

**Interview of retired Colonel Eleanor M. Carey
on her U.S. Air Force career and her service in the Vietnam War**

5Ruth Stewart: This is an interview with Eleanor M. Carey in San Antonio, Texas, on
6 March 26, 19 – oh, 2007. Uh, interviewers are Ruth Stewart and Patricia
7 Martin. [0:21] Ellie, start in by telling us about your early life, where you
8 were born and where you grew up.

10Eleanor Carey: Okay, I was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. I was the youngest, the
11 last child that was born. And, um, we – my family moved to a little town
12 called Avoca, Pennsylvania. You know, at that time, of course, um, they
13 were worried about, my mother worried about him, you know, going to
14 work a long distance and stuff like that so, um, they decided to move up
15 closer to his work. And, um, we, uh, so we went there when I was just, I
16 wa-, I was not, I was in sch-, in school [inaudible 1:08] the 1st grade in that
17 little town. And, uh, it was Avoca, A-v-o-c-a, Pennsylvania, and, um, that
18 was it. It was a ni-, it's a nice little town. It's still there, you know, and,
19 and they're not sure that they know me anymore but it's still – and, uh,
20 [throat clearing] so I went to a parochial school there and, uh, a high
21 school in another city. My mother sent me to the high school, the catholic
22 high school there. And then from there I went to Mercy Hospital School
23 of Nursing and, uh.

25Ruth Stewart: [1:45] What, what made you decide to go into nursing?

27Eleanor Carey: One of the things I thought, uh, it was something that – um, I felt that I
28 would like to do something. You know, be, be something. Be, be
29 somewhere and be something and stuff like that. And I guess that was
30 what I was thinking about. And my, my father and my mother supported
31 me in that and my brothers.

33Ruth Stewart: It was an opportunity for a career.

35Eleanor Carey: Yeah. And, uh, and, uh, one, of course, one – I had another, one sister.
36 That was enough sisters. [chuckle]

38Ruth Stewart: [2:28] And then so you went to Mercy Hospital?

40Eleanor Carey: Mercy Hospital School of Nursing.

42Ruth Stewart: [2:31] And that was a 3-year diploma?

44Eleanor Carey: That was a 2-year...

1
2Ruth Stewart: Okay.
3
4Eleanor Carey: Uh, 3 years, I guess, diploma. Yeah.
5
6Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.
7
8Eleanor Carey: And they wiped out those anymore. And that's good, I think they need
9 nursing put actually in the learning field instead of just all, you know...
10
11Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.
12
13Eleanor Carey: ...creeping along. But anyhow, I got – I then went, um, I went, I went in
14 the air force. [phone ringing] Oh, that's me. You want to give me a call
15 and tell them I'll get them, uh, get a message. Thank you. Um, my, uh, we
16 were talking about it [phone ringing] and, uh, I, I really wanted to do
17 something. And I thought I'm in this little town and, um, I thought, well
18 jeepers, I don't know what to do. And then I finally decided and I said to
19 my, my father I think I'd like to go to the, into the air force. And he said,
20 well, you know, it's your choice, but, uh, remember, you know, that, that,
21 that's going to be tough and so forth and so on. And he knew that I knew
22 he would be, he would be, he would say [inaudible 03:45] I was think-,
23 thinking about. And so they, I finally got in, um, I got in, went to school
24 there. It was about 3 years I guess it was, or 3 or 4 years.
25
26Patricia Martin: [3:58] This was at Mercy Hospital?
27
28Eleanor Carey: That was at Mercy Hospital, yeah. And so I got all the rudimentary stuff
29 there, you know. And when I decided I wanted to go into the air force –
30 um, I had heard them flying over and stuff like that and I'd seen some of
31 them and I thought, well, why not me? You know, 'cause I, I don't have
32 any, I'm free [inaudible 4:18]. You know, I'm...
33
34Patricia Martin: Mm-hm.
35
36Eleanor Carey: So I told my mother and dad and, uh, they said – well, they weren't too
37 happy about it. My mother wasn't too happy. My father was a little more,
38 he thought it was better. He said okay. He said now I have – he – my, 2
39 of my older brothers were in the marines and [chuckle] so he told people,
40 you know, I have 2 sons in the marines and, and 1 daughter in the, in the
41 air force. He said I don't know where, what, which way to turn.
42

1 Ruth Stewart: [4:52] We were interrupted there for a minute, Ellie, but you were talking
2 about your parents concern about your going into the military, but they
3 finally agreed to that?
4

5 Eleanor Carey: Oh yes.
6

7 Ruth Stewart: Okay
8

9 Eleanor Carey: Mm-hm, yeah.
10

11 Ruth Stewart: They, they agreed to...
12

13 Eleanor Carey: That's right.
14

15 Ruth Stewart: You could join your 2 brothers in the military.
16

17 Eleanor Carey: I cou-, I could join. And they would say, uh, you know, my father said,
18 well, I have a daughter. You guys can't, you know, take care of that, you
19 know. He said 'cause most of them had men in the, in the military at the
20 time. And he said, well, I have that daughter over there, so. And then I
21 went to Vietnam. [chuckle]
22

23 Ruth Stewart: Hm. [5:27] Well, where did you go first in the air force?
24

25 Eleanor Carey: Uh, we – I went in, um, I'm trying to, um, well, I went in, in '55, in
26 October of '55, so 13th of October I was sworn in there and, um, I, I kept
27 going. I was a – okay, I think I'll tell you my medals and stuff like this.
28

29 Patricia Martin: We've got all that.
30

31 Eleanor Carey: Oh, okay.
32

33 Patricia Martin: So we'll just...
34

35 Eleanor Carey: Yeah.
36

37 Patricia Martin: We'll fill that in later.
38

39 Eleanor Carey: Oh, okay. And what, what do we know and we were thinking about what?
40 I lost my train of thought.
41

42 Patricia Martin: [6:08] Where, where were you first stationed?
43

1Eleanor Carey: Oh, in Fort, in, not in Fort, that's, which is – uh, what's the name of that
2 place?
3
4Patricia Martin: Okay, that's okay, but...
5
6Eleanor Carey: In Beirut. I, I went to Beirut, Lebanon.
7
8Patricia Martin: Beirut.
9
10Eleanor Carey: Yeah, mm-hm.
11
12Patricia Martin: It was your first assignment...
13
14Eleanor Carey: That was my first assignment.
15
16Patricia Martin: ...after, after your...
17
18Eleanor Carey: Indoctrination and so forth.
19
20Patricia Martin: Yeah, okay.
21
22Eleanor Carey: Rooty tooty with Bei-, in Beirut as we called it. [chuckle]
23
24Ruth Stewart: [6:38] And what was it like as an assignment in, in Beirut? What did you
25 do as a nurse there?
26
27Eleanor Carey: I was on the, I was on the, uh – I, I didn't like doing, uh – it was with
28 children or something, but I – it was ordinary work. It was, um, it was the
29 – we took care of the children and we took care of the families in some
30 con-, conditions and in some, most places, um. And Bei-, Beirut was,
31 Berec was, Beirut was really civilized, you know, and, uh, so that they,
32 they were up with our brand of medicine, you know. Th-, they taught our
33 medicine.
34
35Ruth Stewart: Pretty modern.
36
37Eleanor Carey: Yeah. Things like that. And then we went to Vietnam some time later.
38
39Ruth Stewart: [7:27] From Beirut you...?
40
41Eleanor Carey: Uh, no. I went later.
42

1 Ruth Stewart: We're moving on after our second interruption on this tape in hope that we
2 can continue okay now. You were talking about what you were doing in
3 nursing in Beirut. You were doing general duty with pediatrics.
4

5 Eleanor Carey: General, general duty, general duty nursing. And from there I volunteered
6 for Vietnam.
7

8 Ruth Stewart: Okay.
9

10 Eleanor Carey: And, uh.
11

12 Ruth Stewart: Right while you were at Beirut.
13

14 Eleanor Carey: Mm-hm, yeah. Well, I'd been someplace, there was someplace other than
15 that and I can't remember, but it was after that. It was after Beirut.
16

17 Ruth Stewart: Okay. [8:06] And in Vietnam then what were you, what was your role
18 there?
19

20 Eleanor Carey: I went to Vietnam. I was a general duty nurse. Um, and again, I wish I
21 had those papers 'cause – I will send you one as soon as I can get one if I
22 can locate the original, you know, uh, 'cause that has a whole about, about
23 5, about 5 sheets of information. But I was in Vietnam and, you know,
24 um, it changed my way of thinking sometimes. Because, you know, we
25 go around, I'm assuming I did the right thing and I'm assuming that some
26 places somebody is going to feed me or, you know, all these things and
27 when I look at the world [inaudible 8:50], boy, there's a whole difference.
28 Those little kids had – so many were mal-, they were malnourished under
29 our standards and, um, a lot of 'em had very serious lesions, uh. We
30 weren't sure about what it was from but it was, there were a lot of lesions
31 and there was, they were deep, kind of deep. And, of course, they'd clean
32 the skin and or they debride the skin. And god knows where they lived
33 'cause we never did get – we got outside some of the places, but not
34 ever...
35

36 Ruth Stewart: [9:27] So you were taking care of the Vietnamese local people...
37

38 Eleanor Carey: Uh, yes.
39

40 Ruth Stewart: ...as well as our soldiers?
41

42 Eleanor Carey: Oh yeah, yeah. Well, we called, we called it MEDCAP. We'd go out to
43 the villages and that we feel was part of our, of what we should be doing
44 over there, okay, um, because nothing makes it – you know, if our soldiers

1 come out and get shot at every time that they do anything like that, uh, that
2 we wanted those people on our side to know that we were not mean-
3 spirited and we would like to help them. And one way that we did this for
4 the children [inaudible 10:11] and getting their lesions cleaned off, but the
5 problem that we had was they didn't know what soap was like, soap was
6 like. And, uh, we had – I remember calling – uh, writing to my sister
7 saying send some, send some soap. And they were, uh, one of, one of my
8 friends, um, she was telling her niece about it, you know, get some soap
9 out there and they, they were high school kids so they had some-, they
10 found somebody that would give them the music and they had a dance, a
11 soap dance [chuckle] and would take so many bars of soap for them to get
12 in and all that. I thought that was really, really neat, you know, and...
13
14 Ruth Stewart: [10:57] These were high school kids then?
15
16 Eleanor Carey: They were high school kids, yeah. And they did it very, very [inaudible
17 11:01], you know. And, uh, I have a, I have a large picture and I, I
18 thought maybe that he had it, uh, that I, I think, I think mine is over there
19 in Pennsylvania. And I'm going over pretty soon and if I have the picture
20 that I hope, uh, I will be glad to give it to you.
21
22 Ruth Stewart: Well, we would copy it and give it back...
23
24 Eleanor Carey: Yeah.
25
26 Ruth Stewart: ...if your nephew wants the original.
27
28 Eleanor Carey: Oh yeah. But this is one and this we're in I guess, you know, how latrines
29 with no doors on it, you know, was back, and so we would be sitting there,
30 we would be sitting there with a child or something. And I had, I was
31 cleaning this child's arm from all the stuff he had on it, you know, and this
32 other, it was a perfect thing he's there, you know, and this other little kid
33 is looking and he's kind of scared but he kept getting close to it, you
34 know, and it was just such a wonderful picture and it's a large one, so.
35
36 Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.
37
38 Eleanor Carey: I will try to retrieve that for you.
39
40 Patricia Martin: [12:08] You were a flight nurse when...?
41
42 Eleanor Carey: Yes, uh-huh.
43
44 Patricia Martin: ...you were over there?

1
2Eleanor Carey: Yeah, uh-huh.
3
4Patricia Martin: [12:11] So you were actually on the aircraft?
5
6Eleanor Carey: Oh yes, mm-hm, mm-hm. We had, um, [inaudible 12:19] uh, yeah, I was
7 in, uh, nursing administration for 8 years and then flight nurse for 7 years.
8 And I would like to have gotten, you know, kept going from there, but, uh,
9 I'm, I'm not – no, I'm not going to put what I say. Turn it off and I'll
10 [inaudible 12:42] 'cause I don't want to be nasty.
11
12Patricia Martin: [12:44] Tending to soldiers on the airplanes like after they were evacuated,
13 taking them?
14
15Eleanor Carey: Yes, oh yeah, oh yeah. Air evac. That was the biggest thing that
16 happened in that war because we got, we were able to get people right off
17 the, you know, um, we could go in. We could fly in as long as we got
18 enough flight, you know, enough, um – what do I want to say? The
19 length, the, the runway, you know, how it would be. And, and if it was an
20 emergency, uh, boy, we could hit that, hit that thing and go off again. But
21 we – it was a wonderful experience and I, I just thought it was, it was
22 great. And I think that was the, at that time, the Second World War
23 maybe, maybe had a few, but this war really got, there was a lot of
24 airplane, aircraft and that was good. And the, but the great day, one of the
25 great days, I had a few, more than one, and I'm thinking about these days
26 and I'm going to write a letter or a note. Uh, the man that is trying to get
27 into the, go into the White House, um, um, what's, what's his name?
28 Senator McQuail?
29
30Ruth Stewart: [14:11] McCain?
31
32Eleanor Carey: McCain, Senator McCain. I escorted Senator McCain when they, when
33 they, at the time when there was an exchange of prisoners of war kind of a
34 thing, you know. And so they were put out in different groups because
35 depending on where they were going, you know. And I can remember our
36 commander saying to us that day when they were all set up to, you know,
37 get them and he said do it flawlessly 'cause the whole country will be
38 watching you. [chuckle] And it was wonderful. So we got these kids,
39 these men, you know, and, and McCain was one of them I escorted part of
40 the way. We would escort part of the way so they would get, so
41 somebody else would – there was a lot of people outside the fence, they
42 were, we, and they were yelling at them like asking if they know so-and-
43 so and on and on and that was difficult. We had been briefed earlier on
44 what we should, should do and not do, you know. And one thing was, uh,

1 uh, they, never ask them what they wanted to eat because they didn't have
2 that before, you know. So we would say, well, would you like cream of
3 chicken or something or would you like...?
4
5 Ruth Stewart: Give them a choice, but not...
6
7 Eleanor Carey: Yeah. Give them the choices.
8
9 Ruth Stewart: ...open-ended.
10
11 Eleanor Carey: Sure, yeah, mm-hm. And, um, so it was, it was very, very interesting.
12 And there was one young kid, he, he must have been, he looked like he
13 was 18 or 19. I know he was young. And I remember him so much too
14 because I was up near the cabin and, during the, during the flying and he
15 came up and he put his arms around me and he said "I'll always remember
16 you 'cause [inaudible 16:06] you're taking me home." And I wanted to
17 cry, you know. It was wonderful, you know, so. We thought that was
18 [inaudible 16:15].
19
20 Ruth Stewart: [16:15] So you were on flight duty for 7 years then.
21
22 Eleanor Carey: Yes, uh-huh.
23
24 Ruth Stewart: [16:19] Out of Vietnam the whole, that whole – well, it wouldn't have
25 been the whole time.
26
27 Eleanor Carey: No, no.
28
29 Ruth Stewart: [16:24] It was back here then from after that?
30
31 Eleanor Carey: Well, yeah. But, um, no. I was, I was off status for a while after that time,
32 yeah.
33
34 Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.
35
36 Eleanor Carey: Oh, I would have stayed on it forever. [chuckle]
37
38 Patricia Martin: [16:39] You, you retired from San Francisco area?
39
40 Eleanor Carey: No. Not San Francisco.
41
42 Patricia Martin: [16:49] Where was your last duty station?
43

1 Eleanor Carey: Oh lord. Where was my last duty station? Flight nurses [inaudible 16:55].
2 um, my separation date was 1979, October 31, and that's when I
3 separated. [throat clearing] And my, do you want me to read my...?
4

5 Ruth Stewart: No, that's all right. We'll fill, we can fill that in later. We want to get
6 your words...
7

8 Eleanor Carey: Yeah.
9

10 Ruth Stewart: ...at this point...
11

12 Eleanor Carey: Mm-hm.
13

14 Ruth Stewart: ...first. [17:21] And after you came back from Vietnam, when did you,
15 how did you feel in leaving Viet-, how did you, how did you live in
16 Vietnam? We haven't covered that. How did you...?
17

18 Eleanor Carey: Live there?
19

20 Ruth Stewart: ...as an air force nurse live there?
21

22 Eleanor Carey: Okay, yes. Um, we lived there and we were, uh – when I, we first got, I
23 first got there, I came off the flight line. I forget where, [coughing] where
24 I was when I went, I went. Oh, I – well, I went from there someplace and
25 went there and so I got, I got a C-30, C-130 I guess it was and I got a hit, I
26 got a ride on one of those aircraft, you know. And then they dropped me
27 off and I had to find somebody else to take me someplace. And I had, uh,
28 I talked to the people that were there and they did very well and I was
29 asking, well, where can I, you know, where can I spend the night, you
30 know? And they told me where the flight nurses usually slept, you know,
31 and so I got a place there. And in the meantime, at the same time, I was
32 going in my summer uniform with my [inaudible 18:41] shoes, you know,
33 and I was dying to get out of this so I could get a shower. And I never
34 knew that a shower was so wonderful [chuckling] until I got there. And,
35 um, so then I, I was told that I had, um, I had my – oh, what do I want to
36 say? I, I [coughing] I was going to another, another place. Can you turn it
37 off for a minute? Okay, if you don't mind.
38

39 And, uh, I went, I was going to, um, I was going to Vietnam I guess. Did
40 we close that and cover that one? Yeah.
41

42 Ruth Stewart: No.
43

44 Patricia Martin: [19:24] You mentioned earlier that you had been at Cam Ranh Bay?

1
2 Eleanor Carey: Oh, Cam Ranh Bay. Yeah. That was, that was one of the places, yeah.
3 And so I got to Cam Ranh and found my friends. And I had, uh, my, my
4 new chief, my chief nurse and she was a really neat lady and the first thing
5 she did when I arrived there she took me to a party. [chuckle] And I
6 thought that was, you know, that was the right idea, you know. And once
7 I got sorted, sorted out what we were living in, we lived in tents for a little
8 bit. And, um, the – oh, and the VIPs always came here, you know, for
9 some reason and [coughing] they'd always tell us how [inaudible 20:06],
10 you know, [inaudible 20:08]. And we didn't do that, of course, somebody
11 else went in and did that for us. And so then we were, uh, I was, um, let's
12 see, I was there and I took, um...
13
14 Ruth Stewart: [20:24] Where did you eat when you lived in these tents?
15
16 Eleanor Carey: Well, depended on the tents, um, they would usually have a mess hall
17 someplace.
18
19 Ruth Stewart: The mess hall.
20
21 Eleanor Carey: Yeah.
22
23 Ruth Stewart: Okay.
24
25 Eleanor Carey: Yeah. It was, 'cause we were almost transits at that point, you know,
26 because – and so [inaudible 20:39].
27
28 Ruth Stewart: [20:39] And you had local people that took care of all your, your basic...
29
30 Eleanor Carey: Oh sure.
31
32 Ruth Stewart: ...chores and all that...
33
34 Eleanor Carey: Sure, mm-hm.
35
36 Ruth Stewart: ...sort of thing.
37
38 Eleanor Carey: Yeah. [inaudible 20:47].
39
40 Ruth Stewart: [20:47] How did you like the Vietnamese people that you interacted with?
41
42 Eleanor Carey: I, I was just amazed at them because I thought that, um, they were, they
43 were poor. [coughing] Excuse me. But it seemed that they had a
44 lightheartedness also at the same time, you know, because they, they

1 [inaudible 21:13]. And they wore these long, you know, [inaudible
2 21:16]. And, uh, they would, but they were very good in helping us. Um,
3 and we would talk to the mama san, you know. And mama san would get
4 our, our underwear and stuff out and we had to watch them because they
5 might, you might lose some underwear, you know, so. You always had
6 some lingerie [inaudible 21:38]. But I thought the Vietnamese, uh,
7 [coughing] the ones that I had contact with were very nice. They tried to
8 learn our language and they would learn a little bit of this and a little bit of
9 that and they would ask where were we from. Uh, and I think they
10 thought everybody was from New York. But, you know, they were, they
11 were anxious and we were trying to collect some money and I guess we
12 did it too [inaudible 22:10] because they didn't have, as far as I knew at
13 that point, they didn't have any education processes. I mean, you know,
14 like we have regular, uh, um, [inaudible 22:24].
15

16Ruth Stewart: Schooling.

17
18Eleanor Carey: Schooling rather, our schooling. But, um, we collected some money to put
19 one of the children, um, at least get them started in his education. And
20 one, [chuckle] one of my friends who had a few drinks one night and she
21 was talking about this and her tears were rolling down, these poor little
22 children, you know. [chuckle] So we said, yeah, every one of us, you
23 know, felt the same way.
24

25Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.

26
27Eleanor Carey: Yeah.

28
29Ruth Stewart: [22:51] So then you left Vietnam eventually.

30
31Eleanor Carey: Mm-hm.

32
33Ruth Stewart: [22:55] And from where did you go there?

34
35Eleanor Carey: Oh lord. Where did I go after Vietnam?

36
37Ruth Stewart: [23:01] Did you come back to the States?

38
39Eleanor Carey: Oh, I came back to the States. Yeah, and, um, I forget where I was. I was
40 in another assignment, not, it was a temporary assignment. And so in, um,
41 '79 I could get out at any time, you know. Yell, you know, if they had,
42 um, you know, I felt I was a career officer and, uh, I didn't have to get out
43 after 10 years or something like that, so I was there till 1979 and 24 years
44 of active duty.

1
2 Ruth Stewart: Okay.
3
4 Eleanor Carey: I liked every bit, bit of it, did not ever regret going, never.
5
6 Ruth Stewart: [23:56] And did you have any changes in your idea about the military or
7 the war from being in Vietnam and being exposed to that?
8
9 Eleanor Carey: Yeah. I had, the ex-, the exposure was, you know, um, I felt, you know, I
10 was, I was [inaudible 24:15] something which was wonderful to me
11 because I had not been there before. How do these people, how do they
12 operate? How do they think about us? And, uh, the, the realization that so
13 many of those children over there couldn't get an education. They don't
14 even know that there is an education, you know. And, um, and some of
15 the planters I think, I shouldn't say this, but some of the planters I think
16 probably gained for that, you know, so I mean if you keep them dumb,
17 you know, they're going to work for you. And so those were some of the
18 things that we were concerned about. I tried, uh, my, my, my reading
19 became, um, more powerful to find out where was [inaudible 25:01] going
20 and what was happening.
21
22 Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.
23
24 Eleanor Carey: And to me at one time, you know, I learned that I lived in a different world
25 and there were so many people that didn't have and, you know, and they
26 did, they didn't have, um, the people to get them, to get them the things
27 that they needed, you know. And so some of the things I did was
28 changing, changing what, what goes up here.
29
30 Ruth Stewart: Changing your, your own thinking processes.
31
32 Eleanor Carey: Yeah, uh-huh, yeah. 'Cause, you know.
33
34 Ruth Stewart: Well, Ellie, this has been very interesting what you've told us about your
35 experience in the air force...
36
37 Eleanor Carey: Mm-hm.
38
39 Ruth Stewart: ...and in Vietnam. [25:45] Is there anything else that you'd like to add
40 before we close this up?
41
42 Eleanor Carey: No, because, um, as I told you, I had, I had a write up and I, I don't know.
43 I have to – I think I put it in the wrong place and I'm trying to, trying to

1 find it. If I find it, I'll be the first one to, I'll give it to you because,
2 because I, I want some of my feelings on there too, you know.
3
4Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.
5
6Eleanor Carey: That we, we lived in a world that, you know, you thought everything was
7 there and it was all right and everybody was all right and you look at
8 people who barely get enough food a day and really little education. And
9 some of those kids would say to some when we were working with them
10 or playing with them really, uh, they'd say how, they would try to ask how
11 much it would be, this would be like a 12 year old or so or 14 maybe, how
12 much would it cost to, you know, to go to school there and all this. And
13 we just thought, you know, god.
14
15Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm. Well, this has been very, very interesting and we sure thank you
16 for your time and we'll get the rest of the paperwork...
17
18Eleanor Carey: Yeah. Okay. Yeah.
19
20Ruth Stewart: ...filled out as we go along.
21
22Eleanor Carey: Sure.
23
24Ruth Stewart: But we surely do thank you for this.
25
26Eleanor Carey: Oh, you're...
27
28
29/mlc