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SD: Shirley DeVoe

SD: I am Shirley DeVoe and a nurse veteran of World War II. This an effort to share memories of my experiences in World War II which hopefully will give you a small picture of nursing at that time. I would like to tell you about my basic nursing preparation and why I decided to join the military. Let me tell you of some of my personal experiences as a military nurse. On coming home I had many different emotions perhaps which can best be expressed by a note that I wrote in August of 1946. It says here ends a story that started over three years ago July 5, 1943 to August 13, 1946. I've lived worked and loved halfway around the world Florida, California, and the Philippines. I've know laughter and Sunshine the warm comradeship of so many wonderful people and the rendering heartache such as nothing else like war can bring. Many dearly loved ones live now only in my heart. I am tired, terribly tired and need time to find myself again and gain new strength to carry on. I hope that I have done my job well, I've tried. Perhaps eventually, he bruises will heal and I can find some measure of contentment. Perhaps these three years have help too much of joy and tears, but I know the imprint of them will remain with me for the rest of my life. My one great hope is that the peoples of this world have found that there is room for all to live in harmony.

I graduated from a three year hospital program that was probably about 99 to 100 percent of nursing students came from that type of program at that point in time. I also was very fortunate being on a very progressive environment where going on to college was encouraged and I was had the benefit of going on to the University of Buffalo and receiving a baccalaureate degree in nursing. Meanwhile World War II had started, and it's a little bit hard in this day and age to reflect back entirely because society has changed so much and the attitudes have changed so much. Which probably sounds strange to you if I say it was a popular war not in the sense of people wanting to have war or being killed or anything of that sort but because this country had been attacked by the Japanese in Hawaii it united people like as they probably have never been united since and everybody seemed to pulled together to do whatever was necessary in order to achieve the desired results. I think probably the sense of citizenship and personal response for that was at its very height in this country. Whether it will ever occur again or not well let's say I hope not because I hope we never have that type of war again. But for those of us that were young, everybody we knew was going into service I know at the hospital that I worked the young physicians they finished their internships and every single one of them went on active duty immediately following, so the temper was to do this.

I can't answer the question of would I have gone anyway, possibly yes but what really made the war come home to me was the death of somebody who was very close to me and that made the war seem very personal and so I felt that I just had to go I had to be part that I had to complete the job that this young gentleman had started. I enlisted in what was then called The army air corps as a nurse this of course this eventually became the separate organization of the

Air Forces but at that time was part of the Army and as a single person I took off on a train one night and ended up Tallahassee Florida at Omegary field which was a air station. The program there was designed primarily to trained young men as fighter pilots and we supplied the medical attention that was necessary for them. It was quite a learning experience for me because I had been spent my nursing career up to that time at a very active teaching hospital with a lot of high powered surgery and care and things of this sort and suddenly I was dropped into a small hospital which was devoted mainly to small unusual little problems that people would have which normally were only taken care of in doctors' offices because in the military you either had to be fit for full duty or you were in the hospital. So I learned an awful lot about people I think more so than I ever had before and their reactions and how to learn to be a supportive person to help these young men in any way that I could to face the future that they were going to be facing and to deal to with problems. They were away from home they were separated they were sometimes having problems with their girlfriends and what have you and I got to be a great listener and what have you and felt that it was a part of what was necessary to do at that point in time.

I also began to find that this was a whole different environment but for the first time in my life I had patients with Malaria and this was something that I had only read about in textbooks and suddenly we had an invasion of young fliers who had been over in North Africa who came back with Malaria and needed that kind of treatment. We had to learn to deal with aircraft crashes. We had one crash that we suddenly received 30 patients critically ill in this little hospital and yet by good organization all of these young men were taken care of and were on their way to recovery in about twenty four hours. All the definitive surgery had been done and everything was done to put them back on their feet and get them going. It also opened up another different world they did try to help us understand how the different men in their different organization how they lived worked and things of this sort. We did things like this, we went to camouflage school we learned how to camouflage we went through the obstacle course they trained us in the a various things like we learned how to march and how to salute and do all the little things that were specific to the military. One other thing that we did there which was kind of interesting from a nursing point of view this community had very little to offer in the way of medical assistance and we did have a lot of young women who were wives of the young fliers who were there and many of them were pregnant so the only thing we could do was to somehow or another meet their needs and we started an OB department and we did this first of all the officers wives earned money for us so we could buy the instruments and things that were needed. At that point in time the military did not take care of dependents but they did say you could have Quote a building so that was all we started with a the original bassinets were orange crates a when father came in at night to see his wife he went home with dirty diapers and dirty shirts and things like that to take care of the laundry because we had no means of doing laundry. It was quite an interesting situation but over a period of eighteen months that I was there we developed an excellent first rate OB department. We had bassinets. We had everything you can think of in a well operating OB department and at that point in time we were delivering about six hundred babies a year. Which was a pretty good operation for a 150 bed hospital.

After eighteen months, one day I came off duty we use to work split time we were working twelve hour shifts and if the work wasn't too heavy why you did have a period of maybe two or three hours break. Came off and another friend for break and we were going out for coffee and I ran into the chief nurse as I was coming down the corridor and she said to me you're leaving for California tonight and I said thank you. I went down the corridor until I got to

my friend and in shock I said Mary I am going to California tonight 3000 miles away. Cleaned out my room packed my bags and they put me on a train around 2 O'clock in the morning and I was off to California. Five days later transferring on several trains and what have you at 3 o'clock in the morning the train stopped in the middle of the darkness. I got off the train took off and I was the only one there in the dark and I thought what am I going to do were I am 3000 miles in the pitch dark but an MP little jeep came up and they took me up to headquarters had me sign in took me to the hospital and the nurse that was on duty found a bed for me to sleep in. We were originally slated to go overseas with a unit at that point in time but here had been a little bit of error in the way our orders had been issued and consequently we were notified at our original stations that we were to leave to go to the next station the same day that we were suppose to have gone overseas. So the hospital at Camp Roberts in California which is an infantry training center had to pull thirteen nurses from their staff send them with the overseas unit and then we came in and filled those thirteen positions for a period of about eight months.

Eventually one day again I got orders and I left for a staging area in northern California from there we went to southern California and one day boarded a ship a little ship which was designated the Evangeline. It was built for a Caribbean cruise to hold 150 people there were fifteen hundred of us on the ship and we plowed the Pacific Ocean by ourselves. We had a Navy gun crew on, but that was about all. We zigzagged across the Pacific it took us 26 days on the ship before we finally ended up in the Philippines. Now apro of that giving you a little time of war before we left for overseas we were issued winter gear galoshes wool liners for our jackets we were sure we were going to Alaska or someplace nobody knew were you were going, You just got in a boat and they took you someplace and here we ended up in Manila and the temperature was 120 degrees. Fortunately they did have an issue of khaki slacks and shirts for us because I think we would have been pretty ridiculous running around in galoshes and wool underwear. And we spent a few days in Manila staging and then we were sent by ambulance up through Lausanne to probably about mid way of the island on the west shore of the China sea to what was called base M. And base M had been established for the invasion of Japan. It was loaded. You went by miles and miles and miles of equipment supplies piled up ready to go and there were several two or three different hospitals that were staging there. As you could appreciate living conditions in any of these environments as pretty difficult. I have said and sense there was a time in my life that I lived with such a minimum of basic food, clothing and shelter that that I felt that I would never again feel any sense of being in want because I learned to live with such a small amount. Give you an example when I left Manila to go up to the upper part of the island they had told us that we could have one piece of hand luggage. They suggested that we pack at least a change or two of clothing, which we did. Since our luggage was rather small that we were permitted we a group of us kind of got together one person took shoe polish another person took laundry soap we kind of divvied up these things and it was good we did because we ended up in a tent for ten and we lived or about three and a half months with no more personal belongings than what was in that one little suitcase. But we learned, we helped each other out instead of everyone washing every night two of us would wash every night and we washed for the whole tent. and we passed the job along so you only washed about every five days, did laundry about every five days.

Working conditions the hospitals consisted of a cement a piece of cement like a driveway and over this had been erected a tin roof and the sides of the building consisted of a manning of swally and that just kind of went around the building. Housekeeping was great all you had to do was pour water on the cement and pour it out the sides but we were still able to give patients very

good care. And by standards I would say excellent care that was given to them even though these circumstances were very primitive. I've racked my brain many time and maybe its the nice thing the passage of time makes you forget the pain makes you forget the hardships makes you forget how uncomfortable how unbearable you were. You know that the time you were sweaty and dirty and you were lucky if you could get about a bucket of water. Water was premium to wash in so you washed in and then you washed your clothes in whatever was left over because that was all that you had But those memories kind of fade and the thing that's most wonderful to remember is all the wonderful people I met. People from all over this country from all different nationalities, different racial groups each who made their own contribution and became a very very special part of my memory. There was such a feeling of unity there was such a looking after each other of trying of each of us trying to make the other person life a little more comfortable a little better. And it didn't matter if you were an officer and enlisted a man or a woman everybody kind of looked out for every else. And one evening we were at the engineers club and there was a young engineer who I had met who was going home the next day and sure he was having a couple beers with the other fellows, But tears were running down this young man's cheeks and he said I want to go home more than I want to do anything in this world but oh if I could only take all of you with me. Because he kind of knew that the kind of friendships that you form under certain circumstances adversity never stop they are always there the continue. And I know this has been true with me I have friend who I talk with a usually couple times of year some of them I haven't seen in thirty or forty years but we still have something in common and we still share that. I think we grew in many many different ways. First of all some of the procedures that we are not taught as students and were strictly the physician's prerogative during the war became the nurse's responsibility because of numbers. There was probably maybe one nurse or one doctor for three or four hundred patients and one nurse for a hundred patients really on duty at one time. But I learned to take blood pressures which I have never done before. I learned to start on intervenes occasionally transfusion and things of this nature which were not nursing per say.

I think one other big outcome which certainly has affected the outcome of nursing tremendously was the GI Bill of Rights. As I mentioned to you before, I had a baccalaureate degree before I went on active duty but I was rare I never met another nurse while I was on active duty who had a baccalaureate degree. I kind of kept it hidden. I certainly didn't brag about it but I think nurses felt a strong need for more education and for more diversified education and the GI Bill made it financially possible for many of them to go on and get baccalaureate degrees. Also the programs of moving school of nursing out of hospitals and into colleges and universities had its big push at that period of time and now I don't know if there are any hospitals schools of nursing. I am sure there are some in the country but by and large the vast majority of nurses are now being taught in educational institutions. None of us appreciate how much ability we have how much courage we have until we are faced with sometimes what seems almost impossible. To realize probably that every single woman who has gone to war with the troops has been frightened worried wondered what would happen and what have you but she had to put her own fear aside because she was taking care of sick young men and she had to be courageous she had to have a smile on her face and she had to face whatever had to be done in order to achieve her goal as a professional person. And I think that every single nurse would find that when really challenged that she would come through and she would face what was necessary in order to take care of her patients.