A NURSE'S MEMOIR OF RAAF MEDICAL EVACUATION AIRLIFTS IN WW2

By Mrs. Joan PATTERSON.

- Formerly Sister Joan LOUTIT, 2nd M.A.E.T.U. (*Medical Air Evacuation Unit*) R.A.A.F.

Joan writes: **This talk came about originally one August the 15th. Friends were talking about *V. J. Day* and what we were doing when the Japanese surrendered in World War II. Some were at school, some went to a ball - I said I was in the Pacific Islands, nursing and flying battle-casualties back to Australia! Someone said that would make an interesting talk...**

I'm Australian born. I did my nursing training at the *Alfred Hospital* in Melbourne from early 1940 to 1943. I can remember saying to my mother in 1942, half way through my training, *"I hope the war lasts long enough for me to join the RAAF Nursing Service."* - It was at that time that the Japanese bombed Darwin. On the first raid 98 bombers came over, they killed 243, wounded 400 and sank seven ships and severely damaged 14. This was the first of 64 raids over Darwin and district over the next two years. There were 250,000 servicemen ready to retaliate. All children and civilians were evacuated and Darwin was a garrison town for the next four years. My father was in Darwin all that time. He was an

Engineer, the C.O. of DOM Force, with 10,000 troops who built the road from Alice Springs to Darwin at the rate of three miles per day.
I well remember the day in early 1943 when my friend and I went for an interview with Miss Lang, *Matron in Chief* of RAAFNS. We had just finished our training and were very keen to join up. (After graduating in Australia you had two weeks to find a job, or *"The Manpower"* [Directorate] would find one for you. It probably would have been in a country hospital which would be under-staffed and under-equipped.) So, after looking at our references and letters of introduction, Miss Lang asked how old we were and what experience we had had. We replied that we were 21 years old and had graduated the day before. *"Oh!"* she said, *"With such a great age and vast experience I will need you straight away - BUT do some useful work while you are waiting."*
I went to the *Freemasons' Private Hospital*, my friend went to an Anglican one. (She wasn't allowed in the *Freemasons*' as her father was not a Mason. He was a Theological Professor. We never did work out what our fathers had to do with our nursing capabilities.) The *Freemasons'* was a very nice place, almost new, overlooking parklands and 15 minutes walk to Melbourne City. It was three stories high and the nurses' home was in the same building, no draughty corridors to walk along.

***Freemasons' Private* today.**

We had very smart uniforms. Crisp, white, double-breasted, row of buttons, a pale blue cape, a veil and an Alfred Medal. I think it is a pity they have done away with the authoritative veils. In Australia every training hospital had their own medals, so you knew where a person trained. This uniform was a far cry from navy blue and white checks and a wrap-around white apron and black stockings and shoes, plus a cape with 15 'Elizabeth Frills' at the back, worn for 3 years.
The Porter at the *Freemasons'* had a smart uniform too. Pale blue with silver buttons. He used to meet all the new patients and carry their suitcases.
On my first day there I set sail, feeling like an administering angel with my veil - BUT my first patient said, *"You haven't warmed the towels Sister!"* I said I was sorry and proceeded to make her comfortable. She said she would like the blue bed jacket, and after we got that sorted out she changed her mind and had the pink one. Then she said, *"Would you mind putting this purple orchid in the fridge and bring back the yellow one. I have two American friends you know!!"* There were thousands of American soldiers in Melbourne at the time. Some of these patients and visitors were Jews. I have never seen so many beautiful rings. I think that after they escaped from Germany and Europe, they brought a lot of their wealth out on their fingers.
These patients were quite different from the nice 50-to-60-year-old ladies in the Public Hospital who would say, *"You know nurse, this is the first time I have had breakfast in*

bed." They were so appreciative and grateful for everything you did for them and after a week or so they would say, *"I'm tired of doing nothing, have you got any darning I could do?"* Patients stayed in hospital much longer in those days.
After several weeks I decided I wasn't very happy with this type of private nursing. So I went to the Matron (Miss McRae) and asked if there was a vacancy in the operating theatre. *"Yes,"* she said, *"Can you use an electric sewing machine?"*
I was a bit surprised, but said yes. She said, *"That is good, because the sewing lady has been called up and the theatre staff are now doing all the hospital mending."* Then the Porter got called up, blue uniform, silver buttons and all, and we did all his work. The nursing staff also managed the switchboard. One of those old-fashioned plug-in types. All the 40 private rooms had their own phones and we had to connect them through the switchboard. (I think we disconnected a few sometimes.) But after a while it was quite fascinating. Nurses can do anything!
We were also privileged at this hospital to work with some of Melbourne's leading Surgeons. One, Sir Alan Newton, 6ft 3in., very distinguished and complete with a monocle. He was also called *"The Thyroid King"*. When doing a round with him we would take the dressing off [the patient's throat] and he would say *"Oh, I've done such a wonderful job. Your father won't need to buy you a string of pearls."* We were terrified of him.
He also operated at the *Mercy Hospital*, a Catholic one on the opposite corner to us. They tell the story of a patient over there and Mother Superior. Sir Alan and she were doing a round and patient said, *"Good aye Doc. I had a beaut night last night Doc."*
Afterwards Sir Alan said to Mother Superior, *"Please would you tell that fellow I do not like being called 'Doc'."*
She said to the patient later, *"That's Sir Alan Newton, not Doc,"* etc.
Next morning, the patient said, *"Good morning Sir Alan Newton. I'm much better now Sir Alan Newton. I think I could go home soon Sir Alan Newton."*
Sir Alan said, *"That fellow is absolutely impossible."* Mother Superior said, *"Yes, I do my best, but he calls me Mum!"*
I had nine months at the *Freemasons' Hospital*. When I was eventually called up we had a medical examination and typhoid, tetanus, TB and smallpox injections and we did a two-week course with 14 Sisters and 14 doctors at Ascot Vale in Melbourne. Lectures were given on RAAF administration and tropical medicine. All were given by Senior Medical Officers. We were given uniforms and we visited rehabilitation centres and an artificial limbs factory.
It was most interesting meeting Sisters from all the other States in Australia and discussing different methods, broadening our horizons and realising that the actual procedures we were taught at the Alfred Hospital were not necessarily the only way to do things. We also had drill from a retired Welsh Guards Sergeant. He was very strict. I'm sure we nearly drove him mad. Most of us grasped the art of marching, but one Sister was hopeless and very funny, we thought. She could not get the hang of the *"Right/Left"* business. She would have left arm/left leg and reverse on the other side. The Drill Sergeant would shout at her. Why do all Sergeants shout?!!
Eventually, in full uniform, we were supposedly having a practice for the pass-out parade when one girl's hat blew off and she broke ranks and chased it. The sergeant was screaming at her and she was crying out, *"But it's new, it's new,"* and we were all laughing. We didn't have the pass-out parade after that.

ARUNDEL, VIC, 1944-05. WOMEN MEMBERS OF RAAF NO. 1 MEDICAL AIR EVACUATION UNIT LINED UP IN UNIFORM FOR THEIR PASSING-OUT PARADE.

Instead we sat in a hall while the Director of Medical Services spoke to us on Air Force etiquette etc. which appealed much more. I don't think nurses make very good marching teams. Miss Lang (Matron in Chief) also gave us a pep talk. She was a great one for discipline, high standards and strict rules. For example the RAAFNS were allowed *one*sherry at a party (two if pressed...). - We commented on the narrow skirt in our uniforms. Miss Lang said she would *make ladies out of us, even if she had to hobble us*. So we could never run for a tram or train - you had to walk - and get there on time!

When we finished our course we were posted to different stations and hospitals all over Australia. I was posted to Sydney, to a large military hospital with 1,000 beds (500 Army, 300 Air Force and 200 Navy). I was in three wards. One *Skin Ward,* full of patients with tropical ulcers, malaria, scrub typhus and other tropical diseases. A *Psychiatric Ward,* which was called "Battle Fatigue". Very sad - all young lads who couldn't cope with service life. An *Officers' Ward* with several aircraft accident cases, badly burned and crippled.

I was also in the operating theatre. I met up again with Miss McRae, the Matron from the *Freemasons' Hospital*. She was Matron in Charge of the 300-bed Air Force section. She said, *"Back in the theatre again Sister? You're not juggling the orchids now!"*

I said*, "I didn't know you knew about the orchids..."*

And she said, *"Oh yes - the cook was always complaining about the orchids in her fridge!"*

In the operating theatre we had a medical orderly who [in civilian life] had worked as a Theatrical Scout. He said one of the first things he noticed was how important the Theatre Sister was, because it seemed to him that every now and then the Surgeon would stop what

he was doing, turn to the Sister and say *"Suit you?"* For some time he thought she was being asked to give her blessing on the standard of the Surgeon's work. It took him a while to realise that what he was really saying was *'suture'.*

I had several months in Sydney. Then the RAAFNS called for volunteers to form an Air Evacuation Unit after the Japanese had sunk two hospital ships. 100 Sisters volunteered and 25 were accepted. The RAAF Board then formed MAETU (Medical Air Evacuation Transport Unit). In the Pacific the fighting in the islands and New Guinea was very heavy, with casualties going to Port Moresby every day. So 25 Sisters and 25 medical orderlies were posted to a Medical Training Centre in Melbourne. There we had three weeks' intensive training. Training included physical training, lectures on jungle and ocean survival, aviation and tropical medicine. There were pressure chamber tests too, to check the ability to maintain stable when required to fly at high altitudes during evacuation of patients. Then there was an examination at the end of the course.

One question - **What do you do if your plane ditches in the sea?**

The answer - **The dingy is lowered and Sister steps out to organise where the patients are to sit etc.**

One of the Orderlies wrote: *"The dingy is thrown out, closely followed by the Sister."*

A variety of aircraft were used for evacuations - Liberators and Catalinas (mainly for walking wounded) but the most reliable were the wonderful C-47s. The aircraft were fitted with metal brackets, holding 12 stretchers on each side in stacks, plus one or two walking wounded, one Sister, one Orderly and three aircrew. Sisters were responsible for the loading the aircraft from the ambulances, organizing each patient according to his condition. Serious cases on the lower levels; fractures on the second layer (to tie limbs up to upper bunks); those not-so-serious were on the upper bunks. Battle fatigue boys on the lower stretchers as well - they were all fairly heavily sedated.

Placing was a matter of common sense and knowledge of patient's condition, altitude and length of flights. We saw them the night before at the casualty clearing station. Then add the cargo and mail.

For those of us who were stationed in Morotai, which is 1,000 miles north of Darwin and 1,000 miles east of Singapore. A typical working day for an Air Evacuation Sister began at 3am; breakfast at 3.30am; as flights over New Guinea had to be before the heat of the day. Conditions over New Guinea were quite difficult because of the terrain and the quick build-up of clouds. We flew over the sea whenever possible.

It was 4 or 5 hours to Biak, on the north coast of New Guinea or to Merauke on south coast of New Guinea. Overnight in Biak if the clouds came down early, or on to Merauke. Then on to Townsville, Australia where *No.3 Air Evac*. continued on to other capital cities.

We had a medical box with drugs and dressings and an oxygen cylinder; a 2 gallon thermos of tea. The first aid box doubled as a table for sandwich-making.

Some of the girls of *No.1 Air Evac.* were based in New Guinea. All of us bringing out battle casualties. The boys were all tired, ill and weary.

Most of the trips were uneventful. On one trip that I did from Morotai to Ambon and on to Darwin, I had a very ill lad on board. I asked another Sister on Ambon if she had any spare oxygen. Yes - she only had walking wounded and was not using her oxygen so we swapped cylinders. I had little left in mine.

A Nursing Sister administering oxygen to a casualty in flight. [AWM OG3344]

I asked the radio operator to radio on to Darwin to meet us with oxygen etc. When I got to Darwin the ambulance driver hadn't received the message, so I sent my orderly to the hospital with my cylinder and the patient and asked him to bring back my cylinder. Then I went to the office at the airport and said, *"Didn't you get my message?"*
They said, *"No"*.
Somebody said, *"Who's complaining out there?"*
"It's a Sister Loutit."
"Oh, we had a Brigadier Loutit here this morning. He was complaining too - no transport to meet him."
I said, *"That must be my father. Can I get in touch with him?"* They rang through and the message came back that he was at a meeting with General Herring and did not want to be disturbed. So I said, *"That's alright; I'm flying down to Melbourne tonight at 9.30 - will you please give him the message?"*
Then, at 9 o'clock, who should arrive but General Herring, my father and a very young Adjutant to see us off, which was very pleasant. My father said, *"Give my love to the old lady"* - meaning my mother.
I said, *"She's not as old as you!"*
The Adjutant said, *"You shouldn't be talking to him like that."*
I said, *"I'm the favourite daughter. I can do no wrong."*
And he said, *"You're lucky!'*
Air Evacuation continued on to Borneo as the Japanese were pushed back. On August 15 'The Bomb' was dropped and there was a sudden end to the war. For the Flying Sisters the priorities suddenly changed - the evacuation of POWs. 14,300 Australians were taken

prisoner, half were already dead. For the others every aircraft that was capable of carrying passengers was made available for evacuation. Liberators, Catalinas, Dakotas and even the Duke of Gloucester's own Avro York (he was the Governor General) was offered and accepted for POW evacuation.

SINGAPORE, 1945-09-25. FORMER POW AUSTRALIAN "LEGGIES" (AMPUTATED LEGS) ARRIVE AT KALANG CIVIL AIRPORT FROM BANGKOK, THAILAND.
IN THE DOORWAY OF THE AIRCRAFT CAN BE SEEN THE RAAF MEDICAL AIR EVACUATION TRANSPORT UNIT (MAETU) SISTER WHO ACCOMPANIED THE MEN ON THE FLIGHT.

Several Flying Sisters were based in Singapore and flew POWs to Borneo and then on to Morotai to the Army Base Hospital and later to Darwin (8 hours and 40 minutes). We flew non-stop for 28 days. 250,000 POWs, servicemen and civilians were evacuated. The Flying Sisters in Borneo flew 1,000 stretcher cases from west coast Borneo, Kuching, two hours to Labuan. Several short trips included one when they evacuated 20 English and Dutch nuns who were in a bad way. On my first trip I had 48 patients. I said we usually only carried 27. Some POWs were only 4 stone [weight=25kg.]. They were walking skeletons. It was also a great thrill when they **found** 27 Army Nurses who had been POWs for three and a half years.

Another trip was with 40 West Australian POWs. I flew them to Perth on my 23rd birthday. Darwin to Perth was 10 hours. I was making sandwiches with some asparagus, which the Red Cross used to give us. I opened the tin and poured the asparagus water down a small hole near the door. Somebody landed on my back and I thought he was going to push me out...

He said, *"Don't waste that!"* I don't know which was worse, the embarrassment or the fright. Even now when I open a tin of asparagus I can't tip it out - I drink it. It was wonderful seeing all the friends and relations of the 40 Western Australian POWs and the welcome they received. It was a great birthday.
On our return trips back to base we had "Number 1 Priority" and could board any plane going north. We flew with cargo, mail, veggies and the troops. There were no seats. We sat on our First Aid boxes. Troops sat on their kit bags. When you got back you put your name at the bottom of the list and flew out again as planes became available. We were still flying six months after the war was over.

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL P02741.002

Ternate Island, Halmahera Islands ['*Spice Islands*'] 1945. Members of the Medical Air Evacuation Transport Unit (MAETU) were invited to a luncheon hosted by the Sultan of Ternate.
Some of the visiting group consisted of, *from left to right*: Des Piper, an RAAF pilot; Sister Joan Loutit, Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service (RAAFNS); Sister Colleen Ryan, RAAFNS, and the Sultan of Ternate.
The MAETU group flew to Ternate in a Catalina aircraft and were met by the Dutch Administrator's wife, Mrs Van de Hoot. The MAETU members were specially trained in Melbourne in preparation for repatriating Prisoners of War and wounded personnel from the islands on the cessation of the war. [AWM P02741.002]

I remember, after returning to Morotai, it was Christmas Eve 1945 and the war was well and truly over. Three or four RAAF Sisters had been invited to a party at a nearby naval station. On arrival we discovered there were several officers whom we knew. They told us their ship carried POWs but they were unfortunately delayed and would not make it home for Christmas. The Captain said, *"I am sailing a very sad ship."* - I was sad too and looked out into the bay. The ship was in darkness. My friend Audrey Gilbert and I asked permission from the CO to go with a Scotch Lieutenant out in the crash boat to the ship. As we approached the Lieutenant hailed the ship, *"I have a couple of Flying Sisters here to wish you a Happy Christmas."*

Gradually a few lights came on and a few people appeared on the deck. We began to sing Christmas carols and hymns. The Scot had a beautiful voice. It was a clear, moonlit tropical night and the sound carried easily over the calm water. Gradually lights came on all over the ship and the decks were full of people. Soon, hesitantly, they started to join in, and after a short time the ship and we were all singing beautiful carols. It was a Christmas I shall never forget.

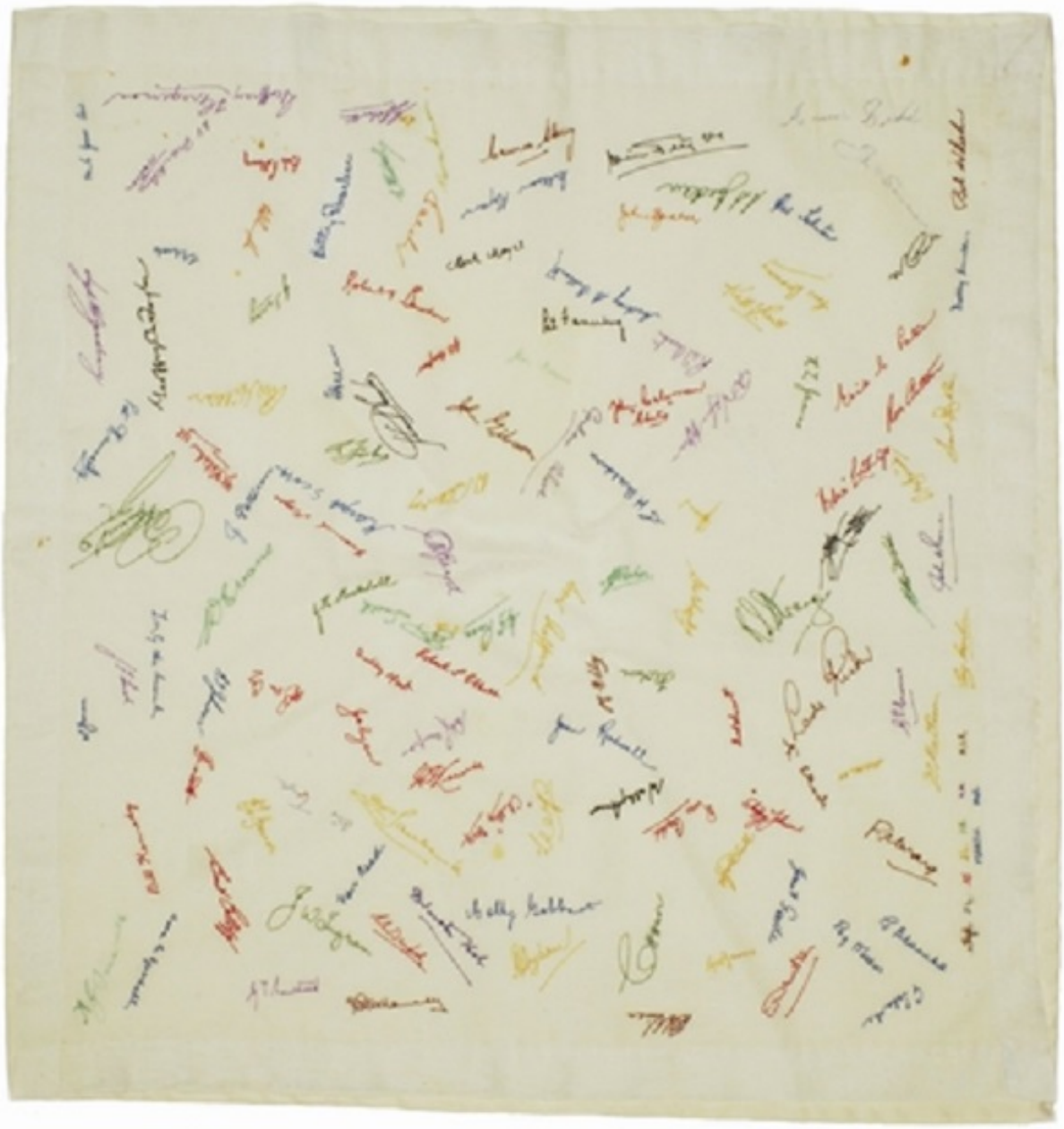
The only casualties that MAETU Sisters suffered happened after the war, in 1946. Two Sisters crashed between Morotai and New Guinea: Chick Sheah and Marie Craig. Marie had a premonition that we were not all going to get home. (*"Of course we will,"* I said.) Three weeks later she was gone, and she and the plane were found 23 years later by two American Missionaries on a mountain in New Guinea. There are two paintings of these girls in the Canberra War Museum.

The Army Sisters had a much harder time than us. They lost 56 nurses; they died in POW camps; they were shot at on boats; drowned; and 22 were massacred on a beach. Eleven died on a hospital ship off the coast of Australia. When we were brought back to the mainland, Miss Lang said our career had been one of *adventure, daring, endeavour and hard work, but no glamour*.

- No glamour at all! - Setting off in early a.m. on dangerous flights in awful weather!

It was nice of her to say so, but I think we all coped most of the time. We were all proud to be members of the RAAF Nursing Service, *Flying Sisters* Unit.

I have two nice souvenirs. One is a watch; our leather bands knotted and the pilots made us stainless steel ones (from crashed planes). I did have a Sister's Veil; I got the pilots and doctors to sign the Veil and them I embroidered the signatures in colours: all the RAAF squadrons in different colours (34, 35, 36 and 38); AIF in brown and Sisters in blue. In 1999 in Canberra there will be the dedication of the *National Memorial for Nurses* and they have accepted my veil. I shall be there for the opening of the $2 Million building. (There are plenty of Memorials for men - 100 years since the Boer War.)



Nurse's white cotton veil embroidered with many coloured signatures of Medical Air Evacuation Transport Unit (MAETU) nurses, pilots and AIF personnel.
The key seems to indicate that nurse's signatures are in blue, and pilot's are in black, red, yellow and green. AIF personnel signatures are brown.
Associated with 500548 Sister Joan Medway Loutit, *Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service* (RAAFNS). Daughter of Brigadier N. M. Loutit, DSO and Bar, ED, the Commanding Officer of Darwin Overland Maintenance Force. [Australian War Memorial REL25741.]

Then, when we were demobilized, after years of having all accommodation, meals and clothes provided and *do-as-you-are-told,* it was quite a shock to be told, *"You can go now!"* I think it was harder on the men than the women.

I was lucky, for the Government of the day formed T.A.A [Trans Australia Airlines], a new civilian airline and they wanted air crew and hostesses. So some of us just changed uniforms! What a lovely job. Newly-painted planes, a seat for everyone, safety belts, only 10 passengers on any flight. Three hours between States, overnight [rest] and back next day. You gave out tea, biscuits, barley sugar and magazines and chatted. It was quite

fascinating watching a new airline being formed. There was also the private company ANA. (T.A.A and would give out sandwiches, tea and biscuits and ANA would put on *cakes*, sandwiches tea and biscuits; everything they did, we did one better!) I was 10 months as an air hostess. I'd hate to be one nowadays. Auckland to Sydney two and a half hours; turn around and back again; hundreds of passengers.

I came to NZ for a holiday. I met Kelvin Patterson. (Dare I say none of those Aussie boys were good enough for me? I found a good mate in NZ.) We have four children, three of who live in Australia. I have had 51 happy years in Wanganui, with lots of friends.

I had an old photo which I showed to my granddaughter who stared for a long while and then said, *"What happened to your face Nana !"...*

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL P00477.008

SYDNEY, NEW SOUTH WALES, 1946. FOUR RAAF NURSING SERVICE SISTERS. FROM LEFT: ALEX TAYLOR; COLLEEN RYAN; MOLLY GOBBARD; JOAN LOUTIT. [AWM P00477.008]

This text is sourced from a speech that Joan made to a gathering of nurses in the late 1990s.