Yamatji (Ngoonoro Wadjari) woman Sue Gordon is arguably one of the most high profile Aboriginal ex-servicewomen. She has led an incredibly full life: member of the Stolen Generations; raised at Sister Kate’s Home in Queens Park, Western Australia; service in the Women’s Royal Australian Army Corps (WRAAC); work in Pilbara Aboriginal communities; first Aboriginal magistrate in the Western Australian Children’s Court; chair of state and national inquiries; chair of the National Indigenous Council; chair of the Northern Territory Emergency Response Taskforce; and mother. Gordon credits much of her life trajectory to the discipline instilled in her through her upbringing and her service in the WRAAC. Hers is a compelling story about military service providing new opportunities but the individual being the one to seize them.

I was born in 1943 at Meekatharra, WA, but as a result of the government policies of the day, I was removed from my mother at the age of four in 1947. I was taken from Mount James Station out of Meekatharra and brought to Perth and

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1 This interview is available from the National Library of Australia (hereafter NLA), ORAL TRC 6260/5; reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Australia. It was recorded in Perth on 25 November 2010.
placed in a children’s cottage home, later known as Sister Kate’s Home.\(^2\) I have no memories of family. I think in modern-day terminology, post-traumatic stress would have wiped any memory of a four-year-old. When I got my government file in the 1990s, it had the letters from the police officers, who were the protectors of natives. They were keeping an eye on me from the age of two: ‘This light skinned child named Susie is being looked after, but should be removed’, and then the Commissioner of Natives writing back saying, ‘Yes, shouldn’t be living with natives. Should be brought up as a white person’. Two years of letters went between police and the Commissioner of Natives and it even included the station people. The decision was made that I was to be removed and the cold-hearted letters read along the lines of: ‘We should remove as quickly as possible. The mother will be upset, but they soon get over it’. They were words to that effect, but in the meantime, they were working behind the scenes to find out who my father was, so they could get maintenance out of him. They were better than the Australian Taxation Office and child support these days. They used all sorts of coercion to get him to accept that he was my father, right down to the fact that if he didn’t sign the form, his name would be published in the local paper; so he signed and then began to pay maintenance.

While all that was happening, I was removed from my brother. My eldest brother, Norman [deceased November 2013], he was six at the time – he can still see it. I don’t have any memory, but I was taken from Mount James, which was quite a few hours’ drive from Meekatharra proper, so the police came out and took me from my mother. My brother sees this and my mother’s going through whatever agony at that time was possible and I’m driven to Meekatharra. I’m handed across to a white lady called Mrs Webb from Mount Magnet and she and I are then put on the midnight train down to Meekatharra and to Perth over two days. Now, I don’t have any recollection of that whatsoever. But I didn’t go straight to Sister Kate’s. I went to what was then called the East Perth Receiving Home. That’s on Lord Street, here in Perth; the building’s still there. I was there overnight, so that meant I was given to more strangers and then the next day, people from Sister Kate’s came and collected me.

The funny part is some of the bigger girls who looked after me said, when I finally landed at Sister Kate’s in November 1947, I couldn’t speak English. I had desert blonde hair, candles hanging out of my nose, I had sandshoes on, no laces, no socks and what they called a little old gin dress. That’s the derogatory term for Aboriginal women. I used to defecate in the corners of the house and I was like a little feral animal, but I was four. As I said in the *Australian Story* on television, I’ve got grandchildren and I cannot in a million years imagine my

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four-year-old, any four-year-old grandchild, going through that and coming out the other end. Obviously, post-traumatic stress set in, so I only know that now because it’s in my file. We were told we were orphans, which was the practice of the day. When I was 14 there were actually people in the home who were my cousins, but you didn’t know that. You grew up with all these other kids and you basically became brothers and sisters in that sense, and they’re still my brothers and sisters today. I chair the organisation which is called Sister Kate’s Children 1934 to 1953 Aboriginal Corporation, and we’ve built aged persons units for those who want to return to the only home they ever knew.

The policies and the legislation were that children whose fathers were white were to be removed, but two weeks after I was taken away, a letter was in my file. My Uncle Tony Moncrieff, who’s passed away now, wrote a letter to the Commissioner asking could he have me and he’d bring me up as a white child. He would send me to school, because he was living under the White Act, the Dog Act, and they wrote back and said, ‘No, she can’t be living with natives’. He’s had to forego any relationships, like Albert Namatjira with his family, to be under the White Act, the exemption, and yet he’s told I can’t be brought up with natives.3 I took my Uncle Tony a copy of that letter in the mid-1990s, when I got my file. My late husband and I took it up to Carnarvon and he was tickled pink. He said, ‘You know, I didn’t write that letter’. I said, ‘Who did?’ He said, ‘Your aunty wrote it’, because he couldn’t read and write. We had a big laugh about that, but I gave him a copy. I’d just come back from Meekatharra and I’ve got cousins and more cousins and more cousins, but you know, family’s family. I think that’s what makes you a person. There are people I grew up with who never found their families.

I know all my family now and it’s really good. When I was 14, one of the girls found a letter in the office addressed to me and so I read the letter. There’s a photo of this stockman, not that I knew what a stockman was, standing tall. He must have been in his early 20s and said he was my brother, Joe. I went down to the office and said, ‘Oh, I’ve got this letter’. ‘What do you mean, you’ve got this letter?’ ‘Oh, well, I got this letter from the office and this man says he’s my brother’. One of the girls from Sister Kate’s, whom I knew, Pearl, had said where I was. The letter was taken off me and ripped up and said, ‘No, that’s what these natives do. They’ll tell you lies. You don’t have a family’. So that was the trigger.

Thirty years later, when a 16-year-old nephew came into the Commonwealth Employment Service where I was working in Port Hedland in the mid-1970s, said he was my nephew and I said, ‘Well, I don’t have any family’. Then it triggered, this letter, and I asked him if I had a brother Joe, and he said, ‘My uncle Joe’.

I now know all my family, I know who I am, I know where I’m from so I’m a complete person. I knew my mother for 11 years. It’s a strange thing to say: I only knew my mother for 11 years. I never knew my father at all. I know who my father is because my mother told me before she passed away, and of course it is in my government file. She came down to me to die in Perth and she asked me not to make any contact and I won’t. I know who they all are. They didn’t want anything to do with me as a kid, so why bother? But my grandkids want to know the family tree, so it’s all there, warts and all for them to follow up if they want to. My kids know, too; they will have the files when I die.

In Sister Kate’s we were basically brought up in a little English setting. We lived in group houses, not dormitories, and we were brought up in steps and stairs. Boys and girls mixed. We went to church each day, brought up as little Anglicans. We learnt how to cook, sew and clean because we were being trained as domestics. Some kids knew that they were related, but we weren’t told we were Aboriginal. We knew that we were different to the kids across the road at the school. When we got to school, we used to get the name calling – the niggers, boongs, all that sort of stuff, or arky arky little darky. But we were told to ignore them, so we developed a bit of a buffer in as much as we were all in the home, so we called ourselves the Home Kids and still do. The kids who lived outside the home were called the Outside Kids.

In the 1940s Aboriginal people weren’t allowed to go to school by law, but Sister Kate just went across the road and demanded that her kids be allowed to go to school. She wanted an education for us, which we are so grateful that we were allowed to do that. In 2005, about 60 of us went to the 100th anniversary of the Queens Park Primary School, which was just across the road from Sister Kate’s. I gave a speech on behalf of the Sister Kate’s kids about our experiences at the school and the home. Then the other kids, Outside Kids, were talking after the speeches and to us about how jealous they were of us. We thought, ‘Hello? Why are you jealous?’ – because we always had someone to play with. A lot of those kids were from single child families and there were anytime up to 80 kids where we were, and there was always someone to play with. When you’re playing with a big mob of kids, it’s really great fun. You’re playing rounders or you’re going down the creek or whatever; we just took it for granted.

We didn’t realise that people were envious of us. We used to whinge about the meals, but if you look at when I first went there, 1947, it was just after the war. Everybody was doing it hard. We were a charitable institution and everything was donated. We had a farm at Kenwick where the boys, as they got bigger, went and they grew all the vegetables and everything like that. We had our own cows, so we had fresh milk. We had big veggie gardens and chooks at Sister Kate’s in Queens Park, plus the Kenwick one, so we weren’t that badly off, but we were deprived of any contact with families.
Sister Kate (who was from a wealthy family in Bath, England, and was named Katherine Mary Clutterbuck) started the institution in 1934, but prior to that she’d been at Parkerville. She’d come out in the early 1900s from England with some waifs from the streets of London and some other Anglican sisters. They’d started Parkerville, which was in the wilderness. It’s just the hills now, prime real estate, and when she turned 70, Archbishop Le Fanu told her she was too old and she should go into retirement. Being a nice nun, she didn’t tell him to get stuffed. She just went with her benefactor Miss Phoebe Ruth Lefroy, from a very big farming family, who had 40 acres out at Queens Park, 10 kilometres from the central business district now. They were at Buckland Hill first; they began the home for kids, and she wrote to the Commissioner of Natives and said she’d take the lighter-skinned kids because no one wanted them. You have to look at history as well, not just the policies and the legislation of the day. The policies and the legislation were to remove the kids, but also in Aboriginal society those kids were shunned because they were white kids in their eyes. This was not in every tribal grouping, but in quite a lot. We were there and Sister Kate started the institution just to take the lighter-skinned kids, but she’d had all that experience at Parkerville and then she started to look after us. Sister Kate died in 1946 and then Miss Phoebe Ruth Lefroy continued running the place until her death in 1953. Because of the argument with the Anglican Church, she bequeathed the property to the Presbyterian Church, which went on to become the Uniting Church.

I was there in that crossover period, so in 1953, when the Presbyterians came in, they changed all the rules. There was abuse, but not when Sister Kate was in. Sister Kate did not allow men into the home; they could do the manual work in the daytime then had to leave. So there were only women looking after the kids and they were usually trusted people she’d brought from Parkerville with her. So then the type of house mothers, as they were called, changed. They became very short-term people; they came and went with complete abandon, no thought about the kids. They often came in between husbands. They had their own kids. Some of their kids abused the kids from Sister Kate’s. Some of Sister Kate’s kids who went out to placements, where they used to put the kids out for holidays, were abused there. Kids went out to work, even some my age and older, on farms where they were abused. Then men were allowed in the home and there was some abuse. I wasn’t abused, not that I recall being abused. We were abused inasmuch at school; everyone got the cane and we used to get the strap, so physical abuse was rife, but it was rife across the country. Sexual abuse was the other one that people talk about, so there are a lot of people who went through that experience and then there was abuse among children. There’s always abuse among children. There are always bully kids. We had a couple of girls who were bullies. That’s as far as abuse goes in my case.
There were a lot of Aboriginal people who used to come to the gates of Sister Kate’s to see people because it was a bush block. There would be families who would go into the bush and the kids would run over there to see them. But because I was from Meekatharra, there were none of my family in Perth. I didn’t have any contact at all, but others, the Nyoongar people of the southwest who are around Perth areas, some of their families were able to see them.
We were sent out to work in the school holidays when we got into high school. I used to go to Dalkeith, which is a very posh suburb here. They had a full-time housekeeper, who was a Sister Kate’s girl. She was on her annual holiday, but she didn’t go overseas or anything like that. She just went and stayed with another Sister Kate’s girl because they didn’t get enough money to go anywhere. I went in as the live-in childcare girl. I wasn’t the cleaner, but I was there to look after the two kids while the lady of the house did her own thing, and that was quite enjoyable. The kids I was minding were totally spoilt and there were other kids in the area from St Joseph’s Orphanage and some other Sister Kate’s kids that were with other families doing the same as me.

As we were getting a little bit older, they used to try and put kids into homes for weekends and the holidays. That was after Sister Kate. I used to go out to a few places. I remember one place wanted to adopt me, but I didn’t know what adopt meant and no one explained anything to you. I can recall the experience on Christmas Day. It was lovely to go because you were going to get a better meal than probably at home. I think we were very selfish children in that way. I went to this place and I woke up in the morning and I remembered getting on my bed a brand new Raggedy Ann doll. I was overcome with joy because everything at Sister Kate’s for Christmas was broken and second-hand. We got one thing that was probably new in our little box on the end of our bed. But it was a charitable home, so in hindsight you have to look at it from that point of view. I was excited and I ran into the other girl in the house because I was going to be adopted and be her sister, not that I knew anything about all that. She had on the end of her bed the most magnificent bride doll, so in my little ten-year-old eyes, I could see that there was a difference, and on Christmas Day I demanded to go home. I was taken home, lots of tears, and I was sent to bed without any lunch and told how ungrateful I was. I didn’t know what any of all of this was about; I just knew I didn’t want to be there. Years later, I mentioned it to the superintendent (Mrs Minors), who said, ‘But you would have had an opportunity’. I said, ‘But I wouldn’t have had an opportunity because I would have always been the second-hand rose’. Anyway, I had some delightful placements where I just went for a holiday.

I had a group of people called Toc H. They were formed after the First World War and the ladies of Toc H were mostly spinsters; that’s a quaint old word, isn’t it? They used to take me out for picnics and overnight. I used to go to South Perth—a lovely little spot. I learnt with these genteel ladies about having English high tea, and they did a lot of charitable work. Anything new I got was from these ladies—mostly knitted jumpers, twin sets—and they looked after me. The Toc H as a group, men and women, used to come out once a month to Sister Kate’s and show movies in the old kindergarten. We used to call them our ladies, so I used to have them as my ladies. Somebody else would go off with another group of
people. There'd be annual picnics where we'd go with the Buffalo Club to the zoo. We'd be put with a family, so in a lot of ways Sister Kate and Miss Lefroy were giving us as much taste of life as they could possibly give us. But we were still being trained to be domestics and farm hands.

I was in that crossover. Just before Miss Lefroy died, if you weren’t doing well at school, you were sent out to work. So girls went out to work at 12, 13, and boys too. Once the Presbyterians came in, if you started to do okay at school you could stay. I started high school with seven kids and I think three or four of us finished. The others were sent out to work, and I still hate domestic work. There was no way was I going to be one of those. And then I was lucky. When I was in third-year high school I had a typing teacher (Mrs Scurry) who thought that there was some promise because I liked typing. It was one of those things you just take to, and she got me a scholarship to business college. So that was my out.

I went to Underwood Business College, but Sister Kate's weren't happy about that because they had to find money in a charitable institution to give me a weekly train fare into Perth and that was £1 in 1959. That was a lot of money – a whole pound. That was my weekly train fare, so I had to take my lunch and I used to meet up at lunchtime with some of the other girls who were working in the city. I did well at business college because I wanted to, and those were the days where business college guaranteed you a job. My first job where I got paid was with the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, as they used to be called [now the Australian Bureau of Statistics]. It was a year of a census and I spent three months just typing up forms. No computers – nothing – and I’m typing up all of these things. This was 1959–60, and then when that job finished, they automatically got me another job at Skipper Bailey Motor Company, up in the top of Hay Street. It doesn’t exist there now. They sold Hillmans, Humbers, Super Snipes and that’s the days there were no crassy car yards; only a genteel type of customer came in. By now I was a junior stenographer, so I also had to learn how to make morning teas for the board, those little old white-haired gentlemen who came in once a month to have a board meeting. Because of my training with the Toc H ladies, I knew how to make all of that. I used to think it was a waste of time, though, cutting morning-tea cake wafer thin. But I had to do that and they trained me hard there, but that was the old school. When you went to work, you went to work. I had to get to work half an hour early to put the urn on because I also had to make the morning teas. Then the junior boy and I had to take the mail up to the post office and we had to run, because we were timed by the head lady in the office.

I enjoyed that experience, but there was something missing and I had to get out of Sister Kate’s because as soon as you worked, you had to leave. You weren’t encouraged to stay. There was nowhere I could stay. I had become by now
a Ward of the State because my father had shot himself Christmas Day in 1951. I had to find accommodation, so I wrote to the Welfare and said could they find me accommodation without children, because I’d had enough of all these kids. I told them not to go to Sister Kate’s and tell them, but they went straight to the Home, so my trust in the welfare system and social workers just went out the window. I’ve never had any real trust because they couldn’t keep the confidentiality of a child as I was still then. So Sister Kate’s said, ‘We’ll find you a place’, and I said, ‘No. I’ll find something’. The pressure was on me, and by now I was 17. I went up into North Perth as it used to be called, now Northbridge, and I was in Francis Street and they had the Army barracks there and the recruiting office. I went in and it sounded all exciting. They were going to pay me and send me to Sydney. Where’s Sydney, you know?

I went back home and I said I was going to join the Army and Mr Daniels, the superintendent, said, ‘Well, you can’t because you’re not 18’. I said, ‘No, when I’m 18. Then I’ll have accommodation, because this has got accommodation’, and he said, ‘Well, there’s some terrible people’, and he started to tell me about bad men. I said, ‘Well, you were in the Army’. God, I must have been cheeky. He huffed and puffed and he said, ‘Well, we won’t allow it’. Now, I don’t have a birth certificate, like a lot of Aboriginal people my age. My birth was never registered anywhere but I got a letter from Sister Kate’s. You can’t do that these days, just get a letter. I’ve still got that letter that says, according their records, I was born on this date. I posted that off to the Army and then when I was 18, I went and I said, ‘Now I’m not a Ward of the State anymore. I’m going to join the Army. I’ve been and signed the papers. But I need a letter from you to say that I am 18. That has to confirm it and if you do that, then I’ve got to fly to Sydney’. The day I joined the Army [19 October 1961], I joined with another Perth girl who was escaping alcoholic parents. There was another young non-Aboriginal girl who just wanted a bit of adventure, and twins, whose father was a policeman. This was the Women’s Royal Australian Army Corps.4 I’m still friends with them. All these years later and I see the twins on Anzac Day. One marches and one doesn’t.

So off we went on this great adventure and Sister Kate’s reluctantly took me to the airport. I’d never been on a plane. I didn’t even know where Sydney was and we were all frightened. We had our worldly possessions in our suitcase and we were put on this plane to Sydney by the Army and met by the Army. Then the

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4 The Women’s Royal Australian Army Corps (WRAAC), formed in February 1951, was the successor to the Second World War’s Australian Women’s Army Service (AWAS). The force had a similar role as its AWAS predecessor: to employ women in non-combat capacities to free male labour. WRAAC was disbanded in 1984 as women were fully integrated in the regular forces. For a history of WRAAC, see Janette Bomford Soldiers of the Queen: Women in the Australian Army (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001); Lorna Ollif, Colonel Best and her Soldiers: The Story of 33 Years of the Women’s Royal Australian Army Corps (Hornsby, NSW: Ollif Publishing Company, 1985).
yelling and jumping around started at Middle Head in Mosman, New South Wales. I didn’t find it difficult because I’d been brought up in an institution and you get six weeks when you first join the Army. If they liked you or you didn’t like them, you could go and no one was to suffer. I just found it rather good because the meals weren’t bad, they paid me, they gave me a uniform, the girls were okay; they were just like kids from Sister Kate’s. In the six weeks we were there, three or four girls went home because they couldn’t handle it. We learnt how to march; we learnt how to salute the goal post because you have to practise saluting. You learnt the military history. You learnt how to spit and polish your shoes. You learnt how to do heavy domestic work. Well that wasn’t anything new; I’d already done that – cleaning, cooking, those sort of things.

Then you learnt all about the facts of life. Now, I was a little virgin and here I am suddenly in this man’s Army, Women’s Royal Australian Army Corps it was called, and they then had to give us educational level lessons about venereal diseases. Oh warts and all – all in this one room and there’s a movie screen up, and suddenly you’re seeing genital STIs [sexually transmitted infections] in full colour on the screen, and everyone’s going, ‘Oh my God!’ But we had to sit and watch that and then we had to ask questions. We had to understand these were possibilities and that if you had sexual intercourse, this was going to happen. Whoa, oh my God! It would put you off for life. They wouldn’t show these in schools today. The training was designed to get you disciplined. But I already had discipline because that came from Sister Kate’s, so I can’t say the training was outrageous. We did march in the middle of the rain because Army always seems to want you to march in the rain, three, four or 10 miles with a great big poncho on – a ground sheet, it’s called – but it never covers every bit of you. Women’s Royal Australian Army Corps didn’t do weapons training, so we were then going off to individual units for the next training.

The Army asks you, ‘Where would you like to go?’ ‘What are these choices?’ But you don’t actually get a choice; they just send you anywhere, but it looks nice that you’re asked. My mate Lyn and I, because we’d both had office backgrounds, got sent to Signals in Victoria, which was then called 403 Sig Regiment. Lyn and I went off to Signals, the twins went off to become drivers, and Gail went off to do something else. Lyn and I ended up at 403 Sig Regiment in Watsonia, but we were living at 21 WRAAC Barrack in St Kilda Road in Melbourne, and it was an old mansion, converted to barracks.

Once there we learnt about prostitutes. We learnt about lesbians. We didn’t even know what they were. We were told not to wear white shoes in St Kilda Road and we couldn’t work out why. We’re young women and we wanted to wear white shoes with our nice summery dresses. We found out that the prostitutes used to walk up and down St Kilda Road in white shoes so the curb crawlers would know who they were – valuable lessons being learnt. We also learnt
about lesbians. I had no idea about lesbians and some girls in the know, in the barracks, put you in touch very quickly: ‘Make sure you don’t let this one or this one get you in a room on their own, because you’re green as grass’. ‘And what’s green as grass?’ So you learnt all about those things very quickly.

We were sent off to work. Because we were going into Signals, we went to Mount Martha on the Mornington Peninsula. The Army had acres and acres of land up there. We lived in Mount Martha in this old guesthouse just for the women and we went each day with the men in Signals training because of our background in office work. We learnt to be teleprinter operators. Later we also learnt how to become cipher operators, which is ‘Shhh – if I tell you, I’ll have to kill you’. We then became the elite in Signals. When we went back to our unit, we worked shift work in the big tape relay centres, which were as long as this building. Today, you can put on a chip in a computer. We became special people working shifts, but then the cipher people worked in another room, which was always locked and only certain people were allowed into that room. I became a cipher operator and because we were specialists, Lyn and I were also sent to Perth in 1962 for the Empire Games to do the communications with AAP Reuters, and we also got sent up to Sydney to Dundas to do the cipher work for the boys when they were on exercise in the field. We got a fair bit of special treatment and a bit of liberty because we were cipher operators. Cipher operators are sort of cream Signal regiments. You have to be a bit special. You’d work on a shift on your own, so you’d be there bloody 12 hours on your own, but all of that training was about discipline. I say it now: ‘That discipline from Sister Kate’s and the discipline from the Army is what gets me now’.

One interesting thing was in Cipher and in the Signals centre. When you’re doing shifts round the clock, you’re getting signals from around the world. I was on duty with others when the Cuban Missile Crisis hit the fan. There are these tapes, spewing out. Now, you’ve seen old movies, where these tape relay machines are there and they spit this tape out. As part of our training, we had to learn to read the holes in those tapes. That’s the Murray Code. You could read these tapes without any typing on them because you’d learnt that. These tapes are spewing out and they’ve got the code on them, which is the highest, and I think, ‘Oh my God!’ It was not just me; the duty shift sergeant was having a fit as well, and that meant calling higher-ranking people out to come to see all this. But we were on duty when the Cuban Missile Crisis hit the fan – John F. Kennedy and all.

They were probably highlights and being sent across for the Empire Games was another one. We came across to Perth on a troop train with all the SAS boys in second-class travel, because the Army was always second class. I’m a trained touch typist; I’m still a fast typist, first as a junior stenographer and then in the Army we went on to teleprinters. We used the teleprinters at all the venues
around Perth: the velodrome, where the cycling was, and Perry Lakes, where most of the events were. We actually were seconded to AAP Reuters and we had to type up all the results. We were typing flat out. We typed up all of AAP’s results and then they were just fed into the system for overseas. We also had a bit of a holiday while we were over here and then we were sent back to the eastern states on the train again.

We learnt another skill, as most Army people do. For women, if you were coming home on your own, you could come on the train first class or they would fly you home for your leave. But if you were travelling with somebody else, you travelled second class and you didn’t fly; you came on the train. So Lyn and I used to plan our leave so she went on leave a week after me, so we could still be on leave here, but we came first class on the train. I suppose it’s called just using and abusing the system. We had a really good time. We made so many friends. We went out together with people and you’ve got to remember too, it was also six o’clock closing at pubs and so we used to get signed into clubs. Someone would sign you into a club down the dives of Melbourne, which is now Southbank. It was a pretty divey country then; you’ve got your Crown Casino there now, but it just used to be quite seedy down in South Melbourne and there were the clubs there. During the time in the Army, you could stay in any state at the Army Club. Accommodation was quite cheap, but you also made these long-term friends, males and females, Army, Navy and Air Force.

I can still remember we used to go to a lot of parties when the Navy were in. They would send an invitation to the girls from the barracks to come down, have a party. It wasn’t about sex and all of that, or drugs, because I don’t know if there were many drugs around. There was alcohol. I remember going to a party on HMAS Voyager, the ship that was sunk by the HMAS Melbourne. When that accident happened, I could recall going to this party and some of those boys that we would have met there would have died in that accident. When we lived in St Kilda Road, Dell, who was from Queensland, was our driver. There were Lyn and I and a couple of others who used to go out to Watsonia every day for work before we moved to Watsonia. Dell also became friends with all the mounted police in St Kilda Road. She used to get us invites to the parties out at the police stables. They had good parties out there. Then there were times, because of our top secret clearance ranking, Lyn and I used to work in Vic Barracks in the centre room there, which is now Defence Signals Directorate.

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5 The HMAS Melbourne and HMAS Voyager collided on 10 February 1964, killing 82 sailors and leading to a royal commission.
Figure 4. Sue Gordon, Lance Corporal in WRAAC, Signals-Cipher operator, 1963
Source: Courtesy Sue Gordon
When I was in the WRAAC there was no sexism or gender discrimination. There was not in those days because we were in designated women’s type roles and promotions were set for women only. In the WRAAC you weren’t being promoted in the male section and we had female officers. We were 403 Signal Regiment. There was a male colonel in charge of the whole area, but in my area of Cipher, I had a male and a female officer in charge of that. The shift sergeant was a male, so you worked with them because you were all in Signals. Even now, it’s quite funny – if I march on Anzac Day the guys from Sigs always yell, ‘Listen, girls. If you don’t get the numbers, come and join us’, because we were all signallers, so it’s like a big family. Nowadays if I’ve got a problem – there are two groups of people and it’s probably a bit sad. I will talk to somebody from Sister Kate’s or somebody from the Army. I’ve told my own brothers and sisters and they said, ‘Well, that’s who you grew up with’.

I remember one particularly funny time in the Army. You’ve got to remember you’re talking about 1961 to 1964, and there were ‘reds under the bed’. I used to play basketball for a civilian club outside of the barracks. One of the girls I played basketball with was living with one of the Army boys in the barracks, who was a friend of mine and I can remember having ambitions in the Army. Although I was at the top in Cipher and I didn’t want to go to another regiment, I thought I would like to get into Intelligence one day. I can still remember it, and it’s not covered under the Official Secrets Act or anything, but I got a message that I had to go up in full uniform while I was off shift. I had to go in full uniform to the Colonel’s office and there were some people from Intelligence who needed me to go before the Intelligence Corps people. It is like going before the Spanish Inquisition; it is sort of scary. But I thought, ‘Ooh, they might want me to join them’ – naive little person. I marched in there, because you’ve got to march and salute everywhere, and there are these three people sitting there and they needed to ask me some questions about people I was mixing with. It turned out that Pat, whom I was playing basketball with, was living with one of the boys. She and I played basketball, but she was a known Communist. I didn’t even know what a Communist was. Intelligence put me through the third degree, asked me these questions and then told me there was nothing I could do about it; I was not to have anything more to do with her. I’m playing basketball in a team that was winning, and how do I do this? I had to stop playing basketball. I couldn’t say anything. I couldn’t say that I’d been told; it’s very hard, but I had to manage that part of my life. So when I went back to my mate, Lyn, because we shared rooms, she said, ‘What did they want?’ I said, ‘I got told off. I’m not allowed to play basketball. I have to pull out cause Pat’s a Communist. What’s a Communist?’ That was very severe in hindsight, which is always wonderful. I’m in Cipher, which is hush-hush secret. I had a top secret clearance and so they were obviously frightened for me. I told this story at an 80th Signal Regiment dinner in Perth a few years ago and they said, ‘Who was it? Who was it?’ and
I said, ‘Not telling you’. Anyway, it was Rory; Pat was his girlfriend. I found out years later in the Pilbara what a Communist was when old Don McLeod said he was a known Communist and they’d kept an eye on him.6

Figure 5. Sue Gordon, front row, second from left, captain of the netball team, Southern Command WRAAC, 1963 or 1964
Source: Courtesy Sue Gordon

I didn’t have any problems in the Army. There was obviously a little bit of racism. There wasn’t overt racism. There was racism in as much as I think there were some people who weren’t sure why Aboriginal people (some still called us natives) were being allowed in. I used to say to people, ‘I grew up in an institution with a lot of Aboriginal people who are put there from their families’. And I said, ‘A lot of boys I grew up with went to war’. And I said, ‘I joined the Army because I needed somewhere to go’. I didn’t know much about it, but I had name calling all my life, so it was just more name calling, but I didn’t have a lot. I think it was because of the nature of the work that I was doing; you weren’t really in the run of the mill areas. I made a lot of firm friends and I’m still very good friends with most people I joined up with. You’ve got to remember that we were all 18.

6 Don McLeod was a member of the Communist Party of Australia who was active in Indigenous politics, especially in the Pilbara region. See Don McLeod, How the West Was Lost: The Native Question in the Development of Western Australia (Port Hedland, WA: Don McLeod, 1984).
We were very young people and very impressionable, and then we watched a lot of the boys go off to Vietnam. Some of them went to Borneo first with the SAS. It was no different to the boys that I’d grown up with, but I was growing up with these boys in the Army and some married within the Army. I eventually married an SAS Signaller, my first husband. Not all of them worked out. I think it’s because you’re working 24-7 sometimes with people; you think that’s how it’s going to be.

I met up with a few other Stolen Generations and other Aboriginal people in the Army. I had contact with a man that had a lot of difficulties; he was from the Northern Territory. He was accepted in the Army. One of the Aboriginal men who wasn’t in my unit but was in Signals went to Vietnam and he was very popular with his fellow soldiers. He had racism because he was from the Northern Territory. One of the Aboriginal girls I served directly with, she was from South Australia. She had a lot of racism because she was pretty dark and she took offence. She only did three years, too. She got out and I don’t know what happened to her after that. What I saw were just taunts. When I say taunts, I mean name calling: ‘Oh, hurry up, ya boong’ – things that actually hurt without thinking about it. When I look at the era, those people who were making those comments, that’s how they were brought up. Their families would have acted like that, and it wouldn’t have meant anything. There were lots of other Aboriginal servicemen and women, but I didn’t serve directly with them.

My contacts were with the boys that I grew up with at Sister Kate’s. I was the only girl from Sister Kate’s who joined the Army. A lot of the boys did, because we had boys from Sister Kate’s in the Second World War and in Korea. We had five in Korea; some were in Malaya and Vietnam, and now some of our grandchildren are in Afghanistan. We have a big history, a proud history at Sister Kate’s, and we had this function a few years ago up at Bruce Rock with John Schnaars of Honouring Indigenous War Graves. One of the Sister Kate’s Korean veterans was going around to the different ones, finding out who’s holding medals for someone deceased. He could get them mounted and then he was checking up who was related to whom and he said, ‘Now, we’re all brothers and sisters, so we’re entitled to wear someone else’s medals’, but on the right side. When we rocked up to Bruce Rock for the function, which was part of the ‘Back to the Bush – Vietnam Veterans’ weekend, I think there were about half a dozen of the Sister Kate’s kids, all wearing medals. Some wore their own medals and others were wearing them for one of the Sister Kate’s brothers or sisters who had passed away. It was really a proud moment, because we’ve always called ourselves brothers and sisters. It just sort of changes the whole history of medal wearing, but it is how we view it.

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7 See Chapter 5.
That was the Army and I did three years from 1961 to 1964. They wanted me to stay in the Army. I found it an interesting experience, but I was not ready to sign my life away. After three years I’d been promoted to a lance corporal, one stripe, and in charge of a shift and then offered another stripe to stay in, but I needed to travel. I’d got the bug and so I said, ‘No, thank you’. Once I was out of the Army, after working in the office in Myer, Melbourne, for three months, I went to Queensland and worked up in Lennon’s Hotel. I’d been up to Queensland with one of the girls who got out of the Army and her grandmother put me up and I got a job as a ledger machinist. The ledger machine has all these keyboards; it was this great machine that used to feed all these numbers into it and accounts. At the end of every month, you had to balance all the accounts. Skipper Bailey Motor Company had trained me to operate the machine (you can now do the same job on a laptop), so I walked into this job and I worked shifts there. I told them I would only stay for one year, and it was a very classy hotel. It was the hotel in Brisbane and it’s a small boutique hotel now. It’s not the same as it was in those days and it was a family. The manager of the hotel insisted that all the girls who worked evening shift got sent home in a taxi. It didn’t matter if you were the barmaid or the ledger machinist.

I was in the office, but if you wanted to rotate through to understand the hotel, that was fine. It was part of the practice. I spent a week in the cocktail lounge, learning how to make cocktails with the girls there. Then I went into the kitchen to see how the kitchens operate and it actually paid benefits to the hotel. In the office, you would get the dockets for the functions and you would have been up in the kitchen and you then knew how everything worked up there by the time you got the dockets. It was interesting and everything ran so smoothly on the surface, but ducks disease behind. Little feet were going flat out and I recall two incidents at the hotel in 12 months.

One of the major things was I said to my boss, ‘My best friend is getting married in Tasmania. I can’t afford the airfare down, but I need to go because I’m going to be her bridesmaid but I will be coming back’. Now, people trusted you in those days. This was 1965, and he said, ‘That’s okay, Sue. We’ll pay your fare’. I’d only been at the hotel for about five months. So they paid my return airfare to Tasmania and I came back and I finished the 12 months and I paid the money back. So much trust people had; they looked after the staff.

One incident happened when I was up the kitchen doing my little week. I just was observing how they were. There’s the kitchen. There are all the function rooms. There are the different chefs for all the different things and then there is the lady who sits and every meal’s got to go past her. So she’s putting in the dockets and they’re getting done. In those days, they used to put them in the little tube and – shwoop – suck them down and they’d end up in the office. I’m sitting there with Mrs Mac and there are two big function rooms
nearby. I’d been to see one function room, which had the most magnificent swan sculptured out of butter, and another swan carved out of ice. There was pomp and ceremony to take food out. The little apprentice chefs in their little checked pants and white tops were coming out with the big platter with the pig on it. Mrs Mac’s checking it off to send to that function room number, and the head chef is coming behind the boys. One apprentice tripped and fell. The pig went on the ground, the apprentice’s bawling, the chef gives him a quick one behind the ear: ‘Get up, you stupid boy! Pick the pig up!’ He put the pig back up on tray. They used to have these brown paper heavy duty funnels on the bottom for piping. They used to pipe mashed potato around for decoration, so by now the pig’s back on the tray, apple’s back in its mouth, chef’s got a bit of greenery on and he’s piping more potato around it, on the pig. Then the kids walked in ceremoniously into the dining room. No one would have known what happened, except us, the observers. This pig’s been on the ground. That’s the goings on in a hotel. Another time I was on day shift and had arrived early one morning; we were told that there was a flood on the mezzanine floor. What happens in a flood? It happened just after midnight and up until seven in the morning, there were these big removal vans pulled up outside the front of Lennon’s Hotel. Without batting an eyelid, these removalist people were coming down with dripping wet carpet, down the side of the big balcony, the staircase, just down one side, dripping on plastic, out into the vans to take it away. In the meantime, guests are coming and going and the hotel’s running as if nothing’s happening. But you could see it all.

After 12 months work at the hotel I came back to Perth. I owed Sister Kate’s some money because before I went to join the Army, I had a Vespa scooter bike and I hadn’t paid it off. I stopped off in Sydney to see Bob and Meg Simpson first, to catch up and because I had stayed with Meg when Bob went to play cricket in South Africa in 1958/59. Bob Simpson used to teach the boys from Sister Kate’s how to play cricket. The institution said I had to come and cut the money out, so I went back to Sister Kate’s for three months and I worked looking after little Aboriginal kids. It was the most appalling time of my life because here was me thinking I’m this woman of the world by now, and I am looking after these kids who were probably the same as I was when I was placed in Sister Kate’s.

I then got a job with NASA in Carnarvon, at the tracking station. The Amalgamated Wireless of Australia was the subcontractor and they were looking for a teleprinter operator. I didn’t even know where Carnarvon was, but I found out later that my uncle, all my cousins and everyone were there. I applied for this job and I went in there and I had a quasi-interview. They just said, ‘When can you go to Carnarvon?’ Sort of like, ‘Today?’ So within days, I was on the plane to go to Carnarvon. They used to take eight hours on the plane to go to Carnarvon on old DC-3s because you’d go everywhere.
I rocked up into Carnarvon in early 1966. The tracking station was doing the first of the Manned Space Flights. They’d done the Gemini and then they were doing the first of the Apollo Manned Space Flights and I was employed in the communication centre. When I first went there, my old staff sergeant was in charge and everyone else in there was ex-Army. There were ex-Air Force around the USB radar section and some other navy people were there. It was basically all ex-military, and American and English technical experts, because we all had the top secret clearances. We used to do 16-hour shifts when the spacecraft was in our area, coming across the horizon. We lived in Carnarvon at the old Port Hotel owned by later federal MP Wilson Tuckey. We were basically isolated from Carnarvon people because we worked terrible long hours. But that was our job, and it was fascinating. The space commander’s talking to us, as they’re going over the horizon. Again, the Army had given me that discipline and training and I just walked in that job.

When I was in Carnarvon at the tracking station, I played basketball again. I was actually playing basketball against my cousins. They knew who I was but didn’t want to say anything because they were too embarrassed. Years later, I just saw one of the cousins up there and I said to her, ‘You know, you mob could have said something’. ‘No, no. We were too embarrassed’. That was the sort of thing that happened. I was at the tracking station working for NASA during the 1967 Referendum. At the time it annoyed me what was happening in Carnarvon with the Aboriginal conditions that were there, but I had not known that I didn’t have any rights, if you know what I mean. I’d been in the Army. I’d had a lot of freedoms; I wasn’t restricted. I went to pubs and clubs. I didn’t appreciate the fact that I wasn’t supposed to be doing those things because no one actually openly told me I shouldn’t as an Aboriginal woman. There were probably some veiled hints, but nothing open.

For nearly two years I worked for NASA. Then I came back to Perth and got married. My husband was in Signals in Melbourne at Watsonia in another unit, and then he was accepted into the SAS. We then got married in Melbourne and his mum was the only mother I had for 15 years, before my family found me. His mum and dad took me in basically and they paid for my wedding. That’s a bit of a weird one, isn’t it? We then moved to Perth as he was still in the SAS, and then he decided he was going to get out. That was with the beginning of mining in the north-west, so he got a job at Goldsworthy. He got out and I was working in the office at Western Australian Leather Goods in East Perth. I was the only girl in the office there and doing everything: ledger, machining, typing – the whole lot. Rick got this job and said we were going

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to go to Port Hedland: ‘Where’s Port Hedland?’ We went up to Port Hedland and we were with Goldsworthy Mining. I had two boys both born in Hedland, 1969 and 1971.

We went back to Melbourne a couple of times and then we went to Wickham, out of Roebourne. We even lived in Newman for a short stint. That was when I first went to Jigalong to see if the Welfare had any record of my time spent there before Sister Kate’s. It was the most appalling time; the Welfare worker virtually stayed behind the wire fence and told me there were no records. I worked half days with the Ieramugadu Group in Roebourne for the local Aboriginal people and half days for the Welfare. That was my first contact with traditional Aboriginal people and that’s the first time people said to me, ‘Well, there’s nobody who hasn’t got a family’. Alice Smith [now deceased], whom I call Aunty Alice, said to me, ‘You must have family’. She’s the first one who said to me in the ’70s, ‘Your family’s in Meekatharra’. I said, ‘I don’t have a family’, and I was denying it. I’m working with these wonderful traditional people in Roebourne and learning all these beaut things about people. I was learning all the hard facts about how isolated Roebourne was, as against mining, because Wickham was a closed town then. I would go home each evening to a three-bedroom, air-conditioned house, paid a pittance rent and I could see the poverty in Roebourne, so I was seeing this. We stayed there and then we went back to Melbourne and then we were thinking about getting a divorce and then I went to Hedland. I drove to Melbourne twice with two little kids in an old Falcon from Port Hedland. All the time, when I was getting a divorce, my first husband’s parents took my side: ‘There’s always a place here for you’. Rick had come back from Vietnam. He’d been to Borneo. He was seeing first-hand death before he was 20 and he had post-traumatic stress disorder, but none of us knew that. No one knew what post-traumatic stress was. He had malaria really bad. We were both drinking too much. If we’d known about post-traumatic stress then, if they’d have had treatment, I think in hindsight you don’t know how things would have been. At that same time, I’m working with Aboriginal people and people are telling me I’ve got a family. So I’m finding my Aboriginality and he’s going through post-traumatic stress and trying to hold down a job. You can see how bad it must have been for both of us.

We divorced and I moved to Hedland and I got a job with Commonwealth Employment Service, which was lucky because they provided accommodation as well. I was again working with traditional people and travelling out as far afield as the Great Sandy Desert and finding people who said I’ve got family. My family still hadn’t found me and people were saying that they think I’m part of their family, and it turned out that they were. So that was good for me, but it
was exceptionally good for my kids, because I had an Aboriginal lady with a big family who used to take my kids when I had to travel 600 kms a day. They were being brought up with Aboriginal brothers and sisters, so to speak.

Meanwhile, someone told my nephew [Maitland] and someone had told somebody else that there was this lady in Port Hedland who could be his aunty. I was called Lundberg, which was my first married name, but they said that they thought my maiden name was Gilla. It wasn't Gilla, but it was Giller, because the government used to change your name. They used to often split up brothers and sisters when they took them away and gave them different names, but they just varied the spelling of my name. So that's how he found me. My nephew's a cheeky little bugger. He just knew I was his aunty. I got to know my brother Joe before he died because he worked at Ethel Creek Station. I had to go out to Jigalong community, so I used to have to drive through the station. I'd sit and have a chat with him and he was also roo shooting at the time. On the way home, I'd get kangaroo tails, frozen ones, out of his van and take them home. When my family came and found me, it was not a big shock to my kids. But I went to Meekatharra with my nephew who'd found me and suddenly, in a weekend, I met my mother, my brothers and all these nieces and nephews and cousins. It was overwhelming for me. It wasn't overwhelming for my boys because they were in primary school. It was really good and I was happy after that, but it took a lot of time for my mum to talk because she thought I blamed her. I told her that I never, ever blamed her.

There were 11 brothers and sisters all up, but just recently I found out in actual fact there were 13 of us because some had died. Only I had been removed by the government. My eldest sister was the result of a rape of my mother, so she was put out to adoption. My eldest brother [Norman, now deceased] had a different Aboriginal father. Then my next brother had an Aboriginal father. Then there was me with a white father. Then all the ones who came after me had the same Aboriginal father. I found out recently that one of my sisters, who's younger than me, was actually a twin. Now, that's the first I'd ever heard of it. 'No one ever told me', and I said, 'It's not in my file'. She said, 'No. I just thought I better tell you'. I said, 'God'. Some of my siblings have died since, so there are only five of us left: just myself as the eldest and my four sisters.

My brother Joe died when I was in Roebourne. You've got to bear in mind that it's 560 kms out to Ethel Creek and it's another 200 kms down to Roebourne. I was in Roebourne and I got a phone call from the police. As soon as the police call you, there's something wrong: could I get to Hedland Airport? How long does it take? I got to Hedland Airport just in time for the flying doctor to come in with his body and his Aboriginal wife Josie. She was a mess. She couldn't do the identification, so I had to do it and I'd only known my brother a few years. I had to do it. I spent half an hour in the morgue, talking to Joe about all the
things that I should have talked with him when I was a kid. It was quite sad and I was telling my sister and she said, ‘Oh’. When it was time to take him to Meekatharra, I’d said to the family, ‘I’ll drive Brother down, 12 hours’. ‘No. Get the undertaker’. I said, ‘No, the undertaker’s too expensive. Who’s going to pay for that?’ ‘Oh, you work’. I said, ‘No, I don’t earn that much money. I’m not paying for it and you mob aren’t paying’, so I said, ‘I’ll bring Brother home’. One of my nephews [Lindsay] and I drove him home and the people were a bit funny about that, but in recent times, it’s becoming more fashionable. Now there are more and more Aboriginal people who are driving their families home.

When we lost my mum she was down in Perth, and my late husband and I decided we’d drive Mum home because it was going to cost money. That’s 12 hours and we had to time it just right. So we got into Meekatharra at first light so that we could take Mum straight to the morgue, but people wouldn’t get in the car. I said, ‘That’s okay. I don’t mind’. We just put something over Mum and just chatted away. I just chatted to her about being a kid. I think you’ve got to do things sometimes because you didn’t have the opportunity before. I go to all the funerals where I can. People now know that I’m retired, and self-funded retirees can’t have all these trips. I said, ‘I’ll come to as many funerals as I can, but I’ve got to remember that it’s my super that I’m spending and I can’t afford it’. People have this mistaken belief, even in my own family: ‘But you’re a magistrate’. ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I know and I made provisions. I’ve got my superannuation, but that’s my pension. The government doesn’t give me a pension’. ‘Oh, okay’. But they still think you’re rich.

The first strike in this country by Aboriginal people was the stockmen strike of 1946.9 I had the privilege to work with those blokes who were involved in that strike and old Don McLeod, the known communist. He’s from Meekatharra and at one stage he thought he was my father. I was the only public servant he would let out to the community. He used to squat on the ground and type away on his little typewriter and write letters to everybody and their dog. He sent me so much stuff and information, and he taught me a lot. He said to me one day, ‘You know, Sue, there’s something that I have to tell you’, and I said, ‘What’s that, Old Man?’ He said, ‘I could be your father’. I said, ‘What do you mean, you could be my father?’ He said, in this quaint way, ‘I knew your mother’. I said, ‘Oh, my God’. I said, ‘But you’re not’. He said, ‘What do you mean?’ And I said, ‘Because my mum told me who my father was’. He said, ‘Oh’, and I said, ‘So you thought you’d been my father all this time?’ He said, ‘Yeah, I’ve been working up how I should tell you’. I had the privilege of knowing all of those old fellas who were part of that walk-off and then I stayed in touch with 

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9 For information about the 1946 Pilbara strike, see How the West Was Lost, directed by David Noakes, produced by Heather Williams and David Noakes, 72 mins, Ronin Films, 1987.
them when I came down here. They had their claim in at the Supreme Court for 1 per cent of the gross revenue under section 70 of the Western Australian Constitution. Then they sought legal advice and went to the High Court. But they lost in the High Court and on the way, two or three of the claimants had fallen by the wayside [died].

I said at a speech a few years ago: ‘You know when you talk about Aboriginal people being chained up, that’s how you talk about it. You say, oh, well, Aboriginal people … ‘. The talk was at the Police Federation. I was their keynote speaker and Andrew Forrest [mining magnate] was after me. I talked about remote policing and I said, ‘In those early days, when you coppers were the protectors of natives or you just went out and rounded them up’. I said, ‘You just talk about the Aboriginals or the natives were chained and they were left in the cells, chained’. And I said, ‘The Aboriginal people tell the other side of the story: what it’s like to be chained up with six other blokes when one wants to go to the toilet’. They just burst out laughing, and I said, ‘Jacob told me that if you want to go so badly in the middle of the night, you’ve got to get them all up’. These coppers had a sense of humour about it, but I said, ‘You’re going back to those periods, back in the late 1800s and early 1900s, where police up in the north went out on patrol for six months. That was remote policing – none of these bloody radio systems, satellite phones and all of that. That was horseback, a rifle and you lived off the land for six months, and then you brought the natives back’. They were the sorts of things that those old fellas were talking about to me, so I was so lucky that I was working in the Pilbara in the late ’60s. My kids had the privilege of meeting these old fellas. I used to pull them out of school and get homework sent and take them to remote communities. The Education district superintendent said to me, ‘It’s really a good thing what you’re doing’.

I wasn’t a radical, but I was a bit of a hippy in the ’60s with long hippy skirts and everything else after the Army. But I was in the north of the state. An Aboriginal man once said in the east on one of his websites, quite derogatorily, ‘Well where was Sue Gordon during the years of activism?’ Well, I was actually working for traditional people in the Pilbara; so where was he? That was my question. I was involved in Aboriginal affairs on the ground, not in the protests interstate. I once wrote a poem about Noonkanbah.10 I sat on the side of the road in Hedland with all the old people from the 12 Mile Reserve [later known as Tjalka Warra community] to watch the convoy go past, and we were protesting in silence on the side of the road. That particular time I was still working for the government and we just got all the oldies out at 12 Mile Reserve. We sat there on the side

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of the road and this big police inspector from Karratha came and told us to get off the road. I said, ‘We’re not on the road’. I used to go to meetings with him: ‘Get off the road, Sue, and get the old people’. I said, ‘They’re not on the road, Inspector. They’re on the side of the road, outside their houses, and we’re here to protest in silence’. I wasn’t involved on national committees then, but these were my little protests. I was working with just mostly traditional people in Roebourne and in the Pilbara generally right out to the desert communities. I had to do a lot of work, a lot of travelling with desert people, and it really brought home to me the comparisons. Even now, when I talk to the people in the eastern states and they go on and on about it, I just say, ‘Look, no. You’re not speaking for tribal people. You’ve got no right to speak for tribal people’. I have never said I could speak for traditional people either.

In 1977, with three other Aboriginal men, two traditional and one urban, we got an Aboriginal overseas study award and we went to the USA. The two tribal guys were from Amata in central South Australia and the urban guy was from Sydney but had been working in Alice Springs. We went like little lambs to the slaughter to the US. We went mainly to the Midwest and the traditional guys liked that because it’s cowboy country. I was there to study employment programs and I ended up living with the Navajos for a few months. The Navajos also took us on a road trip to the Grand Canyon and back – brilliant trip.

Back in Australia in my role I looked at employment and alcohol problems and children’s issues, and then I was still in Hedland. I changed in 1983 to the position of Branch Manager of the Aboriginal Development Commission in Hedland, so I was having to go to Canberra more for meetings. I was mostly involved with traditional people. I got involved on bodies mainly with child protection in the early 1980s. I was on the welfare review in Perth. Then in 1986 I came to Perth as the Commissioner for Aboriginal Planning and the first Aboriginal person to head a government department. The Aboriginal tribal people in Hedland said, ‘Well, you’re going to Perth to be the big Ngimbili [number one]. Don’t forget who you are’.

I moved to Perth simply because my eldest son was about to start university. We had no family in Perth, and also because I had managed to get a position as the Commissioner for Aboriginal Planning, making me the first Aboriginal person to head a government department in WA. I also remarried, this time to a police inspector, who retired some years later as a police superintendent.

There is one funny story about this old man who’s passed away now. I’m now the big Commissioner for Aboriginal Planning in Perth, ready to chair a Heads of Government meeting. I got a phone call and my secretary had got me out. There’s a phone call from Royal Perth Hospital; could I get up there? This old man’s asking for me at the hospital. Because he’s one of the tribal senior law
men from Jigalong. I thought, ‘It’s got to be urgent’. So I went back into the
meeting. I said, ‘Look, I’ve got an urgent message from one of the traditional
men. He’s in Royal Perth. I have to go. Deputy will take over’. I rock up to Royal
Perth Hospital, I get in there and I see the old man sitting on the side of the bed.
I said, ‘What’s wrong?’ He said, ‘I haven’t got any ’jamas’. I said, ‘What?’ And
he said, ‘I’m not wearing that’. I said, ‘What are you here for, old man?’ And he
said, ‘This eye’. And he said, ‘You know that’. I said, ‘Yeah, but what am I here
for?’ ‘You’ve got to go and buy me ‘jamas. I am not wearing that’. So I duly went
off and bought him some pyjamas and some bath gear and everything. I went
back, got him settled, and the nurse came and she said, ‘He was stubborn’.
I said, ‘No, you want to tell me about stubborn’. I said to him, ‘I’ll come back
in this evening and see how you’re going’, before he was going the next day
for surgery. I went back to the meeting and they said, ‘How is he?’ I said, ‘Oh,
well, he’s having surgery’. I didn’t mention the pyjamas. I went back, and he
was settled down. He said, ‘I don’t know how these people walk around here
with their arse showing’. I used to often get messages like that. I’d have to race
to the hospital and it could be something quite simple, but they just wanted
somebody there whom they could trust to go and do something. It could be
something simple like ringing to say where they were. I always believed in
being honest with people. I never made promises, even when I was in charge
of anything.

I was getting more involved in national issues. Then, when I was asked to be
a magistrate, to take that on without a formal qualification, I did that. I’d been
a Justice of the Peace and sat on the bench, but the Children’s Court had limited
jurisdiction in those days. With our limited powers we didn’t deal with serious
matters. We basically put the children under the care of the department – any
child who was a problem child on criminal charges. If they were more serious
charges, you sent them up to the Court of Petty Sessions. If they were even
more serious charges, they had to go before the Supreme Court anyway. Then
the Children’s Court in 1989 got its own legislation and I just decided, when
my youngest son was finishing his law degree, that I would do a law degree.
I did it eight years part-time. He said, ‘You should come while I’m there’,
because then he could bludge money off me. My second husband was a police
superintendent, so he said, ‘Oh, you’ll be right’. But then he had major heart
surgery through the middle of it, so I was going to pull out of the course. The
boys said, ‘I thought there was a rule that if you start, you’ve got to finish’.
I had made the rule. So I did my law degree eight years part-time. Most of the
kids at uni, except the mature age students, didn’t know what I did for a living.
You can’t just say, ‘I’m a magistrate’. ‘But you’re not supposed to be a magistrate
until you have a degree’. ‘It’s okay; I just do it differently’.
It was a good experience. I failed some units miserably in the first year, and the Dean said to me, ‘Well, we should really probably kick you out’. I said, ‘No. I can come full-time’. I hadn’t even worked that out yet; so anyway, I saw the president of the Children’s Court. I said, ‘I think I need to take all my long service leave’. I went full-time for a year and the Dean and I came to an arrangement where I would go and see him once a week, like going to the headmaster, and we became friends. I went through three deans during my years there. Then we had another arrangement where I had been so long out of the loop that I would just do practice exams and my tutors would mark them. So by the time exams came around, most of them were repeats anyway. I would go, ‘Oh, I know this. I can do this’. Then when I did, I did one elective, which was Aboriginal Peoples and the Law. I can still remember the boys saying to me, ‘If you fail that, you’re dead in the water’. ‘I don’t fail. It’s only an elective. Piece of cake’, and I got a distinction. But I battled at uni, like a lot of mature aged students, but we had the discipline. The young ones don’t have the discipline. But they’ve got the brains; so I thoroughly enjoyed that, but I didn’t have to do it.

In the middle of that, my second husband was having major surgery and I got through that. He was in charge of Aboriginal–police relations. Can you imagine that? I was at uni when I lost him in 1998, so then the kids pushed me that I had to finish this bloody law degree. So I finished that, but then at the same time, I was then asked by the government to run an inquiry here. So I’m trying to run an inquiry, I’m trying to mourn; I’m doing all these things at the same time. I’m sitting on national bodies by now, but I’m very heavily involved in child protection and crime. Previously, in 1988–89, I had sat on the National Committee on Violence after the Hoddle and Queen Street massacres [shooting sprees in Melbourne], and that was a brilliant exercise for 12 months. I just took time out of the court when required and we travelled around Australia. But I was becoming more tied to child protection, child abuse issues. Then in the middle of all that, my children are getting married six months apart and I lost my mum and my husband. He was there for two weddings, but my mother had passed away before the second child got married, which was so disappointing, and his other grandmother couldn’t come because she was too sick. They’re the sort of things that happen, but I always credit Sister Kate’s and the Army with the discipline. They’d get you through just about anything.

My interest in child abuse and child protection started from that period in the 1970s, in the Pilbara after a horrific rape of a two-year-old child and having to go to court. Twenty years as a magistrate, listening virtually daily to child abuse, is not a good thing, but you learn how to switch it off. Someone said to me, ‘Well, how can you take children away when you used to be taken away?’ I said, ‘No. It’s entirely different. I was taken away because of policies and legislation and because I had a white father. We remove these kids from
their parents because of neglect, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse’. I said, ‘And in this modern day and age, when everyone gets money, there is no need for it. The fact is some of these parents just shouldn’t have children’. That’s what I view it as. When I got asked to chair the Northern Territory Emergency Response Taskforce in 2007, I was treated like a pariah by some people. I said, ‘Well, hang on. This is about child abuse. This is about bettering Aboriginal people’s conditions who have been neglected by governments of all persuasions for decades. So what do you want people to do? Let the kids continue to be abused? Do you want change in communities or do you want people to stay?’ I didn’t coin the words ‘living museums’. Do we want to leave Aboriginal people in living museums? Aboriginal kids are still being abused, urban like the white kids and in remote areas, but there has been some change. I said, ‘As long as I draw breath, I’ll just keep highlighting child abuse’. People say I sound a bit stuck in the groove there, but I said, ‘No, I don’t care. As long as there’s one child being abused, that’s one child too many’.

Thinking about Reconciliation – it depends on how you view Reconciliation. There are people who want to have a warm, fuzzy feeling. I’ve seen so many Reconciliation plans with business, the boards that I sit on. But if it’s a piece of paper, and it’s sitting there and it’s a lovely glossy thing they hand out to all their clients, what’s the point? What are they actually doing as Reconciliation? Reconciliation is about doing something. It’s not about nice, fluffy words; I don’t believe in symbols and I’m well known for that. I didn’t ask to be said sorry to. It should have been to my mother. She was the one whom I was taken away from. I don’t have the memories; she had the memory right up until she died of over 30 years of horrific memories of your child being snatched from you. There are a lot of Aboriginal people who like symbols. I don’t like symbols. It’s got to be some action with it. It’s intervention. I’ve sat on a lot of national bodies and chaired national bodies, but I’m not a radical. It’s got to be practical to get me involved. I don’t do symbols very well.

I had actually been invited to sit in the House of Representatives for the National Apology to the Stolen Generations [in 2008]. I was chairing the taskforce of the Northern Territory Emergency Response at the time. I’d been asked by Tiwis to go out to the Tiwi Islands, to go to the unofficial opening of their secondary college. Former Indigenous Affairs minister Mal Brough had given $10 million for a 99-year lease over their land, so they’d built this secondary college. The kids were going to it, so I went out there and I watched the apology. It didn’t do anything for me because it was made very clear there was to be

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no compensation. It was a nice, fuzzy, warm feeling, but when that was said – ‘There will be no compensation’ – people presumed that was only the words at the time. But they found out very soon after that there’s no compensation. We’ve seen what’s happened since. Closing the gap is just three little words. CTG they call it. There are programs at the health, programs at the dentist, programs here and there, but the gap seems to be widening. The gap’s not going to be closed in my lifetime. There are still a lot of people, black and white, who want the status quo to remain, because poor fella me, if I’ve got nothing to whinge about, don’t change it. We need something to whinge about. With the Sister Kate’s group, we have our annual fundraising fête every November. We work for months beforehand, most of us who are able to, making jams, pickles, everything to sell, getting donations. My oldest members are 82 or 83. They all work on the fête day selling things and having a good time, but we raise money to run our little office and we enjoy doing it. We’re not sitting back waiting for a government handout. So that’s the difference with some people in the community – that they’re going to do things to help themselves and not sit around waiting for someone to rock up at the door, because they then own you because they own the program and they want to tell you how to run it.

I grew up with people like Polly Farmer and Ted Kilmurray – brilliant footballers. We had quite a few people who went on to do well for themselves from Sister Kate’s. Some didn’t do well, but the one thing is that none of us have ever discriminated against anyone else. I became a magistrate and I’m still one of the little kids in their eyes. Someone used to give me a hiding, someone used to wipe my nose; but they’re all very proud for you. The biggest thing has been education. We’ve all pushed our children to go to school. In the Sister Kate’s Children 1934 to 1953 Aboriginal Corporation that I run, there are about 140 members around Australia. We do a bimonthly newsletter and I think, amongst our kids, we’ve got eight lawyers and the value of education can never be pushed hard enough. My grandkids would never dare talk to me about not going to school. I’ve extended that to my own birth family. I say, ‘Education is far too important’. It’s very noticeable, but the Sister Kate’s kids of my era and before that, in the main, have moved on. In their own way, they stopped being victims a long time ago because they weren’t moving. It’s a bit hard to explain that. If you remain a victim, you can never move on with your life. You have hang-ups and you just don’t know how to get ahead. So people used to say to me, ‘Oh, you’re a magistrate’. I said, ‘Yes, I know, but I’ve worked hard. I went to law school. I paid for that myself, but you don’t know what’s going on behind me. You’ve got no idea about my background. All you’re seeing is me and that’s your fault, because you’re just seeing the face’. And I said, ‘You’ve got to remember there are lots of other people who might not have done as well, but they didn’t want to be a magistrate. They didn’t want to go to law school. So they have done what they wanted to do, but the most important thing they’ve done is encourage their children to stay at school’. And I said, ‘And you’ve got to look
at it from all angles’. But we all carry baggage. One of the things that I find with the Sister Kate’s kids, they accept what happened. While it happened, you can’t change history and the more people try and dwell on, ‘Oh, look at it; poor fella me’, you can’t change history. Nobody can change history. It’s happened. You’ve got to accept it happened. You can’t be happy with it, but you’ve got to now move to the next part of your life. Otherwise you’ll stay bogged down forever if you remain a victim.

Figure 6. Sue Gordon, on retirement from Children’s Court, 2008
Source: Courtesy Sue Gordon
You can't change history. We had five boys from Sister Kate's in Korea. They'd never seen snow. As Tom Hunt said, 'You know, we're there and we didn't get our winter gear for a month, and you've got no idea what it's like'. He said, 'You go to bed on the ground, put your ground sheet over you, because you're cold and to wake up and it's flat on your face, because it snowed through the night'. Now, the five Sister Kate's Aboriginal boys who went to Korea and came back men, when they came home, they were treated differently. They weren't allowed into the pubs and were refused service. Tom Hunt tells a funny story and it's reminiscent of a lot of them. He said he and six of his mates went into the pub when they came back, all in full uniform. They ordered beers and they were told they couldn't serve the native, which was Tom. Tom was light skinned, but he was a native. So the other blokes said, 'That's okay. Just give us six beers'. So the bloke came out, gave them six beers and they all got up and left. No one paid, nothing; just left. They just made their little stand. Yet, before they'd gone away to the war, they'd worked hard on stations, on railways, on big projects, just alongside everybody else, but they were treated differently because they were Aboriginal. If I could change things, it would be to get people to understand that Aboriginal people are just that. The book Forever Warriors has got Aboriginal people who are West Australians, from across the board – from the Boer War to Vietnam to East Timor. Aboriginal people are still serving in all areas of defence on a regular basis and, as I said, the Sister Kate's kids have served in all those conflicts. Now grandkids are in Afghanistan and to them, it's something that they want to do. Those who joined from Sister Kate's joined because they wanted to try something else, but they all did their best. They were just like any other person.

I am a member of both Honouring Indigenous War Graves and the Women's Royal Australian Army Corps' organisation. I don't belong to the RSL. I march on Anzac Day because the Women's Royal Australian Army Corps manages to always get enough of you to march. And I attend most Honouring Indigenous War Graves ceremonies when I can. They're special days that you mark in to turn up to. I've gone through my own family; my Great-Uncle Alex went off to the First War and a lot of my relatives, as I'm finding out, were part of the slave labour list, who were just sent to stations to work for nothing as part of the war effort. I just want people to understand what history was about.

There's got to be more of the education in schools. There is some, but a lot of it's not mandatory; it's voluntary. When I went to school, we learnt about King, Country and Empire. With geography, we learnt about the pink bits on the map, which was the Commonwealth, but you learnt fairly thoroughly about the world. I'm a reader; I like to read about parts of the world and have travelled

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12 Jan 'Kabarli' James, Forever Warriors (Perth: Scott Print, 2010).
to lots of parts of the world where things happened. I’ve been to Gallipoli and spent some time in Turkey. We need to get people to understand that Aboriginal people were part of all of that. The really horrific part, which is not common knowledge, is that Aboriginal trackers were taken to the Boer War and left behind. They weren’t even brought home. So there’s all these descendants of Aboriginal people running around with the Bushmen, but they were just left. Just like horses. Just left there! It’s not common knowledge. Just think – they were people.

Thinking about the present-day Defence Force, I worked with Major General Dave Chalmers who was a Tank Commander. He was the coordinator of the Emergency Response in the Territory and a wonderful man – a very intelligent man who holds two Masters in strategic planning from the US. It’s a different educated Army, and I did a lot of work with Norforce cadets and soldiers up there. I spoke at Larrakeyah Barracks where they’d brought in 80 cadets from across northern Australia. These kids had been in cadets and loved it and they joined Norforce. I spoke to Norforce: black, white and brindle. We had Norforce who worked alongside of us with the logistics. This was the Army that everyone said we were taking in, but they were just logistics. We needed the Army to be able to use Army barges to go to those communities where there’s no access.

General Chalmers and I would rock up. For instance, we went to Maningrida in Arnhem Land and he’s in full uniform, right down to the feather in his slouch hat. We’re having a cup of tea with these old girls who were doing the night patrol, and they said, ‘Where’s your tank?’ He said, ‘We haven’t got any tanks’. And he said, ‘Why?’ and this old girl said, ‘Well, we heard you were going to come with the soldiers and the tanks and we were going to get out there in front and stop the tanks’. He said, ‘How?’ She said, ‘I was going to show a leg’. We just all cracked up and Dave looked at me and he said, ‘It’s only me and Sue. There’s no Army; only me and Sue’. So they used to just laugh. But when we’d go into the communities, I said to Dave, ‘The Aboriginal people like to know who you are. I will introduce myself and I’ll tell them who my family is, so then they immediately can know where they join in’. (I found so many sisters and cousins in the Territory.) Then Dave would follow me and give his Army background. That’s who he is. Then people could talk. He is a person who learns very quickly.

I’ve also had some contact previously with the former Chief of Defence, Angus Houston, because I’ve got a big thing about Army Cadets. I’d like more cadets out there. I said, ‘I’m now the President of the Police and Citizens Youth Club, so there are cadets in there’. It’s getting that discipline early into kids. I think

\[ \text{Norforce is a reserve unit operating in the Northern Territory since 1981 that employs a large percentage of local Aboriginal people.} \]
the modern-day Army is very good. I mean the SAS is still the SAS, but what the boys do, when they go away, this modern Army – it’s just horrific to think that people make these derogatory comments about military without any concept of what it’s like. Since day one, there have always been armies of one sort. The Aboriginal people had an Army. Before white men, Aboriginal people had 100 per cent employment because everybody in the tribe had a job. When I said this at a talk I once gave someone laughed and I said, ‘Well, the women hunted and collected stuff, the men hunted, the old people did this’. I said it was 100 per cent employment. Now we’re talking about people who need a job. You can think of the funny sides of it. Sometimes, you have to have that sense of humour to make people think. But modern-day military, it’s very difficult, because there are still the knockers out there. People don’t have any concept of what military have to put up with. Now, it’s a choice. People choose to go into it, but then you’ve got to respect that choice that people have made and they’re doing it for their reason to join the Army, to protect the country. If we didn’t have an Army, where are we going to be?

Finally, I never wanted anyone to feel sorry for me. I think it was the discipline from the Army. I realised that if something was going to happen, I had to make it happen. There was no one around me. Although I could rely on my Sister Kate’s kids or my Army mates, if I wanted to move and make something happen, I had to do it. That’s why I keep saying to people about discipline. If you’ve got that self-discipline, you make it happen. No is not a good word!