



Lil Crosby

Member of the Gawler RSL and a member of the WAAAF (Womans Auxiliary Australian Air Force) during World war 2.

Interviewed by Marilyn Simpson in February 2018 as part of the Gawler Oral History Project.

The transcript of the interview is as follows:

Marilyn: It's Marilyn for the Gawler History Team. With me is Lil Crosby a well-respected Gawler identity who has led a full and interesting life. Hello Lil.

Lil: Hello. Pleased to meet you Marilyn.

Marilyn: Lil today I want to focus though on the World War 2 years. Now when war broke out in 1939 you would have been 13. How did you hear the news?

Lil: Well I was at the Gawler Blocks Primary School in Grade 7. I didn't start school until 1933 when I was six and a half. And I remember the old headmaster telling the children that we were now at war.

Marilyn: What sort of things were the children saying?

Lil: I don't know. I think we were sort of ... it didn't really register much at our age. It sounded bad enough ... you know. It didn't register very much. But then the next year I was at High School and .. so .. we had a lot of discussions about things at High School. One teacher .. we felt was a little bit biased toward the other side (laughter). We'd come home and tell Mum all about it. Because my Mum was English you see, and we were very English oriented.

Marilyn: Yes. So, what did Mum say when she heard this?

Lil: Well she use to listen and think ..you know .. but she had a picture of Churchill in the kitchen .. a huge picture of Churchill. A very much-admired man in certain .. the bad times.

And the bank manager's son came to the airfield in Gawler with a squadron. And he .. I think he piloted the plane .. but there was an incident where he flew the plane up Murray Street ... about 500 feet up. And our local taxi driver who was very dark .. of South African origin .. and he said: " Am I pale? Have I gone white?" (laughter) And a pilot used to buz Mrs Barnett's house on the hill behind the bank. Buz the house .. and of course, they had chimneys. They used to ring up the bank manager, not knowing it was his son driving the plane, but complaining about this plane because it was so close to the house.

But Gawler was quiet. You see there wasn't much traffic. No one had cars much.

Marilyn: Was there a reason why he was doing that?

Lil: Lil: Oh! I think they were training or something and they liked a bit of mischief. (laughter) But I do remember the plane going up Murray Street. It was clear of the buildings. It was quite an event.

Marilyn: Did you have family members and friends away in the war?

Lil: Yes. I had my cousin who was determined to join the Air Force. And he was "knocked back" twice but, he eventually went. He joined the English RAF and trained right near where my cousin's lived. He became the rear gunner in a Lancaster bomber. They came to grief on the way home between the 3rd and 4th October 1943, and the pilot had to ditch the plane, and three survived but the other four perished ... including my cousin. The pilot came back to live in Australia. He lived for many many years but ... Sid was so keen to join. He (the pilot) said when they ... the plane didn't last more than a few seconds before it sank but, he said: "I can see lights over there". There were lights on the Dutch coast. But the others were picked up and taken as prisoner. They were treated well. But .. there were four who went down with the plane. But he was washed up 6 months later on the coast of Holland. So, for 6 months we didn't know.

Marilyn: That would be a horrible 6 months.

Lil: Another neighbour who was in the Air Force over there was on submarine patrol. Now they never ever knew what happened to him. He was lost over the Atlantic ... and he was a neighbour.

Well then you see I was in the Bank after leaving school a bit early and I decided I was better off earning a bit of money. So, I was there two and a half years. Then I joined up. They were calling out for women. Beautiful advertisements to join .. and we were in a bit of

a predicament ... it was very threatening to Australia. They were sending the boys up north and urging the women to come in and do the jobs. Three hundred of us sat for the exams to join the Air Force and we spent the whole day going from one specialist to another .. to examine you from head to foot. I was just 18 then. So, I became a tele printer operator. They chose what they thought you should be doing. But not having done an academic course ... I was due to do an academic course in High School on their advice, and yet my mother wanted me to do a commercial course ... but no they knew better ... (laughter) .. but see I ended up having to do typing and the Air Force taught us typing in Adelaide. I went to Melbourne for "rookies". Back to Adelaide for typing lessons in the Foy Gibson building and we had to march every day from North Adelaide to Commode Street to Foy Gibson and back again.

Marilyn: So, you marched in formation?

Lil: Yes. And we used to give an "eyes right". The sergeant gave us an "eyes right" when we saw a couple on the lawn having a little cuddle (laughter) .. and that was a known thing .. you know. Anyway 40 words a minute and then we were off back to posting. And I preferred Melbourne. I had a choice of Gawler or Melbourne and so I said Melbourne. Well we trained for teleprinter work at Point Cook and the Sun used to go in for three days and not come out. It was so cold.

And some of the girls had the chance to go up in the training flights. Well the weekend we were due to go the weather was bad, so we missed out. I was stationed at the Headquarters and I didn't know for many years that it was in touch with the British War Office in London.

Marilyn: You were privy to fairly sensitive information?

Lil: Oh yes. It was good...shift work .. there were three shifts .. then three days off. And we used to explore the Dandenong's, and Melbourne was full of beautiful flower stalls.

Marilyn: Did you know anybody before you joined .. like did you know anybody in the WAAAF?

Lil: No.

Marilyn: So, when you went over to Melbourne you were on your own.

Lil: That's right. You sort of had an instant rapport with people in your own situation. But it was overnight in the old train .. it was very cold .. we got out at Ballarat freezing .. even though it was January (laughter). Sausages and that for breakfast. Then we were put in tenders .. trucks .. in the back .. in groups .. and taken through what I think might have been

the worse districts of Melbourne out to Camberwell where the camp was. Good facilities but, we had to get our own palliasses and our own straw and fill it. That was our mattress.

Marilyn: You are kidding me?

Lil: We were all day because we were half awake. We hadn't slept well on the train (laughter). So, it was all day.

Marilyn: Sounds like the boy scouts.

Lil: And items of clothing ... and my beret ... they used to call it "the veranda" because it was too big for my head ... but never mind. (laughter) But no! and that was a six-week rookie's course. One hour of lectures and one hour of drill.

We were living in a new area that had become a sanatorium, but the patients had been moved back to old premises. Our sergeant used to take us on bivouacs and one gentleman would stand at attention saluting us as we passed. It made you sad. But he did that every time. He stood there saluting us. So that was six weeks. It wasn't easy. At 5am get up and clean the bathroom.

Marilyn: Sounds terrible.

Lil: But good food and every day officers would come through asking if there were any complaints. One day I found a rusty nail in my custard (laughter). I think it had been put in there to see .. (laughter)

Marilyn: To see if you ate your custard. (laughter)

Lil: Coming off shift we used to line up in the cold waiting for the cooks to open the kitchen. And they'd be standing there waiting for the exact time ... 7.30. And they would be looking at us through the window .. you know.

Marilyn: And they wouldn't let you in until it was 7.30. Had any of your experiences in Gawler prepared you for what you were doing?

Lil: Well we did go along to consult .. my mother took me to see the ... the doctor recommended we go along to see the head of the Red Cross in town and to see which service ... because I was very thin and didn't look very strong. Anyway, he recommended the WAAAF because The AWAS (*Australian Women's Army Service*) ... my cousin was in the AWAS .. and she did say to me later "How come you joined Blue Orchids". She was in AWAS and was on Rottnest Island the entire war.

Marilyn: So what were they doing on Rottnest Island? Lil: It was an army place and very strategic. And one night they heard trucks rumbling or something. There was a ship that came down the west coast of Australia and nobody knew where it was and who it was. It was a mystery thing and it disappeared. But they were all on the alert because the WAAAF people over there .. in the book that I got later .. said that this night they all went to the trenches. And they were on the coast up near Learmonth. They went to the trenches and left the telephonist. He was the only one left .. you know .. to mind the phone. (laughter) But it didn't happen and was a bit scary ... the whole thing.

We were treated well I think. When war ended I had been in hospital with scarlet fever .. and another girl who is from Western Australia was in my ward. We were out of hospital by two days and there was this great celebration on VJ Day.

Marilyn: Where were you?

Lil: In Melbourne. In the heart of Melbourne. I've written it in my eulogy. It was a wonderful time. Everybody was celebrating and of course we were feeling a little bit weak. And my girlfriend who was with me clung onto a veranda post almost hysterical with laughter because she saw two sailors make a beeline for me and hug me ... and of course she got so amused because she could see this happening and I .. (laughter) But anyway that was the celebration, but we weren't out for another few months, because there were 22000 lasses in the WAAAF overall ... over 22000. But it was well worth the effort. I was given a vocational guidance test when I came out and I was offered a university place, but I knocked it back. I thought well it meant ... my home was a little humble place and I didn't want I felt that it wasn't me ..so I didn't go to uni. I should have, could have.

Marilyn: Did you find it difficult to settle in Gawler?

Lil: I did. Home for 6 weeks and it was so quiet without the company around you .. and I got a job down the South East as a house help looking after two children. Now I met them two years ago at Chowilla Station. He was 6 months old and his sister was three years old. And they were on a farm out of Naracoorte. I lasted three months there. It was a 24/7 job (laughter) and very good. I did well. I was kept busy. But then I went to Sydney thinking I would do a dress making course. Well! a gentleman in Adelaide hadn't forwarded my application. I received a letter saying that I was due to start in Adelaide. So, I raced into the headquarters in Sydney. They had to give you a job. I was given a job and I lasted three months. The humidity of Sydney nearly killed me (laughter). There was a little work room with no ventilation and it was hand sewing.

Marilyn: Did you wish you had taken the university course at that stage.

Lil: No. See I had friends. My WAAAF friends were there. And it was good. We used to meet.

Marilyn: Because you make very strong friendships when you are there.

Lil: And the last one only died last year.

We were like buddies. We were like two quiet country mice. And she was from far western New South Wales and I was from Gawler. Well, we were great friends. Anyway, over the years we didn't meet for a long time.

I eventually ... after I left this job .. it was in Kings Cross which horrified me at the start. People, just ordinary people live there like you and me and so, then I was given a job in the land sales control office. They really didn't have any work for me, but I had to be there ... and I was in to sewing so I made a suit for one of the office girls, and I had to give her a fitting in the lunch room. As we disappeared in there the big boss came through and they said we were just so lucky we weren't there. (laughter) Anyway I was supervised by my land lady. I lived at Burwood then for a few months, and this girl well, the suit suited her really well.

But then I was restless because there wasn't much to do and so I went nursing. I got a job at the Canterbury District Memorial Hospital. But, as I was a little bit older and had done domestic arts at high school, so I was back in the wards running while all the other girls went to their domestic arts lessons. It was very fruitful, and I was in the Intermediate ward of all operations. And I had to accompany people to the theatre and back again. But I got homesick and that was the end of it. I came home at the end of 47. Then I went with a friend up the River Murray on a working holiday. Everybody was happy. They all had jobs. It was a lovely time. And I met my husband there and his friend. My girlfriend ... I think this man proposed to her after she had been going with him for 5 weeks. That was a bit quicker than mine. (laughter) Then we married at the end of the year .. December of 1948. But we had work up there and my friend and I were offered a job at the packing shed after our stint of picking grapes. There were 12 of us. Some were from Queensland. This was on the property. And we said: " We don't want packing shed jobs, thank you." That was packing oranges for export to New Zealand .. in my job. The lot of us .. and everybody used to admire the engagement rings in lunch (laughter)

Marilyn: Flash them around(laughter)

Lil: But look. It was ... met some lovely people .. and then we settled at Loxton. But that was quite an experience. Learning to ...

Marilyn: Had your husband been ..?

Lil: He'd been in the army. But I didn't know him in the army. He had been discharged. He'd gone to west coast and he was in the middle of a paddock sewing wheat bags .. lonely after army life. And his friend said come over to the Riverland there is plenty of work here. So

first he went to a winery and they put him down big tanks to clean them and he didn't like that much. I think he lasted seven months ... and someone in the waterworks was calling for people ... and he was with the waterworks .. the EWS department and they were good to us. Mary was about three and a half when we came to Gawler. We moved from this area with our caravan and little place, but she cried for a week when we went to Loxton South. " I wanna go home". So hard .. she was about three. She's 67 now. (laughter) But yes .. it comes very easily.

I didn't go to any reunions for many years but when I did I've been to Adelaide, Sydney, and Hobart .. but there was always that rapport. Even though you didn't know the people you felt at ease with them.

Marilyn: You'd had the same experience. You had all been through the 6-week thing of ..

Lil: Oh, the rookies. And the Queenslanders always come beautifully in white slacks. In Sydney it was good .. I don't know that I knew the Adelaide people that went. But it was just a good experience.

Marilyn: It's amazing to me that at the beginning of the war you were a kid in Primary School and at the end of the war you were a young woman.

Lil: Yes, I know. And it was an honour. We felt very proud to serve our country and you felt safe in uniform. From Sydney I went for a weekend up to Katoomba and because I had a uniform on I felt safe .. and I climbed the Three Sisters ... a thousand steps up there and a seat every 25 to sit on. Yes. I wanted to see other places so ... and the first introduction was my friend Norma said: "well there's the coat hanger"... because we stayed at the YWCA for a few days while we had leave. "There's the old coat hanger", and that was the Sydney Harbour Bridge. When I think of it I don't think I would dare get about now like I did working in Sydney. I lived at Burwood and had to get the train in and walk up a street and be there by a certain time. And night time I was asked to work til nine and I think one night I was the only one in the work room ... finishing off whatever ... but I certainly didn't hang around when I got out. I went to the bus stop and got on the bus and wherever the train and got home. I was looked after.

And many years later I was working at my local high school here as an ancillary member of staff and a girl from the office said: "there's someone to see you". She had said to someone: "listen for the scream". There wasn't a scream but these people who had been my ... I was living in their house .. they were my landlords .. it was them.

Marilyn: They tracked you down.

Lil: They did. They knew. They had come to see their daughter who was a doctor .. and I didn't follow up. They were good to me. Though he used to chase me around the house a

bit and I certainly kept him at arm's length. (laughter) She complained because she was always sick and didn't have any family but, years later she had these two daughters. They were white haired .. a bit older than me but .. (laughter) it just goes to show how things will happen .. and years later you see them again. The same with these people at Chowilla, because I said who I was and "are they here today?" And I said:" The last time I saw him he was a six-month-old baby" and I said: "At Naracoorte I had to run out and bring the nappies in every afternoon". It rained and poured through winter. And to see him there and he's nearly 70 (laughter) Oh dear. No. It was a great thing. It was an open day up there, and there were hundreds of people, but a very dusty ride from Renmark out to the back blocks. Mary came with me because she loves oldy places ... and there was a flotilla of all the house boats on the river .. which was most interesting. We were on the one from Goolwa ... the Oscar. And the owner stood up the front .. the one with the big flag or trumpet playing it. But look, it was a lovely experience.

Marilyn: Thank you so much for talking with us today Lil. It was a fascinating account of the war from your perspective.

Lil: It's something that never leaves you. The rapport with others who have been in the Services and I'm lucky to have survived this long .. a matter of being happy and trying to stay happy now and content with my way of life.

Marilyn: That's your recipe for long life is it?

Lil: Thank you. Yes. I have been blessed really with good health .. so far. But things are slowing up. I mean I'm 91 now so

Marilyn: (laughter) You wouldn't think so. But I figured you had to be that age.

Lil: Yes. And we stopped marching. I used to march in the Adelaide march. Gradually the numbers dwindled, and we got a bit far to walk. I used to have quite a thrill because neighbours would be in the crowd and I'd hear these voices saying: "Hello Lil" out from the distance. But .. yeh.

Marilyn: Thanks. That's great.

Lil: My pleasure.

