

WINIFRED GANSEL

Santa Clara, California Chapter

Transcript of an Oral History Reminiscence

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Winifred Gansel

PREFACE

This transcript is the product of a tape-recorded reminiscence conducted For the Women's Overseas Service League.

Signed, dated agreements of release and biographical information accompany the original cassette.

*Transcribed by Patricia Siggers
Lansing, Michigan*

WINIFRED GANSEL

E Santa Clara Chapter

Q: You served overseas in World War II, in the South Pacific

4 theatre. Could you tell us a little bit about
yourself? Maybe you could give us a little idea about
your

6 childhood before you went into the service.

WG: O. K. Well, I was born November 7, 1807, the second
8 child of seven children. We were in a low-income
bracket, but we were very happy because there was much
love

10 between us. My dad was born in Denmark and came to the
USA when he was about 14 years old. My mother was

born IE of Irish descent, and was born in San Jose, California.
I attended Willow Glen Grammar School, and San Jose High
14 School. I earned my money working in the cannery to
pay my way through O 'Connor Hospital of Nursing. My
family

IB was against nursing at first because they felt like I
was a glorified maid, but they soon got over that.

18 In 1931, I graduated, and did private duty nursing
and general duty nursing. In 1834, I went to
work at the

E0 Santa Clara County Hospital, where I worked until I
was joined up with the service. I did surgical nursing
and
EE general duty nursing. (Laughter) My happiest time there
at the hospital was working in the isolation ward, where
E4 we had all kinds of contagious diseases; diphtheria,

26 scarlet Fever, meningitis, TB, measles and mumps, or
 uihat-have-you. We had many seriously ill children, and
 it uias the time before Salk and penicillin, which made
 us
28 have to do more intensive nursing care.
 After Pearl Harbor, which happened December 7, 1341, I
30 applied for service in the Army. The radio kept pleading
 for nurses- the desperate need of nurses. I believe I
32 was the First one to sign up in the county. Big stuff!
 In February, '42, I received my orders to report to
 Camp
34 Roberts in March.

Q: Where is Camp Roberts?

36 WG: That's about 120 miles from my home at San Jose. I
 went in as a Red Cross nurse and the status was changed
 to
38 Army Nurse Corps, Second Lieutenant. The men used to
 tease us about our rank; calling us 90-day wonders,
 or
40 'shave-tails." We wore the navy blue blouse and the
 gray skirt and the little overseas cap. We wore that
 about
42 two years.

Q: Do you recall what your pay was at that time, when you
44 entered the service?

WG: Yes, it was only \$65, and I think the range finally ended
46 up about \$300 or \$350.

Q: Were you supplied your uniforms then?

48 WG: Oh, yes. We had our complete supplies. At Camp
 Roberts, we nurses had charge of large wards. Camp
 Roberts was a
50 real hot place. (Laughter) It always got cooled off at
 night, though. We had to wear a coat at night when we
58 went out; and we had to take salt tablets because it
 was so hot we were perspiring all the time. My ward at
 the
54 time, also was isolation. They seemed to put me in that
 bracket. We had measles, mumps, meningitis, valley
55 fever, and pneumonia. We all felt like pioneers
 because we were using sulfa drugs and penicillin drugs,
 which
58 were quite new at that time. I remained at Camp Roberts
 for about two years.

60 Q: While you were at Camp Roberts, did you have corpsmen to
 help you, or were the WACs then helping in the
 hospitals?

68 WG: Oh, yes. We had corpsmen entirely, and they were pretty
 good, too. They did all the hard work. I always
 missed
64 the nursing care, myself, but we had to be in charge
 of them. We had a half-day off a week and one-and-a-
 half

66 *days for a weekend every month, so I was able to drive*
home; to my home here in San Jose. I had my car, and
I

68 *was lucky enough to have plenty of ration tickets to*
buy gas, thanks to my friends.

70 *D: What kind of houses did you live in? What was*
your housing like?

72 WG: Oh, we had real nice rooms— private rooms.

Q: In barracks?

74 WG: They were in barracks, yes. They didn't have air
condi tioning at that time, of course, but we did have
our own

76 private rooms. We had to walk quite a ways to the
mess hall. We had a very nice dining room.

7B During my stay at Camp Roberts, I volunteered For over
seas service. After one-and-one-half years and many
80 shots; yellow fever shots and smallpox vaccinations—
which I had had For every six months because I was on
the

82 alert to go overseas— I was called to Join nine other
nurses to go to Camp man and join the 80th General
St

B4 Hospital.

We took a train to San Francisco and spent our last
86 evening at the Top of the Mark, having a drink and
reminiscing and watching the scenery go by, because
the

88 roof daughter³ revolved around it.

We were very busy at Camp St man. It was the staging
80 area to go overseas, and it was such a terrible stress.
Everybody was under stress because we had to get all
our

32 *equipment, and we had to stand in line an hour at a*
time to get Just our mess kit or our duffle bag or
something.

84 *I was first lieutenant at that time, so I helped the*
head nurse, who was a captain, with details on
registration—

36 *and in details. There were about a hundred nurses in our*

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of Red Cross nurses, dieticians, and
physical therapists.

After several days, we were to walk to the ferry Cone-
and-one-half miles! with all our equipment. We thought
that was a lot, but anyway, we made it. The boys had
always felt like we were going to faint or something
along the way, but we didn't. The ferry boat took us
to the L_____. That was our troopship to go overseas.
We sailed quietly out of San Francisco Bay- no escorts.
We zig-zagged across the Pacific Ocean to Milne Bay, the
southern tip of New Guinea. Most of us were seasick at
some time or other. We heard stories of the Japanese
being close, but we made it safely. We had only nine
bunks in our small cabin, so we were a little on the
crowded side.

After about ten days it seems like it was! we disembarked
at New Guinea. This was at night, and it was
raining cats and dogs. About four hundred of the nurses
were taken off the ship with us. We were transferred from
the ship by amphibious tanks and driving through the rain
and mud through the Jungle. We could see many eyes
glaring at us from the trees which made us feel a little
eerie. We landed at the nurses' staging area. It was
all enclosed in canvas pens.

Our first clothes in New Guinea were men's sun-tans, pants
and shirts, with leggings to protect us from mosquito

bites. We had orders to be sure and take our Atebrin every day to prevent malaria, and never to go out of the compound without an armed guard. There were stories of rape attacks, etc. Not from the natives; they always stayed in their own area, but they were out during the day to help the Australians build our sheds and different buildings.

Anyway, on that dark, cold night our first cots were in small tents with mosquito net, and we could see spiders were all around. (Laughter)

Later our cots were moved into a long, thatched-roof shed with a floor. The latrines were double holers in little sheds, which we shared with the spiders and the lizards.

We used our helmets for taking baths and washing our clothes. We were glad to see the per-pads come in, after managing with diapers.

Finally, the shower room was completed, and it was long rows of showerheads— no privacy. The water supply was very unreliable, so many times we were caught short; being soaped— well-soaped and not able to rinse.

With all the inconveniences, we shared a good comradeship between us; we had lots of good times. Some of the girls were attached to field hospitals, but the rest of us had to wait until our hospital was ready. We were able to go to parties in the evening with our groups.

There were many young men at that time on their way to the front

lines, wanting somebody to talk to and drink with.

150 fly Favorite - safest drink was rum and coke or beer.

Q: Where were these parties held?

152 WG: They were held in recreation centers and then
were sponsored by the Red Cross.

154 Q: Were these in tents, also?

WG: No, they were in pretty good buildings. I guess they
156 had had Milne Base set up For a staging area For a long
time before we ever moved there. Our water
15B supply was in a canvas bag with chlorine to Flavor it,
and the water was always warm. So we got to
160 like beer as our Favorite drink of the day.
To go back to the parties: One moonlit night, I remember
162 I wore my white blouse and suntan pants, Feeling real
dressed up. My Friend and I were going with our dates
164 to a swim party. My Friend and I proceeded to
get ready to get in the pool. Then I
166 realized I still had my corn plasters on my toes, and did
they show up like neon lights! It didn't
168 take me long to get rid of them, so all went well.

Q: Must be the PX 's were well supplied with corn plasters?

170 WG: CLaughter) Yes, those Field shoes were big and
they rubbed all of us in the wrong places.

17e In mid '44, our general hospital was finally ready for
us. It was built on the hill. It had been built before;
I mean, it wasn't brand new to us. Other units had used
174 it. It was on the hill overlooking the harbor. It was a
beautiful view.

176 Most of our patients were boys being sent back home;
mental cases, and skin disorders, Jungle rot, and things
178 like that. We also had the electric shock ward, which I
hated. Most of my work was administrative, making
180 rounds and reporting to the head nurse. I was offered a
promotion to a captain, but I 'd refused it because I
1B5 didn't feel qualified. The colonel said at the time
that he had never heard of that before, but I felt happier
184 as a First lieutenant.

In 1845, we were sent to Clark Field, outside of Manila.
186 We joined a field hospital for a short time; took care of
the boys directly from foxholes. Most of them had been
188 in the foxholes for 40 to 60 days. They came in with
terrible diarrhea and vomiting and mal-nourished, and the
130 First thing we had to do was to start I-U's. Thank
goodness for the corpsmen, with the I-U's, etc. We had
192 to give the morphine and watch the condition of the
patients. At that time, we didn't have enough beds; nor
184 sheets; nor blankets. Finally they came, but we were
under distress until we got our supplies.

186 Then the general hospital moved to Manila. Our

198 buildings had been badly bombed. Roofs— and plumbing was
ruined, but the latrines were set up in tents outside of
our courtyard until the plumbing was complete.

800 Finally, we were whole again. fly ward was a polio ward
808 with respirators and hot packs. Boy, was it a tough
one, wringing out those hot packs with no instruments,
804 burning your hands all the time. Thank goodness, we had
good electricity for the respirators.

80G In the interval in New Guinea, I was given a one month R
and R at Sidney, Australia. We went by seaplane. I had
808 never ridden in a plane before, and was I scared! We
went over the deepest harbor in the world. (I understand
810 Milne Bay was.) We had a lovely time; met so many
friendly people. I sure had my share of ice cream and
818 chocolate pie. The mess food back at camp had very
little fresh fruits and vegetables and ice cream. The
814 Australians were friendly to the Americans. They felt
closer to us than they did to their mother country.

816 One Australian family invited us into their home, and
invited us to tea. Well, the tea turned out to be a
whole dinner. We had so many lovely, different kinds of
818 foods. I think they had saved all their rations in
order to accommodate us. They even saved their
880 petrol ration to take us to the mountains: To the— what
they called 'the bush,'— we would call the mountains.

Q: You mentioned "R and R." What do those letters stand
For?

WG: Rest and recreation. I had been in New Guinea, I guess,
nine months then. I had quite a bit of leave time
built up. We really had a good time. We even
saw the cemeteries (Laughter) in Sidney, and we 'd always
go see the cemeteries. There were three of us that went
together. We had a good time, though, and we were all
Catholic people; So we went into this cathedral, thinking
we were going to a Catholic Church. We 'd find out after
we got in there that it was a Presbeterian Church.
(Laughter) But we were treated royally there.
Also, in my stay overseas, I was lucky to meet my brother
in New Guinea and also in the Philipines. He treated me
and my friends to picnics and dinners and dances— after I
got permission from my commissioned officer to go with my
brother and his friends. (They were all non-
commissioned officers.) (Laughter)

Q: Oh, that did take a bit of finagling to get to go with
them, didn't it? (Laughter)

WG: Well, they had been in foxholes for a whole month— over a
month, so they were glad to get away from their unit.

Q: Were they pretty strict about the relationships between
enlisted men and officers in that area?

WG: Yes, they did show that up quite a bit, so I was very
sure I didn't want to be embarrassed with my brother—
24B being a PFC. He was in the Paratroopers, the Medical
250 Corps, P_____ Company.

Q: Wasn't that fortunate, though, that you were able to
252 meet him? - twice!

You had mentioned several times about your uniform being
254 suntan pants and boots, with your leggings and all. Was
that the only uniform you wore all the time over there,
255 or did you at sometime change?

WG: When we got to Manilla and our unit— our hospital
25B ward was intact, we were allowed to wear a seersucker,
hose. Were the boys glad to see our legs
with
260 then! CLaughter3

Q: I imagine so!

262 WG: It was so warm there, anyway— Manilla. We were glad
to have dresses.

264 Q: When you're talking about the— when you say the seer
sucker— were those the little brown and white striped
266 seersuckers?

WG: Yes. They had kind of a little wrap-around.

26B D: With the little overseas cap?

WG: Yes. Of course, mine was always off because I was
E70 reaching into the respirator, or something,
CLAughterl and getting it knocked off my head.

E7E Q: When did you return home then? Did you return
home before the end of the war?

274 WG: Well, it was after the bombing, and we knew the Japs
were taken care of- pretty much. In November,
E76 1845, I was sent home. I had several months of
leave coming. I was discharged as a
S78 captain, March 3, 1846.

□n our way home, we were on a cargo ship. We landed in
E80 Los Angeles area, and we were met by the band, which
played many patriotic songs. Then we took the train to
EBE San Francisco, and I took a bus from San Francisco to San
Jose, carrying my fatigue bag and my purse. I had the
284 khaki uniform at that time, so that my yellow skin (from
too much Atebrin} really showed up. (Laughter))

E8B After a month or two, I went back to work; in March,
right after my Army time was up. I went back to my old
E88 Job at the isolation ward at Santa Clara County Hospital,
and my job was waiting for me. I was supervisor then.

E90 If I didn't return in 60 days, I would have lost
my seniority, but I was ready to go back to work.

29E In retrospect, I really did miss my friends in the Army.
I kept up correspondence for several years, but I 'm a bad

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294 Q: In mentioning your friends, were these the same
friends that you had gone over there with?

296 WG: Yes. Part of them were.

Q: Did you come back with these same four people that
you went over there with?
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WG: No, three of my pals were sent home. One had her back
300 injured in a jeep accident, and one had bursitis that she
had gotten from a yellow fever shot that she had taken.
302 The other one went home with a lung condition, so I was a
loner coming home.

304 Q: All along you have mentioned about taking care of the
men. I wondered, were any of our women ill very much?
306 Were they able to withstand the illnesses and pressures
from over there?— other than these three that you have
308 mentioned? What was the general health condition of the
nurses over there?

310 WG: Some went home pregnant, (Laughter) but it seemed to be -
I think everybody was happy enough; and they were in
312 fairly good health. But they were usually on another
ward that I didn't have much contact with.

314 Q: There was a special ward for women?

WG: Yes, and I think they were sent home if there was
316 anything seriously wrong with them. They were sent
home quickly.

318 Q: After you got home; have you made any use of the GI Bill?

WG: I didn't go in for the education at all. I felt like I
330 was going to stay in my nursing field. I didn't go on
to college and take advantage of the education, but I did
333 get the GI loan on a lovely new home; which I sold
but I was able to get a very reasonable interest rate at
334 that time.

Q: This was on the Cal-loan, wasn't it; because you were a
335 Cal-vet?

WG: No, I couldn't get the Cal-Uet. That was lower than the
338 federal. I got the GI loan, rather than the state
loan. I was put out of shape because I couldn't get the
330 loan. The interest would have been cheaper, but they

said that I wasn't a worthy benefit because I just had my
333 dad: If I was a married person and that had children, I
would have been able to get the state loan.

334 Q: I didn't know that! That is news to me, but that was
the way it often worked. Did you find that there
338 ever was any conflict between the fact that you were a
woman and your military status— other than the incident

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WINIFRED GANSEL, Santa Clara Chapter

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338 already mentioned when your brother came, and he was a
PFC? Were there other times that you any conflict
340 had with this?

WG: No, I don't remember any, but I think the opportunities
348 were pretty fair to both sexes, from what I saw of the
service.

344 Q: What was the hardest thing for you to adjust to? Do you
recall?

346 WG: Well, I guess maybe it was the uniform, especially in
New Guinea.

348 D : That was hot.

WG: Yes, that was hot. We had those men's pants that
350 buttoned in the front and they didn't fit the woman's
behind. CLaughter)

358 Q: They were either too large or too small.

WG: And the sleeves on the shoulders..

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Transcribed by Patricia Siggers

