

## **ELVA VAN DER LAND MY JOB MONDAY 27 MAY 45? CARNIVAL ROMAIN OVERTURE**

Interview with Elva, conducted by Reg Neal

Announcer: Tonight, in the series, "My Job", Reg Neal (N) is to interview Elva Van Der land (E), who is at present serving with the WASBIES.

N May I first of all introduce our guest for tonight - Elva Van Der Land

E Good evening everybody. Now Mr Neal, what would you like to know?

N I understand that you were in the AWAS for a period before joining the Dutch women's Army

E Yes. I joined the AWAS on May 23rd 1942 and was attached to the Signals Unit, and I think I was stationed at every camp in SA. After 2.5 years I was offered a position in the Dutch Women's Army which is called Vrouwenkorps or V.K. which was in process of formation in Australia. I joined up and we trained for service in Java, so I went to Brisbane to Camp Columbia.

N Was that only a training School?

E No. We had to do our ordinary work as well as our training. What I mean by that is, that I was again on a switchboard, I missed out on a lot of the instructional classes. I managed to learn the Dutch language, but missed out on most of the grammar classes. Well, I was in Camp Columbia for about 12 months, and then a British recruiting officer came requesting recruits for WASBIES, so I joined up the British 14th Army and left for Bombay with 14 others.

N So, within a matter of fourteen months you were an Australian, a Dutch and a British woman.

E From the point of view of service, I certainly was. When we reached Bombay, we went to Calcutta and some of the party went on to Japan while four of us went to Assam and lived in what had been a monastery.

N Did you go by train from Calcutta or by car?

E Train from Calcutta to Gehati and then paddle steamer across Brahma Puta. This was in flood from the monsoons. After we had crossed, it took us six hours to get to Assam which is 6000 feet above sea level.

N Was that a train journey too?

E Oh, no. This was in an Indian bus, which has to be seen to be believed. It was built for twelve, and there were four of us white girls and at least fifty Indians. They were hanging on everywhere, with saris flying in the wind. I still don't know how that bus made the journey.

N It would be worthwhile riding behind one of them with a movie camera wouldn't it?

E Yes, as long as you kept a fair distance away. Well, as you know, Shillong is the capital of Assam, which is a health resort, and one of the most beautiful spots in the world. While there, we saw a Buddhist Festival. We noticed, that to denote their caste, the men and women have different coloured rice in patterns on their foreheads.

We were the only two white people there so we were well looked after. Some of the effigies have elephant's bodies and a man's face and the whole thing is gilded over and is worth a lot of money.

At one Stage in the proceedings, three men threw themselves into the river and these, what appeared to be Gods, were thrown in after them, but I could never discover why.

N Where there any Christian churches there?

E Yes. I am glad you asked that, because it is rather a strange thing that the earlier missionaries in this part of India were Welsh, and their customs have been handed down to this day. The churches are Welsh, as are the homes and it is comical to see Indian women wearing Welsh hats and shawls.

N You mentioned that Shillong was a health resort. Surely you didn't need to go there after a short service?

E Oh, no. Assam was the relieving Headquarters of the WASBIES and we were to get our uniforms, equipment and so on.

N Perhaps before you go any further will you explain what actually are the WASBIES?

E Yes. I was about to offer to do that. When java fell to the Japanese, a few of the British wives who had remained in India, started a canteen for the troops, and out of that grew the WASBIES.

The head WASBIE is Colonel Noonan Taylor, she is known as the "Queen Bee". When my uniform was finished, I went back to Calcutta and had a few days sightseeing. I was feeling a little home-sick one day and went for a walk and eventually finished up at the zoo.

N I have heard of people remarking about going to the zoo to see their relations, but I have never heard of it as a cure for homesickness.

E No, it was not that actually. I just wanted to go somewhere. You can imagine how thrilled I was to see two Australian kangaroos. But I felt extremely deflated when the keeper didn't know what they were, but felt very pleased when I was able to tell him.

Just out of Calcutta I saw a Burying Ground. It is a large well, over which is placed a kind of sieve. The bodies are placed on this and the vultures, of which there were always plenty, eat the flesh and the bones drop into the well.

N Ugh! Let's get on to something more cheerful.

E All right. Now let's see. Here's something to restore you colour. I saw the Banyan tree. It is the largest tree in the world. Some idea of its size may be gained from the fact that three divisions of men can be assembled underneath its branches.

N Did you see the Twelve Temples of Calcutta?

E Yes. The first time we were not admitted as we had no socks on and therefore could not remove our shoes, but when we did get in, found they were very beautiful. In each temple there is a table, on which are arranged flowers in various designs, and offerings of food are always placed on them.

The Buddhist priests eat the food. A strange thing we discovered was that many of the children taught by the Buddhist priests to speak English.

N Well, I think it is time you left Calcutta and did some work.

E Yes. I am afraid I may be giving the impression that life in the WASBIES was a long holiday. We boarded the Ethiopia and went to Rangoon and apart from striking a cyclone in the Bay of Bengal we had a fairly comfortable trip.

N Did you mean that that was the cyclone in the Bay of Bengal?

E Not quite. When we reached Rangoon we were amazed at the damage done by the RAF. It was all necessary in order to get out the Japanese. There were no railways and no water supply, and Chinatown, which was once a beautiful shopping centre was mainly a mass of bomb craters.

N Was Rangoon your destination?

E Yes, There were British and Indian troops there and I was working at the British services swimming pool which was the recreation camp for the forces. There were about 2000 men stationed there and we had to run the canteen for them. It was here that I did my first broadcast for the BBC. It was for Radio Rangoon. I made two recordings and sent messages to Australia.

N Isn't there a huge Pagoda in Rangoon?

E Yes, it is the Schowo Dagon Pagoda and it is the largest in the world. It has a dome of solid gold which can be seen glistening for miles. There are dozens of smaller shrines inside made of precious and semi precious stones. The evacuees have been allowed to live in the pagoda. Amongst all this wealth is a lot of filth, which is usual throughout India. All around the pagoda was packed with diseased dogs. And yet no one thought of destroying them.

N How long did you stay in Rangoon?

E Not very long. We boarded the Ismale which is a Mecca Pilgrim ship. There were no comforts on board. We arrived in Singapore and were boarded at the Rex Hotel which had been taken over by the YWCA who were doing a grand job. The Europeans have always been proud of their wonderful library in Singapore and during the Japanese occupation many people

wondered what would be the state of it when they eventually returned. Fortunately they found that the library was in perfect condition. The Japanese had used the books, but kept a records of every book on loan.

N That must have been a relief to the Europeans?

E While there I saw an opium raid and also the arrival and departure of Japanese war criminals. We visited the Changi camp and jail, and saw the theatre the POWs built and the gardens where they had grown vegetables to keep themselves alive. On the walls were hand written calendars and we also saw plenty of blood on most of the walls, which spoke volumes of the sufferings of our men.

N Where was your next port of call?

E We left Singapore for Surabaya in February this year and travelled in absolute luxury on a Dutch hospital ship. But when we reached Surabaya there wasn't even a dog on the wharf. We had to tie ourselves up. Before we could though a way had to be bombed for us through dozens of sunken ships in the harbour. Surabaya was almost a shambles.

There was hardly a house standing and shops and big buildings had been destroyed through the street fighting. Dead bodies were floating in most of the canals.

We were flown by Dutch plane from Surabaya to Semarang where we worked with the 5th Paratroop Brigade. While I was in Surabaya I went to a radio station and found lots of books. I packed them in crates and took them by plane to Semarang with me.

Our men had been without any reading material for months and we two girls carried the books in on stretchers.

N Were you running a canteen there too?

E Yes. It was a Mobile canteen and we went up to the hills where our men were fighting. It was appalling to see the starving Indonesians. One day I saw six drop dead in the street. Our British troops were marvelous. If they found any orphans they adopted them and looked after them and eventually found homes for them.

N What did you have in the canteens?

E Oh, we served tea, coffee, sandwiches and sausage rolls etc. we took flour, and what you might call the raw material which we had brought from Surabaya. We also distributed any leftovers amongst the children most of whom were suffering from dysentery and beri beri.

N Did you come across any evidence of the Japanese attempt to upset the currency?

E Yes I did. When we arrived in Java we had to use Japanese guilders. I went to a Chinese shop and one fish cost 700 guilders. I have so many 1000 guilder notes with me that if they were legal currency I would be a millionaire.

Well, we left Semarang and went back to Surabaya and eventually across Java to Batavia. Incidentally there are thousands of bicycles in Batavia and it made us feel we were almost in touch with civilization again when we saw trams running alongside a canal. I also had a rummage in a bazaar and saw a box of Australian matches there.

The shopkeeper wanted five guilders for it, which is about 7/6. We had hoped to fly from Batavia but there were so many wounded to be taken out that we went by ship to Singapore and there I met a number of Australian planters who had just returned. The Danish Consul's wife in Singapore was a WASBIE and she used to entertain us in her lovely home.

On the day we landed at Singapore I was waiting for my luggage to come up from the hold and I saw a Japanese wharfie and asked him if I spoke English. He informed me that he did and that he was a graduate of Tokyo University. The Japanese must salute every allied person male or female.

N I suppose that made you feel very important?

E No it didn't really. It made us feel rather sad. I should have mentioned earlier that I met a Javanese Lieutenant who was the brother of a prince. He wondered whether his home still stood, so he commandeered a plane and flew over, but the Japanese were still in possession so he dropped a message and his family arranged branches in a tree in the form of a message in Dutch. This was the message: "Mother very thin. Please drop food".

Well, on February 16th we left for home and arrived in Derby WA. We hired a hall to have a dance but the only women were myself and four aboriginal girls.

N Well you certainly had plenty of partners, wouldn't you?

E We did, but it was a little of an anti-climax. Our ship took on a lot of bullocks at Derby and 400 bales of wool at Carnarvon. We took all this with us to Fremantle. And there was plenty of smell and noise.

N Did you come from Fremantle in a ship?

E No. I came from Fremantle in a troop train with six suit cases, six smaller cases and a Malayan coolie hat which I had been guarding.