

Mabs Lavis: *My Army Career*

1927 - 1931: I did my training at Royal North Shore Hospital, Sydney. I then went to South Grafton for about 8 years.

1940: I enlisted at Victoria Barracks, Sydney, as I was still nursing at South Grafton at the time.

5 March 1941: I commenced at the 113 Australian General Hospital Concord, and completed my time there on 27 October 1941. I then had my final leave.

2 November 1941: Embarked on the Queen Elizabeth after Matron from Barracks, Matron Keary, arrived and we collected our Pay Books. A launch took us over to the ship. We went to cabins - 5 in our cabin. Mine was the lower berth. We stood on the main deck waiting for the Governor General to arrive. He wished us luck and said his wife sent her love. Matron wished us goodbye and shook hands with us. Waited until 7 pm for dinner. Went on deck and then to our cabins. When our luggage arrived we got into a terrible mess crawling over everything. Our steward is very obliging. We may call him Harry, and many questions were fired at him.

3 November 1941: Harry hasn't arrived yet, wakened by shouts from people in small craft, which continued until we passed the Heads about 7.30 am. The Queen Mary sighted when having Life Boat Drill, also the Canberra (escort vessel). Some Sisters on duty today - a few patients. Several Air Force boys on board. I knew one of them from Grafton. One early morning I was wakened by a noise - man overboard. The Elizabeth slowed down, and then the Canberra signalled that the stoker had been picked up alive. Next day, notified that after leaving Fremantle anyone overboard would be left behind. We found this very difficult to serve the meals. The cutlery delivered first, then the plates, then the food, all through a pokey little Day Room.

7 November 1941: We arrived at Fremantle, where several Western Australian Sisters came aboard. Busy this morning sewing "Australia" patches on for the Air Force boys. No shore leave. A concert that night. My friend and I were a bit late and missed the Opening Chorus and my friend sang. She had a lovely voice. However the Concert was repeated the next night and my friend sang very well. Spending quiet days when not on duty and the Pursers from the ship sometimes invite us to their little gatherings. We were rostered for duty on the ship in the Sick bay. The Emergency Gong would sometimes sound, so we rushed and got our life belts and went to our Emergency Stations and would wait for the All Clear signal.

14 November 1941: I got up at 6 am, dressed and went on deck to find we were steaming into Trincomali, a town and Naval Station on the East Coast of Ceylon. What a thrill to see land again. The Elizabeth was anchored outside the Harbour. The Queen Mary steamed in ahead of us. Large red-brick birds flying and

swooping around the ship. We heard of the sinking of the Ark Royal that night. We had a YWCA representative put into our cabin, so we were very overcrowded, but moved next morning. For the next few days had a sore throat and felt fairly miserable, but continued on duty.

22 November 1941: Busy repacking and getting the washing and ironing done in readiness for disembarking. For 2 days we have been drifting around the Red Sea or Arabian Gulf. The Queen Mary also left our convoy.

24 November 1941: Breakfast at 5.45 am, and found we were anchored at Port Tewfik, such desolate looking land, but illuminated by the early morning sun, it looked rather pretty and after all it was land. We were given a luncheon packet and supposed to disembark at 9.30 am, but we were about 2 hours late. We eventually got on to a dirty little steamer and went several miles to our destination at Taufiq. We were well loaded - respirator, with bottle and tin hat hanging over our shoulder, also a great coat tucked through it. Suitcase in one hand and in the other a few odds and ends parceled up in a blanket and then our lunch packet. When we got off the steamer we walked a short distance to where we were to have our lunch.

We were given a cup of tea in very large dirty looking enamel mugs. I had a sip, but it was sweet so did not drink it. One Arab carried my friend's case, and when she gave him English money he was very upset and threw it back. One Sister came to her rescue and had a few words to say to him. He probably didn't understand her. We eventually boarded our train and it was very interesting to see dwellings as we went along, and the children running after the train. We passed a German Prisoner Of War camp, and the Germans stood to attention and made the Nazi sign, while we shouted "The King". We arrived at Kantara and it was there we had our evening meal of egg, bacon and tomato, but could not eat the bread and butter. We left immediately by bus and taken to a train, as soon as we settled down we were put in the dark till morning.

25 November 1941: Some troops disembarked and then us. A bus picked us up and took us to the 1st AGH, where we had breakfast of what was called Goldfish and Grapefruit. We then saw the Doctor and given some cough mixture. We then went scrounging for boxes or boards, but did not have much success till we met a carpenter. Later, we went into the village of Gaza - it was interesting but dirty. We were visited by the Principal Matron, who told us there were few restrictions, but they were necessary in a strange land. Matron of the Middle East who gave us a chance of changing over to a different Unit, but my friend and I stayed with the 2/5 AGH. We continued to scrounge and picked up anything we saw that might be useful. Went to Tel Aviv - decent shops and Woolworths. Some of the young soldiers would come down to our Mess to go to the pictures. They just liked some female company to go with.

24 December 1941: Still raining. We had already moved to another tent as we had been flooded. Went to midnight service. A very cold and windy Christmas Day, we had a very nice dinner and sang carols. We had work rosters for duties in the Mess.

30 December 1941: I was on duty in a ward and a bed collapsed and fell on my right foot, and I landed in hospital with a fractured foot. Weather still very cold. Foot continued to be quite sore. 2/5 AGH moving. Left Gaza and arrived at a staging camp, 'The Aviary'. Next day left in a small boat to the Mauritania.

6 February 1942: We arrived at Bombay. There are rumours that we are going back to Australia. Had shore leave in Bombay, went to the Taj Mahal Hotel, and had quite a nice lunch there. While in Bombay we had to buy grey material to make mosquito leggings. Our next move to a ship, The City of Paris, in a convoy of 13 ships, excluding cruisers. We arrived at Colombo, then on to Fremantle, arriving there on 16 March 1941. As we approached we could smell the gum leaves.

23 March 1942: Arrived at Adelaide (my first visit) where we were billeted in private homes and reporting to barracks most days. My friend and I were at St.Peters.

27 April 1942: Our next stop was Sydney and then home for one weeks leave.

25 May 1942: Took the train to Armidale to a tent hospital there. Very cold, but the people of Armidale were very kind to us. Most of us had a little garden plot. I planted out 35 lettuce plants.

21 December 1942: Matron rang, to go off duty and catch the 3 am train to Brisbane for a trip on the Manunda. Took the Ambulance to the station. Lunch at Toowoomba and spent the night at the 112 AGH. Went to Ascot the next day where we received shirt and trousers, boiler suit, leggings, water purifier, emergency rations and mosquito cream.

24 December 1942: Boarded the Manunda. The routine is to go each day for reading of Routine Orders and Action Station drill at 10.30 am. Not all work - a dance at night.

25 December 1942: A church service and Christmas dinner in the evening. It was then that our easy life stopped. Put on evening duty at 6 pm. Scrubbing after the evacuation of a number of patients during the day.

On duty till 9.30 pm, and went straight to bed. On night duty the next day. The hospital was on a hill and there was mud everywhere. I was glad to get back to my own unit, which had just arrived.

21 January 1943: Back with my old Unit, and more mosquitoes. We are invited to the Moresby Club sometimes, so it makes a nice change in the evenings. Was Home Sister for a few days, but did not enjoy that very much. We get invited to the Moresby Club when the boys come to Moresby after a term of duty.

31 January 1943: Had an injection of TAT and TAB today. Still going to the Moresby Club at times, when we are invited to make up a party, and one evening met a doctor with whom I worked at Grafton. To make our tent more comfortable we had some grass mats given to us to make tent life more comfortable.

12 April 1943: Red warning alert early this morning then the all clear about 10.30 am, then another Red warning. Lots of Jap planes about. Visible, two petrol dumps burning. A report from Guinea Gold Paper 13/04/1943, 'the raid was the biggest ever made on Moresby, and brought the total number of raids on the area to 106, but not a lot of damage done.'

May 1944: Back in Australia, and went to several places.

March 1945: Back on the Manunda bound for Morotai, and was there for 7 months - our tents right on the beach. Not a busy place, we were then taken over by the 9 AGH.

December 1945: At Herne Bay until February 1946.

9 March 1946: On the Manunda again to Japan, where we arrived on 24 March 1946. Rations very poor for some time, and the Japanese did not have much either. I enjoyed my stay in Japan, and saw a good part of Japan, and nursing was not difficult. I was in Tokyo and other parts which were quite pretty.

21 December 1946: We experienced an earthquake, we had been cautioned about a number of things, but not an earthquake. It was interesting to know what each person did. I got under my bed which had a thick wire mattress.

Note: Mabs Lavis celebrated her 100th birthday on 23 April 2009.