

**Virginia Goodwin Holt Cavanaugh
Veteran**

**June and Ken Hunter
Interviewers**

January 31, 2012

Virginia Cavanaugh **VC**
June Hunter **JH**
Ken Hunter **KH**

JH: This is January 31, 2012. Ken and June Hunter are interviewing Virginia Cavanaugh who served in the United States Navy Nurse Corps. She entered the service March 1942 and served until June 1944, when she resigned to be married. Virginia, will you please tell us your full name, and when and where you were born?

VC: My full name is Virginia Goodwin Holt Cavanaugh; Holt was my maiden name. I was born in Biddeford, Maine, September 26, 1916.

JH: What did you do before you went into the Navy? Were you in high school?

VC: Well, I graduated from Thornton Academy in Saco, Maine, and then I went to Boston for my college and nursing training. I graduated from Simmons College, New England Deaconess Hospital School of Nursing in Boston. And then I was appointed Head Nurse Supervisor at the New England Deaconess Hospital, and I was on the staff of the hospital for four years until Pearl Harbor. I was in Boston with a group of girlfriends from the Hospital when we heard President Roosevelt come on the radio, and we heard him give the

speech of Pearl Harbor. Of course we were all shocked because we knew the Japanese ambassador was in Washington negotiating for peace.

So I went back to the hospital where I was on the staff, and the announcement came over from Washington, that the military needed nurses to enroll because of the projected wounded; we were now at war. Roosevelt had declared war. So we were now in World War II. So I decided I would join the Navy because they wanted Navy nurses to teach, and I was a supervisor teacher. At the Navy hospital in the States, we taught the Navy corpsmen how to do nursing care, and about treatments and the Navy way, and how to take care of the sick and wounded. I had a class of corpsmen at the Boston Navy Hospital at first. While I was there, I had John F. Kennedy as a patient. He was up and around, having tests for his injury at Harvard. And I was the Navy nurse that rescued a foreign seaman whose ship had been torpedoed by a German U-boat. And the Navy doctor and I took care of him. You don't want me to describe it?

KH: Go ahead.

VC: When I first saw him, I went directly to the operating room when I was called. The doctor was there, and the patient was brought in by some Navy men. He was unconscious, wrapped in blankets, and he had a long nightdress on that covered his body, and then wrapped in blankets. Both legs had been shot off during the explosion of the ship. He was a Norwegian. Later, I understand that they picked up another Norwegian boy from that same ship. But I never knew that the German U-boats had come into the Atlantic off the coast of Boston. He was picked up at sea by a ship and brought to our hospital. So the Navy doctor and I took care of him till he became conscious; he was unconscious. Then after that--

JH: Did this young man survive?

VC: --then they asked for volunteers for overseas to take care of the projected wounded, and I thought, well I'm all trained, so I will volunteer. So I volunteered for the Navy Nurse Corps. I went to the Boston Red Cross and they interviewed me and I had all the tests and things.

My first assignment was at Chelsea Naval Hospital (which is Boston Navy Hospital) and I was there a few months when I had John F. Kennedy for a patient, and then I was assigned overseas and I went to San Francisco where I joined other Navy nurses, and we came from all over the country. I had never seen anybody from that group before, and so I boarded a large troop transport which was a luxury ship at one time, I think, and so we had quite an eventful trip in the South Pacific. When we reached... we had scares because the Japanese subs were all around us, but we didn't have an escort because our ship was so fast that we could go faster than the escorts.

When we neared New Caledonia we were told that a Japanese submarine was in our path, so we all had to go to our lifeboats and so forth. Finally a plane came and went around our ship, and we were at our lifeboat stations all that time. And we saw the oil slick come up out of the water at the side of our ship, so we knew the Japanese sub had been hit.

So then we continued on to New Caledonia and Noumea, and when we were still at sea, we were told that the Navy nurses had to get off the ship. Well, here we were in the middle of the ocean, and I thought, how can we possibly get off this ship now? But then we were told we had to go down a rope ladder, all the way down. Now this was a huge luxury ship, so it was a very large ship, and I had never been on a rope ladder in my life, and it was a terrible, terrible trip. I didn't think I could do it. But we Navy nurses, they said we had no choice. They told us we had to get up on that rope ladder, which we did, one by one, and when we got to the bottom of the ship—and this was a large ship—we had to drop the rope and jump into a Navy skiff that was bobbing in the water. We were told that after we

jumped, we would be caught by the seamen. It was a terrible experience. But anyway, I made it, and the skiff took us into the harbor of Noumea and they told us that the harbor was protected by.... so ships couldn't get into the harbor....

KH: A net? A submarine net?

VC: Well, something like that. So the ship was too big to go in, and also, they had to go to Guadalcanal which was in another direction, to leave off all these Marines. So we ten Navy nurses had to get off, and the skiff took us into the harbor of Noumea, and there we went into a jeep and they gave us a tour of the harbor. In the hills we found there was an Army hospital, and we toured that, and they had a few pilots that had been shot down and they were being rehabilitated to be sent to the States. Anyway, after that, we went back to the harbor and we picked up a smaller ship than the big one, and there were ten of us left to go to New Zealand, so we went on the second ship, the smaller ship, and we arrived at the harbor in Auckland, New Zealand, which was a beautiful place. That was my journey over. It was a terrible trip. (Laughs)

JH: Did you get seasick?

VC: No I didn't actually get seasick; I fought it. But most of the Navy nurses and others were seasick, and I took care of them. You see, I'm from Maine so I'm used to ships, I've seen a lot of ships. But I didn't get seasick, I was just a little bit uneasy, that's all.

When we arrived in New Zealand we were told that there were no quarters for women. The Navy hospital was in the country, several miles from Auckland, New Zealand, and it consisted of Quonset huts, and that's where we took care of our patients. We received the wounded, of course they were Marines and Navy men from ship battles. We had to stay at first at a bed and breakfast place in downtown Auckland, and a jeep would take us back and forth to the Navy hospital which was in the

country a few miles from downtown. They had no permanent buildings there, they were all Quonset huts where the men were. So New Zealand people volunteered to take in the ten of us Navy nurses. We were the first Americans to go over; we were in the paper, and all kinds of publicity because of that. So I was one of the first ten Navy nurses to go overseas.

My New Zealand family, he was a colonel in the New Zealand Army, and his wife was a teacher, and they had three children, so they were one of the ones that volunteered to take us ten Navy nurses. They interviewed me, and I went to their home. It was a nice experience. They were very English, as the country was under England. But they reminded me of my own home. My family came from England, too. I had a nice experience with them. And then when the hospital had built one building for women--that was the other time, when I came back. So I stayed with this New Zealand a family maybe two or three months before I returned to San Francisco. When I came back they had built this one building, a residential building for the Navy nurses. I went over in '42, and in '43 they sent more nurses over.

JH: How was your equipment and working conditions while you were in New Zealand? You said you had a Quonset hut?

VC: Yes, they were all Quonset huts.

JH: What was your equipment like?

VC: Well, we had excellent Navy doctors. They came from all over the country, the best hospitals. Each one was a specialist. I was in charge of orthopedic wards, and I had an orthopedic surgeon as the doctor in charge. I think he was from the Crile Clinic in Cleveland [Cleveland Clinic] and they all came from wonderful hospitals. They had a psychiatrist for the psychiatric patients, which today they call something else...

JH: Post-traumatic stress syndrome?

VC: Yeah.

JH: Didn't they used to call it shell shock?

KH: They called it shell shock back in the old days.

VC: Yes, but we listed them as psychiatric patients. Some of them were very violent, and Navy nurses weren't allowed in the wards, they were so violent, they had just come from the fighting. And so I, being in charge of the orthopedic group, I went in with the one in charge of the hospital there, but otherwise I couldn't go in alone, they were so violent. They would attack women. They were very violent after the fighting. So we didn't stay in that ward. The men did, the corpsmen.

It's a terrible experience being in the war and taking care of wounded. We had them come in on transport ships, almost a thousand at a time, and after each battle and each island. Each island had to be secured, they were all occupied by the Japanese when I went over. The Marines had to go in, and of course the Navy boarded them until they got to this island. They had to go in and fight the Japanese that were on the island for control. Guadalcanal was the first American victory in the South Pacific islands. The Marines were able to conquer the Japs on the island. Then the Seabees were able to build the airstrip, for which they received the Presidential Unit Citation, Henderson Air Field. My husband was one of those engineers on Guadalcanal.

KH: Did you meet him at the hospital? How did you meet your future husband?

VC: Well, after the battle of Guadalcanal, we received all the wounded at my hospital in New Zealand, and so he brought down one of the wounded from the battle to my hospital. And the one he brought down was a friend of his from MIT in Boston. So I met him when he brought this fellow down. Later on that particular group from Guadalcanal went to New

Zealand for rest and recreation for several weeks, so I saw him frequently. And then I didn't see him again until after the war.

KH: Did you have visiting dignitaries come to the hospital to see how the soldiers were being treated at the hospital?

VC: Yes, among the visitors was Eleanor Roosevelt, and of course I was in charge of the orthopedic group, so I escorted her around the wards and she stopped and talked with each one of the veterans in my ward and asked them where they were wounded. She said she came in behalf of the President of the United States to thank them for their service. The Marines, I understand, didn't want her to come because this was in the middle of a war, but Eleanor came. I had met her once before when I was a supervisor in Boston. She always had empathy for the sick. So she came to my hospital in Boston and interviewed some of the patients on my wards. But this time I took her around the wards, and later they had a reception for her in New Zealand because she was the wife of the President; the family that I stayed with in New Zealand went to that reception and they heard her speak.

But anyway, the South Pacific was controlled by three admirals in the Navy, and one of them was called Admiral William Halsey. Well, he came to my hospital, and he was the only admiral who actually came and visited all the sick. So I escorted him around my patients. Later that day, they told the ten Navy nurses that the Navy was giving him a reception at the hotel in downtown Auckland, New Zealand, and the Navy nurses and doctors were invited. So I went to the reception and the dinner with Admiral Halsey. He visited each one of the wounded, and he told them how proud he was. Later, my granddaughter married a graduate of Annapolis, and I toured Annapolis several times – this was years later—and I saw the memo to Admiral Halsey, he was so famous from World War II. And there I'd had dinner with him, and had my picture taken with him.

Other than Eleanor Roosevelt and Admiral Halsey, we didn't have any of the high ranking ones coming there to visit the patients.

KH: Did they have any entertainment there, like the USO?

VC: Well you see, this was war. We didn't have that. This is the war zone. No, you didn't have that in the middle of the war. That's later, later they came; they had great entertainment. But we didn't have them in the war, no.

JH: Now when you had rest time, R&R time, did you get to tour around New Zealand a little bit more?

VC: There was a beach there. We went swimming. I had about a week off the whole time I was there. I went on a trip to Rotorua, New Zealand, and it was so famous in the 1800s, and you probably heard of it. I was amazed they had all these wealthy people from England and the rest of the world that used to visit this place. What was it, they called it? A tornado covered the town with the explosion....

KH: A volcano? A volcanic eruption?

VC: Yeah, that's it. Well, they had that in this town in New Zealand, and the people there—many of them were from Europe, they were a wealthy group—this was in the 1800s. And it erupted and buried the whole town, and we were visitors; when I was there they had uncovered a few of the buildings. One was a church, whose spire you could see. We went down a very steep ladder to go to the bottom. This town was covered with soot. Everybody was buried. It was apparently in the wee hours of the morning when it occurred, and some people were having tea. They uncovered the bodies many, many years later, but it was a frightening experience, all those people died from the eruption.

JH: Like Pompeii.

KH: Going back to something that strikes me. You didn't finish the story when you had to go down the ladders from the ship. How did they get your equipment to you? Did they put it down or did you have to go with nothing?

VC: Oh, we had no equipment. All we could do was hold on. No, I'd never been on a rope ladder in my life. It was one of the most frightening experiences I ever had. Because I don't like heights, and it was like looking down from the top of the Empire State Building; it was so far down because it was a huge ship, like the Queen Mary. We went down one by one, and we had a Navy crewman that was in charge of us. He told us to get on the ladder and not look down, feel your way all the way down, and when you got to the bottom of the ship, let go of the ladder and jump into the skiff where were caught by the seamen in the skiff. I've never had such a horrible experience!

JH: I take it they caught you just fine, because you're here.

VC: You can never forget. It was the most horrible experience, terrible.

JH: Did you go through basic training?

VC: No. You see, we were at war.

JH: So they didn't bother having you go through the training?

VC: I had no training; they did later. But this was right after Pearl Harbor.

JH: So they were just glad to get a good nurse to come and help.

VC: We had no seaman training, no nothing. And I might have known a little more about what I was doing going down the ladder if I had, because they do that, go down the ships. But no, this was 1942.

JH: Did you run into a lot of rough seas?

VC: Oh sure, I was thrown out of my bunk one night during a storm.

KH: I take it you had separate quarters for all the nurses there?

VC: We had the quarters; we were all together in the quarters in bunk beds, we all had bunk beds, and we were all in one room. We were always guarded day and night. A Marine guard with his gun. I could hear all night long him pacing outside in the corridor. Every once in a while he would put the gun down to rest and then get up and walk. We were never left alone, we were guarded day and night.

JH: Did you have a special place where you ate, or did you eat with the other sailors?

VC: Well we ate in the ship's mess hall. I don't think it was special, but we had a certain section there. Most people couldn't eat--

JH: Well, that cut down on the expense....

VC: I went to every meal, even though my stomach was queasy.

JH: They say that's the best thing for seasickness, is to eat. Did you have any kind of entertainment, like movies or anything?

VC: No, this was war. You couldn't even have a light on in the ship. It was in total darkness. Nobody could even smoke a cigarette because we were in the top deck in the officer's quarters, and the Marines were all in the bottom of the ship. But we could see them, we were up high and we could look down. And this was a big ship.

JH: You said it was the Queen Mary you were on? A cruise ship turned into....

VC: I said it was as big as the Queen Mary. It wasn't the Queen Mary, no. That was years later. No, it was a very large ship, I don't know the name of it.

JH: Well, you see we've met some men who did go over on the Queen Mary or the Queen Elizabeth, the big ships, that ordinarily were cruise ships, converted during the war.

VC: I don't know what it was, but I was told it had been a luxury liner. That's what they did during the war, it was a troop transport ship, very large ship.

JH: So what did you do during the day on the ship when you were on the way to New Zealand, and how long did the trip take?

VC: I don't know exactly, but it was weeks.

JH: What were your duties while you were on the ship?

VC: Well, I was taking care of those that were sick! That was my duty.

JH: So they had a lot of people there?

VC: Of course, they weren't sick the entire trip. We didn't have any time to ourselves, trying to keep alive.

JH: How was your food on the ship? What did you have to eat, in general, do you remember? Were there good meals on that ship?

VC: Well, as I say...

JH: Well I know, you were at war, you don't expect pheasant under glass!

VC: I never looked at the quality of the food, I was just glad I could hold something down.

JH: Once you were in New Zealand and you lived with a family, did they feed you, or did you get all your meals at the base?

VC: No, we all had our meals at the hospital. A jeep used to pick us up morning and night.

JH: Like a taxi service. Did you get to meet other people who lived in New Zealand, natives...?

VC: They had different groups entertain the Navy once in a while. One thing was, and this was early '42, they didn't have any fly control, and you'd go into a beautiful home and the layout of the dining room would be filled with flies, all over the food. Of course the Americans had to change a lot of stuff. And they had no heat, they never had heat, and it was pretty cold in the winter season down there. Their seasons were opposite of ours. So when they finally built that one building for the Navy nurses, I was ready to come home so I wasn't in there too long.

KH: You mentioned the Quonset huts, that was the typical kind of housing that they had during World War II. How many people would they have in the hospital ward in a Quonset hut?

VC: In each Quonset hut? I imagine there were probably about thirty patients in each Quonset hut. I don't remember the number, but all the patients were in Quonset huts.

KH: And doctors made the rounds every day, several times a day?

VC: Yes. As I said, the specialist that you had would be the one that you dealt with.

JH: Were the sanitary conditions... How did they deal with that... for infection and all that?

VC: Well, if you know the Navy—

JH: Well, he would know better than I (referring to KH).

VC: --inspections were a big thing In the Navy. Yes, it was kept as clean as possible.

KH: Do you remember paydays back in those days? What kind of a wage did you get as a nurse?

VC: I have no idea. It isn't like today.

KH: You mentioned that you met your future husband there, and you got to see him maybe once or twice when you were overseas.

VC: Well, he came for rest and recreation, so they were there a few weeks.

KH: He was in the construction battalion, you said. What was it like for him being in the Seabees?

VC: What was it like for him? What do you mean?

KH: Being a Seabee, what did they have to do?

VC: Well, I don't know their duties. They did the building of the airstrips on all the islands for our planes to land. We didn't have many planes then, they were all bombed at Pearl Harbor. The Japanese controlled all the South Pacific islands, so the Seabees had to go on each island with the Marines and build these airstrips for our planes to land, and that's how the Marines got to go to every island. The Seabees did a wonderful

job. The Sixth Seabees were famous for the ones on Guadalcanal. As I say, it was the first American victory on the islands.

KH: Now at any time while you were over in New Zealand, were there any threats from the Japanese? Did the Japanese have any air raids or plane raids?

VC: No, but I understand, years later, that they expected to go to New Zealand and Australia next, and they had all the plans to go there when they were stopped by the Americans. You know, Guadalcanal was the first one that stopped them. So they never got to New Zealand and Australia. Of course they were close friends of the Americans, the Australians and New Zealanders, they worked with the Americans to defeat the Japanese.

KH: They had a good relationship with the Americans?

VC: Oh, a top relationship. And they helped win the war with the Americans.

KH: From New Zealand, where did you go from New Zealand, did you have another duty station?

VC: No, I was always stationed there. It was one of the satellite hospitals that the Navy built to take care of the wounded from the island fighting with the Japs. My hospital was Number 6. They had them scattered throughout the South Pacific islands. I was among the first ten Navy nurses to go to the South Pacific in the war.

KH: You mentioned that you were getting out of the Navy in 1944?

VC: June of '44.

KH: For what reason?

VC: To get married.

KH: Was there a policy that you couldn't be married?

VC: That's right. And that policy, Navy nurses could not marry. And that policy was only changed years and years later. At one of the reunions in Washington, I talked with a Navy captain and she told me that it was only changed—I don't know exactly the year now—but many years after the war. They didn't let Navy nurses marry and stay in. But you could stay in in the Army; they had married Army nurses, they didn't have that rule. But the Navy had very strict rules. So if you wanted to get married—of course you can't marry when you're in the middle of the jungle! (Laughs) I didn't plan to marry when I went overseas.

KH: So from 1944, where did you go from there, back to the States?

JH: Did you go to California when you left New Zealand?

VC: Well I married a construction engineer, and he was still in the Navy when we got married. We were going to marry on our vacation, but he wanted to marry as soon as we arrived in the States and not have a big wedding later. And so we did. We married at Old St. Mary's Church. Then I went with him. The war was still on until '45. We were married at the end of June in '44. After our vacation I went back with him to California where he was assigned. After our vacation he received orders to go to California, to San Francisco, Camp Parks in Shoemaker, California, and I went with him. And so we were there a few months. Then he received orders to go to the Mojave Desert in California and build a Naval ordnance test station, which was to test rockets and the Marine pilots came in and tested rockets from their planes. While we were there, Lt. Edwards was shot down and he was testing a rocket in his plane. And of course he died in the crash. So after the war they changed the name to Edwards Air Force Base. So that's

where I lived with him until the war ended, in 1945, the next year.

JH: Did you have big celebrations when the war ended?

VC: Well, you know everyone was so glad the war was ended. There were no celebrations—we were glad to get home.
(Laughs)

JH: I meant to ask you earlier, did you get many letters from your family back home when you were in New Zealand?

VC: Oh sure.

JH: They got the mail through.

VC: In New Zealand? Of course, the mail was scarce and we wouldn't get mail or letters for a long time sometimes.

KH: Did they censor your mail that you sent back home?

VC: Yes, everything was investigated, of course. You couldn't write what actually happened or where you were or your name was, or anybody's name, it was all strictly investigated. You couldn't talk about any patient or mention any patient or who you were.

JH: So you couldn't write—did you have a mother or father back home?

VC: Oh sure.

JH: So you couldn't write to them and sign your name?

VC: I could write, but I couldn't tell them—

JH: --what you were doing or where you were?

VC: I couldn't tell them anything about the patients or mention how many patients. Everything was investigated.

JH: So it was probably pretty hard to think about things to write about when you pretty much worked all day.

VC: Well you couldn't talk about it, no. This was wartime.

KH: After the war, I think you mentioned that you took advantage of the GI Bill?

VC: I went after the war under the GI Bill to American International College for my bachelor degree in Biology, but I was moving state to state with my husband where the jobs were, till we came to New York City.

JH: So then after all this, have you maintained a membership in any of the military groups?

VC: Oh sure. The Navy Nurse Corps, I was an active member. And I'm a lifetime member of the 1040 Club in Delmar, I'm a lifetime member of the Legion, and my husband was too.

JH: I suppose you used to do various things with the Legion? And when you were a member of the Nurse Corps? What did you do in those groups?

VC: Well, the Navy Nurse Corps was located in California. I corresponded and I attended all the functions in Washington. My daughter went with me to all the Navy functions. We went to many down in Washington and Virginia and other places.

JH: And you mentioned that you used to volunteer at the Veterans' Hospital here in Albany?

VC: I volunteered at the Veterans', and I used to visit the patients at the Veterans' for a long time.

JH: Mainly visited with them, and you did that for many years?

VC: My picture was in the foyer there, my World War II picture. I don't know if it is there now, but it was there, and I was in uniform. This Navy nurse friend in Albany married [unclear], and graduated from the Navy hospital--not graduated but attended the Navy hospital--in Long Island. I don't remember which one that was. She saw my picture in the foyer there. She took a picture of it to show me.

JH: So you were probably a close-knit group in New Zealand, just ten of you. Have you maintained a correspondence with them afterward?

VC: Only two. None of them lived around where I did. But two of my closest friends were in the same group as me, and I heard from one in retirement, she and her husband, I was with both of them in New Zealand. She and her husband moved to the Cape after they retired, so my husband and I would stop and visit them every year. But they've all died. I'm the only survivor of that group.

JH: So anyway, this has really been a pleasure meeting you and hearing of your experiences. We thank you for your service to the country.

VC: Well your husband and I have a lot in common. (Laughs)