

Hilda Interview, Ballymore Eustace, Co. Kildare on 6th July 2005.

In conversation before the tape was turned on, Mrs. Martin Smith explained that she had been trained as a nurse in Dublin and she signed up for the British forces when she qualified in 1940.

1. HMS: I went with my friend Mary for interview to Military Hospital in Belfast. We had applied and at that time it was hard to get in. I got my uniform in Tidworth, where Harrods made it.
2. The mailboat used to go about eight o'clock in the morning so we'd stay overnight in Dublin. That was after embarkation leave. My sister came up because there was a petrol shortage here and we'd booked into this hotel in Harcourt Street for bed and breakfast and they asked us to pay when we went in. In those days, that was not usual, you paid when you left but the next morning, there was nobody awake in the hotel and we were out about six o'clock and we'd no breakfast. I had an old mufti coat on over my uniform and we got on the mailboat and after about ten minutes on the mailboat I suddenly see the mailboat full of brown bags, where obviously everybody had worn a coat over their uniform [laughs]. Everybody was in khaki on the boat now and I thought it was so amazing. One minute it was all mufti, and then suddenly it was all khaki. I think it might have been one hundred per cent of the people on the boat were going back, all in khaki uniform.
3. I saw two other [nursing] sisters, one from Cork and one from Galway, I think it was, and so we got together and we had a traumatic journey down to London because of the bombs on the way down. Some towns, you know, Crewe and all round there – it was terrible – and we didn't get to London until about one o'clock in the morning. We'd booked nowhere and we got a taxi – one thing in London, you always got a taxi no matter what was going on – and we said we wanted to go to a hotel. We'd all arranged to stay with relations, but we'd sent telegrams from Crewe to say that our arrangements had changed. The girl from Galway, her people were having a big party for her in London and she said we'd be welcome to go so the girl from Cork and myself sent telegrams to say the arrangements had changed.
4. Of course, there was nobody at the station at that hour in the morning and the taxi man wanted to know what hotel. Well, of course we said we didn't have anything booked and he drove around London for an hour and a half looking for somewhere and in the end he said he was running short of petrol. He said he would have taken us to his house only he'd had to take in a bombed out family and so he had no room. He said we would be better to go back to the station and stay there but at that time, we thought that would be a terrible idea and so we said we would prefer to sit down with a cup of tea. Of course, we'd had nothing to eat all the way, from the day before, because there was nothing on the boat and nothing on the train. Anyway, eventually we got to a Lyons' Corner Shop and we said we would go in there to get a cup of tea because the taxi driver had to go home.
5. We went in to the Lyons' Corner Shop and it was thronged out with uniforms and they made room for the three of us. We got sitting with some Canadians but the next thing we heard was that the Lyons' Corner Shop was closing at half past three. By this time it was snowing – that was a real year of snow – and we had to go out in that bad snow. One of the Canadians that were sitting with us – they'd moved over to make room – he said he thought he had seen some sort of religious house that we might get into nearby. It was not very far from this Lyons' Corner Shop.

6. When we got there, there was a little light and there seemed to be some sort of a collecting box outside. We pressed the bell anyway and eventually a lady came down, very tall with some sort of a nightcap on, and carrying a candle. We told her of our situation, it was snowing badly at this time, and she said we could come in. Then the girl from Galway asked would she ever let these three Canadians in just to sleep on the floor, because they had nowhere to go either, and with that she all but turned us out. But anyway, she let us in and turfed the Canadians out in the snow. She brought us upstairs, I don't know how many flights of stairs into a big room with four beds in it. There were four windows, all blown in from bombing and the snow blowing in through the windows but we didn't care, we were off the street. Ever since, I remember that it's a terrible thing to feel you have nowhere to go, that you'd be walking the streets and it's a dreadful feeling.
7. So we just lay down in our uniforms and then in the morning, they were banging on the door at six o'clock. Of course, we didn't get to the bed until well after four and she had said we would get the usual two slices of toast and a cup of tea. That was the usual breakfast in London and eventually, because we thought they were going to knock down the door, we went down into a room where there were about thirty people, all on their knees praying. We were late because we just couldn't get up when they started banging first and the next thing, the lady that had let us in said we were to get on our knees. Straight away we said we were all Irish Roman Catholics and we didn't know what they were doing and with that, she turfed us out. We had to pay 2/6 by the way, for the night, without the breakfast but we were really glad to pay it.
8. So we went out in the snow, there was a church nearby. The girl from Galway suggested that we go in and sit in the church – it was open – until Lyons' Corner Shop opened at eight or half past, whatever it was, and so we went in there. It so happened that it was a Roman Catholic chapel and the girl from Galway went up to the altar and she was praying – we were all praying really by this time – and anyway, when Lyons' Corner Shop opened, we went over and there was a queue half a mile long. They were all soldiers and airmen and when they saw us, they insisted that we go up to the front, which we did, and we got two slices of toast and a cup of tea. That was the standard breakfast but even though we weren't Roman Catholic, the girl from Galway was a Roman Catholic but we all said we were because we wanted to get out. It was most extraordinary – to this day I can't imagine what they were doing [laughs].
9. MM: Can I go back a bit and just ask you which branch of the forces did you join?
10. HMS: The QAIMNS – it was the Queen Alexandra Imperial Military Nursing Service in those days and it was a difficult thing to get into too. It wasn't every hospital that they took the sisters from.
11. MM: Which hospital had you trained in?
12. HMS: I trained in the Adelaide in Dublin and I was finished training in 1940. It was then my friend – anyone who trained in the Adelaide at that time seemed to go to the forces anyway – so of course, we were dying to get going. My friend who was with me, she had also finished training – a girl called Mary Cooper – and herself and myself went and got permission to apply and we went up to Belfast. We had an interview and eventually we were accepted and then Mary was called up but I got pleurisy and Dr. Bewley, who was the Chief Medical Officer in the Adelaide, he was a pacifist and never encouraged anyone to go, but that didn't worry us.

13. So Mary was called up and she went and it ended up [pause] I would write to her and she would write to me and then her letters stopped. When I was not called up with Mary, I took a Sisters job in Cornwall, where I stayed for a year, when I was called up.
14. Of course, the post was dreadful during the war anyhow, but I was in a station once at Trincomalee, that's in Sri Lanka now, it was Ceylon, and there was a sister there and when you arrive first, everyone is asking where did you come from, when did you come out, on what ship did you come, what was the last station you were at, all this – and I told her. Then, of course, at that time whenever I was sent to anywhere new I would always ask did anyone ever hear of Mary Cooper. Then there was a girl there and she said she did, that she was in Singapore with her at the Alexandra Hospital in Singapore when the Japs came and they drew straws and Mary only got off on the last boat and it was torpedoed. They were washed up off Batavia or somewhere like that and some of the sisters were shot by the Japs. Anyway, Mary ended up in a prison camp in Sumatra, where just before the war ended she died from the starvation and beatings.
15. I came back on a hospital ship – I didn't have to come back on a hospital ship and it was true, they said in the army never volunteer for anything because it will always be you, you and you [laughs]. But we were in this camp, at a place called Delong where people assembled, either for going in or for embarkation home, and our names went up on different ships because the war was over now and it was October and the war ended in August. Then the next thing was there was a red line through our names because we didn't have any priority. We weren't married and we didn't have any children or anything but we got tired of that, we were knocked off about three ships. We were there over a fortnight and then somebody came along and said you can go home if you work your way home on a hospital ship. This was October '45 and we thought about it and we thought well, the war is over since August, and these fellows going home won't be that bad and we'll have a bit of chat and that wouldn't be too bad.
16. So we decided we would go and so when we got on this miserable ship, there were about a hundred patients on it, including about twenty six women from the same camp that Mary had been in and one of them told me all about how she and Mary were put in cages for six months one time, because they found a bit of rice in Mary's pocket that somebody had given her. They beat her up and Mrs. Nixon [pause] I think her husband was quite high up in the Diplomatic Service and she had been sent out with Mary. I never found out exactly what sort of work they were sent to do but they weren't able to do anything anyway. But Mary had a little bit of rice in her pocket and they found it going into the camp, turned out her pockets and found the little bit of rice. So they thrashed her and put her in a cage for six months, and Mrs. Nixon was in the cage beside her for six months. Mary got out of that but she died in the end.
17. We had one girl there amongst the twenty eight, and she was only twenty four and she was a big strong girl and anyway, she was a grave digger. Her family was out there before the war, doing whatever they were doing and her father and mother and herself were captured. The father was sent somewhere and the mother and herself were sent to this camp in Sumatra. She was a grave digger and she had [pause] they used to have to dig mostly with their hands and she had to help to dig her own mother's grave. Anyway, she had a nervous breakdown on the boat coming home.
18. MM: Where were these people coming back to?
19. HMS: They were all coming back to England.

20. MM: Would they all have lived out in the Far East before the war?
21. HMS: No, some of them had, we also had about [pause] I think something like twenty very high up fellows, it seemed to us anyway, they had had very good jobs. We had a matron and I think ten sisters on the boat, and the matron was very gaunt. She was very like that lady that had the house in London, she was a big, tall, gaunt woman, sort of nearly like a witch, we thought. She told us we were late and the boat was held up because of us. Of course, we went exactly to orders, we were told what to do and everything, it wasn't our fault. She said we were to go on night duty and we said no, we wouldn't do that normally and we wouldn't go on night duty because we were dead tired. So we did have a rumpus going on but anyway, she said you can go on tomorrow. So we went to our miserable cabin and the next morning we went on duty until twelve and went on night duty that night.
22. It seems that the soldiers wouldn't stay in the wards if the civilian people were in the same ward. That was true too, that happened in Sumatra. The Dutch people there that had been residents out in Sumatra – they knew the language for one thing, and also, their homes – they had money and they were able to bring clothes. But someone washed up like Mary, who had only her uniform, a dress and shoes [pause] she lost her glasses as well and she was short-sighted, she had quite bad sight. A bit of aggro went on in the camps because the young ones were made do a lot more than the usual. This was because you had all these superior people, or they thought they were and this was the same thing with the men on board. Why else would soldiers not want these ones in the ward. They knew the language so well and that made a big difference for them, of course. You might say something and the Japs would box your face because you'd said something completely wrong, when they were captured first. When you go out there first, anyhow, they all look alike, at the start.
23. MM: Did you get any specialist training before you went, when you went to London?
24. HMS: When I went from the Adelaide and I enlisted, I was fully trained.
25. MM: So it was your nursing training?
26. HMS: We were all trained, state registered nurses in the QA's because they wouldn't take you in otherwise.
27. MM: How long were you in London prior to travelling to the Far East?
28. HMS: Well, my first station was Tidworth, I was there about six months and it was a very big military hospital. After the Adelaide, I must say I liked the way the military hospitals were run, they were always very correct, of course, after an Irish hospital [pause] the teaching here in Ireland was very good, it was very strict as you can imagine. We were just like greenhorns.
29. MM: I know somebody else who trained there. She went in 1942 so she'd have had the same regime as you.
30. HMS: She'd know what it was like, yes. Anyway, it was very strict training. The army, of course, was different because you could stay out all night if that was what you wanted so long as you were on duty at eight o'clock. They weren't interested in what you did in your private life. In the Adelaide you had to get permission to go out and you had to be in at a certain time, ten o'clock, all that.
31. MM: The lady I was talking about – her daughter also trained in the Adelaide and even some twenty five years later it hadn't changed very much.
32. HMS: Of course, now it's gone to Tallaght. That's where I had my hip done, in Tallaght. It's all quite different now I'll tell you that, I saw a big difference. I didn't see much

difference in the army and the Adelaide, except that there was no sister breathing down your neck because you were the same rank as the other sisters.

33. MM: Did you go in as a private?
34. HMS: No, you went in as an officer, as a lieutenant and then the assistant matron was a captain and the matron was probably a major. So, they were all very nice girls and we had orderlies – that was in Tidworth – and we had Red Cross and John's Ambulance and all that.
35. MM: In Tidworth, did you live in the hospital?
36. HMS: We lived in Tidworth House. They said that Lord Nelson had given it to Emma Hamilton. I have a picture there somewhere, a photograph of Tidworth House. It was right in the middle and an ambulance took us to the various wards, it was that big. It was all very correct. The breakfast table was white linen everywhere, it had sideboards of food, everything you could think of, even though it was wartime. Huge silver lids on everything. They had told me to bring a silver napkin ring so I had that, everybody had that, there was so much silver and all these dishes, with their huge lids, and enormous table settings - all absolutely perfect.
37. MM: Very odd piece of army equipment – a silver napkin ring [laughs].
38. HMS: I know, but you see that was '42, but it was the very same as that when I went to Rawalpindi, that was my first station in India. It was exactly like Tidworth and they didn't even know there was a war on up there. They really didn't and we were nearly four months getting out there. Singapore fell when we were on the journey out, but of course, I didn't have to go, being Irish, they said I didn't have to go abroad but I needn't tell you that I was only jumping to get going abroad .
39. MM: You weren't concerned about the dangers?
40. HMS: No, you don't think about those things at that age. Not at all, it was like a dream that you could travel like that but we thought, probably [pause] France had fallen, so we thought the obvious place was – this was before we got on the ship, when she asked us to sign the form if you wanted to go abroad – we thought, well, the only place now that they can fight is the Middle East, they were fighting there at that time, so we were pretty sure we were going to the Middle East. But we thought we wouldn't be any longer away than six months or a year, at the very, very most because that was the usual thing in the army, before the war, of course, that you'd go abroad and you wouldn't be any longer than a year at the very outside. We'd no idea that we'd be going to India eventually. They didn't know what to do with us when Singapore fell, to be quite honest.
41. In Durban, we had to tranship and we got on a ship with twenty three thousand on it. The other ship that we went to Durban on was the 'Monarch of Bermuda', it was a beautiful ship and I only shared a cabin with one other person. They worked us out there on alphabetical order and I just happened to be W and this other person was Wood and she was a very travelled person and she was a great mentor for me. However, we got to Durban and we transhipped on to the 'Strateden' and the 'Monarch' went back. We were told it came back to Liverpool, but on the second ship we had I don't know how many sittings for meals and the sisters all had a table in one part. Whatever table you were allocated to, that was where you stayed for the voyage but on the 'Monarch', there was only one sitting because there were only about two thousand on the 'Monarch'. Of that, I suppose there were about one hundred and fifty officers and that's all that would be in the dining room.
42. MM: Were these privately owned ships that had been taken over for the war?

43. HMS: She was a Cunarder, the 'Monarch', then the 'Strateden' was the big P&O ship, she was the lead ship of the P&O. She was sailing behind us the whole way out and when the weather got better, it was very rough in the north, but anyway, we saw there were sisters on the 'Strateden', we could see they had gone into tropical uniform. That was the thing, we knew of course, that we were going to be in tropical uniform and suddenly one morning the ship was all white, everyone was in white. Only myself and Helen going out, all the way from Liverpool, and when we got on the 'Strateden' there were eight of us in a cabin and we only had a shelf all the way round and they had these biscuits they called them, little mattresses, and you were sleeping head to toe. So it was some change from the luxury on the 'Monarch' but we only had about a fortnight on that one.
44. MM: At that point had you still not been told where you were going?
45. HMS: No, at Durban we were told we were going to India but not until we were at Bombay, there was a chap who was at the same sitting as me – it was all ranked, very strictly – you couldn't go here and you couldn't go there, we could not stand that but anyhow, he was going to Calcutta, that was where he was ordered to go. But we had a choice, somebody came along and said if we had a choice was there anywhere in India we would like to go but you might as well say where would you like to go on Mars? To us, it's not a country you knew. We'd heard of Delhi but that was all and I said to Helen, my room mate, where did you put down for and I was going to put down for Calcutta because Michael was going there but she said don't be daft, that's a dump. Come up to Rawalpindi with me, she said, so that's what I did. It didn't mean a thing to me where Rawalpindi was but I agreed because she said the other place was a dump. However, I went to Rawalpindi and I was delighted I went because I saw what it was like during the Raj, it really was just like Tidworth with all the silver covers and we had bearers with our crest on and we had a bearer between two rooms. Helen had a room – our rooms [pause] we had a big bedroom, a bathroom and we had a lounge with couch and armchairs and tea table and everything. You could entertain in your room – ask people up for drinks. I was there, I suppose, three months, I think and then I went up to Kashmir from there.
46. There was only one way of getting up to Kashmir then and that was on the mail bus. I think they called them buses, now I forget, but anyway it left at about half past six in the morning. But how I got there was because there were far too many sisters in Rawalpindi and there were two sisters going up to Kashmir and one of them asked me would I like to go. There were supposed to be four of them going but two of them dropped out and they had a houseboat that would accommodate four and there were only two of them. So they said would I like to go and even I had heard of Kashmir [laughs]. We set off and the girls sent me a telegram saying what boat they were on and the heat in Rawalpindi was terrible, it was never less than one hundred and thirty, absolutely frightful. The hospital always went up to the hills in the summer for six months, but they didn't send us, I was in the hospital itself where it was all a skeleton staff.
47. This bus was supposed to arrive in Srinagar, the capital, I think it was due at eight o'clock and the girls said they would meet me there at the bus stop, wherever it was. But anyway, they were stopping here and there and they were throwing water on the wheels and they stopped at different tea houses. I never entered any of the tea houses I needn't tell you – if you've ever read any of Dearbhla Murphy's books – well I hadn't read them in those days but they looked terrible and I didn't want to go in. At that time, I wasn't very brave because I only got oriented later. There were two American missionaries on the bus – middle aged,

probably in their forties – and I had got cold. Remember, once you got past Murree it got colder and I only had very light clothes and Kashmir was like Ireland and I only had my dress but I wanted to get a cardigan and the luggage was strapped on the top of the bus. Of course, you'd only wooden seats, the most uncomfortable things ever, and I was in the front and the two missionaries were on the other side in the front. They objected [pause] we were stopped at a tea house by the way, and the driver said to me they'd help me get a cardigan down and the two missionaries said no, that if he went up to get my cardigan he would disturb their luggage.

48. MM: Not very Christian.

49. HMS: We were very cold at this stage and I just had a little light blouse but we had to stop then and cross half dried up rivers and wade across and now it's moonlight and we were still going. We didn't arrive at the post office until after one o'clock and I did not know it but the two girls had been and gone. Now I discovered I didn't have the telegram with the name of their boat and the bus stopped at the post office and there were hundreds of Kashmiri fellows there, all men, no women. But someone had told me that if I was in trouble anywhere to go to the Post Master and he would probably see me right. So I went to the Post Master because there was nothing else to do. The two missionaries, they were there, I saw them going out of the door and they never even asked me if I was all right. So by this time I thought half Sirinogga seemed to be around me, all speaking another language, Kashmiri. Then the Post Master spoke English and he thought for a while and he said I think I know where those girls are and he asked me when they'd arrived and I knew approximately. So he said he would get me a tonga, that was a pony trap that they used out there and he told me what to pay for it and that was it. He said this was a very reliable man and I would be all right. So we were trotting – these tongas, they sit in front and you sit facing out with your back to them.

50. MM: So you couldn't even see where you were going?

51. HMS: You couldn't see where you were going and when the clouds came over the moon, it got black dark and we only had a tiny little light and you could hear the pony trotting along. I didn't know where the hell I was or anything. The next thing, after some miles I thought, we stopped and now I see water. They said to get in a boat and I didn't know about this at all but I paid them and they said – there were two Kashmiris smoking their hookah in the boat. By this time, it was black dark and I was thoroughly frightened but there was nothing to do only get in the boat. When I was on the lake with these two I never thought I would see anyone again. I'd paid the tonga man and he told me what to pay the boat men and that at least was a good sign.

52. So anyhow, the next thing after paddling along in the boat for a couple of miles, suddenly we hear shouting from the houseboats. It was from what they called the donga, which was really a servant's boat behind the houseboat, where the servants stayed. The boatmen and the servants were all shouting now and the next thing I see the girls in their dressing gowns. I can tell you I was glad to see them [laughs].

53. MM: I can imagine. Did you have family at home?

54. HMS: I did, my mother and father, sure they were having fits before I went.

55. MM: Was there any way to let them know where you were?

56. HMS: No way, absolutely no way. We were allowed one letter when the boat got near India, because there was a convoy and there were so many ships. As far as the eye could see there were ships and this convoy would be going back. When we got to Rawalpindi, we were

allowed to send a telegram with an address for post and to say that you were fit and well. So they were relieved at that but they were still worried. Nowadays it would be nothing but then it was as if I had disappeared.

57. MM: My own daughter has always been a great traveller and she has been all over the world but at least communication is fairly easy, between the phones and email.
58. HMS: Yes, my grandson is heading off to South America tomorrow. You just don't worry when you're young. But on the other hand, I always had the British Army behind me. I knew that if you were lost, they would try and find you.
59. MM: How long were you in Kashmir? Did you know you would be moved to Burma from there?
60. HMS: No. Well, this was the thing all the time we were on the ship, nobody told us anything about where we were going. We knew nothing about what would be expected and it didn't occur to us what would happen to the people who had been in Singapore. We didn't realise that half the Japanese army was on the move, the population of Singapore were all moving up through Burma to get to India. We didn't know anything about that and we didn't think about what happened to the people there. After arriving at Rawalpindi the next day we were to go and meet [pause] when I say 'we', that was Helen, my friend, and we had to go down to meet the train and help to sort out people. When we got there and saw, I couldn't believe it, all these people who got off this train bedraggled and looking terrible in rags. They had trekked up through Burma.
61. There was one woman, she was a young person, she couldn't have been more than twenty and she had long hair and it hadn't been combed. She had this child and then one of the senior sisters called me and told me to bring it to Matron's office because the woman wouldn't admit that the child was dead and she was carrying her baby. The sister told me to get the particulars and to get a tonga and bring her to the hospital but she wouldn't give me any information and she didn't want to part with the child. So I had to bring her with the child to the Matron and then we were able to take the child to bring it down to the mortuary. Matron gave me the key to the mortuary which was round the corner from the hospital and I set off and the next thing I saw a flock of vultures that was sitting on top of the mortuary. They were the most ugly creatures and they were sitting on top of the mortuary. I was so frightened that I didn't know whether to go on or not but then I got courage enough to go on and I got through the door and there was nobody in the mortuary so I put the child on a shelf and I thought to myself I'm not going out through that lot. I stayed in the mortuary for about ten minutes, too frightened to go out, and then I realised that no one was ever going to come and I just went out quickly and locked the door and ran as fast as I could back to the hospital.
62. Helen told me that she was brought to help these women too and they all got jobs to bring them somewhere. They'd walked for a thousand miles, living on nuts and God knows what, but people didn't realise that. All these women walking through the jungle – the heat alone would have been horrific.
63. Interference on tape for approximately four minutes – interview incomprehensible.
64. HMS: Actually, when Mary joined up and after I got over the pleurisy, I wasn't called up immediately and I applied for different jobs. There was a job advertised in the 'Nursing Mirror' for a sister's job in Cornwall and I applied and they said what wages do you expect? At that time I think we were getting about £48 a year and I thought the sisters were getting about £80 a year. So I think I asked for about £90 a year and I got a letter back to say I'd got

- the job and offering me £130 a year. I took the letter along to Matron and showed it to her and she said Nurse, do you really think you'd make a sister [laughs]. Anyway, I went.
65. Further interference on tape for approximately two minutes.
66. HMS: Travelling out there, that was the worst thing. Travelling was awful. It took four days for instance to go from Bombay to Rawalpindi, and to go from Ceylon up to a place called Comilla which was a big hospital away from the lines. The further up hospitals would do so much and then they would send them back. The thunder and the lightning there, that was another thing. The journeys were pretty horrific and no matter where you went ... Further interference for three minutes.
67. HMS: They had a thing of sending middle aged sisters abroad and they weren't able to cope. They've changed that now but they must have thought that the young ones would go mad or something but it would have been better to be young. Anyway, she was in charge of rations and of course she lost the ration box and we were on the boat between Ceylon and India and there were no rations, there was nothing to eat. Of course, we were all very cross about that but it didn't matter because we were split up. She got sick then and had to go to hospital and then that left four of us. Then two were sent somewhere and another and I was going to Comilla. So I asked this fellow where was Comilla and he said it was the other side of the river. Sure we were thinking of the Liffey or something, not this enormous river that was more like the sea. It felt like we were going up and down the coast of India. The crossing took five hours and it was pouring rain when we got off the boat and we had to go through customs or something. Anyhow, we had our luggage and we were told to mind our trunks or they would be stolen. So in the rain we were standing and we were waiting there about an hour when we were told that the coolies had gone on strike so there was nobody to carry our luggage. But there were some officers and they said they'd get our luggage to the hospital for us.
68. So we eventually got to the hospital about half past four in the morning and we went in to the night sister who didn't know what to do with us. We were worn out travelling and dirty and everything – these were white uniforms – and she didn't know where she was going to put us.
69. Further interference for approximately seven minutes.
70. HMS: There were an awful lot of officers killed in tanks because they had to be up in the turret. You just got on with things as best you could and did your work. Interference.
71. I was on a flight down to Calcutta, there was no other way but to fly, and it so happened that when I got there, there was a big ball in the Governor's palace that night and when we got there we were asked to go to it. I had nothing to wear that was suitable. Interference for four minutes.
72. So my fellow took off saying those R.A.F. chaps are all the same, they're this, that and the other and I'd had enough of this and said I was leaving. Of course, he said there was no way I was going back by myself and we had words and I threw the engagement ring at him. Well, he wouldn't take the ring and I didn't want it either. We weren't allowed to wear rings on duty so it meant that if you had anything decent you would pin it in your pocket because you would never see it again. There was nowhere to keep things.
73. MM: You probably had a lucky escape if he was that inclined to be jealous.
74. HMS: There was nothing but rows going on. Then I got engaged [pause] it was up in Limbao and I got engaged to a chap.
75. MM: Did that last?

76. HMS: Well, I never wanted to get married out there anyhow. You see, the fellows they all thought you would go off with someone else because there were so few girls. I remember we were going to go down to Ceylon and it was in a state of siege which we didn't know until someone told us in Delhi. One of the officers in the hotel told us that the European women had all been sent out because it was in a state of siege and the Japanese were bombing it. So we thought we would never get to Ceylon but we got there and it was pretty rough all right, in the beginning.
77. I always said I would get married at home because you always felt you would never stay with one person out there. So I dumped him at the victory dance [laughs] in Chittagong and I never told him what was wrong. But he was gone most of the time and I didn't know where he was. He was up behind the Japanese lines most of the time. He was a Count, by the way. A Count of the Holy Roman Empire. His mother was Church of England and he had all that sorted out but then I realised [pause]. The war ended very suddenly for us. In fact, we thought we were never coming home. We had all our friends right there and the men felt the same. They thought that all their girlfriends would have gone off with Americans or the Home Guard or something and at one stage I think we were really forgetting home and England and everything. It was extraordinary.
78. But then the war ended like a thunderbolt. I remember when I was told it was over I couldn't believe it. An officer came along and he said they've dropped the bomb on Japan. An officer came and told us they dropped one bomb and they wouldn't stop and then they dropped another one and now the war is over. Of course, in a lot of places the Japanese kept fighting because they didn't believe it.
79. Well the second thing that struck me very quickly was that there was this fellow that I said I would marry the minute the war was over but I hadn't been answering his letters. Didn't he turn up at the victory dance with his friend – so that was that one gone!
80. MM: It was an interesting aspect of victory [laughs]. So what did you do then? Did you come back to Dublin or to England?
81. HMS: I came back home then. I got a fortnight's leave and then I was posted to a place outside Bistern until we were demobilised. We were about six or seven months in Bistern
82. I thought that was the end.
83. MM: Why was that?
84. HMS: Well that was all A.T.S. girls and it was a place where there was hardly anything wrong with them. I supposed it was for sisters who had been abroad, to let them wind down a bit, and there were only three sisters there. The A.T.S. girls had got oranges and they'd peel these oranges and there were peels on the floor and the soldiers – it was a big camp, an ordnance place and they had been in Bistern, the whole lot of them had been there for about four years. I didn't like it at all.
85. I'd got the Burma Star at that time and another one and I had them on my uniform. I would go down with one of the other sisters, one of them would come down with me to a hotel in Bistern in uniform, because now we'd got rationing and we didn't have any mufti to go about, and the locals [pause] it's a very posh part of the world round Bistern, a lot of very well heeled people. They would see the medals, the ribbons, and they would come over and buy us drinks. But I didn't like it.
86. MM: Was it just because it was boring after everything you had been doing?

87. HMS: It was really boring and I couldn't get used to it. And the soldiers would be sitting on the beds and they were [pause]. After a couple of months we'd just given up. The ordnance soldiers had a hard time there collecting stores for D-Day.
88. MM: Did you stay on?
89. HMS: No, I left that. Actually, I was home for a couple of months and the first time I met my husband he was with a girl. Of course, it was a different kettle of fish over here because there were a lot of girls after him. It was not like abroad, where there were no women.
90. MM: Was he very impressed by your service?
91. HMS: Yes. He was only nineteen when his father died and he would have loved to be in the Merchant Navy but he farmed and his father died, so he didn't get the chance. But anyway, after about five months I was at home, and I'd been ranked as captain, and I got a letter from the Q.A.C. asking would I go back but Bistern had put me off.
92. MM: Presumably the peacetime army would have been very different?
93. HMS: I wouldn't like to be in it at all now, definitely not. Everything is different now.
94. MM: I believe the Queen Alexandra's were wound up after the war.
95. HMS: Yes, they went in to the Army Nursing Service and a lot of the orderlies had to become state registered and then they got the same status as the sisters. I wouldn't have fancied that, though some of the orderlies were excellent, there's no doubt about it. Especially now, the ones we'd trained. Of course, we'd give them lectures and teach them and then they'd get really good and they'd disappear and you'd get some novice who would know nothing but obviously they had taken them for the field hospitals. Actually, they must have done that – the orderlies, and of course, the doctors too, they had a bad time. The first stage was first aid, then the field hospital and then they'd be sent to us.
96. MM: Were they all men, the orderlies?
97. HMS: Yes. The skin wards and the V.D. wards, they were all men. The orderlies had to do everything there, injections and everything else.
98. MM: Here, at least in Belfast in the Royal Victoria, there were women nursing in the V.D. wards, when the American soldiers in particular were brought in for treatment. But yet, all of the information where they were trying to warn people about being careful, the films that they made were always for segregated audiences and they weren't allowed to have a man and a woman in the same audience. It seemed strange, given the subject matter [both laugh]. Those attitudes died hard.
99. Health chapter
100. HMS: I remember one time this chap, I remember I was on night duty at the time and seemingly this chap came in maybe at eight o'clock or something like that. He hadn't been diagnosed but whether they had their suspicions, I couldn't tell you, he was not yet diagnosed as far as I was concerned. He was only eighteen and the Medical Officer came round about half eleven and said the chap had V.D. and he would be transferred in the morning. But we had just got penicillin then and he said we would give him penicillin and would I give it to him. So the doctor had just told him and eventually I got the penicillin and he was in floods of tears, this young man, he was only eighteen. I was shocked he was in such a state and we were both embarrassed and in the end I asked him what he was crying about. He said he was so ashamed of himself. He said his parents would be so ashamed of him and I said they don't have to know, you don't have to tell them. He said I only went once to a brothel when two

other fellows brought me, which was probably true, and he picked up V.D. He was mortified but that kind of thing happened all the time.

101. MM: It wasn't a great start to his life.

102. HMS: He was mortified but I said anyone would be. Seemingly, the Japanese had women with them all the time.

103. MM: Well, a lot of the women were captives and they didn't have much choice about it. And the ones who survived the war couldn't go home afterwards because of the shame they thought it would bring to their families.

104. HMS: They were Korean women mostly. There were a lot of things like that. We were very sheltered in Ireland at that time. We didn't really know about anything like that before we went out there. I remember at night time, on night duty, there was a doctor who would come round between half past ten and eleven to sign up for things, drugs or if you had a patient who had to be seen. Every single night this happened but this particular time a Sikh man, a major, with his turban and all he seemed about six foot tall or more, a youngish fellow about thirty, very well built. I'd known them from Sri Lanka where there were a lot of Sikhs and they couldn't pass you without touching you. They had to touch you some way or another. Now these would be the lowest orderlies that we had and they'd come in to get something or do something and they'd have to rub past you or something. But anyway, this Sikh major had signed off what he wanted me to do and usually the doctors would stay and have a chat, just like ordinary people. So this fellow, he spoke very good English and he was chatting on and he asked me where I came from and of course, he'd never even heard of Ireland.

105. Now it was gone twelve o'clock and no sign of him leaving and the injections were supposed to be done by twelve. That hospital was very [pause] you had wards maybe thirty yards from one to the other and you had to cross over between them. Now at half past twelve I wasn't giving any injections and he's still there. At half past one I was still telling him stories about Ireland because I was frightened about why he was hanging on there. I was keeping my composure but I couldn't get out because there was only a narrow doorway into a passage and he was standing in front of it. There were only the Sepoys, the Indian orderlies around and they were outside somewhere. Anyway, I actually saw the man's eyes go red, it was a little place and I saw his eyes starting to go red and I thought if I don't go now I'll never get out. The chair he was sitting on came out a bit into the passageway but I was really frightened and I didn't know what to do because I knew I was trapped completely. There was no window so I made a dart for the door and I got out. I was very slim and it was very unexpected to him and like a flash I got past him. There was a side door on the ward and I knew the Indians wouldn't help me because they were more frightened of their officers than they would be of a British officer. They were really terrified of their own officers and they wouldn't dare interfere. I took the short cut over to the British wing, out through scrub jungle. I'd never been in it before because the road ran round like a track so I ran through this scrub and there was another sister on the British wing. Then the next thing I heard the branches and everything breaking behind me and I knew he would kill me. He would rape me and then he would have to kill me, he would have no option. We did have a sister, by the way, who was raped by a Cypriot and he was shot.

106. I had an idea of the way across and he didn't, he'd only been there a few days and he'd no idea. Number one, he didn't know about that side door but it was a couple of hundred yards, about three hundred yards and I'd say I got about fifty yards of a run before I heard him

coming. I'd say I was running for my life and I ran through the trees better than he did because there were so many and I could move faster.

107. MM: Presumably you were wearing a white uniform so he could see you?

108. HMS: Yes, I was and it wasn't black dark. It was a fairly dark night but cloudy at that bad hour of the morning but I could just make out where I was going. I'll never forget when I saw the light and he must have seen it at the same time that I saw it so he stopped and realised the game was up. When I got in I collapsed on the floor and when I came to the sister was sitting on the floor with her arms round me. I'll never forget it.

109. MM: Was there any action taken against him afterwards?

110. HMS: The next morning we went to breakfast and I told Matron what had happened. Such a stupid matron, she was a Red Cross matron, not an army matron, which was very unusual. I think they were running short at that time and I think she really did not know the army rules well. She just said, well he didn't hurt you, imagine! So she was making light of this and I said I wanted to see the colonel and she came down with me. He said to her I would like to speak to Miss Webb privately but she didn't want to leave. I told the colonel exactly what happened and that Sikh major was never seen again at that hospital.

111. At this point Mrs. Martin Smith's grandson arrived to visit her and the interview ended.