

**Interview of Alta May Andrews Sharp on her service
in the American Red Cross and the U.S. Army Nurse Corps during WWI**

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4
5 Margaret Duncan: This is Margaret Duncan interviewing Alta May Andrews Sharp.
6 This is in Tucson, Arizona, April 16, 1985. Alta is a member of the
7 Tucson unit who served overseas in World War I. [00:24] Alta, you
8 wanna tell us your name?
9
10 Alta May Andrews Sharp: Alta May Andrews Sharp.
11
12 Margaret Duncan: [00:34] What branch of the service did you serve in, Alta?
13
14 Alta May Andrews Sharp: I went in the Red Cross first.
15
16 Margaret Duncan: Uh-huh.
17
18 Alta May Andrews Sharp: And then joined the Army Nurse Corps.
19
20 Margaret Duncan: Uh-huh. [00:48] How long? How long were you in the Army Nurse
21 Corps?
22
23 Alta May Andrews Sharp: Two years [or something 00:57].
24
25 Margaret Duncan: [00:58] Where were you stationed?
26
27 Alta May Andrews Sharp: Mostly in [inaudible 1:02] Paris and then – in Paris most of the time.
28
29 Margaret Duncan: Uh-huh. [1:07] What, what hospital unit were you with?
30
31 Alta May Andrews Sharp: American Red Cross Military No. 1.
32
33 Margaret Duncan: American Military – American Red Cross Military...
34
35 Alta May Andrews Sharp: No. 1.
36
37 Margaret Duncan: ... No. 1 [01:20] What influenced you to volunteer for the army?
38
39 Alta May Andrews Sharp: My father always worshiped the Civil War nurse, Mary Briggs, and I
40 always wanted to be another Mary Briggs.
41
42 Margaret Duncan: Oh. [01:36] What did you do prior to your enlisting in the army?
43
44 Alta May Andrews Sharp: Private duty nursing.

1
2Margaret Duncan: Uh-huh. [01:47] Uh, what did you do when you were in the service
3 in France? Did you work on the wards? What, what kind of nursing
4 did you do when you were in the hospital in France?
5
6Alta May Andrews Sharp: Oh, I was usually chief nurse in, uh, Ward 83, Red Cross Military
7 No. 1.
8
9Margaret Duncan: Oh, I see. [02:14] Uh, when you served in the uh, um, hospital
10 overseas, uh, did you, uh, expect any of this experience to, uh, aid
11 you in your career after the, uh, war? No, not really, huh? Uh-huh.
12 Uh, what was your pay? How much did they pay you each month?
13
14Alta May Andrews Sharp: It started at \$60 a month.
15
16Margaret Duncan: Sixty?
17
18Alta May Andrews Sharp: Sixty dollars a month.
19
20Margaret Duncan: Is she saying [16 or \$60 02:53]?
21
22Female: Sixty, six-oh.
23
24Margaret Duncan: Oh. [02:55] Uh, \$60 a month?
25
26Alta May Andrews Sharp: When I started.
27
28Margaret Duncan: When you started.
29
30Alta May Andrews Sharp: Yeah.
31
32Margaret Duncan: [03:02] Uh, how much, uh, in 1919, when you got out of the, uh,
33 service, how much did – were they payin' you then? You can't
34 remember?
35
36Alta May Andrews Sharp: Can't remember.
37
38Margaret Duncan: [03:17] Um, what was your – what was your housing like overseas?
39
40Alta May Andrews Sharp: I lived in a [brand new 03:24] apartment, which was vacant and they
41 put the nurses in there.
42
43Margaret Duncan: Oh.
44

1Alta May Andrews Sharp: And I was on the fourth floor.
2
3Margaret Duncan: Uh-huh. [03:36] Uh, did they – did they take care of you if you were
4 sick overseas then?
5
6Alta May Andrews Sharp: Oh, yes.
7
8Margaret Duncan: Uh-huh. [03:40] If you were in the hospital, they did take care of
9 you?
10
11Alta May Andrews Sharp: That's right.
12
13Margaret Duncan: [03:45] What was your uniform like?
14
15Alta May Andrews Sharp: Overseas, it was gray chambray.
16
17Margaret Duncan: Oh.
18
19Alta May Andrews Sharp: With white butchers' aprons and white [tower 03:58] cap and cuffs.
20
21Margaret Duncan: Uh-huh.
22
23Alta May Andrews Sharp: White [tower 04:03] cuffs and cap with a red cross on it.
24
25Margaret Duncan: [04:12] Uh, can you recount any of your memorable experiences?
26 Can you... You can't remember any of those?
27
28Alta May Andrews Sharp: Oh, yes. I...
29
30Margaret Duncan: You can remember lots of'm but too many to tell us?
31
32Alta May Andrews Sharp: [laughter]
33
34Margaret Duncan: [04:36] What's the most exciting one you had?
35
36Alta May Andrews Sharp: Uh, with the air raids over Paris...
37
38Margaret Duncan: Oh.
39
40Alta May Andrews Sharp: ...and being bombed by Big Bertha.
41
42Margaret Duncan: Oh. By Big – being bombed by Big Bertha?
43
44Alta May Andrews Sharp: Yeah.

1
2Margaret Duncan: Uh-huh. That was that big German gun.
3
4Alta May Andrews Sharp: Right.
5
6Margaret Duncan: Uh-huh.
7
8Alta May Andrews Sharp: They called her Big Bertha.
9
10Margaret Duncan: Uh-huh. [05:01] Uh, did you experience any conflict between being
11 a woman and being over, uh, seas in the army? Did you have any
12 difficulty?
13
14Alta May Andrews Sharp: No.
15
16Margaret Duncan: Working in a man's world?
17
18Alta May Andrews Sharp: No.
19
20Margaret Duncan: No? No difficulty at all?
21
22Alta May Andrews Sharp: No.
23
24Margaret Duncan: [05:24] What, what required the greatest adjustment, uh, when you
25 were overseas? Was it the, uh, being in uniform or was it, um, um,
26 living conditions, or the war or what?
27
28Alta May Andrews Sharp: Ask that again.
29
30Margaret Duncan: What required your greatest adjustment? How did – what – how did
31 you adjust to things? What was the greatest problem you had?
32
33Alta May Andrews Sharp: I don't know how to answer that.
34
35Margaret Duncan: You don't? Uh-huh. Well, did you have trouble – were – did you
36 have any trouble working with the men?
37
38Alta May Andrews Sharp: No.
39
40Margaret Duncan: No trouble at all?
41
42Alta May Andrews Sharp: No.
43
44Margaret Duncan: [06:06] And they treated nurses very well?

1
2Alta May Andrews Sharp: Right.
3
4Margaret Duncan: Uh-huh. [06:12] Uh, what was the most unpopular regulation that
5 they had for nurses when you were in France?
6
7Alta May Andrews Sharp: That we couldn't go out with enlisted men.
8
9Margaret Duncan: Oh, is that right? [laughter]
10
11Alta May Andrews Sharp: [laughter]
12
13Margaret Duncan: Uh-huh. Oh.
14
15Alta May Andrews Sharp: They had to be the officers, and the officers were more interested in
16 the French men themselves.
17
18Margaret Duncan: Oh, is that right?
19
20Alta May Andrews Sharp: Yeah.
21
22Margaret Duncan: Uh-huh. Mm-hm. [06:42] Uh, after you came home from the
23 service, what did you do? Did you go back to nursing?
24
25Alta May Andrews Sharp: No. I was all through nursing.
26
27Margaret Duncan: Oh. [06:54] What did you do after you came back from the service?
28 Did you get married? Is that when you got married?
29
30Alta May Andrews Sharp: Well, not right away.
31
32Margaret Duncan: Oh.
33
34Alta May Andrews Sharp: I – I'm trying to think what I did. [laughter]
35
36Margaret Duncan: Oh, mm-hm. [07:17] You didn't come back and go to work back in
37 the hospital where you...
38
39Alta May Andrews Sharp: No.
40
41Margaret Duncan: ...trained?
42
43Alta May Andrews Sharp: No.
44

1Margaret Duncan: [07:21] Did you go back to El-, Elgin, Illinois when you came back
2 from the army?
3
4Alta May Andrews Sharp: No. I stayed in Chicago.
5
6Margaret Duncan: You stayed in Chicago?
7
8Alta May Andrews Sharp: Yeah.
9
10Margaret Duncan: Mm-hm. [07:29] And what did you do in Chicago?
11
12Alta May Andrews Sharp: Uh, [inaudible 07:37] [I can't think].
13
14Margaret Duncan: Can't remember. Okay. Well, we'll, we'll look it up in your diary.
15 You have a very complete diary there.
16
17Alta May Andrews Sharp: Yeah.
18
19Margaret Duncan: [07:46] When did you get married?
20
21Alta May Andrews Sharp: Nineteen twenty-two.
22
23Margaret Duncan: Nineteen twenty-two? [07:54] Did you meet your husband, uh,
24 when you were in the army?
25
26Alta May Andrews Sharp: No. I knew him in Elgin.
27
28Margaret Duncan: Oh, you knew him in Elgin.
29
30Alta May Andrews Sharp: Fifteen years before.
31
32Margaret Duncan: Oh, I see. Uh-huh.
33
34Alta May Andrews Sharp: But we couldn't get married because his mother was alive.
35
36Margaret Duncan: Oh, yeah.
37
38Alta May Andrews Sharp: She didn't want another woman in the house.
39
40Margaret Duncan: Oh, I see. Uh-huh.
41
42Alta May Andrews Sharp: So, we had to wait until she died.
43

1Margaret Duncan:

Oh, I see. Mm-hm. Okay. These are some quotes from Alta Sharp's diary, and they're being read by Madeline [Allum 08:27] from the Tucson Chapter – Tucson unit of the Women's Overseas Service League. Okay, go ahead.

6Madeline [Allum]:

"Each day is completely filled with appointments. Uniforms to be fitted here, hats to be obtained there, identification tags to be procured at still another place, how shoes must be fitted elsewhere. It takes a great deal of time to equip so many. The American Red Cross is equipping each army nurse with a most complete outfit consisting of blue serge uniforms with full insignia; blue, velour, campaign hats; gray, chambray uniforms for foreign service; 12 butcher aprons; white collars and cuffs; a blue, silk blouse and a white poplin one; woolen hose; woolen tights; and underwear with long legs and long sleeves.

I know you are laughing. A pair of rubber boots. A [sou'wester 09:34] (a rainhat), rain coat, poncho, dark blue ulster, Red Cross blanket, flannelette pajamas, sleeping bag, and a gray sweater. Last but not least, we are being issued huge, yellow, calf-skin [Coward 09:55] shoes. We have been deprived of the privilege of choosing our own size, and when you see the broad, square toes with the soles of about one-half inch thickness protruding far beyond, you are aghast when told that they are the ones that you must take.

Naturally, as an army is only as good as it's stomach, a nurse is only as good as her feet, and to avoid foot troubles later on, the shoes are selected for us. Being so long, so heavy, and so broad, well, you just don't know your own feet at all.

The first night after we had received our full equipment, our group of 10 from Custer boarded a rubberneck bus to obtain an [airing 10:44] while enjoying the sights along Fifth Avenue. While mounting the narrow, circular staircases to the top, not one of us failed to fall over her own feet, much to the amusement of the conductor. We are gradually growing accustomed to them, but it is just like learning to walk all over again."

I had always been very anxious to, um, not only join the Army Nurse Corps, but to go overseas and had [inaudible 11:14] hoped and wanted to go to, uh, France, and from her diary she says, "Nearly six months has passed since I came here by way of the [cold hub 11:26], and they had been long, anxious months for most of us. But today, my name, with those of nine others was posted with orders to

1 prepare to leave at once for the Holley Hotel, New York City. There
2 to await embarkation overseas.” This was the 11th of May, 1918.
3
4 “Those going with me,” and she names the – all of them, “every one
5 of them are eager, excited, and brimming over with happiness.
6 Mother, I am quite certain that you were introduced to most of them
7 when you were here for the visit, but I must tell you that you met
8 [Jonsey, Dusky, and Ken 12:07] for these three have been my very
9 dear to me these past few months, and we shall continue to make up
10 a very amiable foursome. This group was the largest group so far to
11 be ordered abroad, and great excitement prevails tonight among the
12 [astire 12:24] entire staff, 150 nurses, now stationed here.
13
14 This noon, as I was entering our mess hall, I was surprised to see an
15 unusually large group of excited nurses gathered in front of the
16 bulletin board. While gradually edging my way to within reading
17 distance in order to determine the cause of all this excitement, I was
18 suddenly grabbed by Jonesy who cried hysterically, ‘[Andy 12:52],
19 we are going! You, Dusky, Ken and I!’ Mother, darling, I was so
20 overcome that I could scarcely see the list, but there, indeed, was my
21 name.
22
23 All about were nurses congratulating the lucky ones with all
24 unconsciously revealing little feelings of envy. Everyone is so
25 anxious to get to France that it is quite difficult not to register some
26 disappointment when one’s name is omitted from the coveted list.”
27
28 Margaret Duncan: [13:28] Uh, Alta, when you were in New York waiting to go
29 overseas, uh, what about the, uh, basic training they gave you?
30
31 Alta May Andrews Sharp: Every day, we were taken to different armories and trained. We had
32 to learn how to salute and how to march in formation, had to do
33 [squats 13:50] East and West.
34
35 Margaret Duncan: Did – Alta, you had some interesting things in your diary about
36 when the armistice was signed. [14:06] Can you tell us something
37 about it? Now, that would’ve been November 11, 1918.
38
39 Alta May Andrews Sharp: An officer came to my ward that morning and told me that an
40 armistice might be signed that day. [Inaudible 14:25] my half day,
41 so I went up to the chief nurse, asked for my half day, and she
42 willingly gave it to me because nobody wanted Monday off. And so,
43 by 11 o’clock when the armistice was signed, everybody in the
44 hospital wanted [to take 14:48] the day off, but four of us had

1 already asked, and we – and by 11 o'clock, we took off on the Metro
2 from the heart of Paris...
3
4Female: [sneezing]
5
6Alta May Andrews Sharp: ... and we were [mobbed 15:10].
7
8Female: [coughing]
9
10Female: [15:15] Did you dance all night in Paris?
11
12Margaret Duncan: [15:16] You went – you went in – you went into Paris and helped
13 celebrate for the armistice?
14
15Alta May Andrews Sharp: All day.
16
17Margaret Duncan: Uh-huh.
18
19Alta May Andrews Sharp: I didn't get home until 4 o'clock the next morning.
20
21Margaret Duncan: [15:27] What did you all night?
22
23Alta May Andrews Sharp: Just celebrated.
24
25Margaret Duncan: Just celebrated. [15:31] Did you dance all night in Paris?
26
27Alta May Andrews Sharp: And, uh, they were starting parades all day and the heart of Paris was
28 just swarming with, with officers, soldiers of all types.
29
30Margaret Duncan: [15:50] And you were – you were in the army then for about, uh,
31 what, another six months over in Paris after the armistice was
32 signed?
33
34Alta May Andrews Sharp: [I think so 16:00].
35
36Margaret Duncan: [16:02] And then you came back to the States?
37
38Alta May Andrews Sharp: Right. [Inaudible 16:06].
39
40Margaret Duncan: [16:06] When you came back – when you came back to the States,
41 where did you go?
42
43Alta May Andrews Sharp: To Fort Sheridan, Illinois.
44

1Margaret Duncan: [16:14] How long were you there?
2
3Alta May Andrews Sharp: Six months.
4
5Margaret Duncan: [16:16] And then you got out of the service?
6
7Alta May Andrews Sharp: Yes.
8
9Margaret Duncan: [16:20] And went back to civilian life?
10
11Alta May Andrews Sharp: What?
12
13Margaret Duncan: And went back to civilian life? [16:24] Did you...
14
15Alta May Andrews Sharp: Yeah.
16
17Margaret Duncan: ...enjoy your, your two years in the army?
18
19Alta May Andrews Sharp: Very much so.
20
21Margaret Duncan: [16:30] And being overseas was interesting.
22
23Alta May Andrews Sharp: Yes.
24
25Margaret Duncan: [16:33] Uh, where was the hospital in France set up?
26
27Alta May Andrews Sharp: In [Neuilly 16:39], a suburb of Paris.
28
29Margaret Duncan: Uh-huh.
30
31Alta May Andrews Sharp: It's where I was.
32
33Margaret Duncan: A suburb of Paris?
34
35Alta May Andrews Sharp: Yes.
36
37Margaret Duncan: Mm-hm. [16:45] What kind of a building was the hospital in?
38
39Alta May Andrews Sharp: It was formally a boys' school.
40
41Margaret Duncan: I see. According to your diary, you had some interesting things
42 happen to you when you were on your way overseas. [17:04] Can
43 you tell us about that?
44

1Alta May Andrews Sharp: There were 12 ships and 650 army nurses on the [inaudible 17:18]
2that I was on, and we had the battleship San Diego that escorted us
3over, and it was sunk on its way back, on its return trip.
4
5Margaret Duncan: [17:35] How many ships were in the convoy?
6
7Alta May Andrews Sharp: Twelve.
8
9Margaret Duncan: Twelve ships.
10
11Alta May Andrews Sharp: Yeah.
12
13Margaret Duncan: [17:43] And then, uh, you went – did you land in France or did you
14land in England?
15
16Alta May Andrews Sharp: South Hampton.
17
18Margaret Duncan: [17:50] You landed in South...
19
20Alta May Andrews Sharp: France.
21
22Margaret Duncan: ...South Hampton, England?
23
24Alta May Andrews Sharp: South Hampton, uh, yes.
25
26Margaret Duncan: [17:57] How long did you stay in England?
27
28Alta May Andrews Sharp: About a month.
29
30Margaret Duncan: About a month. [18:06] Can you tell us something about when you
31got on the ships to go across the channel?
32
33Alta May Andrews Sharp: Well, we, we were escorted by a lot of little subchasers, and we went
34over in complete darkness overnight.
35
36Margaret Duncan: According to your diary, uh, you had a boat drill...
37
38Alta May Andrews Sharp: Yeah.
39
40Margaret Duncan: ...um, in going ov-, before you left to go across the English Channel.
41[18:46] Can you tell us what happened?
42
43Alta May Andrews Sharp: We had boat drill every day.
44

1Margaret Duncan: Uh-huh.
2
3Alta May Andrews Sharp: And we had to carry our life preservers. The men had to wear them,
4 but we were allowed to carry them on our arms, but we had to have
5 it with us day and night. At night, we slept with our life preserver
6 across our [knees 19:10].
7
8Margaret Duncan: [19:13] How long – how many days did it take you to go across the
9 English Channel? That was just a short trip, wasn't it?
10
11Alta May Andrews Sharp: Oh, yeah. Just overnight.
12
13Margaret Duncan: Just overnight.
14
15Alta May Andrews Sharp: Yeah.
16
17Margaret Duncan: Okay. [19:29] Can you tell us about, uh, night duty on the, uh, in the
18 hospital? About – can you tell us about how you had the lamp when
19 you made rounds?
20
21Alta May Andrews Sharp: Oh, we carried lanterns, and we had blue – dark blue linen wrapped
22 around the lanterns. And if we wanted to see a patient, we had to
23 part the [gingham on'm 20:02] in order to see.
24
25
26/tl