Session 1 begins

[Pat Enright]:
This is an interview with Mrs Eileen Elcock MBE, conducted at The Hermitage, Robe, on the 10th of August 1986.

Mrs Elcock, would you give your full name, please?

[Eileen Elcock]:
Eileen Mary.

Eileen Mary. And the birth date?

1904.

Where?

October. Victoria – Melbourne, Victoria.

October?

The 11th.

And Melbourne. Now some of your earlier recollections of your childhood, your – your parents, do you remember their occupation?

My mother was a Tasmanian. I don’t know what she did before she was married, and my father was – he was – my grandparents were Irish, and he was the eldest son, Timothy Neenan(? 6.46.13), and he married my – my mother.

And what was his occupation?

He was – he worked in the railways, Victorian Railways, because at that time apparently they were booming, you know, and they - - -

Yes.

- - - they were young – he was a young man and they – I think for a time they lived at – around Warrnambool or out at – down that area, but they moved up to Williamstown because of the growth of the – the railways and my father was an engineer, I think, not on the trains but in the workshop.

Yes. And your early schooling, where did you start school?

I was – I was trained by the nuns.

Yes.

The St Joseph nuns at Williamstown Victoria.

At Williamstown. The – how long did you stay at the convent?
I didn’t stay, I wasn’t at the convent.

You were just educated at the convent.
   It was a daily one because our own home was quite close to the schools.
I see.
   The school and the church occupied a huge area and it was run by the - as I say – the St Joseph nuns.
And did you go on to any secondary education?
   No, no, no.
And I believe you went nursing?
   Yes.
When – when did you start nursing?
   I can’t remember the date, but I did training at the Austin Hospital and that was about four and a half years of training. We did – we did 12 months at the Austin Hospital and did 17 months at the women’s hospital, so many months at the infectious diseases in Fairfield and then back to Austin, and then I was granted – I became a sister in charge of various wards and finally was advised to do my midwifery and progress further. So then I retired from the Austin, I was given – you know, I had quite a nice honour there, and then I start – I joined up with the women’s hospital in Melbourne.

What was the honour granted you at Austin?
   I was recognised, you know, for the work I did (inaudible 6.48.38).
Yes. And where – where did you do your midwifery?
   At the women’s hospital in Victoria, loved every minute of it.
Any – any further nursing around Victoria?
   I didn’t do any district – I did some district nursing for a while, you know, but that was part and parcel of the midwifery.
Yes.
   Because you had to go out at all hours of the night to know - there was a special taxi would take you out, you’d have to answer whatever call came in, you see.

And there were – there were quite a few home births then, I take it?
   Yes. A lot of people couldn’t come into hospital, you know, they chose to stay home and – and because we were doing midwifery we were taken out and there was always the one who was most senior would be there to make sure. You could do the delivery, you see, the doctor didn’t – very seldom came. It was quite exciting, you know, you’d be called out about 12 o’clock at night time or something.

When – when the war broke out, you were nursing then.
   Yes. I was on the staff at Darwin Hospital.

You were at – – –
   In Darwin.
—there when war broke out?

Yes.

Yes. And I guess you were there when the bombing occurred.

That's right.

occurred. When did you meet your husband?

Well I— I accept —strangely enough I didn’t apply to go to the Northern Territory, but out of the blue I got this invitation to, you know, become a member of the Northern Territory Medical Service, and strangely enough I knew as soon as I read that that’s what I was going to do. Of course my family were very upset, but however I did join it and I was appointed to Tennant Creek first, which I found very exciting because it was a gold town, gold.

Yes.

And I found these—these men, they would keep digging, digging, digging, expecting to get bigger and bigger, you see, and then they’d get—come into hospital, vitamin deficient or something like that, and we would build them up.

Yes.

But I was very interested to hear, because when you have a few minutes or half an hour or something after you’d done a lot of work, you could go and you’d ask these gentlemen where they’d been, and there was incredible amount of interest you got out of those men, you see.

Yes.

And from there I went from Tennant Creek I was called up to Darwin and I did so many months in Darwin. You see I was on a contract I had to work at Darwin, Alice Springs, Tennant Creek and —

I see. That was—that was all contractual?

Yes.

Yes.

I mean — and then after Tennant Creek I went up to Darwin, then the bombing, you know, it started to get a bit dreary and despite the fact that, you know, it was very difficult to expect—to—to tell women that they had to leave Darwin and they would do all sorts of odd things, you know, women who were pregnant and—‘we’d say, “Look, you have to go”, “Oh, but you’re not going”, they’d say to us. However some—you know, women are funny, they would hide instead of being picked up and all that sort of thing. I said to one one day, “You know, you women have been given the opportunity to leave”, I said, “We haven’t”, they said, “Sister, you won't leave will you?” I said, “We haven’t had the opportunity like you have”. However we wouldn’t have left, of course, but we had to leave naturally because the bombs fell and that was just it. But you couldn’t—nobody thought it would ever happen, but when the first one came that really—that really started things. And then this old man who—who was the—he used to look after the stores and—there was nowhere to go, this is the point in Darwin, you see, nowhere to go. So he said to me, “Come on, girlie”, he said, this old bloke, “Come with me”, so we went down on to the seafront or down on the—and we watched—I watched these
Japs, you know, it would fly up and they drop it, and as they dropped the bomb the next one came down and I kept saying, “Look” and he’s, “Bloody hell, sorry, sister, I don’t mean – bloody hell”, he’d say every now and again, and I’d say, “Calm your (inaudible 6.53.12) Mr So-and-So. However he was a dear old bloke. And that’s how we watched it.

Yes.

That’s how it came down, they’d – as it levelled off the next one came and they really did the harbour. Strangely enough, not so long ago one of our – in fact she’s a funny woman, she’s an actress, and she came with her new husband and they were at home this afternoon and we were talking, and somehow he said to me, “I believe you were in the bombing of Darwin and you were in Darwin during the bombing?” and I said, “Yes”, he said, “And so was I”, and I said, “Where were you?” he said, “I was on the harbour”, and I said, “Well how are do you – how are you still alive?” he said, “I don't know”, you know they just (inaudible 6.53.55). It was a – it was a very exciting day - - -

**Because they were obviously fully trained pilots when they bombed that?**

Look it was – it was pretty to watch. This old man – this man in charge of the – the whatever – you know, the stores, he – he’d say – he’d be trying to roll his cigarettes, you know, and then he’d be, “Oh, Christ, look at them, and it’s – oh, sister, don’t hear me”, and I said, “Look, I can't hear a word you say”, and he’s trying to lick the cigarette, you know, he’s choking, and these things were coming down like that, and there was five – there was a stick of five holes, you know, around our – our – one of our wards, and there’s nothing you could you do about it, they sprayed big things, you know, so we were – we were just pushed out.

**And the hospital was – was actually hit, was it?**

Only – it didn’t get a direct hit, but it was more shattered, you know, from these five bombs that fell, you see.

**Yes, yes.**

But it was a funny move, from then on was – nobody was (inaudible 6.54.54) because we were Department of Health sisters and apparently you’ve got to be very important to get in with the RAAF or the medical – the other crowd, you see.

**Yes.**

So we – nobody liked us, and we sort of moved from pillar to post, pillar to post, but at least some of the Americans they – they were very good to us and they said to me, “You’re the only one that’s not upset”, there was no need to get upset because what could you do, and he said to me, “You’re the only”, because all the others were all upset about it, and, you know, there’s always – the – the people with you, although you work with them they’re damn bloody nuisances because they won't do what you tell them and they wanted all the attention and you always get that crowd, don’t you?

**Yes, that’s – that’s true.**

Anyhow we went from pillar to post, nobody wanted us because we hadn’t been through principle matron(? 6.55.44). We offered our services, nobody wanted us, so we just had to
work our way back whatever way we could to get back to Melbourne as far as I was concerned. Couldn’t get – take anything, when we got down to Katherine and we were told to get on the plane the man in charge said I can’t – “You can't take the suitcase on”, and I said, “Well that’s all I’ve got”, he said, “You can't take the suitcase”, so I just said, “Right”, and I opened it up and took about a dozen frocks out of my case and put it over my arm, and everything else I ever had up there was just gone.

**Just what you could carry in your hands?**

That’s all I had, I just put about half a dozen - - -

**Were – were you married then?**

No, no.

**No, that was – you were married afterwards?**

But that bomb put some sense into me. I got married soon after that.

**You need someone to look after you after that.**

But it was – it was – you know, I – I felt – we were – I thought we were prepared for it our crowd up there, we really were, we had all sorts of stuff, you know, packed up and all that type of thing. To me it never worried me, strangely enough, because I knew it was going to happen.

**Yes. You – you were prepared for it?**

I was mentally as well as every other way, you see.

Yes.

I think if you’re prepared mentally you can do anything.

**And then you shifted back to Melbourne after that?**

Well gradually, you know, you got down this – you know, you went down the step and stairs because nobody wanted us, you see, we were nobody’s babies, you know. Finally I – I got to Melbourne, my father said, “Finally, you’ve come home, have you”, you know, in that nice sarcastic way. However, Harold had asked me to marry him, I think, beforehand, and then we – we decided we’d get married, you see, after I’d been back in Melbourne for a while. I flew up one Saturday and there’d been a devil of (inaudible 6.57.44) between movement control and myself, you couldn’t get on planes at that stage, you see.

No.

And finally I got – I was told I could go out – I was going to be married on the Saturday night in Alice Springs and I got out to the airport, and the chap said to me, “Look, there’s another case or something come so you won't be able to travel”’, so I thought – because nothing worried me, I thought, “Well what I can do?” you see. However, I was on the plane and Harold met me and I suppose I think we got into Alice Springs about six or half past six, and Harold had a very nice home and I went there and I changed and I was married at nine.

**All right, everything turned out on time after all.**

Yes. Then we went down to some friends of ours and they had a bit of a party for us and I had a very happy life from then on (inaudible 6.58.44) Harold and I.
And then – where did Harold go after Alice Springs, you were married in Alice Springs?

In Alice Springs, he went to Darwin.

And he was -- --
And I stayed in Alice for quite some time until he decided what he was going to do and then he transferred through the department up to Alice – to Darwin.

I see, yes.
And then he did quite a lot of work with the – with the department up there, and then decided - I don’t – I can’t remember just how – when he decided to – I think he – then he – that’s right, he bought a tractor and he was doing own work, you know, around the place.

Yes.
And after a while well that all ran out and then he saw this advertisement, I think, for somewhere around down here.

For the drains.

Yes.

Yes.
And then we came down.

And when – when did he become ill?
After we built houses – after – after we’d been out here. He had been a frail man for some time, and he had to have an operation and that seemed to upset the whole thing.

Yes.
He never seemed to quite recover from it.

And that’s – that’s when he lost the use of his legs, was it?
More or less, yes.

Down here?
No, that was beforehand all together, yes.

I see, yes.
It was a bad nursing thing that caused it, and when I realised how he was treated and it sort of – he was – I can imagine what – what had happened in the – in the bed itself.

Yes.
And he – he didn’t become paralysed, but it really – he had a fever, whether it was some type of – not Scarlet Fever, but one of the fevers which gave him – you know, it’s a long time since I had anything to do with that, of course.

Yes. The – and then this advert came up for deepening the drains or digging the drains down here.

Yes, yes.

When you – when you arrived, did you come with everything complete, all his equipment?
Well we did – he brought it all down, yes.

Yes, he brought it all down.
Carryalls, and tractors and all that sort of thing.
Yes.
We hired this – what do you call it – a big scoop thing - - -

**An excavator?**
Well it was that type of thing, you know. We hired that, but we had our own tractors, carryalls and that sort of thing, 20 men worked for us.

**Twenty?**
Twenty.

**And the camp was out on the job, was it?**
Yes, it had to be on the job.

Yes.
I mean and they were in tents, and we had a huge sort of truck that was converted into a cookhouse for them, (inaudible 7.01.31) with – they had their meals and we always had a cook, and Harold said, “Bloody cooks, they are always boozers” or something, you know, he – the cook – the man would give me the order and it would be for some - something to break down his grog, you see, and I’d say to Harold, “He can’t be using all that stuff”, Harold – he said, “If it’s on this get it”, and I said, “Very well, sir”, but he – you know, it was something he was boozing all the time, you see.

Yes.
However Harold – not for me, so I just used to get whatever he asked me to get.

**And where did you live in the meantime?**
I was in – we – in the – Harold built a sort of a – not a – a room that we had. We – we used to drink – we had caravans ourselves we slept in.

Yes. And – and you lived on the job with Harold, yes?
Yes, yes. Because we – you know, it was moving about all the time, that drainage down, you know, to – out from – Millicent out that way.

**Yes, yes.**
You know, that was right down to the water all together and we had, as I say, about 20 men working for us and of course they were bits of pains in the neck because they go have booze on Saturday night. I tell you what they used to do, they used to go into Millicent and they’d be down one hotel down the bottom of the road and they’d get a taxi to drive them up to the next hotel on the same street. Half the time they’d be coming home across the stretch to our camp and something would go wrong with the car and they’d be there all night.

**And you – you would have had groceries and meat delivered, delivered to you?**
No, I used to come into the town.

Yes, **to get that, yes.**
We used to keep a certain amount of tobacco and cigarettes for the men, you know, that sort of thing.
Yes.

But as Harold said, “I can't stand bloody drunks”, you know.

And why - did you ever get any meat delivered or - - -

Yes. We used to have Mister – the nearest farmer.

Yes.

You know, they’d kill a sheep for us and then I used to make it up with whatever they wanted, if they wanted steak, and of course that’s when, you know, [audio cuts out] you’d ask for three pounds of so and so, and she’d cut a little bit of here and a little bit of there and a little bit of somewhere, I’d say, “Could we have them so” – I’d be – “It’s just as good”, she’d try to sell me shin beef, you see, and I say, “We don’t” – “But that’s very good”, I said, “It might be, but it’s not what we want, we’ve got to feed so many men”, and she’d be cutting a little off here and a little bit off[audio cuts out] – so many or something that was – you know, I wanted, and when I came in to get it I said, “Where’s my order?” and he brought out – pork it was, that he brought out, and I’d ordered about eight pounds of pork and he brought – and I said, “What’s that?” he said, “That's your order”, I said, “Beg your pardon”, I’d have a fight with him every now and again.

Eight pieces instead of eight pound.

Well when you got to feed men, you know.

Yes, yes.

He’d say, “I’ve got 32 other orders”, and I said, “Well I don't care, that’s got nothing to do with me, you took my order”.

Yes.

This little tiny (inaudible 7.04.50). It’s been an interesting life, I can assure you.

Did you ever have to deal with any bad accidents on – with the big gang working on drains, there must have been occasional times when you’d had an accident on the jobs?

Fortunately, no. But I – I have always had a certain amount of medical staff available.

Yes, yes.

And I, you know perhaps - - -

Well I was just thinking it was a wise move on Harold’s part to have a nursing sister available on call.

Yes. Well, you know, I’d do their eyes or anything like that, but - - -

Yes, but you fortunately never - never had any - - -

No, we didn’t have any accidents, no.

- - - major accidents.

No, no.

And then after the drains cut out – the drain contract cut out that’s when you decided to go farming?

Well, you see, it was a very long one this drainage one.
Yes.
This drainage one and then after we had finished it, it finished up near Ogilvy and then
afterwards Harold got quite a few contracts on the other side of the road, you know, up near
Phil – you know, his father was in - - -

McBride(?).
Yes, up that way.

Yes.
He did the last one up that way, you know, and then I think he was getting a bit weary and also
he’d seen this land out where we – we were.

Yes.
And he still had all that equipment, and he bought that land and – and made a wonderful farm
out of it, you see.

Yes.
Because he pushed the – a lot of the stuff over and all that sort of thing.

Yes.  I was reading in Ms Birmingham’s book, Gateway.
Yes.

How he cleared, I think it was 700 in one year.
Yes.

And 700 acres and ploughed another 400, I think.
Yes. Well of course we had the equipment, you see, and – and he realised he had finished
with all that because everybody had gotten what they asked for, you know what I mean and - - -

Yes, yes.  Did you have any involvement in – when they deepened the drains through the cutting
yard here at here – coming through the (inaudible 7.06.50)?
I think so.  Yes, I think Harold did some, because there was a very nice man I remember going
out there who was in charge of it.  It was fairly deep, wasn’t it?

Yes, very steep.
Yes.  I think Harold did something there because as a matter of fact I had one of my nephews
and he was – he became very – he was only a kid of about 10, you know, and he used to spend
his holidays with – and he was being involved because this was a very nice man who was in
charge of it, you know.

No, that was quite a feat getting that that drainage through there.
Yes, wasn’t it, yes. I don't think Harold did very much, but I know he did something there.

Yes.  Now, Mrs Elcock, you were awarded the MBE for your services to nursing.  Could you tell us
something about that?  Was that for the Darwin episode, was it?
Yes, yes. It was for the Darwin episode.

And where were you when you received word of that?
Well I was down on the beach because of the bombs were falling at that stage.
But I mean when – when you received word of the – of the award?
   That was, you know, sometime afterwards when I left the Territory all together really.

And I think there was a little incident when your husband first found out about it, I think we should have that on tape?
   Well what did I say?

When – when he came in – –
   Yes, yes. Asked – there was sort of a knock at the door and Harold went out and apparently whoever told him that I’d been awarded the honour and I said – he came into the bathroom and he kept bowing and saying, you know, “Madam, all right”, or something like that.

No, that’s – he was certainly bowing to his lady. The – that must have been a great thrill though for you to – –
   It was – it was unexpected of course.

Yes, yes.
   I mean I had no idea because I don't know why I was simply chosen because there were other women up there at the same time and naturally I'm – naturally I'm quite grateful, but.

Yes. Where was it actually presented to you, the award, was it at Government House?
   No, well the – the top bloke in Darwin, what was his name?

The Administrator.
   The Administrator, but also there was a wonderful English gentleman out, and one lovely evening, which is very pleasant in Darwin, I was asked to attend this huge crowd and I was presented by the – by the Administrator, but this wonderful English man was there [audio turned off].

Short break in the tape there, maybe I’ll – we'll recover some of that later. Mrs Elcock, that – after the drains were over and then you decided to come to live in Robe itself.
   Yes.

Do you know notice much difference now to what it is – was then?
   Yes, yes.

Do you remember just when you built the house in Robe?
   We – we semi-retired to Melbourne and Harold got fed up and we came back here, Bruce Hand(? 7.10.19) I could get that from Bruce Hand.

Yes.
   Because he built it, you see.

Yes, I will – it would be – I think it would be probably in the early sixties, was it?
   Must have been, I think.

Yes, because we came here in ’64 and you were here then, I think.
   Yes.

The – I – I – as far as I can remember yours was the only house up overlooking the Lake Butler then, were there any others?
That's right, yes. There was – Mrs. as you came around that corner?

Yes.

What was her name, she was –

Mrs Ralph(?).

Mrs Ralph, yes. She was always sick.

Yes.

She was there, and then of course they built where the two-storey place almost opposite Ralphs, you know, and the man next to us he’d started to build, I think, before we – before Harold built there.

That was the chap from Bordertown?

That's right, yes.

And what are your – what are your main recollections of the changes of Robe since you've been here?

I don't think it’s changed that much, has it?

Not – not –

I mean we’ve got more people here.

Yes. Our services have changed.

Yes, yes.

For instance there wouldn’t have been a doctor when you came here, not living here.

No, but we had a doctor would come down what a couple of times week from – from Kingston.

Yes.

[Unknown person]:

Dr Anderson and Dr McGeary(?). Dr Anderson was before – he’s (inaudible 7.11.48).

Yes. And the general appearance of Robe, do you think that’s altered much?

I think the roads are better.

Yes.

I think that’s important too, don’t you, roads?

Yes, very much so.

Yes.

And the general services – well facilities in the town, they would have changed, that's –

I think it’s a very nice town, Robe, and I think most of the things we want are here.

Yes. I don’t think there’s much really that’s missing. We have, how many supermarkets now, two or three?

That's right, yes.

Yes, a chemist –

It’s – and he’s very nice to.
When we – when the doctor came of course that brought a chemist and that must have been to – especially to the elderly people one of the big advantages of not having to go out of the district for medical services.

Yes.

Well I think we’ve covered pretty well everything, Mrs Elcock. Thank you very much for letting us tape you like this, it’s been most interesting.