

**Interview of Marion Kern Kennedy on her service
in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps during WWII**

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5 Ruth Stewart: Marion Kern Kennedy is being interviewed as a member of the Women's
6 Overseas Service League, San Antonio, Texas unit at San Antonio on
7 October 21, 2003. Ruth Stewart is interviewing, assisted by Carol
8 Habgood. [0:19] Marion, tell us about your joining the army nurse corps.
9
10 Marion Kennedy: I joined the army nurse corps at the Hospital of the University of
11 Pennsylvania because the hospital was preparing, uh, the personnel to fill
12 a general hospital unit. And they were, of course, asking a lot of people in
13 my age group to join. I was one of them and I agreed to join.
14
15 Ruth Stewart: And so that settled where you were going and the next few years of your
16 life.
17
18 Marion Kennedy: Right. And who I was going to go with. Now at that time, when you
19 joined the army you first of all joined the Red Cross. They were, they
20 were at that time the official recruiting agency for the army nurse corps.
21
22 Ruth Stewart: [1:18] And you had just graduated, had you, from the Hospital of the
23 University of Pennsylvania?
24
25 Marion Kennedy: Yes.
26
27 Ruth Stewart: So you were a part of that system there.
28
29 Marion Kennedy: Yes.
30
31 Ruth Stewart: [1:27] And they gathered physicians and nurses.
32
33 Marion Kennedy: Yeah.
34
35 Ruth Stewart: Okay. [1:33] Um, what rank were you when you joined?
36
37 Marion Kennedy: I was one of over a hundred second lieutenants.
38
39 Ruth Stewart: [1:46] No bosses? [chuckle]
40
41 Marion Kennedy: Yes, we had, not very many, though, considering the number of second
42 lieutenants. But then we were all professional nurses and they knew that,
43 that while our experience as graduates had been limited, we had a lot of
44 experience as students.

1
2 Ruth Stewart: [2:12] What was it like for you in the early days in the army unit? How
3 long were you in the United States before you went overseas?
4
5 Marion Kennedy: Uh, we went to Camp Claiborne in Louisiana in the middle of May of
6 1942. We were there until, uh, the 5th of January of 1943. And we had,
7 uh, some classes and some lectures on various military subjects, and what
8 I remember particularly is gas mask drill. And the rest of our training was
9 by practical experience on the wards at the hospital at Camp Claiborne.
10
11 Ruth Stewart: [3:11] And you were there how long?
12
13 Marion Kennedy: From the middle of May until early January, 7 ½ months.
14
15 Ruth Stewart: [3:23] What was your life like during those early days in this change in
16 your life?
17
18 Marion Kennedy: Well, we lived in a cantonment-type building, 2 nurses to a room, and
19 most of the time we were on day duty. And during the day we worked 7
20 to 7, and when we were on night duty we again worked from 7 at night
21 until 7 in the morning. And it was routine nursing procedures, but
22 learning the army method of taking care of patients and learning how to
23 use army forms for a patient's chart. And indeed that was one of the first
24 places that I had come into contact with what was then called the unit
25 system of nursing which was, worked out very well for us and we also
26 used it over in India.
27
28 Ruth Stewart: [4:43] And in those early days, was it difficult for you to adjust to military
29 life?
30
31 Marion Kennedy: I don't think it was particularly difficult, you know, when you're with a
32 hundred of your friends. It all started out a bit as a lark, you know. We,
33 we left Philadelphia on a private train for just, a train just for our unit and
34 we traveled in a Pullman. And it was a, a very interesting 2-day trip
35 across part of the United States I had never seen before. And when I was
36 growing up, people did not travel as widely as they do now and so it was,
37 it was sort of a new and exciting trip. And, of course, Louisiana was
38 totally different from eastern Pennsylvania and the city of Philadelphia so
39 that it was quite interesting.
40
41 Ruth Stewart: [6:00] And then what?
42
43 Marion Kennedy: Well, from Louisiana, of course, we, we went overseas. We went to
44 California by train and then got on a troop ship with several thousand

1 other people and traveled on that to India. And since it was during
2 wartime and when we left California we had, uh, our ship was traveling
3 alone which meant that they zig zagged down the Pacific so that they
4 would not attract the attention of a submarine. And we had 2 meals a day.
5 We had breakfast and then again we, we had dinner. And, of course, the
6 food was either dehydrated or powdered and then was reconstituted for the
7 meals. And we, we didn't have much work to do, so we played a lot of
8 bridge and had limited reading material. Each one of us had, had brought
9 a book and a couple of magazines with us, so we read those and
10 exchanged them and gave'm away, things like that. And we were not
11 permitted to have a radio. We were not permitted to have a camera. We
12 were not permitted to keep a diary. And so between reading and, and
13 bridge and talking, we managed to pass the time.

14
15 Ruth Stewart: [8:04] And how long were you on the ship?

16
17 Marion Kennedy: It was a little over 40 days from the 20th of January until the 4th or 5th of
18 March.

19
20 Ruth Stewart: [8:19] And then you landed in India?

21
22 Marion Kennedy: We landed in Bombay.

23
24 Ruth Stewart: [8:24] And from there how was your professional or personal life in, in
25 India?

26
27 Marion Kennedy: Well, uh, my personal life, when we landed in Bombay, they didn't quite
28 know what to do with us so they sent us to an English rest camp called
29 Poona and there they cleared out a couple of hospital wards in a British
30 hospital and we stayed in those wards for a week or 10 days, I can't
31 remember. Anyway, we had a great time in Poona. It so happened that
32 the week we arrived they were trying to have some social activities in
33 Poona to, uh, raise money for the British Red Cross, so we went to quite a
34 few social occasions, met some very nice British people and men, and had
35 really a very relaxing week or 10 days. And it was just good to be on, on
36 earth instead of on a, a ship that was rolling [inaudible 9:53]. And so we
37 were there until we started, uh, up to the northeastern part of India, which
38 is where Assam is located in the foothills of the Himalayas.

39
40 And when we got up there, it was quite a bit different than, than being in
41 Poona. Uh, when we arrived in the rain, and it really rained, and they had
42 cleared the jungle to make room for some of the, the buildings that we
43 had. And, uh, it was muddy. There were no sidewalks, no means of
44 paving anything. And, uh, the, actually, the area that we took over had

1 been, uh, established as a hospital. The, they only built – every ward was
2 a separate building and the only buildings that had a cement floor were the
3 operating room, the x-ray, and the dental clinic. All the others were just
4 on the, on the cleared ground was the floor. And the, the walls of all the
5 buildings were the woven bamboo matting so that they could easily
6 construct a building in a day. They'd bring in a, a group of native laborers
7 and they would clear the jungle and strip the, the bamboo and sit down on
8 the ground and weave the matting, and then use the bamboo poles for the
9 framework of the building, and then cut off the tops of some palm trees
10 and that was the roof. So it – inside of a day, a building was built and that
11 evening the supply people would bring the cots and set them up and the
12 other basic supplies for a ward and so overnight you have a, a new ward of
13 patients. It was very practical.
14
15Ruth Stewart: [12:33] And how did you function in nursing in that respect having come
16 from a stateside hospital with modern equipment?
17
18Marion Kennedy: Well, we, we improvised and, and we did the best we could, you know. If
19 you're going to take temperatures or pass out medications, those are basic
20 procedures that you can do in any environment if necessary. And so, uh,
21 we managed. We used – the first couple of days we were there, we used a
22 helmet liner for a basin to wash our hands and whatnot. There was no
23 running water. The water came with the [inaudible 13:25] with a bucket,
24 you know, in, in each hand. And in order to, to use it, it was rather muddy
25 and we could use it for certain things, but if you were going to give
26 medications or anything like that, we, of course, had to get water out of
27 the Lister bag because that was the water that had been purified and had
28 been strained. And the Preventive Medicine that, that prepared the water
29 some days had a hard time keeping up with the demand.
30
31Ruth Stewart: [14:13] But that was the system that was drilled in to your unit.
32
33Marion Kennedy: Yes.
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35Ruth Stewart: [14:20] How did you live personally, you and the 99 other second
36 lieutenant nurses?
37
38Marion Kennedy: Well, we were, there were about I think close to 30. We, we had a
39 building much like a hospital ward, the size of a hospital ward. And we
40 had the Indian beds called charpoys, uh, and there were 15 down each side
41 of the, of the building. And, of course, we had come with our bedroll and
42 we each came overseas with one suitcase and a bedroll and a musette bag
43 and that's – we lived out of our musette bags and our suitcases. The, the
44 bedroll we put on the bottom of the charpoy because the, the only thing on

1 the, on the charpoy was hemp. It was woven as the, to hold a, a mattress
2 of sorts and at first we didn't have a mattress. And then the shelter half
3 we put up above. We slept under mosquito bars and we put the shelter
4 half up above the, our beds because as the palm leaves (which were the
5 ceiling) dried out, little bugs would drop down and if you didn't want
6 them falling on you, have your shelter half strung up above your bed.
7
8 Ruth Stewart: [16:13] And how was the food?
9
10 Marion Kennedy: Oh, the food, it was pretty bad. The first 6 months we were there though
11 we had one thing in our favor. We were on British rations and one of the
12 rations that the British got that they really didn't like very much and
13 they'd give it to you or you could exchange were Campbell's baked beans.
14 How in the world they got such a supply of Campbell baked beans, I don't
15 know, [cough] but British supply had'm. And, uh, they – we got an
16 occasional fresh egg. But a fresh egg there was not like a fresh egg here.
17 It was more like a, like a [inaudible 17:08] egg, small and rather strong
18 flavored. But after about 6 months, we went off of the British rations and
19 on to American rations, and when we did, we no longer got the
20 Campbell's baked beans nor did we get the [inaudible 17:27] eggs. So, I
21 sort of missed that, [cough] sort of missed the baked beans.
22
23 Ruth Stewart: [17:40] Do you know why you were on British rations to begin with?
24
25 Marion Kennedy: Well, that area was largely supplied by the British. The Americans were
26 just beginning to move into it.
27
28 Ruth Stewart: [17:54] And that was what year?
29
30 Marion Kennedy: Uh, 1943, the spring of '43. And, of course, they were, they were bringing
31 over, uh, road-building materials, equipment [inaudible 18:14] because the
32 primary purpose for our being there was that they were trying to build a
33 road from India to connect with the old Burma silk road. The Japanese
34 had cut the road and they wanted to send supplies to China by the, by the
35 back door.
36
37 Ruth Stewart: That was the mission then.
38
39 Marion Kennedy: That, that was the mission. They were trying to keep the Shanghai
40 [inaudible 18:49] and the Chinese interested in fighting the Japanese so
41 that there would not be any additional pressure on the South Pacific.
42
43 Ruth Stewart: [19:02] What were the type of patients that you were caring for?
44

1 Marion Kennedy: The first 6 months, 6 to 8 or 9 months, they were lar-, mainly malaria
2 patients and a few Dengue fever. Uh, but, uh, in the fall, a preventive
3 medicine team came in to take care of, of the whole area, base area to do
4 some preventive measures. They, they drained the, the ditches on the side
5 of the road and also poured oil on them. They cut down some excess
6 weeds that were around the roads and around the quarters. They issued
7 some instructions about dress. After about 6 or 8 months we could not go
8 out after dark unless we had on slacks and wore our slacks tucked in the
9 socks and wore a long-sleeve blouse. Also, right around that fall, later that
10 fall, Ata-, Atabrine had been developed and we started to, to get Atabrine
11 and everyone in the area had to take 1 Atabrine tablet a day as a malaria
12 preventive, and it did. All these measures combined really worked very
13 well because in October, November we started to get casualties from the
14 fighting in Burma and so our hospital gradually changed from being
15 largely medical to being mainly, uh, surgical patients.
16

17 Ruth Stewart: [21:35] Could you tell us more about the experiences there that were
18 especially memorable to you there in, in the Indian base?
19

20 Marion Kennedy: Well, I, I think one of the, one of the things that I remember particularly,
21 the American G.I. makes a wonderful patient. They really are, uh, on the
22 whole, you know, non-complaining. They were not feeling well. We'd
23 ask'm, when they had malaria we'd ask'm to drink fluids and all we had
24 was this horrible-tasting water and later on we might have had some
25 lukewarm tea, but we didn't have any ice. And when you have a fever,
26 you know, nothing revives one better than something ice cold to drink and
27 we didn't have that. Uh, later on we did get a lot of canned grapefruit
28 juice and things like that. Uh, but they had to eat the, the same food we
29 did and, uh, as I say, occasionally hot coffee but [inaudible 23:16]. They,
30 they – after a while, we got better, we got better beds for them. The
31 charpo-, charpoys if you've ever seen a picture of them are rather – they're
32 like a low cot and they were – uh, it was very wearing to bend over so far
33 so much. So as soon as they could, they did replace, they did get in some
34 hospital beds with a thin straw mattress. And those men never said a word
35 about their sparse accommodations.
36

37 Uh, we once again just like, just like being on board ship, we more or less
38 provided our own recreation quite a lot. There was no public
39 transportation where we were. Um, if you could, if you could get a date
40 with a young man who had transportation, I'm going to tell you, he was
41 very popular because there was – every once in a while you just wanted to
42 leave the compound. And no place to walk really because the road was
43 muddy and the trucks were going up and down the road splashing mud.
44 There was, there were a very nice group of English tea planters around us

1 and when possible they would provide a movie for us at the tea planters'
2 club. We were there about a year when we got an outdoor movie place
3 where they'd show movies at night. The first movie we saw there was the
4 same movie that had been the last movie we saw in Louisiana. [chuckle]
5 It was Holiday Inn with Bing Crosby, and I enjoyed it just as much the
6 second time as I did the first time, so.
7
8Ruth Stewart: [25:59] When you had a date with a young man with 4 wheels, where
9 would you go?
10
11Marion Kennedy: Uh, we would go, let's see. Where did we go? We'd go down to the tea
12 planters' club. Uh, I had met a young lady from New York state who was
13 a graduate of Bryn Mawr College, which, which as you know is near
14 Philadelphia, and had married a Scot who was an engineer about 15 miles
15 away from where we were with a large oil refinery. Uh, Burmah Shell had
16 a lot of oil wells in northern Burma and that oil was piped back to Digboi
17 to the oil refinery and her husband was the engineer in charge of the oil
18 refinery. So, uh, I met Emma and so I would go down to see her about
19 once a month and she, she told me a lot about her life in India, which was
20 very nice except it was more or less isolated. And, um, the – we'd
21 sometimes drive down to a, a tea plantation and, and you could – tea, the
22 tea plantations were really beautiful. They were so green and, uh, the tea
23 leaves were picked by hand and so that it always looked like just a very
24 lovely row after row of green hedge and we could walk down there.
25
26Ruth Stewart: [28:21] How did you keep in contact with your family and friends at
27 home?
28
29Marion Kennedy: Through the mail. We had United States mail, of course. When we first
30 went over there, mail was about [coughing], excuse me, 2 months old
31 when we got it. But gradually – if you remember V-mail, which was you
32 wrote something and then it was filmed and the film went to the States and
33 then it was reprinted and sent to your family. And then through the years
34 [inaudible 29:20] probably about the second year we were there we started
35 to get, excuse me, we started to get some air mail and then that would,
36 would reach us in 7 to 10 days.
37
38Ruth Stewart: [29:36] And your friends there in the camp with you, did you maintain
39 close contact with the same group that you had gone overseas with?
40
41Marion Kennedy: Oh yes, because we all were [throat clearing] living in the same command.
42
43Ruth Stewart: [29:51] And that was a support system then?
44

1 Marion Kennedy: Yes.
2

3 Ruth Stewart: For all of you in that way.
4

5 Marion Kennedy: Mm-hm.
6

7 Ruth Stewart: [29:55] Did you receive medals or citations during that time in India?
8

9 Marion Kennedy: No, I didn't. None, none of us did.
10

11 Ruth Stewart: Okay. [30:06] Um, what pressures did you feel more than what you
12 described?
13

14 Marion Kennedy: I think that, I think the climate in the summertime was a little difficult
15 because you – it was hot and you, you did sweat a lot. There's no other
16 word for it. There's no polite word. It was sweat. [chuckle]
17

18 Ruth Stewart: [30:44] Were there any special humorous or funny kind of situations that
19 you remember from that time?
20

21 Marion Kennedy: Well, you know, when we first went over we had foot trenches and it takes
22 a certain amount of agility and more than 1 wallet was lost in the foot
23 trench. That was one thing that always struck us as funny. We had one
24 young man who worked in the dental clinic and, uh, uh, he, uh, he met
25 this, this one nurse that, that I knew from – and, uh, he was very, very shy
26 about asking her anything, but every time we went to the mess hall or we
27 went on duty or we came off duty, we had to walk past the dental clinic
28 and he always managed to be out there when Fran was walking by. And
29 she was trying to discourage him and he would not be discouraged so we,
30 [chuckle] we always looked to see if – I can't even remember his name
31 now.
32

33 Ruth Stewart: [32:38] So how long...?
34

35 Marion Kennedy: But anyway, she later married him.
36

37 Ruth Stewart: Oh. [laughter]
38

39 Marion Kennedy: After World War II, he looked her up at home and [chuckle] she, they
40 started to go out together and she married him.
41

42 Ruth Stewart: Persistence pays.
43

44 Marion Kennedy: Mm-hm.

1
2Ruth Stewart: [32:55] How long were you there in the CBI?
3
4Marion Kennedy: Uh, we arrived there in March and I left in June.
5
6Ruth Stewart: Just...
7
8Marion Kennedy: So 2 years and, and 3 months.
9
10Ruth Stewart: Okay. [33:21] And where did you go from there?
11
12Marion Kennedy: Uh, from there I came back to United States and I went to Valley Forge
13 General Hospital in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania.
14
15Ruth Stewart: [33:36] And did you remain then in the service...?
16
17Marion Kennedy: No.
18
19Ruth Stewart: ...continuously?
20
21Marion Kennedy: No. I, uh, I was discharged effective the 1st of January of 1946.
22
23Ruth Stewart: [33:53] And from there what did you do after your...?
24
25Marion Kennedy: Well, from there I, I went home for a little over a year I think I was at
26 home.
27
28Ruth Stewart: [34:13] At that point then you did go back into the service, right?
29
30Marion Kennedy: Uh, I went back to the service in 1953, uh, towards the end of, of the
31 Korean War.
32
33Ruth Stewart: [34:29] And that was the army nurse corps again?
34
35Marion Kennedy: That was the army nurse corps.
36
37Ruth Stewart: [34:33] And how long were you in at that point?
38
39Marion Kennedy: I'm trying to think. [pause] Oh, approximately 18 years...
40
41Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.
42
43Marion Kennedy: ...after that because I had a total of 22 years and 9 months of active
44 federal service.

1
2Ruth Stewart: [inaudible 35:06].
3
4Marion Kennedy: Th-, that much I memorized. [chuckle]
5
6Ruth Stewart: Okay. [35:11] Do you remember the day you, that your service ended?
7 Was that a memorable day that, that you...?
8
9Marion Kennedy: When in – after India?
10
11Ruth Stewart: Uh-huh.
12
13Marion Kennedy: Uh, no. I was at home.
14
15Ruth Stewart: Hm.
16
17Marion Kennedy: See, we had what was called terminal leave because we hadn't had any
18 leave while we were...
19
20Ruth Stewart: Mm-hm.
21
22Marion Kennedy: ...in India, so when I came back to United States, um, after I had several
23 months at Valley Forge, uh, I was sent on what was called terminal leave,
24 so, um, that was...
25
26Ruth Stewart: [35:54] The friends that you made while you, or had went to India with,
27 did you maintain contact with them after that since then? Are any of them
28 still in contact?
29
30Marion Kennedy: Oh yes. Quite, quite a few of them. We've had several, um, reunions of
31 the unit and then there are some nurses here that were in India when I was
32 in India.
33
34Ruth Stewart: [36:30] Did you join any veterans' organizations?
35
36Marion Kennedy: Uh, yes, I joined the Women's Overseas Service League, uh, I joined the
37 China-Burma-India Veterans Association, and I guess that's it.
38
39Ruth Stewart: Okay. Um, [37:03] did the experience that you had during this long
40 period, did that influence the way you look at or think about war or the
41 military at this point?
42
43Marion Kennedy: Well, I, I, I wish that all the countries of the world could find some other
44 way of settling a dispute rather than war. I think war is, is a big waste and

1 I don't like to see people or things wasted and surely there must be a better
2 way of doing things, but until you get everyone in the world to agree,
3 they're not, it's not going to be.
4

5Ruth Stewart: Well, thank you very much, Marion, for this interview.

6

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8/mlc