

1 **Interview of Lieutenant Colonel Bernice R. Couzynse (Ret.) on her service as a U.S. Army**
2 **nurse during WWII and other conflicts**

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6 Interviewer: ...career subsequently spending 28 years in the Army Nurse Corps.
7 Bernice, will you tell us some of the highlights of those years?

8

9 Bernice Couzynse: Well, I was in nursing school at Blodgett Hospital at the time the war
10 broke out, and I guess maybe my going into the military was a rather
11 natural thing since I come from a, a military family. I finished nursing
12 school in the fall of 1942 and, uh, in the first of March I was on my way to
13 Fort Sheridan, Illinois. Up until then, I'd never been out of the state of
14 Michigan, and it was a snowy, blowy day, and I'm standing on the, the
15 platform of a station at Fort Sheridan, Illinois, wondering what on earth I
16 was doing there and wanting to go home very badly [laughter]. I stayed at
17 Fort Sheridan for a little over a month and the middle of April was on my
18 way to the East Coast to a staging area, Camp Shanks, New York, where
19 we subsequently boarded a ship and joined a convoy headed for we didn't
20 know where. It was the largest medical convoy to have left the States up
21 until that time since the beginning of the war. After 2 weeks' time, we
22 landed in Oran in North Africa. Tunis had fallen the day before, and so
23 essentially the war in North Africa was over. We were taken from the ship
24 in 2-1/2-ton trucks out to a staging area that had the rather dubious name
25 of Goat Hill. They had put up some tents, some large tents for us, but we
26 had no cots. We slept on the ground for a couple of nights until they got
27 our equipment there. We stayed in the staging area for about 3 weeks, but
28 our commanding officer got as many of us out on temporary duty to other
29 established hospitals as fast as he could.

30

31 [2:14] From there, from Oran, we boarded trains, a train, and started
32 traveling. We traveled 4 days and 4 nights, one morning waking up in the
33 same place we had been the night before and we'd been moving all night.
34 We ended up in an area that was situated between Bizerte and Ferryville,
35 and there we were to set up our hospital. There were 5 hospitals along this
36 road and it was called Hospital Road. These were all station hospitals. We
37 were set up completely in tents. The one building we had was a Quonset
38 hut in which we had our operating room. We lived in tents, and our
39 patients were housed in tents. During this time, although the war in Africa
40 was over, they were getting ready to, um, for the invasion into Sicily, and
41 we were subjected to air raids. Since we were rather close to the port of
42 Bizerte we were subjected to air raids frequently, and before, fortunately,
43 before we had any patients, we had the experience of having one of the
44 German planes empty their bomb load before heading back right close to

1 us between our hospital and the hospital up the road, a half a mile up the
2 road from us. Fortunately, it was also behind, so that none of us, or none
3 of our equipment was damaged, although the other hospital up the road
4 did sustain some damage.
5

6 [3:48] While we had been aboard ship crossing the ocean, they had asked
7 for, um, someone to volunteer to do anesthesia. There were four of us that
8 volunteered. Only one had ever done anesthesia before. We were given
9 some training and lo and behold here we were, nurse anesthetists. I'll
10 never forget the first patient I gave an anesthetic to. He died on the table,
11 and I decided I didn't want to do, ever do anesthesia again. But the doctors
12 told me that I must, and that it was, on autopsy, confirmed that it was not
13 an anesthetic death. That made me feel a little better, and I guess I must've
14 been, because I stayed in anesthesia the whole 2-1/2 years that we were
15 overseas. We stayed in Africa for a year. As a matter of fact, it was a year
16 from the day we had, had boarded or had landed in Africa that we boarded
17 ship to go to Naples, Italy, which was to be our next assignment, next set-
18 up. The war in Sicily had gone much faster than they had anticipated, and
19 so although we had been scheduled originally to go into, uh, Sicily, we
20 went on to Naples.
21

22 [5:07] There, we set up our hospital. We had one building. It was an
23 agricultural college that we had taken over, and we had one building and
24 the rest of the, uh, hospital was set up in tents. There were terraces all the
25 way back to the drop of the cliff dropping into the Bay of Naples. We
26 lived in buildings that were, uh, building that was about a mile away from
27 the hospital. This did present some problems, but this had been, was a
28 hospital that was run by Catholic brothers, and we had taken over one
29 floor of the hospital, which made it a little bit better. At least we were
30 indoors. We had, um, we were extremely busy while we were in Naples,
31 and the first patients that we received there after we were set up was a load
32 of 50 American and British and Canadian troops. Those were the last
33 English speaking troops that were patients that we ever had while we were
34 in Naples. We were assigned to act as an evacuation hospital for the
35 French Army, and this meant everything that the French Army had in it,
36 all of their, the fr-, troops from France itself and all of their colonial troops
37 including the big black Senegalese troops.
38

39 [6:35] The French Foreign Legion was there. I wa-, of course was still
40 doing anesthesia and one old legionnaire came in one day with a fractured
41 leg, and I tried to put him to sleep and was using a, supposedly a mixture
42 of nitrous oxide and oxygen. I ended up giving, using 100% nitrous oxide
43 and I still couldn't get him to sleep. He was a real tough old guy. Finally
44 he went to open drop ether, and I think it took 3 cans of ether before he

1 [chuckle] he was asleep enough for the doctors to start work on him. We
2 also had there, some of the other colonial troops that the French had, and
3 they were, um, I don't know what they were called, but they did have, uh,
4 like pigtails like the Chinese with their little queues down the backs of
5 their heads, and, uh, they w-, they liked sodium pentothal very much.
6 They, they asked for that all the time, and we did find some who were all
7 bandaged up, and when we cut away the dressings there was nothing
8 wrong with them. We think that they had really [laughter], really f-, bribed
9 somebody to [laughter] make it look like they were very badly wounded to
10 get out of the, out of the war.

11
12 [7:57] Um, we stayed in Naples for only about 4 months. We of course
13 during this time were subjected to air raids. We had landed in Naples just
14 prior to the push on to, um, Anzio, and of course a lot of our patients that
15 we received came from that, that push. When we had been in Africa when
16 we had an air raid, we all had to get up and go over to our place of duty.
17 This wasn't so bad. When we were in Naples, we had to go to the air raid
18 shelters, which we shared with the Italian civilians, and this proved to be
19 rather exciting because they were of course absolutely petrified and it was
20 much screaming and, and carrying on. We sometimes felt that we
21 would've been safer had we been up, uh, in our, our quarters rather than
22 down in that air raid shelter.

23
24 [9:01] From Naples, we moved up to, uh, Leghorn, and this was a rather
25 fast move. I along with some others had been on, on R and R in Rome,
26 and it was a custom that we would, uh, take people up to Rome and the
27 truck then would bring back those that had been there. So we were to
28 come back on a Sunday afternoon, and we had gone to church on Sunday
29 morning and when we got back, some of the others that were there said,
30 "You've got to hurry because you've got to go back right away to Naples
31 and pack and come back here tomorrow." The orders moving us had come
32 through much faster than they had anticipated, and our men and all of our
33 equipment was being sent up by boat to Leghorn, and there would be no
34 one left in Naples to cook for us or to take care of whatever we needed. So
35 back to r-, to Naples we went, packed our stuff, and started out the next
36 morning and went back to Rome. So this was really fine. We thought we
37 were going to have a, uh, a real fine time. We'd already had 4 days of R
38 and R, and we had at, who knows how much longer we would be there.
39 Well, after about 2 days, I was told that the surgical team to which I had
40 been assigned had orders to go on TDY up toward the front.

41
42 [10:30] This was when I had my first plane ride flying from Naples to
43 Florence. Florence had been taken only, uh, a few days before this. And
44 they didn't know what to do with us when we reported in to the

1 headquarters there, and they wanted to send us, uh, someplace else, and I
2 refused to go. I must've been very bold, but I did refuse to go until,
3 because we knew that our team, that is our doctors and our corps men,
4 were somewhere, and we weren't going to go anyplace until-, unless it was
5 with them. There was a scrub nurse, uh, along with me. So they finally
6 found out where we were supposed to be and it was with an evacuation
7 hospital that was about 5 miles north of, uh, Florence, and only a few
8 miles behind the lines. This is beautiful country, and it was too bad that we
9 couldn't really enjoy it and also it was, Florence is a beautiful city, and it
10 was the first time I had gotten into a place so soon after it had been taken
11 by the Allies, and we had no money 'cause we'd been in Rome and spent
12 all of our money and it was almost payday, and so we thought we would
13 have a chance to do, uh, shopping later. This was true, but when we went
14 back into some of those same shops about 3 or 4 weeks later, everything
15 was about 3 or 4 times higher. They learned very fast.

16
17 [12:00] We stayed in this evacuation hospital I think about 3 weeks, and it
18 was an extremely busy time. When we first were there, we were working
19 three 8-hour shifts, and in very short order we went, uh, on a 12-hour shift.
20 One of my experiences there that I remember was, uh, giving an anesthetic
21 to an Italian civilian woman who had stepped on a landmine. Her one leg
22 was, had been blown off, and we amputated the other one, and I was
23 sitting there at the head of the table looking over, seeing what was going
24 on down I-, lower end of the table, and one of the doctors said to me,
25 "Lieutenant, I think you shouldn't get so close." And I looked down, I
26 don't know why I hadn't seen it before, but her head was crawling with
27 little things. I could hardly wait until that procedure was finished
28 [laughter] and I could, got her back to the recovery room, and I went up
29 and of course I couldn't do anything about it. I was still on duty, but I
30 rolled up my sleeves and I really scrubbed [chuckle] and then itched all
31 the rest of the time I was on duty [laughter]. When I got off, I went
32 upstairs and took a cold shower. We had no hot water at that point, and,
33 uh, I took a cold shower, and I'm not so sure that I, I really felt safe even
34 then.

35
36 [13:28] One of the things that I had thought when we went up to, um, uh,
37 the evac hospital was at least the anesthesia department would be all set up
38 in our own hospital by the time I got back there, and that was a, being a
39 dreamer of the first order. Because when we got back, who had to set up
40 the department? That's right. I did. Fortunately, I had packed the stuff, so I
41 knew what was in what box [chuckle] and we got, got set up. We were at
42 that point in what had been an Italian military academy, and we shared
43 part of the facilities with a general hospital, the 43rd General Hospital
44 from the Tulane University, uh, in Louisiana. While we were there, we

1 were made a POW hospital, having mostly, uh, the POWs of course were
2 Germans since way back when we were still in Africa, Italy had become a
3 cobelligerent and we did not have, uh, any Italians as prisoners of war.
4 Some of the Germans, uh, prisoners were very grateful and glad to be out
5 of the war, but we did have some who I thought were typical Nazis. Very
6 arrogant and even when they, it became very evident that Germany was
7 losing and was losing badly and fast, they insisted that they were going to
8 win the war.

9
10 [15:07] We stayed in, um, Leghorn until August of 1945. They had then
11 devised a system where if you had so many points, you would go back to
12 the States. If you didn't have enough points, you either stayed over there
13 or you went to the Pacific. And points were based on your length of
14 service, length of time overseas, and how many dependents you had. Well,
15 of course none of the nurses, or very few of us, had any dependents
16 because that was not permitted in those days. So we all headed directly to
17 the Pacific. While we were at sea, as a matter of fact only a few days, the
18 atomic bombs were dropped and we received word that Japan had
19 surrendered. It was a very happy day for us. At least we thought so
20 because we were certain that we would receive orders sending us back to
21 the States. However, the order came that we would proceed as previously
22 ordered. We were a pretty sad bunch, and I think most of us were seasick
23 that next day, which only goes to prove that seasickness is mind over
24 matter. The next day, we were awakened early in the morning by the
25 captain of the ship, who told us that during the night orders had been
26 received changing the course of that ship, and we were now headed for
27 Hampton Roads, Virginia. There wasn't anybody seasick that day. We
28 were all up and at'm, enjoying ourselves thoroughly.

29
30 [17:02] Came back to the States, and of course it was a very happy time.
31 Um, I had assignments at Butler General Hospital, or Deshon General
32 Hospital, which is in Butler, Pennsylvania. From there, went to Valley
33 Forge General Hospital in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, to Camp
34 Breckinridge, Kentucky, which they should've given back to the Indians,
35 and I guess had a couple of times. From there, I went to Japan. It was
36 during the Korean War, and I left to go to Japan in February of 1953. My
37 first assignment in Japan was out in the rice paddies at Koizumi-Town.
38 We were a general hospital and getting patients from, uh, Korea. It was
39 not too bad out there except that it took us a long time to get to anywhere
40 else. In December or November of '53, I was sent into Tokyo Army
41 Hospital to have surgery, and the day that I left to go back to my own
42 hospital, I was told that the orders were coming out transferring me to the
43 staff of Tokyo Army Hospital. In some ways, this was very nice, but I did

1 hate to leave the 343rd General Hospital. However, I did, about the middle
2 of December went into Tokyo and had several assignments there.
3

4 [18:41] No longer was I doing anesthesia, by the way, because I had not
5 been trained. I'd done it for 2-1/2 years, but I did not have any training in
6 anesthesia, so therefore couldn't do that. I had gone back to doing general
7 duty on the wards. While, uh, I was in at Tokyo Army Hospital, I was
8 called to the chief nurse's office one day and was told that they needed a
9 new head nurse on the women's ward. This was the ward that I had been a
10 patient on, and I felt that the head nurse on that ward was an absolute
11 angel and saint because it was a very diverse, uh, type of ward. It had all
12 the services on it except for obstetrics, psychiatry, and isolation.
13 Otherwise, everything else was there. The chief nurse, who I thought was
14 a friend of mine, we had been stationed together earlier, thought that I was
15 just the person to take over that ward, and I did, and we had, uh, I
16 remained there as a head nurse for 1 year. That was a pretty bad time
17 because we had so many very different services, we'd, sometimes would
18 have enough personnel, but I must say it presented a challenge, and I
19 guess I work well when I'm challenged to do something that seems
20 impossible at the time you take it over.
21

22 [20:19] From Japan, I returned to the States and, y'know, we had these
23 dream sheets that we filled out, and at the time, most of the nurses were
24 getting their second or third assignment, so I thought I'd fix them. So I put
25 down what I really wanted the second or, as my second or third choices,
26 and I put 3rd Army as the first choice. I probably was the first nurse in the
27 history of the Army Nurse Corps to get her first preference, because I got
28 3rd Army. Fort Gordon, Georgia. Well, that was not even what I had in
29 mind when I, I, um, had said I would go to 3rd Army. And, uh, I stayed
30 there for a couple of years. While I was there, I was promoted to the grade
31 of major and at the time was the head nurse on a women's, um, surgical
32 ward. But we had these things that were called slots that we were all
33 placed in, and that was not a major slot. So I had to become the supervisor
34 of OB. I hadn't done OB since I had been in nursing school. However, I
35 got the job, and I, I took it, and I, I don't know how I got through it, but,
36 uh, I seemed to have managed.
37

38 [21:50] From there, I was sent, in January of 1958, was sent to Fort Sam
39 Houston to, uh, attend the advanced nursing administration class, which
40 was at that time a 7-month course. Was there from January until July. I
41 liked San Antonio very much, but I did hope, and fortunately that hope
42 was realized, that I would not be assigned to Brooke Army Hospital there.
43 I was assigned instead to the hospital at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, where I
44 was, uh, made the head nurse on pediatrics. I had done some pediatrics

1 when I was at Fort Gordon and really liked it a great deal. From Fort
2 Belvoir, Georgia, I received orders sending me to, uh, Germany, and I
3 went in August or sep-, August of, um, 1960. I left Fort Belvoir and
4 eventually landed in Landstuhl, Germany. This is a little town that is close
5 to the French border. Very interesting but could get very isolated, and we
6 didn't have a great deal of snow there, but when we did, we could be
7 completely isolated on the top of the hill. But it was a very interesting
8 thing. I had my car with me and was able to do a fair bit of traveling.
9 While I was, um, in Landstuhl as far as the traveling was concerned, did
10 go to Switzerland, to the Netherlands, to, um, Austria, and, uh, even
11 Vienna, which is a beautiful place.

12
13 [23:38] My assignment in Landstuhl was as the head nurse and supervisor
14 of the outpatient clinic and emergency room, which I enjoyed very much,
15 particularly the hours because I worked straight days and didn't have to
16 work weekends except sometimes on Saturdays. Stayed in Landstuhl until
17 October of 1962, when I returned home and was assigned to Fort
18 Benjamin Harrison in Indianapolis, Indiana, which was very nice because
19 it was close to home. I could get home in about 5 hours from there, and I
20 appreciated that assignment very much. I did general duty there, was chief
21 nurse, or assistant chief nurse of, uh, the hospital. Was the head nurse in
22 the outpatient clinic. Also of the, uh, officers and intensive care ward.
23 From, the Vietnam War was really in full force at that time, and I thought
24 certainly if I were to go overseas again it would be to Vietnam. But lo and
25 behold, in the summer of 1965, I received orders sending me back to
26 Germany. I must say I was rather glad of that and relieved. I would, of
27 course, have gone to Vietnam, but I was just as well pleased that I was not
28 sent there.

29
30 [25:16] This time, I went to Frankfurt, Germany, to a large general
31 hospital. I had a couple of different assignments while I was there in the
32 hospital. I started out as a relief evening and night supervisor, which was
33 very fine. Uh, I became the surgical supervisor in rather short order, and I
34 think a month later was the assistant chief nurse of the hospital. Stayed
35 there at Frankfurt at the 97th General Hospital until August, which was
36 about a year, and, uh, I was still a major. A lieutenant colonel came in, and
37 of course she became the assistant chief nurse. One of my duties as the
38 assistant chief nurse there was to make rounds of all the various clinics or
39 dispensaries that came within the Frankfurt medical, uh, command, and so
40 one week every month, I was out on the road visiting these places. So
41 when the chief nurse told me that Colonel Rose was coming and would be
42 the assistant chief nurse, she asked me what I would, wanted to do. I told
43 her I wanted a dispensary, and she told me I could have the 10th General

1 Dispensary, which was in Frankfurt. The chief nurse of that ho-,
2 dispensary was returning to the States.
3

4 [27:57] So I had a new assignment but did not have to leave my quarters. I
5 was living off-post on the economy, as we say, in a very nice apartment,
6 which was quite close to the hospital. I could walk back and forth to work.
7 I did have to drive my car when I went down to the dispensary, but it
8 made it very nice because I didn't have to move. This was a most
9 interesting assignment also. It, the 10th Dispensary was the largest
10 dispensary in the army medical service in Europe, and I had under me 3
11 American civilian nurses as well as the GIs and several, uh, German
12 nurses. Again, because of the hours that I worked, which was straight
13 days, and I worked every fourth Saturday morning, I was able to do a lot
14 of traveling and did so. We had, there was one tour group that we traveled
15 with which, uh, did nothing but short-term tours. Weekends, American
16 holidays, and this kind of thing. And another group that did longer tours. I
17 was able to visit the Scandinavian countries as well as going back to
18 Austria and Switzerland and Holland.
19

20 [28:32] The one thing I forgot to mention when I was in Landstuhl, we
21 were going on a tour called the five countries tour that was to take us to
22 France and Spain, Monaco, Switzerland, and just a little bit into the
23 northern part of Italy. The Berlin Wall crisis came up and many leaves
24 were canceled, and they had to cancel the tour because they didn't have
25 enough to take on the tour. The only other tour they had at that time and
26 for about the same number of days was a tour to Italy. I said I hadn't left
27 anything in Italy that I had to go back for. However, I was not about to
28 give up my leave, and I did go back to Italy and thoroughly enjoyed it. Did
29 stay in the same hotel in Rome where we had stayed in 1943, '44, excuse
30 me. And, but it was certainly much different. We had elevators. We had
31 water. We had electricity. No more did we have to walk up the steps and
32 figure out when we were gonna take our showers.
33

34 [29:46] But getting back to Frankfurt, I, by this time, had, was completing
35 25 years of service and was prepared to retire. Was going to retire over
36 there and spend a couple of months over there doing some traveling along
37 with a friend who had also retired over there. Three days before I was to
38 retire, I received a call from headquarters in Heidelberg telling me that I
39 had been selected for retention in the corps and asking me if I would
40 accept this retention. After much thinking, and didn't have much time to
41 do this thinking, and some advice from the chief nurse, I told head-,
42 Heidelberg that I would accept retention and wrote a letter saying that I
43 would but I would not go to certain places. I guess I thought at that point I
44 had nothing to lose. They were asking me to stay on. I wasn't asking them.

1 I got the assignment that I asked for, which was William Beaumont
2 General Hospital in El Paso, Texas. Went there. I had been, this was in the
3 summer, then, of 1968.

4
5 [31:11] This was in August of '68 about a month after I had gone there
6 during which time I was relieving the various supervisors while they went
7 on leave in order to familiarize myself with the hospital and with the
8 various services. The chief nurse had told me that I was to become the
9 assistant chief nurse in October when the current one was retiring. I
10 received a call from the chief nurse telling me that my promotion to
11 lieutenant colonel had come through. This had been one of the conditions
12 that I had given them when I re-, decided to remain on active duty, that if I
13 did not receive my promotion, I would not stay on any length of time. I
14 became the assistant chief nurse at William Beaumont then in the fall of
15 1968. This was a 1,500-bed hospital with various services, many
16 medically oriented schools. We had the school of anesthesia, an operating
17 room course, we had the 91C course, which was a course training the
18 enlisted men to b-, and women, to become licensed practical nurses. In
19 addition, we had some other short courses and on-the-job training for
20 operating room technicians, psychiatric technicians, and so on. We had a
21 very fine chief nurse and shortly after I got there, we, uh, got a new
22 commanding general, Kenneth Orr, who was just a real fine person and a
23 fine commanding officer. I stayed at William Beaumont then until my
24 retirement in the first of April of 1971.

25
26 [33:14] I've never been sorry that I went into the army nurse corps and
27 that I stayed in. I've been able to do much more than I ever would have
28 had I not been in the army as far as traveling and all the very fine people
29 that I met and the fine friends. I think I can go almost in any state in the
30 union at this point and find someone that I have known throughout the
31 years. Is that enough?

32
33Interviewer: Thank you, Bernice, that's an- [click]

34
35Bernice Couzynse: Start over again.

36
37Interviewer: Thank you, Bernice, that's an interesting, vital life. Certainly well spent.
38 And since your retirement, you've been active in the patriotic
39 organizations.

40
41Bernice Couzynse: Mm-hm.

42
43Interviewer: [33:59] Which of those could you tell us about that you've belonged.

44

1Bernice Couzynse: Okay. I, back in 1936 I had become a junior member of the American
2 Legion Auxiliary through the eligibility of my father, who was a World
3 War I veteran and also was in World War II and served also during the
4 Korean War. Um, after I retired, I still had kept my membership up in the
5 auxiliary and I joined the American Legion, the same post of which I had,
6 the auxiliary I belonged to. I served as office-, uh, as an officer in the post
7 and, uh, the finance officer. Somebody decided that I, I was just the one to
8 keep all the money [laughter] so I did. I also have become, uh, became and
9 still am a very active member of the Grand Rapids Army and Navy Club,
10 which is really, uh, a very fine group of officers, uh, and we have some
11 very good programs, and it's, uh, I think it, it sort of is, keeps us in mind
12 of the military and yet we're not, uh, that close to military here in Grand
13 Rapids, but we still have some, like to have some connection. I joined, uh,
14 Women's Overseas Service League in April of 1972 and have thoroughly
15 enjoyed, uh, that group. I've attended several of the conventions. I've
16 held, uh, the various offices, uh, ending with, uh, a two-year term as the
17 president of the Grand Rapids unit a few years ago. Now I'm sitting back.
18 I thought I was, anyway [chuckle]. Now I'm the treasurer [laughter].
19

20 [35:52] Oh, and also, a few years ago, an organization was organized.
21 That, that certainly is double talk, isn't it? [laughter] We h-, was begun of,
22 uh, the Retired Army Nurse Corps Association, and this is an organization
23 that is just as it says, made up of retired army nurses. We, uh, meet in
24 convention every two years, and it's not a real business-like organi-, er,
25 real business organization. It's more or less, at least our conventions are
26 more or less fun and, uh, very enjoyable reunions. We've seen people that
27 we hadn't seen in many a year. Um, I don't have any offices in that, and I
28 don't, I don't aspire to any in those, either, so, uh, it, uh, is it. I think that
29 that, uh, pretty much sums up my, I keep busy in other things, but, uh, uh,
30 am, am not the least bit bored. I thoroughly enjoy being retired. Someday
31 I'm gonna try it.
32

33Interviewer: It's great [laughter].
34

35Bernice Couzynse: That's what they tell me [laughter].
36
37
38/jw
39