

1 **Interview of Mary J. Ford on her service in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps during WWII**

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3

4Ruth Stewart: We are interviewing today Mary J. Ford, um, who is a member of the
5 WOSL, San Antonio Unit, San Antonio, Texas. And this is January the
6 13th, 2004. She's being interviewed by Ruth F. Stewart, assisted by Carol
7 Habgood. [00:26] Mary, tell us a little bit about your early life, as you
8 were growing up.

9

10Mary J. Ford: I was, um, born in a little town, Ambia, Indiana. My uh, my grandfather
11 was quite a successful farmer. Um...he had a, a large farm and had three
12 threshing rings. That's pretty good in those days. And also, had a little
13 hardware in this little town. And uh, then uh, when he died, my father
14 took over the hardware, uh store. And uh, my mother inherited the farm.
15 And this is something; my mother was a petite, quiet person. And my
16 sister and I didn't know until we were – many, many years later – that, uh,
17 my grandfather hadn't left Aunt Ida anything because of something she
18 had done; and my mother gave her half of the farm...

19

20Ruth Stewart: That's something.

21

22Mary J. Ford: ...and, and my mother never said a word. And I'm sure if it had been me,
23 I'd have told someone every other week, you know, that, "I gave my sister
24 half the farm." [laughter]

25

26Ruth Stewart: [laughter]

27

28Mary J. Ford: That was my mother, so... And uh, so then late-, later on, uh, during the
29 Depression years... And my fa-, my father probably needed the money,
30 she sold her half of the farm. I said I never wanted to know what she got
31 for it, but it wasn't much, I'm sure. But uh, my aunt saved that farm; and
32 later on, left it to my sister and I. So...

33

34Ruth Stewart: Oh.

35

36Mary J. Ford: ...which was very nice. So...

37

38Ruth Stewart: [2:08] So it came back to you?

39

40Mary J. Ford: Yes, mm-hm. [laughter]

41

42Ruth Stewart: Yeah.

43

1 Mary J. Ford: And uh, so then, uh, throughout the years, my sister, uh, was four years
2 older. And uh, uh, went to, um, Harper Hospital in Detroit, uh, to nurses'
3 training. And I had always, uh, in my mind, you know, thought that
4 would be wonderful to be a nurse. And so, I, I couldn't, uh, uh, when it
5 came time for me to go into nursing [clearing throat] I couldn't go into
6 Harper because I wasn't 18 until the 18th of October; and the class started
7 in September. And so, some of my classmates from school were going
8 into nurses' training in Kankakee, Illinois, where we lived. And uh, so
9 that's where I went for the diploma program. So...
10

11 Ruth Stewart: [3:06] And what did you think about your days in the nursing school?
12

13 Mary J. Ford: Oh, uh, really terrific. Uh...they, uh, I, I had twice the time length of time
14 in the operating room that, that you normally have, because the nun got
15 sick that was in charge and they had a temporary person in there. And one
16 of the, uh, and one of the nurses, one of the staff nurses got sick. And, and
17 so, uh, I had, uh, a lot of time, which increased my interest. And when I,
18 when I left training, I went to Harper Hospital to work in the operating
19 room there. I was in the operating room for eight years at Harper Hospital
20 in Detroit. So... It was quite an experience. A very busy operating room.
21 We were running about 100 cases a day way back, way back then.
22 [laughter] So...
23

24 Ruth Stewart: [4:00] And when did you get interested in army?
25

26 Mary J. Ford: Um, Harper Hospital, uh, in WWII, had a unit, the 17th General. And they
27 were stationed at Dijon, uh, France. And uh, so at the beginning of WWII,
28 the, the unit was activated, uh, the 17th General. And um, that's, uh, how I
29 became involved with that. Uh...in fact, uh, five, five or six nurses, uh,
30 went with the unit. And that's quite a draw on your staff in the operating
31 room when the youngest nurse has been there about 2-1/2 years. So that's
32 pretty stable staff and we really, you know, we gave good service. And
33 uh... But then there was a staging period up at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin,
34 uh, for some time before they went to, to um, um, uh, Casablanca. So...
35

36 Ruth Stewart: [5:05] You were with the unit when it went to Casablanca?
37

38 Mary J. Ford: Oh yes, uh-huh.
39

40 Ruth Stewart: [5:09] And what kind of, uh, service there...
41

42 Mary J. Ford: We were up to Camp McCoy. It very was interesting. I think it was about
43 a, a two days, two days and two night train trip, uh, over to, uh, Newport
44 News, which is the [port 5:22] of many of our patients. It's called Camp

1 Patrick Henry. And people were saying that some woman sold that land to
2 the government, you know, for that. We said, “She must have hated her
3 son, because the mosquitos were so bad.” [laughter] So uh, we stayed
4 there and, uh, and I think we were staged there, uh, for nine days. And
5 then we left, uh, uh, and uh, went to um, um, uh, Casablanca. And uh, we
6 sailed on the Empress of Scotland. It was a beautiful ship. And because of
7 the size of it and it went so fast, we weren’t in a convoy. We didn’t have
8 to zig-zag, that, that sort of thing. And uh, it had been previously called
9 the Empress of Japan. But the British had changed the name to the
10 Empress of Scotland.
11
12 Ruth Stewart: Oh yeah.
13
14 Mary J. Ford: And... But of course, it sounds glamorous, but some of those state rooms
15 were, you know, about three decks high, about 40 in a row or something
16 like that. But, [clearing throat] when they were assigning, assigning, the
17 uh, the rooms, uh, places, you know, for you to go, uh, came along four to
18 [inaudible 6:38] or [inaudible 6:40]. A small cabin was just two, for two.
19 And everyone thought that was so wonderful. When you’d wake up in the
20 middle of the night and your close friends are in there washing, you know,
21 uh, rather than being in this big room, you know, uh... [laughter]
22
23 Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.
24
25 Mary J. Ford: Oh my, it was very, very interesting. So, um...
26
27 Ruth Stewart: [7:04] So how long did it take you, then to get...
28
29 Mary J. Ford: Uh, we were uh...
30
31 Ruth Stewart: ...on the ship?
32
33 Mary J. Ford: We’re so far back, now I have to review here all these notes, uh, that uh,
34 um, we, uh, uh, eight days – eight days.
35
36 Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.
37
38 Mary J. Ford: Uh-huh. And uh, so uh... And then, uh, traveling was very interesting.
39 And the British are really pretty gung-ho about meals and things like that
40 [treat us 7:37] for breakfast. [laughter] But uh, it went really very well.
41 And uh, then [clearing throat] when we got to, uh, uh, Casablanca, there
42 was a staging area outside of, uh, Casablanca – an old church. And
43 actually, it was called the [Ghandi 7:58] Passage. Uh...it was named after
44 someone who had been injured in some earlier war.

1
2Ruth Stewart: [8:06] And what is a staging area?
3
4Mary J. Ford: Um, it's um, where we were held to – until we were to go – until we were
5 to go forward. [clearing throat]
6
7Ruth Stewart: Okay.
8
9Mary J. Ford: ...[inaudible 8:17] [clearing throat] Excuse me. They, uh – that we were
10 waiting until the Sicilian Campaign was over before the, the allies went
11 into, uh, Salerno. And uh, but that was – uh, so we were staged down
12 there all that time; and we didn't go in immediately, but very soon
13 afterwards.
14
15Ruth Stewart: [8:41] Then you went to Salerno from there?
16
17Mary J. Ford: No, we, uh, we sailed into the Naples area; a port right next to Naples.
18 [throat clearing] And uh, then uh, they, uh, Salerno had built this large
19 hospital. It was a big – quite a big complex. I've forgotten how many
20 acres. And uh, the, the British had arrived a few days before. And they
21 had a couple of buildings. The uh, [knights 9:11] of somebody or other...
22 The Italians had a building to take care of, of what they could do, uh, with
23 their own people. And uh, which was very little, because they couldn't get
24 supplies. And uh, and then we had, uh, a couple buildings. And we had
25 the pest house. And eventually, the British officers had been – I actually –
26 it had been cleaned up, you know. Uh...but uh, as soon as they moved
27 out, that was our-, the nurses' quarters.
28
29 And the British had, [clearing throat] the British had, uh, arrived before.
30 And so, they had the nurses' quarters. And we thought, "Oh dear", you
31 know. Well, in just a few days, we were happy that we didn't have it. As
32 long as the Germans had gas, they liked to bomb the port, you know, to
33 bomb the ships to destroy the supplies. And of course, then our aircraft
34 went up, uh, to shoot the, the whichever was flying over. And whether it,
35 whether it was the Germans or our aircraft, went in the, um, the building
36 and hit this British nurse in the [inaudible 10:20]. And she died.
37
38Ruth Stewart: Mm.
39
40Mary J. Ford: So, uh, uh, um... And here we're up in the operating room. The windows
41 looked out on the American cemetery there; and here, the British soldiers
42 went, uh, and we told them [inaudible 10:38], you know. And then they'd
43 pause; and then one-by-one they went over at [inaudible 10:44] to a grave
44 and [inaudible 10:45] on that. We were really impressed.

1
2Ruth Stewart: Very impressive.
3
4Mary J. Ford: Very dramatic, so, so.
5
6Ruth Stewart: Yeah.
7
8Mary J. Ford: But, uh... And the building that the operating rooms were in was amusing.
9 Like on the first floor there would be an operating room at the one end;
10 [clearing throat] and then on the second floor, on the opposite end; on the
11 third floor on the opposite end; on the fourth floor... So, if the, probably if
12 building got bombed, they might save an operating room. So, so...
13
14Ruth Stewart: [11:17] What kind of patients were you getting there?
15
16Mary J. Ford: Uh...the [inaudible 11:22] had been in that building for a couple weeks
17 before we got there. They later went up to Anzio. And um, uh, so they
18 had been taking care of a large number of patients for that small group of
19 people. It was amazing. And uh, so there were, uh, the war was going on,
20 so your war injuries, you know...
21
22Ruth Stewart: [11:45] You had the combatants.
23
24Mary J. Ford: ...when everyone was coming up from Southern Italy and, and uh, [Clark
25 11:49] was coming in to Salerno and moving their way up the beach.
26 [clearing throat] And so, and war patients, so...
27
28Ruth Stewart: [12:01] From all of European fronts, was that it – your patients?
29
30Mary J. Ford: Well, Italy. Yeah.
31
32Ruth Stewart: Yeah. Just from Italy, though. Okay.
33
34Mary J. Ford: Yeah. So... [And started friendships 12:09] So...
35
36Ruth Stewart: Okay.
37
38Mary J. Ford: There were, there were – well, the war was going on up there, but we were
39 coming up from this way.
40
41Ruth Stewart: [12:20] What were the major injuries that you were involved with?
42
43Mary J. Ford: Oh, we had everything, you know? From routine debridements to
44 everything. But now, the ones, um, uh, chest and bellies and, and uh,

1 everything, so... And uh, I was so impressed, uh, with, uh, this, uh,
2 patient had been in, hadn't been able to evacuate him for a while, because
3 he had, uh, not only a hip [inaudible 12:51] because of his shoulder and
4 his back also. And so, when they brought him in the op-, to take all the
5 casts off and stuff like that, so there were maggots – which is fine
6 [inaudible 13:05]. But there was so much damage, they weren't able to
7 save a leg... And uh...

8
9 Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.

10 Mary J. Ford: So, we were a Detroit outfit and this boy was from Detroit. And so, uh,
11 somebody talked to him that they weren't going to be able to save the leg.
12 And he said, "Well, I guess I'll just have to go into [law 13:25] then."
13 You know, it was really very touching, you know.

14
15 Ruth Stewart: [13:32] As a nurse, how did you feel about having to care for these
16 patients that were so young and so injured?

17
18 Mary J. Ford: I don't know. You know, it's amazing how you talk to them. Uh...you
19 don't talk down to them in any way, you would talk to them like you
20 would talk to anybody from back home. And uh, so... They were, they
21 were there to be taken care of and so...

22
23 Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.

24
25 Mary J. Ford: But I must tell you when, before we got into the, the uh, uh, permanent
26 place to live, they put us up in the auditorium of this big building. And I, I
27 brought a picture along, because its – there were 111 women, cot after cot,
28 roll after roll. [We were just solid 14:24], hardly could walk, you know.
29 And uh, they tried to fix it so it would stagger, like head-to-feet, head-to-
30 feet, you know. [laughter] But then on the wall looking down over the bay
31 of Naples, we saw churches. That was beautiful, you know. But uh, when
32 uh, the Germans started to come over to the hospitals to go down in the, to
33 bomb the, the harbor and they made us go down in the tunnel, because if
34 glass broke, you know, that wall...that would be very bad. And so, but
35 then you went down in the tunnel and there were sand fleas and, and stuff
36 like that, you know. You hated to go down there, so... [chuckle]

37
38 Ruth Stewart: [15:13] And then when you moved into your permanent quarters, what
39 were they?

40
41 Mary J. Ford: We had to be in a, a, uh, a um, oh what do you call it – the pest house,
42 where they had, they had contagious diseases. It was a regular three-story
43 small building. And uh, my, my two friends and I were – happened to get,
44 um, a utility room. And of course, it was an L-shaped utility room. And

1 so, here there are three beds in there. Well, it was a little crowded. There
2 was a dumb waiter, and someone had given me a German flag, so I put
3 that over the dumb waiter. And uh, and then Edna, uh, knew someone
4 down at the port. And the Germans had left some, some uh, wooden
5 double deckers. And so, they – so she and her friend brought two up; and
6 uh, and so, the lady and, uh, we put them back next to the wall that had
7 windows. And uh, of course, naturally since Edna brought them, I got the
8 upper deck. And... [chuckle] And so, that, that, saved us space. We had
9 just that and one other bed.

10

11Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.

12

13Mary J. Ford: And uh, but then when the, uh, it wasn't too good to have the, you know,
14 windows, cause the Germans would fly over that uh, when our own
15 aircrafts would start spinning up, you know. You never know where the
16 little pieces are going to go. So, you're really supposed to go down to the
17 tunnel. So...

18

19Ruth Stewart: [16:43] And what about your eating and, uh...

20

21Mary J. Ford: Um, when we first landed, uh, uh, that, that's – all is cooked outside on the
22 field stove. And then, we ate and, and would go through the – take care of
23 our mess gear. And at that time, the Italians were still roaming all around
24 the area, you know. And they would want whatever was left in your mess
25 gear. And they... And you didn't want them... You got a tin can, you
26 know, and uh, stick it [inaudible 17:11] scrape it in... You didn't want
27 them to get your mess gear any dirtier than it was. But it was best for you
28 to dump it in there when you got used to that, because, uh... And then
29 there was a big, big brush that you put your mess gear in first soapy water,
30 you know, big 50-gallon drums, you know. And two rinse ones. And uh,
31 and, you better close it up when you did that to keep it clean for the next
32 meal, so... [chuckle]

33

34 And then afterwards, when we got settled, we had a regular mess hall, you
35 know. And one of our doctors had been in, in, uh, the 17th General in
36 WWI. And he was very interested in cooking, so he – and he was a
37 surgeon, but he gave out lot of good tips, you know, about how to make
38 things taste better, you now. Like add a little dry mustard to something,
39 you know, different things like that, so...

40

41Ruth Stewart: [18:10] What kind of recreation then did you have there?

42

43Mary J. Ford: Well...

44

1Ruth Stewart: Other than viewing the bay of Naples?
2

3Mary J. Ford: They uh, um, after a short time, we were allowed to go down-, in
4 downtown Naples. The first little section that was called the [romarot
5 18:24] section; then on downtown Naples, cause there was shopping. And
6 there were, uh, the, they had, uh, what they call a PBS club, a bay section
7 club down in a bank in, in downtown Naples. And then up on the hill, uh,
8 uh, there was a lovely club, uh, with a beautiful view of the ocean and uh,
9 and it was called the Orange Club, [inaudible 18:50] raunchy – the [garden
10 of the arms 18:53] were... And uh, the food was good and uh, very nice.
11 And so, it was downtown Naples and there was the club up in on the hill.
12 But down here, uh, you know, we worked hard; and we would go out to
13 dinner and stuff like that. We did a shortcut to go home, you know,
14 [inaudible 19:16] to get home faster. [chuckle] You got to know Naples
15 pretty well.
16

17Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. [19:22] And did you travel much in the area?
18

19Mary J. Ford: Uh...well later on, you know, when you had the quiet times and stuff like
20 there was [inaudible 19:30] drive and, and uh, uh... Really, uh, other than,
21 uh, site-seeing right around Naples and stuff like that. On up the hill a
22 little ways, there was a marble, like a marble [davenport 19:50], you
23 know. And uh, that had been a, uh, a space where people, when they were
24 showing them Naples, they would bring them up in the hill to see the
25 panorama of Naples.
26

27Ruth Stewart: Mm.

28

29Mary J. Ford: To see Naples, I guess the ultimate view. You can dive in, you know?
30 [laughter] Uh...uh, you think we're taking too much tape on...
31

32Ruth Stewart: No that's, that's okay. That's fine.

33

34Mary J. Ford: Okay.

35

36Ruth Stewart: It's good to hear about it.
37

38Mary J. Ford: And near right there, there was a monastery. And these monks had these
39 rolls of woven, uh, you know, they, uh, made the yarn out of wool. And
40 uh, so I went up there with two of our doctors one time; and uh, of course,
41 I sat on the bench while they were taking tours, because I was not sure I
42 would be allowed to go in. And uh, but...
43

44Ruth Stewart: [20:49] Why weren't you allowed to go in?

1
2Mary J. Ford: Well it's a monastery. Men, you know?
3
4Ruth Stewart: Oh, they...oh, I see. So, you didn't get to see that.
5
6Mary J. Ford: And then later on, we had some friends on up the hill that had established
7 a large hospital, the 300th General Hospital.
8
9Ruth Stewart: [21:15] How long were you in Naples area or in Italy?
10
11Mary J. Ford: I was in, uh, I had been there, uh, I don't know about a year, maybe. They
12 started, uh, uh, they were preparing the ships, you know, for Southern
13 France. And uh, then uh, I don't know whether you're familiar with the
14 2nd Auxiliary Surgical Group. It's an organization that had teams, like
15 orthopedic, neuro, uh, all, all the different specialties. And then, uh, they
16 supply the teams where they're needed to the different little evac hospitals.
17 And then these little evac hospitals, as the lines move up, they uh,
18 leapfrog, you know. And the teams are pulled wherever they're needed.
19 And so, uh, when they were going to, when they were preparing for
20 southern France, they sent half of the 2nd Auxiliary Surgical Group, um, up
21 to France. And they placed them with teams from existing hospitals in
22 Italy. So, when they called the 78th General Hospital for a team, uh, this
23 wonderful surgeon said I've been sitting here tooling around. I want to
24 see what's going on. So, he selected a, uh, a very good surgeon with an
25 assistant, a very good anesthesiologist, a very good nurse – me – and two
26 very good OR techs. And uh, we went up and, uh, as a replacement team
27 up there.
28
29 And we were stationed, most of the, most of the time with the 94th Evac.
30 And uh, usually when a team went out, they had their own tent and so
31 forth. The team suggested, you know, uh, the surgeon, assistant,
32 anesthesiologist, the nurse and two, uh, two corpsmen. And but, uh, but
33 the, uh, nurses would, would have their own tents. Well since I was – it
34 was just an usual situation, they just put me in with a, a neurosurgical
35 team, uh, a nurse. And uh, they [inaudible] 23:2. I was a nurse [inaudible
36 23:30].
37
38Ruth Stewart: [23:32] And this was located where?
39
40Mary J. Ford: Um...up to the north.
41
42Ruth Stewart: [22:38] But in Italy?
43
44Mary J. Ford: Yes, yes. And see, the line was moving up.

1
2Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.
3
4Mary J. Ford: And uh, so... Um...let's see where could I give you an idea of where we
5 were? Each time we would move, it would be a different – we call it the
6 grapevine area or the, the dust bowl area – according to where we were
7 stationed. And I know the first time when we moved, you hurried over.
8 There was an Italian house, you'd hurry over with your dirty clothes.
9 [Inaudible 24:13] And so, they were very friendly. But by the time you
10 got back, so many people had pushed them, they weren't so friendly.
11 [laughter]
12
13Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.
14
15Mary J. Ford: Oh my, so... After that, uh, the commander of that hospital was excellent.
16 He was a wonderful commander. The only thing that we didn't like about
17 him, um, he and his 1st sergeant would get out to explore where they
18 wanted to move next. He always wanted to be the most forward when
19 they leapfrog you know.
20
21Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. But that was impressive then.
22
23Mary J. Ford: Oh yes, uh-huh. And then, um, uh, we always got the big cases. We
24 never got routine debridements. They'd always give [Cal 25:02] like the
25 big chests and bellies and things like that. And then, then as the other men
26 would finish their little debridement, they'd come over and look over
27 [Cal's 25:11] shoulder to see what he was doing, you know. He was really
28 very good. So, it was very nice.
29
30Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.
31
32Mary J. Ford: And uh, then, uh, he wanted me to teach the boys more about, uh, just so
33 they could really [inaudible 25:25] some up, scrubbing, because
34 sometimes these cases lasted a long time. And uh, so, uh, in our spare
35 time, if we had some time we'd like sit on the grass with a tablet and then
36 I'd explain different closures, you know, so they'd understand it and...
37 And then when I'd have them scrub, you go in and set up your stand with
38 steel supplies and your instruments; and then you'd put all your drapes on
39 top of that. That was, uh, that's how you approach a big case. And with
40 them, I always gave them, you know, a lot more time. When I'd scrub, I'd
41 do it in a hurry. I'd be going, "Oh, I forgot some [shards 26:03]", for a
42 wire suture. And they'd say, "Oh what's the matter sis? You forget
43 something", you know. [laughter]
44

1 Ruth Stewart: Teasing you.
2
3 Mary J. Ford: They liked to kid ya. [pause] I'm talking a lot.
4
5 Ruth Stewart: That's what this is all about. [26:26] So then you were with that surgical
6 team...
7
8 Mary J. Ford: Mm-hm.
9
10 Ruth Stewart: ...was that for the rest of your time there in Italy, or...
11
12 Mary J. Ford: Then uh, um, after, um, uh, we moved – different times and... At one time
13 we were moving to a new location in a, a convoy. Every time we moved,
14 you know, we'd usually – it would require a crate or something, you
15 know, that we could use for a bedside table for our tents and cot or
16 something like that. And uh, and the colonel said that every time we
17 moved, it took more trucks to move us. We had to get rid of some of
18 those things. And so, we're going along up the mountain. And whether it
19 was from natural or bombing, or something like that, they, uh, some big
20 rocks came down and blocked off the, uh, road. And so, we were held up
21 till they got all, uh, uh, cleared away for us to move. And it just so
22 happened there was a special service truck just behind us. It had a piano
23 on it and the fellas were really having a good time, you know, entertaining
24 us and stuff like that. And here you got a full truck load of, of, uh,
25 women. Pretty soon, you know what's going to happen – somebody's
26 gotta go to the john. So how do you handle that? So... Well, we handle
27 that real easy. We huddled around in a circle and, and they used their own
28 helmet, you know... [chuckle]
29
30 Ruth Stewart: [laughter]
31
32 Mary J. Ford: Oh my.
33
34 Ruth Stewart: [27:59] What year was all this?
35
36 Mary J. Ford: Well, '43. Let's see, uh, we were, uh, we arrived in, uh, in uh, Casablanca
37 on the 15th of September – that's '43; and uh, then, uh, we were in Naples
38 in October of '43.
39
40 When we, uh, when we, uh, went by boat, um, uh, to, um, from Oran
41 28:42] to, uh, Naples, it was a smaller ship. And uh, when, when we got
42 within so far, so close to, uh to the, uh, to the shore – not that close. Uh...
43 Germans [inaudible 29:01] down planes and, and were that close to, to

1 bomb a ship, you know. So, they, they wouldn't let us go on the top side,
2 you know. Uh...so, but uh, for our own protection, of course.
3
4Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.
5
6Mary J. Ford: Then uh, when we got there, we were able to get off in the barges and
7 taken on in. But uh, several of the nurses had gone in and their pictures
8 were in the paper going over the side of the ship with rope ladders. And
9 there was a picture that looked just like me and, and everybody at home
10 knew it was me. It wasn't me. [laughter]
11
12Ruth Stewart: [laughter] So then, uh...
13
14Mary J. Ford: You asked about entertainment. In Naples, uh, they kept the opera going
15 all the time, because that was good entertainment. And uh, it was really
16 very dramatic, uh, to go down to an opera. And uh, of course, *Butterfly*
17 was a very popular one, and so on. And uh, but before the opera started,
18 they played the Nat-, National Anthem of all of the, all of our allies, you
19 know. And you stood at attention, uh, while they played the American,
20 the British, the, uh... I think there were five different, uh... The French, of
21 course, had gone along with us at that time; and the, um, um, Germans.
22
23Ruth Stewart: Eventually, the China-, or yeah China...
24
25Mary J. Ford: No, no, no, no. They were in some other, you know, other part of the
26 world, you know. But uh, anyhow, it was really very dramatic. And then,
27 uh, that was – the music was pretty and, uh... And uh, when uh, uh, when
28 they played [Umbel Dynos 30:53], you know, it was so pretty. The
29 soldiers applauded, so... They stopped and repeated that area before they
30 went on.
31
32Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.
33
34Mary J. Ford: But uh, Naples... We visited Pompey. And uh, I never saw any of the
35 pornographic stuff, you know, because, uh, I was traveling with a small
36 group. And I knew it wasn't in good taste for me to be there. So, I sat on
37 some big stone while they toured the pornographic part of it. [chuckle]
38
39Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.
40
41Mary J. Ford: So, uh...
42
43Ruth Stewart: [31:38] Did you ever regret not...
44

1Mary J. Ford: No.
2
3Ruth Stewart: ...seeing what it was all about?
4
5Mary J. Ford: No, no, no. But it's just amazing when you think that some of the early
6 mosaic work on the floors and things like that in those early days.
7
8Ruth Stewart: [31:56] So how long were you in Italy?
9
10Mary J. Ford: Well, I, uh, let's see. We got into Italy, um, in October of '43 and I came
11 home in October of '45.
12
13Ruth Stewart: [32:13] Two years?
14
15Mary J. Ford: Two years. Gee I'm glad I wrote these notes down. I never would have
16 remembered... Due to a good friend of mine who keeps good notes.
17 [chuckle]
18
19 But one time, it was during the end of the war, um, uh, right at the
20 beginning, you know, uh... And uh, when I was leaving Naples to go up,
21 uh, my mother died; and my sister, not realizing...utilizing Red Cross, you
22 know, sending word – it was about two weeks before I heard about my
23 mother's death. And so, of course, my father wrote me and said, you
24 know, that, uh, there was no need to come home, you know, that he was
25 fine – this, that.... But then, uh, later on, my father was killed in an
26 accident.
27
28Ruth Stewart: [33:18] So you lost both of them?
29
30Mary J. Ford: That was hard.
31
32Ruth Stewart: [33:21] And that was while you were gone?
33
34Mary J. Ford: Yes.
35
36Ruth Stewart: [33:28] So you spent the entire war there in Italy?
37
38Mary J. Ford: Uh-huh, yeah.
39
40Ruth Stewart: ...till after the war in Europe was over?
41
42Mary J. Ford: I, I really am... Uh...it's very interesting, uh, I went back for a second
43 tour. This was after, after WWII. I was at home for a year and, uh, I went
44 in the office of Percy Jones, uh, General Hospital in Cal-, uh, in Battle

1 Creek, Michigan. And there was thing on the bulletin board for Italy.
2 “Oh, this is for Italy”. So, I said, “My name [inaudible 34:03] with all the
3 rest”, you know? I said, “Eileen, my good friend, she’ll want to go to”.
4 “Well, she has to come over and sign her own name”, you know.
5 [laughter] I go, “Eileen there’s a list on the bulletin board for Italy.” So...
6 We went back to Italy for a tour of duty.
7
8Ruth Stewart: [34:18] Re-enlisted or...
9
10Mary J. Ford: No, no. We were still in the, the whole time, so...
11
12Ruth Stewart: Okay. [34:26] And what did you do then when you back to Italy?
13
14Mary J. Ford: Well, we were flying into the, the, uh, Livorno area – a Station Hospital,
15 just a few miles south of Leghorn. And uh, what was, uh...operating
16 room. No, uh, Eileen and I were both operating room nurses. And uh,
17 the operating room staff was staffed at that time when we went in. And
18 um, so uh, she was, um, put on the officer’s ward and I was in one of these
19 things – it was like an old barracks. One section like [inaudible 35:03]
20 surgeon; the next orthopedics; then next section...that way, you know.
21 And then down here is the kitchen and, and uh, all the sort of stuff, so...
22 And it was a busy time. And uh, so... And then, um, that time, I don’t
23 really want to get into at this time, because we still haven’t finished the
24 war yet. [chuckle] So...
25
26 I don’t know what else I could tell ya about up north – northern, uh Italy.
27 Uh...I have some pictures in here crossing a pontoon bridge and, uh, over
28 Coal River – pretty wide river.
29
30Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.
31
32Mary J. Ford: And uh, uh, but it was just more of being busy, you know. And uh, when
33 we were in this one area, uh, the uh... I was dating a fella and he thought
34 our team shou-, uh, we should take them... And we were just north of
35 Florence at that time. And that uh, they like to go in for an evening at the
36 officer’s club? Fine.
37
38Ruth Stewart: [36:19] Was this in your first tour there?
39
40Mary J. Ford: During the war, yeah. We’re back to the war.
41
42Ruth Stewart: Yeah.
43

1Mary J. Ford: So, uh, the drive in the mountainous area with cats' eyes and uh, and two
2 of these men on our team had new babies they hadn't seen; and they were
3 interested in staying in good health. And they, they were really scared,
4 you know, really. And uh, uh, they said they enjoyed the evening, but
5 they didn't want to go back in anymore. [chuckle]
6

7Ruth Stewart: Yeah.
8

9Mary J. Ford: We're back to uh, when, when we – I missed telling about the train trip
10 from uh, from uh, the staging area of Casablanca to go up to, uh, through
11 Rabat and to Oran. And we needed to go to Naples. Well, so before we
12 got on – the day before, we went down and scrubbed the compartments we
13 were going to sleep in. And supposedly, there was going to be four to a
14 compartment; but there was five in our tent. And so, they, uh...we were
15 figuring how we're going to do this. Then fortunately, one of our tent
16 mates got sick. And uh, so there were four of us. And we put barracks
17 bags underneath the ten-, uh, cots in the center, so we could stretch across
18 that way the floor, which was comfortable.
19

20 And then, it was really amazing, uh, every time anybody wanted to wash
21 up a little bit, you know, they got a helmet, you know, and went in. And
22 uh, cause there was no other place to clean up. Just about that time, a train
23 would come along, you know. [laughter] Oh my, so it was interesting.
24

25 And then while traveling on the train, the train would stop; and they would
26 prepare the food on a field stove and uh, we would eat anyplace, you know
27 – on the rails or anyplace where we wanted to eat. And then we'd clean
28 up our mess there and get back on the train again. And uh, oh, one night,
29 uh, a [Betty Hughes 38:38] had to go to the bathroom. And she got up and
30 she came back in and she said, "There's a, there's cow on the train". You
31 know, I don't know how they got that cow on the train, but there was a
32 Berber there in his brown, you know, striped robe; and had a gun. And he
33 and his cow were down at the end of our thing. Well, she can't go that
34 way; and there's no connection with the next thing. You'd have to climb
35 over things to get into the next thing. And uh, finally, they came to a stop
36 and they, uh, and they got that cow and the, and the Berber off the train.
37 Can you imag-, I don't know how he got on by himself. [laughter]
38

39Ruth Stewart: [laughter] Interesting, interesting.
40

41Mary J. Ford: Yeah, with a gun, you know.
42

43Ruth Stewart: Yeah.
44

1Mary J. Ford: Berber from the mountains, so... There's so much I don't know about, you
2 know, the difference, like the Berber's, I'm not familiar with their
3 background, but they are mountain troops, I know.
4

5Ruth Stewart: They were fighting forces then.
6

7Mary J. Ford: I don't know what they were. I don't know what it was. I don't know
8 what he was doing in there. [laughter] So... Oh my.
9

10Ruth Stewart: You thought maybe the cow was to provide you milk for your meals.
11

12Mary J. Ford: That cow was, uh, was an expensive thing for him, you know. So...
13

14Ruth Stewart: His only asset.
15

16Mary J. Ford: Mm-hm.
17

18Ruth Stewart: Yeah. [40:09] So then when you came back in October of '45, you stayed
19 in the army...
20

21Mary J. Ford: Mm-hm.
22

23Ruth Stewart: And...
24

25Mary J. Ford: We had signed a paper of somebody that wanted to stay in or not, you
26 know. And I thought, well, I wasn't in any hurry to, to get out because
27 when, when uh, when I left Harper, you know, we were doing 100 cases a
28 day. And I thought I'll just stay in the army a little while and see what
29 happens. So, uh, uh, they gave us 45 days leave, not accountable to leave
30 time. And uh, and then I had orders to go to Percy Jones. And uh, that's –
31 I was there for a year; and that's when I saw the note on the bulletin board
32 to go back to Italy. So...
33

34Ruth Stewart: [40:56] And what was the difference in being there in Italy during the war
35 versus after the war?
36

37Mary J. Ford: Well, what was – we were just doing our normal work, you know, like
38 taking care of patients in a hospital. So...
39

40Ruth Stewart: [41:06] You didn't have any – feel any real difference there?
41

42Mary J. Ford: No, uh-uh. But, uh, you know. Uh...it's just a lot of in our off-duty time
43 to do more things – to see, uh, Italy.
44

1 Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.
2

3 Mary J. Ford: It was interesting, um, about when it came time, uh, to uh, for the phase
4 out campaign when they were going to close the hospital, they sent, uh,
5 three nurses down from Germany to help us do this. Well, they'd never
6 been to Italy before. So, uh, you know we could take some time off. And
7 uh, so, I said, "Let's go down so we can take a train to Rome and have a
8 few hours there before we catch the next train down the Naples", uh, cause
9 I knew Naples pretty well, you know.
10

11 Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.
12

13 Mary J. Ford: And uh, so that was wonderful. Uh...we, uh, we had those times and went
14 out to the Vatican and, and uh, so I told this guy, I said, "Now I want these
15 girls to see as much as they can in a short period of time. So, uh, try to do
16 that." So, he'd go – start on the wonders of Italy, you know. And I'd
17 have to go [slapping sound], you know. It was just killing me to think that
18 he could dwell on these wonderful things he wanted to tell everybody
19 about, uh...
20

21 Ruth Stewart: [42:33] Did you speak Italian?
22

23 Mary J. Ford: No...enough. You, you alwa-, in another country you go to, you know,
24 your hair is too curly or too ricci; or you're multi pesante – you look too
25 large, you know, too heavy. And uh, those basic things. And where's the
26 gabinetto – where's the john, you know? All basic things, so...
27

28 Ruth Stewart: [laughter] Okay, and so how long were you in the service then, totally?
29

30 Mary J. Ford: Twenty years, uh-huh. I was so old when I went in, I had to get out at 20
31 years as a major. And so, I, I knew I, that wasn't enough for me to live
32 on, so I, um...
33 Ruth Stewart: [43:12] What year was that?
34

35 Mary J. Ford: Uh...in, uh, um, uh, Sept-, uh, it was, um, um, uh, '40-, uh, '62. You
36 know, 20 years.
37

38 Ruth Stewart: [43:42] '42 to 62'?
39

40 Mary J. Ford: Uh-huh, yeah, mm-hm. So...
41

42 Ruth Stewart: Okay.
43

1Mary J. Ford: And uh, and then, uh, that's when I got out. And so, I went to Europe and,
2 uh, vacationed, uh, for several months. It was cheap living, you know, at
3 that time. And wonderful. I couldn't have done it at a better time.
4

5Ruth Stewart: [44:07] You mean in Italy?
6

7Mary J. Ford: In Italy, uh-huh.
8

9Ruth Stewart: [44:09] You vacationed there before you came home?
10

11Mary J. Ford: Italy and Germany, uh-huh. And uh, some friends of mine were up in
12 Germany. And uh, a colonel and his wife that I had had duty with – and I
13 left extra luggage with them and I would take off to different places. And
14 uh, I would... But then when I came back, I was, uh, visiting at home
15 and, uh, and visiting some friends. And uh, a former chief nurse of mine
16 was a chief nurse at Brooke. She asked me what I was going to do. And I
17 said, "Well, I was going to get a job someplace." They had asked me to
18 come back to Harper to the operating room, uh, because I was a good
19 operating nurse. [laughter]
20

21Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.
22

23Mary J. Ford: And uh, so I thought now I have to tell'm nicely, uh, because I might need
24 to come back. And I said, "I'm...I was thinking of terms of a more
25 moderate climate." Well, it so happened it worked out that, that they had
26 a vacancy for a civilian operating nurse at Brooke. And uh, so I called
27 [Seymour 45:16]. He said, "Go over and fill out the forms". And I
28 worked 7 years there in the operating room as a, as a civil service. And
29 then they, uh, changed the, uh, supply job to a civilian; and would I go...
30 And uh, and uh, "Oh sure", I said. "No call, no shift duty", uh, uh, the
31 [status 45:32] was better. [laughter] And the operating nurses were so
32 happy that I went because one of those would've had to have gone had I
33 objected. So... So, it was, uh, so 12 years in, uh... So actually, 40 years in
34 nursing; 32 were in the operating room.
35

36Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm. Notable career. You really liked the operating room.
37

38Mary J. Ford: Oh yeah.
39

40Ruth Stewart: The excitement of it or the speed of it or...
41

42Mary J. Ford: Well, you're good. You're good in what you do...
43

44Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.

1
2Mary J. Ford: ...and you know what to do. Uh, we, we, we never really finished up the,
3 uh, uh, the WWII phase. When it was come time to come home, um, I,
4 uh, I have a snapshot of some waiver to get a hop down to Naples to, to,
5 um, to be able to get a...go on to Casablanca to go on home. And so, we
6 were there a few days. And uh, uh, the uh, of course we were in full
7 uniforms. And it was hot in southern Italy at that time. And so, uh, they
8 said, well we'd would like to go to, uh, Capri to go to the, uh, I don't
9 know what we'll find. So... We went over to Capri just for the day. And
10 uh, uh, now of course they use the hydro falls to go over. It's easier. But
11 then it was, you know, rough. And uh, so uh, this nurse I was traveling
12 with got a little seasick. And uh, you know, when you get over there, you
13 go on to get, uh, small like a rowboat-type thing to go down the Blue
14 Grotto. Have you been to Italy?
15
16Ruth Stewart: Not to those places.
17
18Mary J. Ford: Okay. And so, uh, uh, you got...you had the opening to go into this, uh,
19 Blue Grotto. And then you wait for the proper waive. And so, you duck,
20 and you go in. And so, sometimes some of these wealthy tourists are
21 traveling and if they get splashed with water and they might be a little
22 indignant, so the uh, the fellow who runs the, the, the boat will say,
23 "You've been blessed", you know. And uh, that makes them feel happy
24 that they get blessed. Well, this friend of mine, she was so seasick, she
25 blessed the Blue Grotto. [laughter]
26
27Ruth Stewart: [laughter]
28
29Mary J. Ford: Then when we got off, uh, our flight to go to Casablanca, we were off
30 loaded there for several days because they were bringing prisoners of wa-,
31 uh, fellas who had been prisoners of war, um, and uh, so they were off
32 loading us for them to get home, to their, uh.... And I have a picture of uh,
33 some of these fellas. I can't think of anything right now.
34
35Ruth Stewart: [48:53] Okay then, uh, what about your time servicing combatants that
36 you had for two years in Italy – with, uh, you taking care of the soldiers
37 and...
38Mary J. Ford: Well actually you scrub with a team, you know.
39
40Ruth Stewart: [49:10] Yeah, you're working with a scrub team, so you didn't have, uh,
41 the same kind of contact with the soldiers as you might have had if you'd
42 been in their post-surgical floor?
43

1Mary J. Ford: No. But you usually wonder around, you know, talked with them
2 afterwards.
3

4Ruth Stewart: [49:27] You did?
5

6Mary J. Ford: Yeah, yeah. Mm-hm. So...
7

8Ruth Stewart: [49:31] Did your work there, your experience there, uh, affect you in any
9 way about your view of war?
10

11Mary J. Ford: No, mm-mm. We didn't start it. Look what Hitler did, uh, you know,
12 people were killed. I think when someone tried to kill him, he had five
13 thou-, you know, when they had that fort falling in on him? I think that,
14 uh, he had 5,000 people killed – was the penalty for that. He wasn't a
15 very good man. So...
16

17Ruth Stewart: [50:10] Then when you came back here to Brooke Army Medical Center,
18 did you, as a civilian, did you join any veteran's organizations?
19

20Mary J. Ford: Um... Really not at that time. It was sometime before I joined the
21 American Legion. And there were so many women in it, you know, they
22 said, "You will join". So, we joined. [laughter] But uh, no at that time
23 they had a very active operating room, uh, uh, organization, uh, operating
24 nurses at that time; and you really enjoyed going. They had good people
25 speaking. And uh, one I've never forgotten. I think his name was Dr.
26 Glass. He's the foremost authority on snake bites in the country. He's
27 dead now. And uh, but he, uh, was really terrific in lectures and pictures
28 and what to do and all that sort of stuff. So...
29

30Ruth Stewart: So, you've had a very interesting and rewarding career it sounds like.
31

32Mary J. Ford: Well it seems like, um, every place you were stationed, um, and you're
33 leaving, you, you're sad at leaving, you know. You hate to go. And then,
34 you venture to some new place and uh, and uh, you're loving that.
35 Sometimes you go, you're sad leaving, so...
36

37Ruth Stewart: Well this has been very, very interesting information and I certainly thank
38 you for your time in doing this, Mary.
39
40/al