

**Gertrude A. Lynn talks about her experiences serving in the US Army Nurse Corps
with the 59th Evacuation Hospital during World War II**

Gertrude A. Lynn: Hello. I'm Gertrude Lynn and I was asked to tell you about my experience in the Army Nurse Corps. I was raised in San Francisco, California. Uh, my mother graduated from the French Hospital in, uh, 1930 so I followed her footsteps and, uh, was trained there, graduating in 1939. We had a very good training there. It was a small hospital and, uh, we had wonderful teachers and I, I thoroughly enjoyed the work. It was long hard hours. Nothing like the nursing is today. I did private duty for a while and I was takin' some classes at the San Francisco State College to get my degree. So for a while I worked at the French Hospital doing private duty and general duty off and on as time permitted. And then I finally went to, uh, the city and county hospital of San Francisco where they, I had been there taking psychiatric training and, uh, my friend also went there. And we were both going to college together and age of what, 27 at that time. So I was working in the psychiatric ward at the time and my friend [Bam 01:30] was workin' over in the other ward's medical surgical. And one night I was on, doing night duty because I was taking classes in the daytime. I used to take my alarm clock to wake me up between classes and I'd doze out in the car between classes. Anyway, uh, one night one of the patients came up and said "Oh, come listen to the radio. Pearl Harbor has been attacked." So I did. I was just shocked. I just couldn't get over it. I was mostly very, very angry. A few weeks later, the girls were talking about the Stanford Affiliated Unit that was going to be formed to go overseas. There was a tea and my friend [Bam 02:15] said let's go to the tea and find out about this thing. So we did. And right then and there I decided I was going to join the army. [Chuckle] I was in four years and never regret a day of it. It was an exciting challenge and I was very excited about it. I was sworn in, in April of '42.

May 5, I reported to the station hospital at Fort Ord pending shipment with the 59th Evacuation Hospital. May 25, 1942. I won't go into great details but my friend [Bam 02:54] had to gain weight and I was supposed to lose weight before we were accepted here which we both did. She had a harder time than I did. We were put through a strenuous calisthenics course. We had all of our shots and we were being outfitted and here I met Captain [Lynn 03:15] who was in charge of the Officers' Club and the Hunt Club. And he asked me to bring some girls over the club which I did and we got acquainted and started going together. It was a wonderful time for me. There were nice places to go around there and there was always the Officers' Club. So it was a very enjoyable time. We'd go to Carmel and so forth. We were, uh, before we got our uniforms, we used to go into

1 Monterey and we'd have to wear our gas masks because we were on alert.
2 So here we were in civilian clothes carrying those heavy, bulky, gas masks
3 and people would look at us and wonder who we were. It was really
4 funny. [Chuckle] We got most of our outfits and supplies and in August
5 11 we were sent to New York for a shipment. I'm not gonna go through
6 all these dates and times. It's just too lengthy to go through. We took
7 eleven days, after, we were in the East Coast for a while on temporary
8 duty where we met some of the navy boys that were shipping out and that
9 was a very sad time to be meeting those fellows 'cause many of them
10 didn't come back.

11
12 On December '42 after 11 days on board one of the ships, there were three
13 ships, the, uh, Uruguay, Brazil and Argentina. We were on the Argentina.
14 And they were luxury liners that were transported into troop ships. The,
15 uh, nurses were all up on top deck and we could look down on the men
16 who were out on deck every day doing calisthenics and, uh, playing card
17 games. We had a couple of rough days that there weren't many in the
18 dining room. We were given two excellent meals and all the snacks we
19 wanted to carry off with us. So the food was excellent. Fresh fruit and so
20 forth. Of course, I didn't miss a meal in the dinning room but many of the
21 girls were sick. One of our nurses, the minute she put her foot on board
22 ship, she was seasick. And she was out sittin' on the deck in the air the
23 whole eleven days. She didn't sleep much.

24
25 [Inaudible 05:30] December 24, 1942 we docked in Casablanca, Africa,
26 the first American nurses to arrive there. It was a very interesting place
27 and we were setup in the, a place called the College [inaudible 05:44]
28 which is, uh, a school for young girls. And each of us had a cubicle and
29 on the cubicle, was a bed and a [bidet 05:55] and a little table. And, uh,
30 they were, the mattresses were straw over, uh, steel slats-like so forth.
31 And it was ice cold. There was no heat in the building. No hot water.
32 And it was cold at that time in Africa. So we got settled in and, uh, like I
33 said there was nothing but C-rations and K-rations but there was a party
34 going on at the Excelsior Hotel and if we wanted to go find some food we
35 were welcomed to go. There was transportation. So some of us went. By
36 the time we got there, there was no food but course always plenty of
37 drinks and cigarettes. A few days after that, we had quite an air raid.
38 There was a lot of shrapnel. Uh, we had set up in some buildings and I
39 don't know exactly when it was but we had our first air ward, uh, warning
40 at the time. There was a lot of shrapnel. We were told just to stay in bed.
41 Some of the girls went up on the roof I found later and they saw all the
42 beautiful [inaudible 07:02] lights and whatnot. So there was quite a bit of
43 shrapnel dropping around us but none of our people were injured. We did
44 have a lot of people brought in to care for. We stayed in Casablanca for

1 about nine months and there was not much action there. The war was
2 moving away from us.
3

4 So in August of 1943 we moved to Palermo after being about nine months
5 in Casablanca. In Palermo, we were stationed in some bombed out
6 buildings and we had a building. The nurses were all together in one area.
7 At this time, I was working in the officers' ward and we were injecting
8 penicillin at the time for a lot of these wounded soldiers that we were
9 caring for. Uh, there was an elaborate chart on the wall that I had to keep
10 up with the time and the site of the injections. And, uh, one day General
11 Patton came by. Oh, all spit and polished. Really sharp man. And he
12 inquired about the, the penicillin. I guess at that time the only, uh, people
13 using it were the army people. Civilians were not allowed to have it. So,
14 uh, we just used a great deal of it. Uh, we also used a lot of sulfa drug, uh,
15 powder that we, uh, the doctors put in the wounds after surgery. Uh, it
16 was in Palermo that they had a meeting and asked any of the nurses if they
17 wanted to learn anes, uh, anesthesiology and I thought well I'll go to one
18 meeting and see. I went and there was quite a number of nurses in there.
19 So I just went to one meeting and, uh, that was all. Well a few weeks
20 later, uh, I was asked if I would consider, you know, going into it. So I
21 did. And we had a Captain Hamilton was teaching us how to give sodium
22 pentothal. And, uh, I learned most of it. A little gas and so forth. And
23 then I didn't use it for quite a while because we were, uh, let's see about
24 nine months in Palermo also. Well it was here I think, uh, our whole, uh,
25 59th Evacuation Hospital was given our first Bronze Star for the Sicilian
26 campaign. Uh, it would take too long to explain everything that occurred
27 in Casablanca and Palermo but it was of no great importance.
28

29 From Palermo, we went to Naples and here we were staged in a big hotel.
30 Mostly all women. WACs, uh, Red Cross. All women. It was very hot
31 and very uncomfortable. The war was moving away from us and I think
32 this was the most frustrating time because we wanted to be up there where
33 the action was. From Naples, we went to Anzio and from Anzio we went
34 to, uh, Battipaglia and this was all, all in the Italian Campaign where we
35 got another Bronze Star for our work there.
36

37 The invasion of France was, uh, quite interesting. This was in August 15,
38 1944 and we got our third Italian Bronze Star for our unit for the end, uh,
39 the Rome-Arno Campaign. Uh, [inaudible 10:32] was a little seaport area
40 and the Germans had pulled out of there in a great hurry and we were to
41 stay there until we got orders to move on. We didn't set up camp, uh, I
42 forgot just where we were staying there. It wasn't for very long. Must
43 have been intense because the doctors would go ahead and set up the area
44 for us. But if there was a livable building we'd move into a half bombed

1 out ruin. Uh, but it was here that we took over a very small hospital the
2 German's had left. There were, uh, Jewish people in their stripped outfits,
3 very emaciated. Uh, they just looked like living skeletons. It was just
4 really sad to see. And here we saw a large supply of, uh, morphine
5 sulfate. The first I'd ever seen in ampoules. So it was just very convenient
6 to use. And I just was very impressed with this. The German's were way
7 ahead of us as far as the morphine sulfate went 'cause we used to have to
8 dissolve sterile water and pills before we could use it. So this really
9 impressed me. It went fast from here on. We moved to [inaudible 11:46]
10 and Carpentras and [Reaux 11:47], Epinal and, uh, I started giving
11 anesthetics there. A lot of pentothal was given. Lots of surgeries at times.
12 We staged, we were on [detach 12:01] service for a while. Uh, Epinal,
13 France was a delightful place because our quarters were, uh, high on a hill
14 and we had to get down to surgery and of course we were on call at night.
15 And the girls had rigged up a little sled and they'd go down the hill to
16 surgery on the sled. We used to make snow ladies and snowmen and
17 snow ice cream and it was interesting 'cause I hadn't seen much snow in
18 San Francisco. Well we were getting some more campaign ribbons that
19 the German campaign ribbon. One time we did retreat for let's see, we're
20 in France for, uh, Christmas and we, we had to move and we were in
21 Germany for, for New Year's and then we had to go back to France and
22 on. See that was in about I guess '45, January '45. We went through
23 Grunstadt, Crailsheim, Crailsheim and Heidenheim. The nurses were
24 always treated with great respect in Casablanca and Palermo. No
25 debutante ever had a fuller social calendar. We could dance every night if
26 we cared to. There were navy people stationed there. So we had the navy
27 and the army. There were a few from, uh, Australia and there was always
28 the good old air force around. They were younger but wonderful people.

29
30 Yes, it was in Palermo that I was introduced to Colonel Westmoreland and
31 some of the nurses said been out for the evening talking with him and
32 [Bam 13:50] said you know that man's gonna go a long way. He's very
33 brilliant. He was a West Pointer you know.

34
35 It is difficult to remember the hard times. We had some of 'em. I saw
36 Dachau and have pictures, many, many pictures of my whole experience
37 in the army which I'm gonna have to look at one of these days soon again.

38
39 Well it was over three years and at long last the European War was over. I
40 signed up to be transferred to the Pacific Theater but we were, uh, in
41 different places up in Le Havre waiting to be shipped back to the states
42 and on to the, uh, the Pacific Theater when it was over. So it happened
43 very fast. I had some leave. I was home with my folks and I hadn't heard
44 from Captain [Lynn 14:44]. And, uh, my, I was shipped up to Galesburg,

1 Illinois which I didn't like at all. I was thinkin' of getting out when my
2 mother got ill and I, uh, went back home and decided to get out of the
3 army which I did. So a year later my father died and shortly after that I
4 picked up the phone and here was Captain [Lynn 15:07] on the phone. He
5 said he'd, uh, gotten my letters back as deceased. And he was sent up to
6 Alaska. As much as he tried to go to the Pacific Theater, they sent him to
7 Alaska. So anyway, we went off to Reno and got married and came up to
8 Fort Lewis and that's how I got up in the great Northwest.
9

10 All and all it was a wonderful experience. I treasure all of it. I find it hard
11 to talk about without getting all emotional. With the GI Bill, I started
12 taking some more classes and, uh, got my degree. I started to go for a
13 public health certificate and I decided that wasn't what I wanted. So I
14 went into psychiatric nursing. I tried to encourage my son and daughter to
15 go in the armed forces but after Vietnam they wanted no part of it. So I
16 kept quiet but I do have a wonderful son and daughter in this area. And I
17 think that's enough for now. Thank you.
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