

**Interview of Lois Kuen Johnson on her experiences serving
overseas in the American Red Cross rest camps near the end of WWII**

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5Interviewer: Hello, Lois. [00:02] What branch of service did you, uh, serve?

6
7Lois Johnson: I served in the American Red Cross.

8
9Interviewer: [00:08] How long?

10
11Lois Johnson: Approximately two years.

12
13Interviewer: [00:10] Where was that?

14
15Lois Johnson: That was in the Mediterranean Theater Operation.

16
17Interviewer: [00:14] What influenced you to en-, volunteer?

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19Lois Johnson: I think it was probably a friend of mine who suggested I volunteer.

20
21Interviewer: [00:14] What did you do prior to enlistment?

22
23Lois Johnson: I worked for the home service department of a utility company putting on cooking
24 schools and demonstrations and things of that sort.

25
26Interviewer: Oh. [00:30] What did you do in the service?

27
28Lois Johnson: I, uh, worked in, uh, rest camps and in officer and enlisted men clubs.

29
30Interviewer: [00:38] Did you expect this experience to prepare you for a career?

31
32Lois Johnson: No, not necessarily.

33
34Interviewer: [00:44] Did it?

35
36Lois Johnson: Not really.

37
38Interviewer: [00:47] What was your pay?

39
40Lois Johnson: Oh, uh, I think that's irrelevant –

41
42Interviewer: Okay.

43
44Lois Johnson [Inaudible 00:51] present time.

1
2Interviewer: [00:53] Were you given equal opportunities for service and education?
3
4Lois Johnson: Well, in the Red Cross, I don't think that that applied to people that, uh, were
5 from that branch.
6
7Interviewer: Oh. [1:07] What assignments were given to woman?
8
9Lois Johnson: In the Red Cross you mean?
10
11Interviewer: Yes. Uh-huh.
12
13Lois Johnson: Well, I think there were recreation directors, Clubmobile people, hospital service.
14 I believe that was it at that time. And then probably in the offices, uh, like
15 secretaries and things of that sort.
16
17Interviewer: [01:29] What was the nature of your housing?
18
19Lois Johnson: I was billeted in, uh, the hotels or in the actual clubs where I worked.
20
21Interviewer: [01:38] And medical care?
22
23Lois Johnson: I didn't have to have any medical care, except one time I thought that I had
24 hepatitis, and they gave me a shot in the fanny with a big dose of penicillin. I
25 think the needle was a mile long.
26
27Interviewer: [01:51] Who's they?
28
29Lois Johnson: The, uh, military.
30
31Interviewer: Oh. Mm-hm. So, then you didn't have to have other medical care –
32
33Lois Johnson: No, no.
34
35Interviewer: Through the army? [01:59] Uh, what was your uniform dress?
36
37Lois Johnson: It was a gray uniform, and, uh, then later on, it became [OD 02:07], it became a
38 sort of [kochi-boch 02:10]
39
40Interviewer: [02:11] What was your, uh, mem-, memorable experience?
41
42Lois Johnson: Oh, I had many of them. Probably, hmm. The most unusual experience I had was,
43 um – had nothing to do with Red Cross, had nothing to do with my ability to be a
44 home service worker, had absolutely nothing to do with what I was doing over

1 there, except I was probably a little too noseey. Uh, I was - in the fall of 1945, and,
2 uh, I was on a special assignment with three other girls in the norther part of Italy.
3 By northern part, I mean it was somewhere in between [Leghorn 02:48] and
4 Rome and Rome and Naples. And, uh, we were, uh, on, on a particular
5 assignment of, uh, giving troops coffee and pastries when they came down on the
6 train from Northern Italy on their way to Naples. And, uh, then from there, they
7 would go home by troop ship.

8
9 And, uh, we took different shifts during the day, and my shift happened to be a
10 night shift. And what we would do, we would get the coffee and pastries ready for
11 the fellas, and then when the train whistled in, why they would get off the train
12 and exercise a bit and have the pastry and coffee, get back on the train, and go
13 back to – and then continue on their, on their, uh, ride down to Naples.

14
15 This was in the mid-, uh, late at night, and an Italian man came running into our
16 club and talked to one of our Italian helpers. And he was saying something about
17 [croce 03:48] – uh, my Italian helper said, “Croce Rossa,” and he looked at me,
18 and, uh, then he said, “Signora, bambino,” and, uh, “signora [melato 03:58],” and
19 I recognized Red Cross, uh, sick signora, something about a baby.

20
21 So, I had the interpreter talk to me, and it seemed that this man, who came rushing
22 into the club, was traveling with his wife, and, uh, she wasn't feeling well. She
23 was pregnant and was gonna have a baby. And he had, uh, taken her out of the car
24 and put her into this – on the, in a boxcar in the switchyard, and, uh, had come for
25 assistance. So, I had one of my Italian people take him into town to get a doctor.

26
27 So, there was an MP on duty and so I – that – uh, I knew quite well and so, I said,
28 “Well, let's go over and take a look and see how this woman is doin'. What's –
29 you know, how she's getting along or if there's anything I can help her with.”
30 And so, I had just, uh, opened a box of, uh, or a bag of sugar with a – and I had
31 the sugar sack in my pocket, and I thought, “Well, I'll get some towels and
32 candle, and matches, and we'll go over and sorta make her more comfortable.”
33 And they had pointed out to me what boxcar she was in, and there was sort of a
34 ramp going up to this boxcar, and we walked over there. And it was pitch dark,
35 and he had a flashlight.

36
37 When we set up the candles and lit the candles and, uh, uh, we – and then I saw
38 she wasn't gonna have a baby, she was having it.

39
40Interviewer: Hm.

41
42Lois Johnson: So, I never was very interested in many – in babies or little animals or seeing
43 anything get born, and probably if, if it was now instead of 40 years ago, I'd have
44 been a little more aware of what was going on. At that time, I knew nothin'.

1
2 But I'll tell ya one thing, from what happened between when the – you, you see,
3 in the movies, the doctor asking the father to heat hot water, and the next thing
4 you see a squall. I found out what happened in between. I, uh, delivered the baby.
5 I had never in my life seen anything being born. I, uh, took the mucus out of its
6 mouth and tried to clean out its nose, turned it upside down, got it to squalling,
7 and handing it, handed it to the mother. I did know I had to do something about
8 the cord though.

9
10 And so, I can remember when I was a Girl Scout that I tied a square knot and, uh,
11 I thought that's the best thing to do. So, I asked the fella that was there with me to
12 burn his blade on his knife on the candle, and I remembered I had the cord from
13 the sugar sack in my pocket, and I cut that cord and tied it in two places and cut it
14 in the middle, wrapped – cleaned up the baby a bit and handed it to the mother.
15 And just about that time, the doctor came.

16
17 And then I could hear the train whistling in, so I hurried back, put a apron over
18 my bloody dress, served donuts and coffee to the oncoming troops, and after it
19 was all over with, I got sick. I was sick for three days. That was one unusual
20 experience.

21
22Interviewer: Indeed [laughter], it was. Wow. [07:37] Is, is that the only one? Or can you think
23 of another one?

24
25Lois Johnson: Oh, I've got all kinds of experiences.

26
27Interviewer: Oh, tell us another one.

28
29Lois Johnson: Oh, I don't know. It's - I'm not very good at telling stories, and I have all kinds of
30 stories to tell. I had one real unusual experience that I call my [duja ve 07:56]
31 friend. And this happened to be that I would see the – I saw the same person about
32 six different times in course of a year and a half. And although I was with people
33 who, I thought, knew that – who – that I had talked with this man, nobody would
34 ever admit that I ever saw this person. The only way I could ever remember who
35 he was or even distinguish him was by his piercing blue eyes.

36
37 I think that anyone who was overseas with the service, things happen so fast and
38 you saw so many different people that just by chance to meet someone six
39 different times was in itself unusual, and as I think back, I wonder right now did I
40 ever know – meet this person, or was it just a dream. But it happened three
41 incidences in Bari, one it he southern part of Italy, one time in Pisa, and one time
42 in Interlaken, Switzerland. I think he was probably with the CIA, the OSS, or
43 what, but he had been in different types of uniforms such as navy, the air corps,
44 dressed like a Swiss, dressed like a native Italian, dressed like a Yugoslav, and

1 never once could I find anyone to admit that they had seen him. I'm sure he had
2 some highly secret assignment. And, uh, although he told me that he'd see after
3 the war, I think he must've been killed because the last time I saw him was in
4 Interlaken, Switzerland in the fall of '45.
5
6 That was the most unusual experience because if any of you can remember, you
7 very seldom, by chance, ran across the same person. Uh, did you ever have
8 occasion to see the same person more than once? It seemed like there were so
9 many people coming and going in the area, and especially the kind of work I was
10 in, I saw lots of people. Never did I see the same person twice, especially in rest
11 camps and – oh, in club work, you – they would come into the club, but you
12 would never see anyone in Rome that you hadn't planned on meeting him. You
13 would never see anyone in Pisa or in Florence or – just by chance on the street
14 and that's [the way 10:17] – six different times I saw this man. I call him my [duja
15 ve] [inaudible 10:22].
16
17Interviewer: That was unusual.
18
19Lois Johnson: Very unusual. I would like to know. He – [the only way 10:26] –
20
21Interviewer: But you talked to him? You talked to him?
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23Lois Johnson: Yes. Every time. I spent time with him.
24
25Interviewer: Oh.
26
27Lois Johnson: He had piercing blue eyes, and that was the only way that I could ever...
28
29Interviewer: Hm.
30
31Lois Johnson: ... distinguish him from someone else. Because, as I said, he was dressed in
32 native costume at times and uh, several ti-, one – a couple times when I saw him
33 on the street, I spoke to him. His name was John, and I got a real lot of flack from
34 the fellas 'cause they said, "What business do you have talking to local people?"
35 And, uh, that's the only, only thing about him and that was ever distinguishable,
36 and I often wondered what ever happened to that man.
37
38 He told me one time that he, uh, taught – that he was a college professor in
39 foreign languages. That's all I've ever known about him, but I've often wondered
40 what ever became of him. I think he must've been killed. Otherwise, I'm sure that
41 I would've heard from him after the war because he took my name and address. I
42 know nothing about what his full name was, who he was, what he was. He did
43 have my name.
44

1Interviewer: Hm. That is interesting.
2

3Lois Johnson: It is unusual.
4

5Interviewer: Yes, yes. No, I didn't have – I was attached to an outfit, so we just saw the same
6 people all the time. [11:39] Can you compare se-, service careers then with the
7 present?
8

9Lois Johnson: I have no way of comparing'm. I, uh, in recent times, I have – don't know anyone
10 in the military nor in Red Cross. So, I have no way of comparing'm with then or
11 now. I know that I was treated very nice. I – the – as you know, the uniform –
12 once you wore – had that uniform on they – you were immediately compared with
13 everyone else. I mean, if you had the uniform, that meant that you were no better
14 or different than any of the rest of'm. And one person could ruin it for a whole
15 group of people.
16

17Interviewer: [12:22] Did you experience conflict between being feminine and being a military
18 professional?
19

20Lois Johnson: Nope.
21

22Interviewer: No. [12:31] Did you use benefits of the G.I. Bill?
23

24Lois Johnson: No. Of course, in Red Cross we couldn't.
25

26Interviewer: We weren't even given any, that's right. [12:38] What demanded the greatest
27 adjustment: uniform dress, living with others, regulations, lack of freedom,
28 terminology? What was the greatest adjustment?
29

30Lois Johnson: I really – there was no adjustment, you know. I went into the Red Cross, uh, not
31 because – well, maybe we want to talk about that later. The reason I went into
32 Red Cross was not from a patriotic reason, nor that I wanted to get away from
33 something. I always liked to travel and it – the way I figured, if it went overseas, I
34 was traveling on someone else's money to see the world. I don't know whether
35 you ever read any books by Richard Halliburton?
36

37Interviewer: Mm-hm.
38

39Lois Johnson: But I re-, enjoyed reading his books on travel when I was a youngster, and I
40 thought, "Ever I get a chance to travel, that's what I'm gonna do." So, tra-, going
41 with the Red Cross overseas meant I was going to be able to travel. I didn't know
42 whether I'd go to Europe, South Pacific, Timbuktu, or where, but the fact that I
43 was over there and it was indeed a job, made it much easier for me than I think it
44 did for the military. It seemed like the fact that they were someplace they didn't

1 want to be, it was a hell hole, it didn't make any different whe-, whether –
2 difference whether it was the most beautiful spot in the world. The fact they had
3 to be there was one thing. To have to do something is one thing. To want to do it
4 is another. I wanted to do what I was doing, and I enjoyed every minute of it.
5
6Interviewer: [14:10] What was the most unpopular regulation?
7
8Lois Johnson: I can't remember about anything unpopular, any kind of unpopular regulation as
9 far as the Red Cross was concerned. I think we probably were freer in what we
10 were able to do than the military was. Uh, I can't think of anything that was very
11 unpopular, except that when I first went over, when I first arrived in Naples, there
12 were 100 Red Cross Girls on the ship, and we were obliged to be at a dance. And
13 100 females with thousands of men, we'd no more dance with'm one second then
14 we were pushed somewhere else, and it seemed just like we were cattle. Do you
15 remember that, June?
16
17June: Uh, no. Isn't that funny, I don't remember.
18
19Lois Johnson: Must've made a big impression on me.
20
21June: Huh.
22
23Lois Johnson: Anyway...
24
25June: I don't remember that. Uh, but I remember that – well, we were freer because we
26 could mix with, uh, the enlisted men and the –
27
28Lois Johnson: Officers.
29
30June: Officers. Where if you –
31
32Lois Johnson: Enlisted men couldn't.
33
34June: Were one or the other, you couldn't. No.
35
36Lois Johnson: Yes. I think, and I think that the unlisted men took a dim view of the fact that we
37 could mix with both of'm. That we probably, in some instances, preferred officers
38 to enlisted men or enlisted men to officers. There might have been that, uh, that
39 problem. However, I was ne-, I was always with officers at one place. I was with
40 enlisted men in, uh, in a rest camp, but there was no problem there.
41
42Interviewer: [15:41] What did you do after your service was concluded?
43

1Lois Johnson: Well, I came to California, and I got a job working. I've worked ever since. I
2lived for about 20-some years in Hawaii and I've been back in California about a
3year and a half or two years.
4

5Interviewer: Hm. [15:59] Were you civilian or military? You were considered military,
6weren't –
7

8Lois Johnson: In, in, in the Red Cross?
9

10Interviewer: The Red – yes.
11

12Lois Johnson: Well, only – I think, that if we were captured, I think we had the rank of a captain.
13Is that right?
14

15Interviewer: Yes. Mm-hm. [16:14] How was your service organized?
16

17Lois Johnson: My – I beg your pardon? I don't quite understand.
18

19Interviewer: Well, I'm just thinking of ours. We had two girls that were in Clubmobile that,
20uh, gave out the donuts, and then we had a man that was the head, that sort of
21received all the mail and –
22

23Lois Johnson: I had a –
24

25Interviewer: Told us where to go.
26

27Lois Johnson: I, I probably was unique in the assignment I had. Uh, I went from Naples, where I
28landed, to Bari, Italy. And from there, I was assigned to the 15th Air Forces. I no
29longer had anything to do with the Red Cross. I was, was directly responsible to
30the military. And I went to a rest camp, and there was another Red Cross Girl
31there. And, uh, she and I ran the activities, recreation activity to the rest camp.
32Usually, one or the other of us was gone some of the time but we ran that. And
33then we went from the mountains of Calabria down to the ocean, to the Adriatic,
34on the – uh, about as far south as you could go to a place called [Santa Cesarea
35Terme 17:32]. We traveled just like a – moved down there like a traveling road
36show.
37

38Uh, we had, uh, men come to our, uh, rest camps for a week at a time. And during
39that week, we planned all the entertainment. And then, the next week another
40group was coming and we'd – were coming, and we'd start all over again doing
41the same thing.
42

43Interviewer: [17:54] What kind of entertainments, for example?
44

1Lois Johnson: Oh, we had, uh, we had, uh, uh, Bingo games.
2
3Interviewer: Uh-huh.
4
5Lois Johnson: We had dances. We had bonfires. Every night, we had something planned. And,
6 uh, then – do you remember, June, when we went overseas, we – there was that
7 horseracing game where we – they shot dice on your horse?
8
9June: Oh, yes. Uh-huh.
10
11Lois Johnson: Well, I set up a horseracing game and, uh, we had lots of fun.
12
13Interviewer: Mm-hm.
14
15Lois Johnson: Bonfires. I can remember, uh, the flight surgeon who, uh, figured – fancied he
16 was quite cook, shooting, uh, a sauce into the weaners for our hotdogs. And some
17 of the men he was putting saltpeter in the weaners –
18
19Interviewer: [laughter]
20
21Lois Johnson: And as a result, they wouldn't eat any of'm.
22
23Interviewer: [18:50] Did you stay in after the war?
24
25Lois Johnson: No, I didn't.
26
27Interviewer: [18:53] What did you dislike about your work?
28
29Lois Johnson: I can't think of anything I really disliked, except that for so much of the time, I
30 was alone. Uh, the other person that was with me was, uh, in, uh, up in the
31 mountains of Calabria, really should never have been in the Red Cross, and she
32 traveled around a lot. And I fig-, I felt like I was all alone quite a bit of the time.
33 All the time when I was in rest camps, I felt like I had no one to turn to. That was
34 what I disliked most about the rest camps.
35
36Interviewer: [19:31] What did you like most about your work?
37
38Lois Johnson: Well, the travel. The – I, I had a really a fortunate – I was very fortunate to be
39 with rest camps because I did get to meet a lot of people. And, uh, have my, my
40 immediate boss was Don the Beachcomber. I'm sure you've heard of the
41 Beachcomber clubs in Hawaii, and he was a colonel, a lieutenant colonel in the,
42 uh, fifth-, with 15th Air Forces, and he knew lots of interesting people, so I got to
43 meet a lot of people, like [inaudible 20:07] and his wife. Any kind of
44 entertainment that was over there. The [inaudible 20:13] was over there with

1 Brian O'Hern and Katharine Cornell. I met lots and lots of people I never
2 would've ever hoped to meet living in a little town in South Dakota.
3
4Interviewer: Mm-hm. [20:26] Were you ever under shell fire?
5
6Lois Johnson: No. Only, uh – what, what happened to us that first night in Naples, first or
7 second night. Were we under shell fire?
8
9June: Well, um –
10
11Lois Johnson: At least there was an air raid.
12
13June: Yeah. Well, they had air raids 'cause they were taking pictures, I think, because,
14 uh, uh, because we were going into Southern France and we were – military was
15 in the ocean, you know. We had all these...
16
17Lois Johnson: I, I know –
18
19June: ... ships in the ocean.
20
21Lois Johnson: That they were – routed us out of bed, and we went down into a tunnel. And when
22 I looked down at my shoes, I had them on the wrong feet.
23
24Interviewer: [laughter]
25
26Lois Johnson: So, uh, I just don't think I'd have been very good under shell fire.
27
28Interviewer: [21:08] Did you have any after effects from your war service?
29
30Lois Johnson: No, except that I believe that I did have a touch of hepatitis, which has kept me
31 from ever donating blood. Uh, I think that's – I, I really don't know whether it
32 was actually hepatitis, but there was a bad emic-, epidemic of it that came over
33 from North Africa.
34
35Interviewer: [21:38] Um, is there anything else you would like to add?
36
37Lois Johnson: No, except I thoroughly enjoyed my service, my time with the Red Cross. I had a
38 lot of fun. And, uh, all in all, I thought it was a good experience.
39
40Interviewer: Thank you.
41
42
43/tl