War Camp. And the girls got mixed up with them.

So the Italians used to get out of the camp did they?

Yes they were allowed out during the day they worked for the farmers. I don't know how many German prisoners there were but there's a few half Italian children around now. (laughs) But whilst we were there, this is a funny thing word got around that there were all these black refugees from the Northern Territory and then some bright spark a tourist company you know a what do you call them when you guide them and they organise tours.

Travel office or tourist people yes.

They put us on the agenda. They used to come out in busloads to look at these black refugees - and they were allowed inside and to roam around to see how we lived, slept, ate, went to the toilet and everything they wanted to know everything about us. And they wanted to know everything about us. And that was the first time I had to learn to iron. With the coal iron, put the coal in with the tongs you know and test it and have a wet rag there. I remember standing up on a box ironing these thick woollen things of by brothers - I mean in those days the men were the head of the house. So, my brother was

the head of the house. We had to iron his clothes and a lady gave me a coin about that big I don't know about the size of a fifty cents. She said, 'that's a good little girl', you know. They used to come around and ask the most personal questions. Honestly, they were quite rude. This went on for months with bus-loads of tourists coming three or four a day to come and look at us .

Did they pay someone.

Oh the tourist guide; not the tourist guide, the tourist fellow they paid him. Yeah.

So

It was degrading.

Did the superintendent or someone ...

No he did not do a thing.

Right.

Until the women and the men got up and complained to him, vigorously and then it stopped. And I still continued on there and then it was time when peace was declared '46 wasn't it?

'45.

45, 46 there was this problem with these refugees in South Australia who wanted to go back to the Territory. Nobody, the government then did not want to take us back. So . . .

This was the Federal Government?

Yeah. Liberal Party, Menzies, I think, it must have been.

That would be right, he was elected in '46, I think was he? '47.

Yeah, Menzies '49. I got married in '49. Yeah, who ever it was had this problem of sending the refugees back. I think we flew in a plane. I'm not sure I don't remember that part.

It would have been hundreds of you.

There was quite a few, quite a few. We did not go back by train. I think they flew us to Alice Springs. I remember staying there, sleeping in the old Army camp thing. They had these things that you pushed the flaps out and there was all sand below that in the Todd River they put us. God help us if there was a flash flood. (laughs) All going down. But

they put us there for the night and then we went back by truck and this time it was different it was the Stuart Highway it was bitumen. The Americans had ...

Sealed the road.

tarred and sealed it. It was lovely going back and then when we got back to Darwin they put us in Bagot, Bagot Reserve because we were still under the Act you know of the Native Affairs. And then they said that you could go out and find your own homes now. So, being born in Police Paddock my mother knew that area - we went back there. But it wasn't Police Paddock, it was called - it was still Police Paddock but it got another name because of all the Army huts that was there and rusting iron it was on the top on that masonite type of thing in the ceiling. It was called Rusty Gully. (laughs) The nicknames we come up with! It was called Rusty Gully and that's where we stayed awhile with dirt floor again but that was familiar, wet it down you know but this time I had a straw broom and we had a wood stove - we were gradually acquiring things. But in the meantime I think - by this time there my brother was old enough to see right to the government or through some chapels to get a widows pension for my mother. Because while she was in Balaclava she did all the cooking and everything which was good. That's how she feed us and then they had ration books too in those days so you could get a little coupon for tobacco for tea, butter and clothing you know. So we were but still the Red Cross were still giving us clothing. They were very good.

During - if you go back to Balaclava during the four years did the conditions improve as more amenities were built?

No.

They didn't sort of

No eventually got those thin coconut fibre mattress and the blankets and it was up to you to get your own sheets and that.

But, how could you get them if you didn't have any money?

The rations.

That's only the rations.

Yeah. So we just stayed with the thin blankets. We gradually got a couple of more flannel blankets, the red, grey and white stripes on the ends.

So the adults didn't go and work on farms or anything ...

Oh well ...

like that?

well they did. The older ones did. My brother went and worked, Port Lincoln, or somewhere. He went off and

worked to get money to help mum because she did not have any. He was about 16 or 17 then. He was the only one.

My sister and I were still at school. I had my schooling there and we came back to Darwin, well I was too old then. you see. Um that was 46 we came back. and then I took on working in the hospital cleaning floors and that you know to get money. My first job was at the, with the Catholic nuns because my mother was a strict Catholic. They wanted a girl to dust and clean their rooms and that. But she did not realise, and I did not realise we had to do it for the love of God, there was no pay.

So how long did you do that for?

Not very long. (laughs) My mother said out of there, out of there! So I ended up working in the hospital just around Millie camp there just the hospital there. As a wards maid cleaning the - that's how I helped mother a bit.

And how much would you have earned each week?

I can't remember. It was a pittance I suppose. Well it was you know, you had unions then so I would have got the basic wage. I don't know it was a large sum of money for ME. I gave half to my mother. But in the meantime we were all growing up you see and she had about three or four at home.

And what did you do with your money that you kept?

I brought clothes. Shoes is my thing now, I love shoes. (laughs) 'Cause I never had any. (laughs) Yeah, I love shoes so there. I did. Then I eventually got married and met my husband who was not discharged, honourable discharged from the Army because of things in his joints, they didn't know what it was. We knew.

You met your husband, what in '40 ... In Darwin?

'49 yes. He had returned.

from Japan ...

just returned from Japan.

As part of BCOF?

They sent him home to die. Because they said he had bad arthritis.

But in fact he lived for a lot longer though.

He did because there was this old chap who works for Burns Philp who had a cure for arthritis. Yeah. It was a concoction he got out of a Greek poem. It smelt like eucalyptus, Dettol and something else in it in a little bottle and he gave it to him put three drops in a day and within a month it had all just gone.

What he would rub it on his joints.

No he would take it.

Oh right.

Orally, in water and it had gone. It went away completely away. Right up to the day he died of cancer of the lungs.

And what year was that?

Four years ago.

Right.

1990

So your husband joined the Army early. He put his age up.

Yes he put his age up in NSW. He was living in Surry Hills I think.

Right.

Mm he put his age up because I mean there was no work or anything so - he, yeah, so I think it was peace time he went over to clean up. Mm.

So he joined the Army just prior to the end of the war or afterwards.

After.

Right.

I would say after because he wasn't in Japan long. They based everything there so then they shipped them back.

So he was 16 but he said he was 17.

(laughs) put his age up.

I think a number did that. He wasn't the only one.

Oh quite a few (laughs). Quite a few. There was nothing no work you see they stopped making things for war time.

And where did he come from?

Broome, W.A.

Oh right.

He was born in Broome. At the age of one they came to Darwin.

Right, and then during the war his family were evacuated down to Sydney? Is that ...

Yeah. They went by boat.

Right.

Mm they went by boat and I was overland.

Right and um you had other members of your family I Uncles that were in the Army is that right?

Yeah, I had one, Uncle Duffen. Uncle Duffen, by then Uncle Laurace and Uncle Philip died. I'm trying to think. Yeah, just one because they were older then you see. They would have been in there 40s or 50s.

He was your father's brother.

Yes.

Right and when did he join up.

That I don't know. But I knew he was in the Army because learned the dental trade to make false teeth.

Yes.

Mm he was trained in that.

And he served his whole time in Darwin? Or in that area?

Oh, I don't know I could not say because by then I was married having children.

There were Aboriginal units serving around Darwin.

There was one the Tiwi Islanders. My husband was the sergeant there in charge of them. At Larrakeyah barracks.

So your husband must have been promoted quite quickly from the time he joined up.

Yeah, yeah. Yes he was. I mean he was the secretary to the Colonel so any promotion going he was it, he signed it himself. (laughs) Very clever.

So that was the only Aboriginal unit that served

Oh there were Aboriginal men in that but I'm not aware Of. But I remember that lot because he was in charge of them and they allocated me an old man to do my work, housework.

You were ...

yes in Close Street Darwin Army barracks. And I did not like that. I did all the work and make him sit down. I mean it was disrespectful for the old man to pull the grass and washing your clothes and ironing them. Well to me he was old, he had grey hair, he probably wasn't that old but my mother was bought up on Bathurst Island and he knew my mother he was related in the kinship way so it was very disrespectful to have him as my servant. So I moved out of there and moved back. It was called 118 camp. All Army huts, no rusty iron this time. They were really good corrugated iron, 118 camp, Parap. We moved in, it was a kitchen a long hut with a kitchen with a push out window which you bolted and that much space under the floor and that much from the top. Just you know no covering inside the ceiling. And when it used to rain it used to come right through. Snakes used to crawl through, centipedes, scorpions used to crawl through on the floor.

So this was when your husband was still in the Army. This was an Army camp?

Yeah, yeah. Well no all the people were coming back to Darwin they located this area for them to move in because there was no houses. Nothing was built in Darwin at that time.

You moved into an old Army camp.

Yeah. 118 Camp it was called.

Right I see.

And we still have reunions to this day, you know the 118 camp.

So, you had 11 children.

Yes.

And so during this period you were producing children. What every year virtually?

Every two years thanks, Bill. (laughs) I did not have them one by one like a rabbit. (laughs) Or two or three years. (laughs) Yeah, the eldest one is Susan she is the ALO here at the Nungawal Centre. University of Canberra. No hang on, leading up to this, when I left school because my father had got killed and I had to go to work I had always wanted this education more. I wanted to learn more but getting married and having all these children I had to wait you see. So then I waited until they grew up and then my husband said well now is your chance. This was before he died - to get this further education, Susan is down here at the University of Canberra, you can go down - because he was involved in setting up the Cultural Heritage Management Unit for Aboriginal people who wanted to learn about their culture because he was then the manager of a branch of DEET out a Palmerston in Darwin. So he came back with Dr Amagulla and other professors and they sat down and set up this unit you see. And then he said, 'as Susan is there', she got the job with the ALO and he said, 'you can go down and see her and study and I will come down every year'. Oh not every year but take his holidays and come down you see so you can get this education you always wanted to. So I said OK. But then he got cancer and died. And then it just sort of carried on and then about a month after, two months after he died I was down here in Canberra studying with my daughter, that's the eldest one. Then there is Gary, he was at ANU at that time studying anthropology. He passed and then he went off, Gary. Then there was Richard, he died as a baby he had genital heart disease. I think it could have been a result of my husband having been exposed to these things you see this is what they put it down to. He had an enlarged heart -there was nothing they could do for him so he died when he was very young. But he was the only one that was affected.

I was wondering how you managed with so many children.

Oh very well. (laughs) No oh budgeting food type budgeting buying household things. Bought them up sort of strictly, on a roster system, typical army style which worked beautifully. Consulted with them on really big decisions in the family, they helped sort of make the decisions. And I don't know, I just bought them up.

And you settled in Darwin in the end?

Yes, when I finish, when I get my BA in Applied Science, Cultural Heritage Management, I go back to Darwin and be a consultant for the Aboriginal women. Only the women because they need help. It is the men who get all the help up there. And go back and help them and I will stay in the community.

So education you see is critical to a good life
do you think?

Well to me it is, personally it is, to others they have different feelings of what they want. Providing they are happy with it. But I have, I always want since I was a little girl, this extra education. I am close to retiring now - it makes no difference I am very happy to have got it.

Are there other stories that you have heard of
the Aboriginal experience during the second world
war, particularly the bombing of Darwin?

Yes, there is actually - there is a chap here who is here in Canberra and there are other women who actually went. They were at Croker Island and after Darwin was bombed they were told they had to leave the Island in case the Japanese bombed them. And with the Missionaries she organised these children they came by boat from Croker Island to Darwin and arriving in Darwin there was nothing had been organized for them to be evacuated. So the Missionary thought well we'll go on to Borroloola and there was no transport, no anything so they walked from Darwin harbour they walked all the way to Katherine stopping on the way living off bush tucker drinking water, creek water because it was wet season then. And they got to Katherine and then on the way between Katherine and Borroloola one of the young girls had died. I think she must have been 4 or 5 - she was the smallest one so they buried her on the way and they walked all the way to Borroloola. When they got to Borroloola they, I think they got help or something or other I don't know but you will have to get in touch with Bobby Randall he was actually, I think, in the walk to Borroloola, from Darwin to Borroloola. Mmm.

And where did they end up?

They ended up in um, eventually evacuated to - I think oh, they sent them to some place. I think it might be Sydney or Brisbane or South Australia. You will have to ask him about that.

That walk must have taken weeks.

It took months actually. It took three months probably. And if you actually go by car it is only 3 or 4 hours or maybe a bit more. But they walked and especially with children and the older children carrying the younger ones on there back or on their hips. They had no shoes and no provisions for them or anything it was a very, very long walk.

And the missionary walked with them as well.

Yes, yes she had to look after them. So I did not realise this was happening until this lady said 'let's do this display of photographs' which we did in the women's centre.

So there are actually a lot of untold stories.

Oh yes, my cousin actually went through the bombing of Darwin and the American's eventually shipped her out with her sister.

Right

That's it.