

**Interview of retired Lieutenant Colonel Jean Schiffman on her career  
in the Army Nurse Corps**

4Ruth Stewart: We are interviewing today Jean Schiffman as a member of the WOSL,  
5 San Antonio, Texas unit. This is January the 14th, 2004. Interviewer is  
6 Ruth Stewart, assisted by Carol Habgood. [00:21] Jean, start in by telling  
7 us a little bit about your early life and what led you into nursing and then  
8 the army.

10Jean Schiffman: Well... Well, I was born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; went  
11 through, uh, elementary, junior and high school there; and decided I  
12 wanted to become a nurse. And uh, went into what we called in those  
13 days, nurses' training, at Hahnemann Hospital School of Nursing in  
14 Philadelphia. And uh, my completion of a three-year program, I was an  
15 RN and went to work in New York at Columbia Presbyterian Medical  
16 Center. I worked in the operating room at the Neurological Institute.  
17 From there, I went into the army in 1949; and uh, went through basic at  
18 Fort Sam. Uh...you want all of my military?

20Ruth Stewart: Well, let's go back a little bit...

22Jean Schiffman: Okay.

24Ruth Stewart: [1:22] ...and tell me a little bit what got you interested in nursing; and  
25 then why, when you wanted to join the military, why you chose the army.

27Jean Schiffman: Is there anything else? [laughter]

29Ruth Stewart: [laughter]

31Jean Schiffman: Um, in my early years, uh, we were essentially poor; and I had two  
32 brothers, a mother and a father. And uh, I don't know, just... I couldn't tell  
33 you precisely why I decided to go into nursing, except I always wanted to  
34 do that. And uh, incidentally, while I was in Hahnemann, I was in the  
35 cadet corps. It came into being during WWII; and, uh, I was a member of  
36 the cadet corps for my last two years...two of three years. Um, is that, is  
37 that enough about that?

39Ruth Stewart: It's okay, yeah.

41Jean Schiffman: And then I, I asked the question, you know, how much of my military  
42 history... I'll tell you about...

44Ruth Stewart: Okay.

1  
2Jean Schiffman: Uh, I'll go – start with my education first. I was an RN from Hahnemann.  
3 In 19, uh, 62, I received my BS from Incarnate Word College here in San  
4 Antonio, while I was on active duty. In uh, '66 I received my masters  
5 from the University of California, San Francisco Medical Center, uh, still  
6 on active duty. And I retired in September of '70. That was 33 years ago.  
7  
8 Um, during that time, I had seven years of overseas duty. I had... In 1961  
9 I, uh, spent a year in Korea. And, uh, well, I'd never been camping before.  
10 It was quite an experience. But it was sort of interesting because, despite  
11 the fact that we had hot weather in the summer and cold weather in the  
12 winter, um, I was healthy the whole year. [chuckle] Many people got ill,  
13 particularly in the cold weather. Uh, I did bring some pictures showing the  
14 type of life we had. We lived in tents with pot belly stoves and... In the  
15 OR... Uh, after six months I became OR supervisor there. Me, a young  
16 first lieutenant. And uh, for my last six months there I was OR supervisor  
17 and also in charge of central materiel. Um, let's see, my next overseas  
18 assignment was, uh, in Germany.  
19  
20Ruth Stewart: Before we leave Korea...  
21  
22Jean Schiffman: Yeah.  
23  
24Ruth Stewart: [4:13] ...tell us a little bit about your work there as a nurse.  
25  
26Jean Schiffman: It was fantastic. I never knew... As an operating room nurse, I never knew  
27 that, uh, technique could be carried out to the extent that it was in Korea,  
28 you know, in the field. Our, uh, hospital was a tent, initially. Later, they  
29 put it into a frame, but it was a tent with just canvas over the dirt for the  
30 floor. Uh, we had a pot belly stove in there. For patients, we had, uh...  
31 The stretchers were brought in, we put on horses. We didn't have  
32 operating room tables.  
33  
34 Our enlisted personnel were really great; and they devised a, uh, an actual  
35 scrub sink. They had a big tank outside where they heated water and we  
36 could actually scrub with not ice-cold water, uh, for surgery. And I did  
37 bring some pictures to show these things. Uh, our living was, uh, really  
38 hard. In the wintertime, uh, you'd wake up in your sleeping bag. And uh,  
39 we slept on cots with sleeping bags and look up and there were icicles  
40 because our pot belly stove... One would be frozen and no heat. Then we  
41 didn't want to get out of the sleeping bags because, uh, then we had to go  
42 to the latrine – and there's a picture of that, too. It's a tent where the seats  
43 would be frozen. [chuckle]  
44

1 Ruth Stewart: [chuckle]  
2  
3 Jean Schiffman: That's – that's a wild, mad awakening in the morning. Really got you  
4 going, though. I'll tell ya that.  
5  
6 Ruth Stewart: I guess. [laughter]  
7  
8 Jean Schiffman: And uh, overall, our food was relatively okay. Uh, we ate out of mess kits  
9 and uh... I think one thing – like our shower broke down so for six months  
10 we strictly were washing out of our helmets. And I think the one thing  
11 that, uh, really strikes me is that, uh, you really learn to appreciate the very  
12 simple things in life, like being able to take a bath, being in a bed, being  
13 able to drink milk. We didn't get... We got that powdered stuff or  
14 whatever it was over there.  
15  
16 And, uh, there's a picture there, uh, where I went to Tokyo, uh, to meet a  
17 regular army board. I had TDY and, uh, that was like in heaven because I  
18 was able to do these things and realize that, you know, what these things –  
19 are simple and I'd been missing. Uh, we had, uh, a wonderful... We really  
20 had a wonderful group there. It was like one big family. We were out in  
21 the field, uh, not near any town or anything like that; but civilians not  
22 allowed, except for, uh, we had some young boys cleaning for us and that  
23 was about it. Is that enough about Korea? [chuckle]  
24  
25 Ruth Stewart: If that's what you want to say, okay. Go on.  
26  
27 Jean Schiffman: I think that's enough.  
28  
29 Ruth Stewart: Okay.  
30  
31 Jean Schiffman: Everybody, uh... We'd work, depending on, uh, the patient load, uh, if we  
32 worked 16 hours, 18 hours, until you were ready to flop really. And then,  
33 somebody else would take over until they were ready to flop.  
34  
35 Ruth Stewart: [7:52] Was there any recreation?  
36  
37 Jean Schiffman: Um, well we used to walk in the hills, uh, where they had, uh, seen that  
38 there were no land mines. Uh, I did get to go one trip to Seoul, Korea, um,  
39 which was... I haven't been there since it's been rebuilt, but all I – I just  
40 have memories of how it was. And I did get to actually – I boarded a navy  
41 ship... [chuckle] and um, going up the old ladder, Jacob's ladder, which  
42 was quite an experience. But that, those were my recreations, actually.  
43 Towards the end we did have a club tent and, uh – the end of my stay. But  
44 it was nothing. Not much more than just all of us meeting.

1  
2Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.  
3  
4Jean Schiffman: Nothing very extravagant.  
5Ruth Stewart: [8:54] And then leaving Korea, what were your feelings about leaving  
6 there?  
7  
8Jean Schiffman: Well, actually what happened was, uh, about several weeks before I was  
9 supposed to rotate, I received a message from my brother here in the  
10 States that my father had died; and the Red Cross had never notified me. I  
11 shouldn't say that I hate the Red Cross. I don't hate the Red Cross, but I've  
12 always had very ill feelings about the fact that I was never notified. And  
13 uh, the chief nurse over there, uh, did make arrangements for me to leave a  
14 couple of weeks early, earlier than I was supposed to rotate.  
15  
16Jean Schiffman: Uh, I think my overall feelings about my tour there was, uh, it was, uh, an  
17 awakening to, uh, things that I wasn't used to, certainly. And of course,  
18 that was true when I was in basic training, too. I'd never lived in a  
19 community before; and at that time, we did. We lived in just a big  
20 community, but because I was a first lieutenant, I was in a room with just  
21 five people rather than 25 people. But uh, it, uh... As I said, I went... I  
22 decided to go regular army; and I did. So, I guess I really liked it and  
23 wanted to stay in the army.  
24  
25Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.  
26  
27Jean Schiffman: And uh, after that, uh, let's see. When I first came back... Isn't that weird,  
28 I can't remember where I was assigned when I first came back. I think it  
29 was to, uh – yes, it was to Fort Knox. Their old hospital, an old nursing  
30 home – nurses' quarters I should say. Nurse, well – nurses' quarters. And  
31 uh, I lived right above where they shoveled in the soft coal. [chuckle] It's a  
32 great experience. Uh, it was a good experience, uh, being back in the  
33 States and not going to, uh, a big hospital at that time. I was ready for a  
34 small hospital; but I didn't stay there long.  
35  
36 Uh, I did get transferred to, uh, Aberdeen Proving Ground. And, uh, that  
37 was an experience inasmuch as there were just two operating room nurses,  
38 and we also took care of OB – like delivery room and all this good stuff.  
39 Plus, they were shooting off all these guns. I felt like I was back in the old  
40 country. [chuckle]  
41  
42 Um, but that was short lived also. I then went to Valley Forge. This was  
43 all in a short period of time, because in 19, uh, 62, I had orders for  
44 Germany. And, uh, I went to Landstuhl, Germany. You hear about

1 Landstuhl now, but, uh, patients going through there coming back to the  
2 States. I spent two years there in the operating room. And I could have  
3 rotated then, but I had the opportunity to go to a, uh, become the chief  
4 nurse of the field unit outside of Frankfurt. So, I lived in Frankfurt for a  
5 year and I was with the 31st Surgical Hospital.

6  
7 I came back in '58 and, uh, to Brooke Army Medical Center. And I spent  
8 four years at Brooke here, uh, only because I asked to, uh, be left here so  
9 that I could finish my BS program [inaudible 13:00]. And what I did was I  
10 worked light duty in the operating room; and took classes during the day;  
11 and carried mostly nine hours. So, I was meeting myself coming and  
12 going. And I used to type, uh, not type...tape, excuse me, tape my  
13 lectures and reference work and then, while I was sleeping, I'd play'm.  
14 [chuckle] My mother was with me then and it drove her sort of wild. But  
15 uh...

16  
17 Then in '60, I had to have uh, surgery; and I'm still going to school and at  
18 that... So, I just took one course that semester and it was a microbiology.  
19 Everyone says, "Microbiology? Wow." So, the night before my surgery,  
20 the day before my surgery, uh, I went into, uh, for my mid-term; then I  
21 had my surgery and I went on convalescent leave and, uh, my kid brother  
22 was stationed in Bermuda with the coast guard. So, I went over there for  
23 my convalescent leave; came back and, uh, got on A in microbiology. I  
24 graduated in, uh, let's see...I think I got the years messed up. Yeah, in '62  
25 I graduated magna cum laude, despite working and going to school and all  
26 that. Hard work...

27  
28Ruth Stewart: That's terrific

29  
30Jean Schiffman: And immediately I got orders for Japan. So, I took my mother and our  
31 cocker spaniel, and we went to Japan. And uh, it was great. You know,  
32 we were in the housing area; had a full-time maid. I was in charge of the  
33 operating room and central supply; and I learned how to play duplicate  
34 bridge and, uh, learned to golf while I was there. That was my country  
35 club assignment. And uh, put in for graduate school and, uh, came back  
36 and went to graduate school for just one year and got my MS.

37  
38 Um, from there I went to, uh, South Carolina. I can't even think of the  
39 name of the place. At any rate, from there I went to Fort Benning, and I  
40 taught operating room nursing until I retired in '70. That's the end of my  
41 military career.

42  
43Ruth Stewart: [15:34] In teaching operating room nursing, you were working with  
44 graduate nurses that were already in the army?

1  
2Jean Schiffman: I was working with lieutenants and captains, yes. And actually, that was  
3 when Vietnam was going on; and they'd finish my program; and they'd go  
4 over, but I never went over. It was, uh, an interesting program, and, uh,  
5 nice, young, eager students. It was very nice.  
6  
7Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm. [16:04] Did you like the teaching?  
8  
9Jean Schiffman: Yes, I did.  
10  
11Ruth Stewart; Mm-hm.  
12  
13Jean Schiffman: I was ready for it, I think. And uh, with my years of operating room  
14 experience, plus my education, I, I think I was pretty well qualified for it.  
15 What else can I tell you? My afterlife? [chuckle]  
16  
17Ruth Stewart: [16:28] Well, before we get to that, what are your major memories of your  
18 career?  
19  
20Jean Schiffman: Oh, I don't know. I, I didn't mention, I don't believe, that in basic I had  
21 gone to, uh, Letterman out in San Francisco. And uh, that was my, uh,  
22 first time out on the west coast. And a group of four of us drove out... It  
23 was sort of interesting – in this clunky old Ford that was about ready to  
24 fall apart. But we were going from basic to Letterman. We got to  
25 Letterman and the car looked around and said, "That's all." It saw the hills  
26 and said, "That's all." [chuckle] Uh, that was a great experience; and I, I've  
27 loved that area ever since, actually. But I was there just for about a year  
28 and, uh, then I went to graduate school there. And then after I retired, I  
29 lived in the hills of Oakland for three years  
30  
31Ruth Stewart: [17:22] So you had a little experience in that area then?  
32  
33Jean Schiffman: Yeah. And I, you know, Korea was a certainly a highlight, uh, that taught  
34 me an awful lot. As a young person, a young nurse, I think I – that was  
35 my greatest learning experience in the army. The rest was fine. I mean, I  
36 really did enjoy my army career.  
37  
38Ruth Stewart: [17:53] And do you have any, um... Do you – your experience as being,  
39 uh, caring for combatants and working in the military through a war, uh,  
40 did that affect your view of war in any way?  
41  
42Jean Schiffman: Well, if I, you don't mind my saying so, war is hell no matter how you  
43 look at. And uh, you know, very little is said about, uh, what happened in  
44 Korea. Uh, we hear about Vietnam, Vietnam; and of course, now, uh,

1 Iraq. Um, Korea was a hard time and actually, it's, it's something that, uh,  
2 never ended. We still have troops there. Uh, there's still, uh, I don't know.  
3 How do I feel about war time in general? I, I think it's... I don't know.  
4 There has to be a better way, but war has always been in our history and I  
5 guess it always will be.  
6  
7 Ruth Stewart: [18:55] Since your retirement, have you joined veteran's organizations  
8 aside from...  
9  
10 Jean Schiffman: I belong to the American Legion, yeah. Other organizations I've joined  
11 have to do with my, uh, loss of vision.  
12  
13 Ruth Stewart: [19:16] Tell us a little bit about that.  
14  
15 Jean Schiffman: About my loss of vision?  
16  
17 Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.  
18  
19 Jean Schiffman: Well, I guess they call it, uh, macular degeneration. And it's where the  
20 macula is the most acute, uh, vision spot in the retina. I don't want to get  
21 too technical but, um, there are two types. There's wet and dry. And I  
22 have – I'm unfortunate enough to have the wet type, which 10 percent are  
23 wet, and 90 percent are dry. The wet, uh, you actually hemorrhage in the  
24 back of your eye; and it obscures your central vision – and the macula.  
25 And so, I have peripheral vision. I can see around the sides, top and  
26 bottom, but if I look at something, I can't read it. If I look at you, your  
27 face isn't clear.  
28  
29 Ruth Stewart: [20:06] You've done some major adaptation though, to improve your  
30 living with this or as...  
31  
32 Jean Schiffman: Up to a talking computer [chuckle] and uh, my, uh, closed-circuit TVs  
33 and, uh, talking books. And what else? I don't know, I have all kinds of  
34 things. I never go without. This is a 9-power magnifier so that I can read  
35 this if I try to.  
36  
37 Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.  
38  
39 Jean Schiffman: Uh...  
40  
41 Ruth Stewart: [20:40] That didn't have anything to do with your military career, did it?  
42  
43 Jean Schiffman: No, it was genetic. It had to do with my age and genetics. Yeah, I think...  
44 You know, my mother was never diagnosed with macular degeneration,

1 but when I think back... She died in '79. Uh, she had an eye problem and  
2 it got to the point where, uh, she didn't read. She'd watch TV, but she still  
3 played cards. She taught me how to play bridge when I was this big. And  
4 uh, but I think that she probably had macular degeneration. So, I think  
5 maybe it was a genetic thing.  
6  
7Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm. Well, you certainly had a notable career as an army nurse. And  
8 we appreciate you sharing this information with us.  
9  
10Jean Schiffman: Well, I hope it was adequate. And uh, but that's my life.  
11  
12Ruth Stewart: Thank you very much.  
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14/al