Interview of Doris Evelyn McGraw Cobb on her life and family
and her long service in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps

Ruth Stewart: Doris McGraw Cobb is being interviewed as a member of the WOSL. Doris was born on August the 11th, 1922. This interview is being taped at the Army Residence Community in San Antonio, Texas. The interviewer is Ruth Stewart, assisted by Carol Habgood. [00:27] Doris, how about starting out with a little bit of your early life and then how you went into nursing and the military?

Doris Cobb: I was born in Hopewell, Virginia. My parents were William Frances and Elma Shelton McGraw. I had an older sister, Fra-, Edith Frances; and a younger brother, William Frances, Jr. I recall asking my mother how I happened to miss having the name of Frances, since my older sister had been named for favorite honor of my mother. And of course, my brother had to be a Jr. I don’t think they thought much about the two of them having the same name, particularly since my brother was always called Bill.

I was educated in the schools in Hopewell; and graduated from Hopewell High School in 1939. I went to school to take chemistry, since I had not had it in high school. I knew I needed it for nursing school. I entered Petersburg Hospital School of Nursing in August 1941. Of course, some things changed after December the 7th, 1941. One thing was that we were now allowed to have radios in our rooms. Another was that the plant my father worked for decided to build plants in the [interior 1:49] of the U.S. And so, my dad was transferred first to Henderson, Kentucky and then to Ironton, Ohio. My mother moved with him.

While in nursing school, we affiliated with two hospitals in Philadelphia. First, for three months of obstetrics – for obstetrics – at Philadelphia [Y & N 2:11] Hospital; and then at Children’s Hospital for pediatrics for three months. I was there from June to 19-, to December 1943. While at Children’s Hospital, I remember being told never to go out alone. The hospital was located at 18th and Bainbridge, a fairly poor section of Philadelphia.

One day, they asked us if we would like to go see the slum area. Having come from a small city in Virginia and recalling the warning, I asked, “Where – where are we now?” I was told that the area down near Front Street was much worse than where we were. When I visited Philadelphia many years later, I discovered that the area around Front Street had been
renovated and was now some of the highest priced real estate in the city.
Times do make a difference.

Also, while a student at Children’s Hospital, the American Red Cross was
doing nurse recruiting for the military nurse corps – army and navy. I
joined the student – senior student reserve of the American Red Cross,
which meant that I was willing to join one of the services after graduation.
I went back to Petersburg and that year was, excuse me, was given, uh,
vacation for Christmas week to visit my parents in Ashland, Kentucky,
[inaudible] to Ironton, Ohio. I made the trip on the Norfolk and
Western train; got to Kentucky okay, but a lot of rain caused flooding and
I was unable to get back to the train station to get the trip back to
Petersburg.

There was, uh, no closer train station other than Portsmouth, Ohio or
Kenova, West Virginia, so I was – would have to go to Portsmouth, Ohio,
to get the train. But there happened to be a little stop across the bridge
from Ashland, Kentucky, in a little town called Coal Grove, Ohio, where
they had, uh, just a fuel-type stop. And so, they – we went over and asked
them if they’d stop the train, so I could get on it. They said, well they’d
call Portsmouth and see if they could stop the train; and they did. So, I got
– they – went home and got my suitcase and came back. And when the
train came, I got on it. The other passengers were sitting there, and they
would say, “I wonder why we’re stopping here. This is not a regular stop
for the Norfolk and Western train.”

Well later on, in the middle of the night, we were going real slow. I asked
the conductor why we were going so slowly. He said they were sounding
the bridges to see if the tracks were still there. [chuckle] I wondered if I
had been smart in trying to get back to Virginia on time. All went well
though and I got back to school in time for another classmate to have
vacation for New Years.

After graduation in 1944, I took state boards in Richmond, Virginia.
Following that, I went to Kentucky to visit with my parents while I waited
to hear from state boards. After passing state board, I was ordered to Fort
Thomas, Kentucky, for a physical examination. I went by train and took a
bus to the fort. The young sentry gave me directions to the clinic. While
undergoing a brief visit with the psychiatrist, he asked,” Why are you
joining the army?” I replied, “I heard some patriotic music.” He said,
“That’s as good an excuse as any.” On my way out, the young sentry said,
“You’ll be sorry.” Truly, I was not sorry then and I’m not sorry today.
On 15 January 1945, I went to ANC basic orientation at Billings General Hospital at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana. I don’t know that we saw the ground during the 30 days we were there. The ground was covered with snow. It was difficult to learn to march in snow. We made it, however. From basic, I was assigned, along with about 10 other classmates, to Fletcher General Hospital at Cambridge, Ohio. I was assigned to duty in an officer’s ward. Most of the patients were casual-, casualties from Europe; although a few had been in the Pacific.

In April 1945, I received orders to Indiantown Gap, preparatory to going overseas. It was there that we received field equipment and clothing. We did not know where we were going. Orders read, “Prepare for cold climate”. I thought we would surely be going to the Pacific, since I thought it was – the war was about over in Europe. From Indiantown Gap, we went to Camp Kilmer for another week of preparation. And then on May 1st, 1945, we departed the U.S. from Fort Dix, New Jersey, on the French – former French line of the Ile de France. Now a British troop ship. There were 500 nurses: 7 1st lieutenants and 493 2nd lieutenants, with fewer – with four male officers in charge of our group.

Needless to say, they did not have an easy time of it. We zig-zagged across the Atlantic Ocean and landed in Glasgow, Scotland on 9 May 1945, a day after the war was over. We took the train to Southampton and were quartered at a camp in there for about two weeks. We were then assigned to various hospitals in the U.K. From the 102nd General Hospital, which had been the re-, reinforcement depot where we were located, on 10 May 1945, we were reassigned on the 25 May to the U.S. – to the 111th General Hospital, which was packed up and ready to go home. Not very happy to see us either – new nurses.

This is when I had my first martini. They had a large container in the officer’s club. I had a glass. Later wrote my parents a letter. They saved it for me. Learned that – right then never to write letters after you’ve had a martini. [laughter]

On 31 May 1945, I left the 11th-, 111th General Hospital and was assigned to the 136th Station Hospital. Here I was assigned to a nursing ward of NCOs. One day, to me, an older master sergeant asked me a question; and I said, “Yes, sir”. He corrected me by saying, “Lieutenant, officers do not say ‘sir’ to enlisted people.” My reply, “I was taught to say ‘sir’ to older people.” Did he get razed by the other patients in the ward. A good group of patients to work with.
Stayed at the hospital until 16 July 1945, when I joined other nurses, most of whom had come overseas with me to go to France. We were assigned to the 813rd Hospital Center while traveling to France. A very rough voyage across the channel. We sat up, up on deck in the front fresh air to avoid being seasick, as long as we could. 30 July 1945, I was assigned to the 189th General Hospital. Not many patients, so I was given a pass to Paris. I attended the [Folies Bijoux 10:59]. Quite an eye opener for a young lady from Petersburg, Virginia.

After two weeks with the 100-, we went to the 173rd General Hospital at Camp Marmalade, France. While there, we were living in tents. Nothing much to do, so was given another three-day pass to Paris. We were waiting for orders to go to the Pacific. While there, it, it became rather strange because they, they had built some new latrines for, for the women. And it got real funny because you sat back-to-back – first, first time you had such a latrine situation. And then there were lots of people who said they just couldn’t go when anybody else was around. So, they would get up in the middle of the night and have the guard escort’m down to the bathroom; and then they’d find out that the place was packed with people that couldn’t go when other people were around. [laughter]

Ruth Stewart: [laughter]

Doris Cobb: I went up to, uh, while we were in the, at the 173rd General Hospital, in the tents, they tried to do things to keep us occupied. And a lot of the people were playing bridge. So, if you didn’t play bridge, they planned tours for us each day. I decided the better part of that was to go on the tours. So, we saw a lot of cathedrals and a few wineries. Returned from my past trip to Paris to find that we were ready to leave to go to Marseilles. But we were delayed one day and so I was able to unpack and repack my bedroll, which had been packed by friends in my absence.

We took the train to Marseilles, riding in what they called The Forty and Eights. It was 40 men or 8 horses. We stopped along the way to take fresh, uh, to get food breaks. They’d have these little, uh, camps set up along the, the way. And that’s – the military had’m set up and then we could stop and then we’d get off and eat. And then we’d get back on the train and drive, drive – ride some more. We’d also have, the French people would come over and, and, whenever we would stop along the way; and they would come over and want to buy our shoes, our shirts. We’d stop and they’d say… And one of’em wanted to know if I’d sell’m my shirt and I said, “No. This is the only shirt I have.” And they said, “Well your friend down the way did” – sold hers. I said, “Well maybe she had two”. [chuckle] But I didn’t have but the one with me at the time.
We parked along the tracks frequently because the – apparently, they only had one or two engines that were working at the time. And so, they would leave us parked along the tracks while they’d take the engine and go take cattle and all this kind of stuff into Paris. And then they would come back and pick us up and go a little bit further down the line. And then they’d come back and park us again. There weren’t enough bunks on the train for everyone to sleep, so most of us sat – or some of us sat in the open doorway, which gave us a good view of the countryside.

Finally, we arrived in Marseilles – found the place teeming with people, going either the United States or to the Pacific. Then came V-J Day. Several of us were put on TDY to the Riviera. Now that was great duty. We arrived back at Marseilles to find that we were not going to the Pacific; and that we were going to be assigned to the 50th Field Hospital at Swanson, France. This hos-, this hospital unit had gone overseas with the 101st airborne and followed them through the, the war. They were ready to go home. That was in August. We stayed there with few patients until October.

While at the 50th Field we worked a light schedule. One patient I remember was an older French lady who had been hit by an auto-, an American ambulance. And she had to have an amputation. Communicating with her was not easy. She spoke no English and I spoke only a little French. Fortunately, my ward master could speak more, much more French.

Another incident that occurred was rather humorous. I was dating an engineer officer who coached the enlisted football team. After a victory one weekend, the team invited us to the EM club. My roommate and I went to the game and were the cheering section. One young ME, not a member of the team, a wee bit intoxicated, had decided that as officers, we were not – should not be in the enlisted club. So, he asked, asked us to leave. Although the team insisted that we stay, we left. Afterall, it was his club. Well, you could guess what happened. In his intoxicated state, he fell out of a second story window and fractured an arm. Imagine his chagrin when I walked into the ward the next morning to take care of him. He apologized for his actions the evening before.

In October 1945, I was again reassigned. I went to the 98th General Hospital in Munich, Germany. Now I was in the army of occupation. I was assigned to work [two wards 17:26], which had dermatology patients, male medical patients and a mixture of women patients. I worked with nuns for the first time – discovered they were like the civilian nurses where I had worked. Some nice, some crabby. I was fortunate to get
leave to go to Switzerland while there. Elected to go to Zermatt, where I
took ski lessons, but did not venture down the Mont Blanc Trail.

Late April 1945, I was asked to complete a form which gave me three
options: Number one, to extend for one year; number two, to stay in the
service indefinitely; and number three, to get out as soon as I could. Since
I had applied to Western Reserve University School of Nursing before I
committed to the military – and had been accepted – I decided to elect
number three. By the end of April, I was on the way home on the day that
the MacAndrews, a medium sized troop ship, which I understand had been
built in WWI.
I went on and was separated from the service on 21 May 1946. My
parents had moved back to Virginia and I went back to Hopewell to stay to
get ready to go to Cleveland, Ohio, to school in August. I did some
private duty in the meantime.

While in school in Cleveland, I met a man to whom I became engaged.
Then at the end of the summer school term in 1947, I returned to Virginia
to prepare for my wedding. I had a change of heart and returned his ring
and canceled wedding plans. I worked as night supervisor for the
remainder of the year; and then in September 1948, I went to the
University of Virginia in Charlottesville, to complete my bachelorette
degree. Finishing all requirements in August 1949. Too late for the
summer graduation exercises, so I’m considered in the class of 1950.

After graduation, I went to work as a clinical instructor in medical surgical
nursing in the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway Hospital in Clifton Forge,
Virginia. I remained there until June 1952, when I went to Petersburg
Hospital School of Nursing to become director of nursing education. In
1954, I rec-, recommended that the school of nursing be closed; and I went
to Teacher’s College, Columbia University, for my master’s degree in
nursing service administration. While in school, I had three classmates
who were in the army, navy and air force. Each of them suggested I return
to the service. And they had information sent to me. I read each of the
brochures and decided to reapply to the Army Nurse Corps.

After processing papers necessary, I re-joined the Army Nurse Corps in
19-, February the 2nd, 1956, reporting to Fort Jay, New York. I had been
out of the army 10 years. I returned as a captain; was assigned to the
women’s ward. Learned a lot of about the army and nursing.

In August 1956, I was assigned to ANC recruiting with office in Boston,
Massachusetts, covering Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts
and Rhode Island. I had about 98 schools of nursing in my area. I learned
a lot about people, publicity, public relations and civilian schools of nursing. It was a great assignment for 3-1/2 years. In March 1960, I was assigned to Brooke Army Hospital in Fort Sam, Houston, Texas, for three months before going to the advanced nursing course at the Medical Field Service School in San Antonio, Texas.

While at the hospital, I was asked if I would like to go out with the 250th Field Hospital for pre and AT&T three days each time. I went along with my roommate and colleagues from recruiting – in recruiting, [inaudible 22:10]. Two other nurses comprised of the team. We had a wonderful learning experience and I thoroughly enjoyed back – being back in the field living in a tent and learning to improvise. The chief nurse said we gave such glowing reports about the good time we had while we were in the field, that she had no difficulty getting volunteers to go the next time.

I attended the advanced nursing course for six months, from June to December 1960. In January 1961, I flew to Okinawa, and was assigned first as head nurse at – on the EM-, ENT unit and the officer orthopedic unit. Learned that 99% of fractured jaws are the result of a fist hitting the jaw. Later, I became the educational coordinator, planning training programs for the officers and enlisted men and women assigned to the nursing service.

While in Okinawa, I had two trips to Hong Kong and two trips to Dupath. A good assignment; beautiful sunsets. From Okinawa to Madigan General Hospital in Tacoma, Washington, as a nursing methods analyst. Wonderful training for a chief nurse. After a year and a half at Madigan, I asked to go to Germany; but was asked to return to recruiting as ANC coordinator, 3rd Army Recruiting District with an office at Pearson, Georgia. Stayed there one year and was then assigned to recruiting headquarters at Fort Monroe, Virginia, as chief ANC recruiting to replace my predecessor, who had had a heart attack and was expected to retire. She returned to active duty and I became the operations officer.

In 1966, I went to Washington, D.C. for a conference and went to the surgeon general’s office and asked for an assignment to Vietnam. I was told to go back to Hampton and be quiet. Instead, I went back to Hampton, met a fella, and was married in February of 1967 – to [inaudible 24:42] C. Cobb, Jr.

In early 1968, I was told that I was going to Bangkok, Thailand, as chief nurse of the 5th Field Hospital. My husband was assigned to JUSMAG; and was assigned to Bangkok also. We lived on the economy. We moved
from a Thai hotel, which had – the hospital moved from a Thai hotel, which had been converted into a hospital – into a new hospital. Although the new building was an improvement over the old – over the hotel – it was not up to American specifications and standards.

It – I was promoted to lieutenant colonel in 1969. The first summer I was there, we were asked to train American teenagers for volunteer jobs in the hospital. We had done this for two years in Okinawa and had a successful program. American teenagers are unable to work and were bored. We agreed to plan and conduct a program. We had 98 teenagers apply; and all 98 completed the training program; and then the 60 hours of volunteer work, which we required. Several worked more than their required hours, because they enjoyed it.

My husband retired in 1969 and returned to the United States. In September of 1969, I was assigned to the Medical Field Service School as class-, uh, as a basic ANC/AMSC orientation course. About this time, two of my husband’s children came to live with us in San Antonio. The older daughter had been married in 1970. After three years, I asked if I could go to Germany; and was assigned in 1972 to the 130th Sta-, Hos-, Station Hospital in Heidelberg as an army nurse – I mean, as chief nurse. A very rewarding and satisfying job.

My husband and step-son occu-, sometime – accompanied me to Germany. We were able to do some traveling to Holland, France, Switzerland and Italy; also, to England. In September 1974, I returned to the U.S. and had a retirement ceremony at Fort Lee, Virginia, since this was close to where my parents were living.

After retirement, we returned to San Antonio. In 1976, I became involved in helping to establish the Retired Army Nurse Corps Association, now the Army Nurse Corps Association. I was the first president. We also established the Army Nurse Corps Foundation to help in building and new AMEDD museum and collect memorabilia for the museum. About this time, we started working and building a new AMEDD museum. It took many years to accumulate the money, but it finally came to fruition.

My marriage ended in December 1978. I have been active in traveling, bridge, American Legion and the Women’s Overseas Service League; served as national president from 1990 to 1992; San Antonio Chapter Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge; served as awards – an awards jury in 1991, as president of WOSL.
Throughout my career, I have attended army chapels; and continued to do so until about 1995, when I joined the John Calhoun Presbyterian Church, where I served as circle moderator in 1999 and moderator of Presbyterian Women from 2000 to 2002. Was recently profiled in a book by Cindy Weigand, *Texas women in WWII*, published in 2003 by *Republic of Texas Press*. That’s my life in…

Ruth Stewart: Very interesting career Doris. [29:28] Uh…did your activities in the service affect your views of the military or of war?

Doris Cobb: No. Other than it made you – makes you look at the situation with a, a different kind of view, I think, than one does as a civilian, because you, uh, you know what the troops have got – had to go through. And you know, uh, sometimes how decisions are made; and you don’t, uh, you’re not as quick to, uh, criticize or be negative, I don’t think if you would, uh, as sometimes civilians are – people who have never been in the military at all.

Ruth Stewart: Okay. [30:24] Is there anything else that you’d like to add about your…

Doris Cobb: No.

Ruth Stewart: …reflections on your years in the service or your years since then?

Doris Cobb: Can’t think of anything. It’s been a long rewarding life.

Ruth Stewart: Thank you very much Doris.