

2/5 A.G.H. It was a wonderful unit.

A presentation given by Nancy Macqueen Shepherd to Probus in Oct, 1995

I enlisted into the A.A.N.S. and the A.I.F. in 1942. I had to wait until I was 25 years of age. I was sent to the Showground – the Pavilions were used as an Army hospital. Then over the months I was sent to various camp hospitals in Sydney. We lived in a hostel just opposite the Showground called ‘Babbington’, it had a beautiful big house, taken over by the Army.

In 1943 about fifty sisters were sent to Brisbane to be equipped in tropical clothes- grey trousers, safari jackets, boots, gaiters, army hats, tin hats and gas masks. We boarded a troop train to Townsville, with no ideas of our destination. Then we boarded the troop ship ‘ The Canberra’ , we were told we were going as reinforcements to the 2/5 A.G.H. at Port Moresby. They were very busy and short staffed. We sat out in Townsville Harbour for three hot days. Our deck accommodation was small and partitioned off from the troops. Then one evening we silently slid out of the harbour. The next morning we were in a very long convoy of ships of all shapes and sizes. The Corvettes were seen on the horizon escorting us. That morning we had boat drill and to learn our action stations. That evening about 9 pm we were playing cards and amusing ourselves when the alarm sounded. We collected all the gear we had to carry at all times – tin hats, haversacks etc. When we arrived on deck, it was a wonderful moonlight night – the ships were zig-zagging, depth charges being dropped. The Corvettes were buzzing about – we just stood on the deck waiting. All very scary! It lasted about an hour. We were then told to go to bed, but not to undress. We had another alarm that night – the next morning we arrived on deck, the long convoy had disappeared, only three ships were with us. The R.A.A.F. flew over and kept an eye on us and the Corvettes were on the horizon. At last we arrived at Port Moresby, met by a convoy of Jeeps and they drove us to 2/5 A.G.H. Hospital. It was a dark night and raining – the Sisters gave us a wonderful welcome and showed us to our tents by Hurricane lamps. We scrambled up a slippery hill. We settled into a low pitched American tent for four people, dirt floors. We took a survey, unpacked our camp stretchers, we were so tired we went to bed. Next day, our Matron had the sides lifted and stretched and the tent was cooler and lighter. We had to find boxes to put our clothes in. When I came off duty my tent mates had found a tea chest and covered it with some cloth – so I had a nice dressing table. After a while we made the tent comfortable., marvellous how one can improvise. We had plenty of water, good showers. The Army cooks did very well for us on Army rations. We worked very hard over the ten months. I nursed Scrub Typhus, Malaria, Dengue Fever and all medical cases. After that we had to leave. Afterwards I was sent to 2/6 A.G.H. on the Queensland Tablelands then down to Greenslopes in Melbourne, and three months at 103 Hospital at Baulkham Hills. A great deal of travelling on troop trains. At last the 2/5 came together at the staging camp at Ingleburn preparing to go overseas.

In 1944 our Unit embarked on the Hospital ship ‘Marunda’. We slept in the hospital wards and were very well cared for. One afternoon we were taking on water at Biak, when the ship steamed out in a great hurry. We heard later that Biak had a very severe air raid. The next afternoon we had an air raid alert. We had to go to our ward and the big doors were locked on us . We just sat waiting . But all was well. At last we arrived in Morotai, a large coral island on the Equator, very hot. Morotai is part of the Halmahera group. We had eleven miles perimeter and the Japs were further on. The men were ordered to shoot us if they came over. The Officers all carried revolvers.

When we disembarked, we had to climb down the side of the ship by rope ladder into a waiting barge – rather difficult. We arrived safely at the hospital site – it was rather hard living at first - no amenities – but it took about a month to settle in. We commenced working straight away.

We had Australian tents on coral sand – no trees – the tents were not pitched properly – very hot- but that was soon fixed. The water from the shower was black at first. When it rained we soaped ourselves and stood in the rain. Once I was soaped and the rain stopped.

We scrounged things for ourselves. The tent sides were lifted and so we were a little cooler. One soldier made me a Masonite cupboard – the men were very good to us. The food were army rations. The Army cooks did a good job.

We were sometimes short of medical supplies and food rations due to the strikes in Australia.

Our hospital was next to the beach – all coral – we went swimming – I was one of the fortunate ones as I could swim reasonably well and I dived over and down the reef and saw those beautiful coloured fish we see on TV.

We were a happy crew and pulled together. We had a good Matron. We also have to thank the A.A.M.W.A.S.; they worked hard doing a lot of menial work in the hot climate – no air conditioning or electric fans (we were all younger). I was there until the end of the War. I was picked to go to Manilla to receive the P.O.W.'s from Japan and the other islands. When I returned to Sydney – I had leave and then was sent to a camp hospital at Punchbowl. I was discharged in 1947 – when I was married.

I was very honoured to be able to serve with 2/5 A.G.H., it was a wonderful Unit.