

1 **Dorothy M. Harrison reads from the memoir of the late Anna Catherine Corbin, who**
2 **served in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps during World War II**

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5This is Dorothy M. Harrison, of the Louisville Unit of Women's Overseas Service League. In the
6last half of the 1960s, we, as a unit, decided to record the experiences of our members overseas.

7It was a, um, historical project we thought would be valuable and we are pleased that the
8National Women's Overseas Service League has subsequently decided to do this as a national
9project. The number, a number of our members who made a record of their experiences have
10since died and it is for this reason that I am going to use this tape to, uh, record their experiences.
11Now, of course, we cannot get a signed release for, for their, from them, uh, but, uh, as they quite
12freely gave their experiences and as we had told all the members of our group that we intended to
13place these in the archives of the Louisville free public library's Kentucky room and or, and/or at
14the Filson Club, which is our local historical society, it is clear that they, uh, expected their
15experiences to go on record.

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17I want, this afternoon, to speak particularly about the experiences of Anna Catherine Corbin
18(Catherine spelled with a C and Corbin spelled C-O-R-B-I-N).

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20Anna Catherine Corbin was an early member of the Louisville Unit after its reorganization in
211952 or '53. I believe there was a former, uh, Women's Overseas Service League Unit, which
22disbanded before the Second World War and then it was revitalized and reorganized in 19, uh,
23either late 52 or in 1953. Anna Catherine was a nurse. She had volunteered her services with the
24Vanderbilt Unit, uh, Hospital Unit, that went overseas, and it is these experiences that we will
25record, but I do want to give a brief biographical background for her. She was the daughter of
26Mr. and Mrs. W.N. Corbin of Owensville in Kentucky. She grew up. She studied, uh, nursing
27and received her license in July of 1937. She had been born in August, on August 31, of 1912, so
28she was about, uh, 24 years old when she, uh, finally received her nursing license. She, um, she,
29after the service, after her service was over, uh, overseas, she eventually did surgical nursing for,
30um, one of the physicians here in Louisville, principally at Norton Hospital, and in the late '60s,
31she contracted, um, uh, cancer of the, breast cancer and, uh, she had, uh, some surgery, removal
32of either one or both breasts and for a while it seemed as though she was going to recover. She
33had chemotherapy treatments, but, uh, she continued to, um, get worse and returned to
34Owensville, where she died on February 11, 1970.

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36She said, I belonged to the 300th General Hospital, which was Vanderbilt University from
37Nashville, Tennessee. We left from Tullahoma for New York in July of 1943, in an old, old
38open-windowed L&N train with straw seats, no water, and no food. We went by way of
39someplace in North Carolina, I think. It took us 3 days. We left on a Thursday and got to New
40York on a Saturday. The windows were open, there was no air conditioning, and it was hot as the
41dickens! We had cinders in our hair. You could comb your hair and get cinders out of it. Most of
42us, when we got to New York, took a shower, hair and all, and threw our clothes in the garbage. I
43mean, there were no facilities for washing them and they were so dirty we simply threw them
44away.

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2We stayed in Camp Shanks, New York in a former mental institution. We were there about a
3week behind locked doors, actually and truly behind bars. It was part of the secrecy, all hush-
4hush. We left Camp Shanks in the evening about a week after we got there, I believe, and rode in
5a closed train coach with the curtains drawn to the 43rd Street dock. The ship we went to Africa
6on was the Thomas H. Barry. At one time, it was a luxury liner. We didn't get on the ship at the
7dock; it was way out in the harbor, so we went out to it by ferry and went up the sides on nets.
8We had full packs, helmets, canteens, bedrolls, Musette bags, and we climbed the nets, which
9were hung over the sides. We wore slacks and climbed by ourselves.

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11It took us 14 days to cross the ocean. I can't remember when we sailed, but it was about the 1st of
12August and we got there 14 days later in one of the biggest convoys that ever went out of New
13York. We were in the middle. There were 2 airplane carriers, one on either side of us, and there
14were battleships and many other ships and destroyers on the outsides. On our ship, there were
156,500 people. It was all medical, mostly corpsmen. Tulane University Hospital was one of the
16other units and we had other odds and ends of personnel. Our outfit carried, oh, let me see, 120
17nurses, about 60 doctors, and about 600 corpsmen. That was a General Hospital. There were,
18maybe, 15 or 20 administrative officers also, something like that. Of course, a lot of your
19administrative officers in a General Hospital were medical men. We probably had 80 officers
20altogether, including the medical men.

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22Going across, we had some burials at sea and some operations that were transferred from the
23destroyers. We had an air attack. We had a submarine attack, too. The submarine attack came
24after we passed through the Straits of Gibraltar, about 5:30 or 6:00 in the evening. We went
25through the Straits and the submarine hit. It hit something, but not us. The air attack caused an
26alert to abandon ship, but it didn't amount to anything. Off the Coast of Algiers, we had another,
27a real bang-up air attack. We went to our preassigned battle stations and that's a real funny thing!
28One girl that was in our [state 8:21] room, there were 6 of us, took only her K-rations and a
29picture of her boyfriend in her Mae West, her life jacket. After that, we landed at Bizerte, were
30loaded into trucks, and taken to what we called the Camel Patch, which was a field beyond
31Fairville and Tunis. We set up in tents. We slept in bedrolls, used outdoor johns, and our water
32came from Lister bags. We stayed there from August until November, just marking time 'til the
33Battle of Africa was finished. It was November and very cold. It was cold as the dickens and it
34rained from morning 'til night! The mud got deeper and deeper. When we came out of our tents
35in the field and got into the heated hospital ship, we all got sick.

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37We went from Bizerte to Naples in November and our landing dock was made of the bottoms of
38sunken ships. We disembarked right on the ships' bottoms. The Port of Naples had been very
39heavily hit, you see, and all the ships in the Bay of Naples had been bombed and had turned over
40and we landed on these overturned ships. There were no constructed walkways on the ships, we
41just scrambled over the bottoms. The battle for Italy was 12 miles beyond Naples at this time.
42You could hear the guns and see the fire. They were fighting out of Naples at Caserta. We were
43the first General Hospital to arrive, though there was one station hospital in before we went in.

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1 We set up in a tuberculosis sanitarium that was built by Mussolini as showplace. There was one
2 in Naples and one in Rome. We took half of the sanitorium and the Italians continued to operate
3 the other half. The Italians who ran the sanitorium were nuns and priests, of what order, I do not
4 know. We had very good relations with them. We went back and forth between the two places if
5 we wished. The hospital was easily cut in two. There had been two sides, one for the nuns and
6 women and one for the priests, doctors, and ma-, males, each with their own chapel. We took one
7 side and one chapel [throat clearing], and they took the other chapel and the other side. We had
8 3,300 beds in our half at one time and sometimes all of the beds were full. But when we first
9 went in, there was absolutely nothing there but a blank building. In the 5 days before we received
10 our first patients, we had to unpack all the boxes of equipment we'd brought on the ship and set
11 up the whole hospital. It was a mess! One box, you'd start unpacking and you'd ha-, you'd find a
12 set of surgical equipment. You might have a carving knife for the kitchen in another and you
13 might have a wrench for the motor pool in still another one. You just didn't know what you had,
14 and you set the thing up from a bare room. I mean, your gowns had no sleeves in them. You had
15 no wrappers. Your instruments were coated in about a quarter inch of Vaseline and paraffin,
16 which all had to be scraped off and cleaned off. We did that in 5 days and the first case that we
17 had, which is a bugaboo in any operating room, was gas gangrene. I mean, that's the thing that
18 everyone has a horror of. It's a bloodstream infection that goes like wildfire. This boy was a
19 nice-looking young fellow. He was a big boy, about 6 feet, 180 to 190 pounds, round face, dark
20 haired. He had been hit in the arm up around Caserta, above Naples, it was shrapnel and, uh, uh,
21 he had been hit in the midarm and, by the time he reached us, his arm was about twice the
22 normal size with the gangrene. He was a handsome boy, about 24 or 23. He'd come from the 5th
23 Army Infantry. Uh, at any rate, his arm was taken off, uh, at the shoulder and, uh, there was
24 nothing else to do. His, his whole arm was bluish-purple, um, and was, as I've said, about twice
25 the size of it should have been, about the size of your thigh. [throat clearing] He did need a
26 transfusion and when the, uh, call for the transfusion came, we found we had absolutely nothing
27 to take blood with.

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29 In the emergency, Dr. Kirtley, that is, Colonel Kirtley, set up very quickly. He took a needle and
30 a rubber tube and a sterile bottle and stuck, uh, a, a volunteer donor, one of the corporals, and
31 bottle fed the patient by gravity. The young man was sent back to the United States and, so far as
32 I know, he recovered. For that operating room experience, that first operation, I remember that it
33 was Colonel James Kirtley (that's spelled K-I-R-T-L-E-Y), James Kirtley, was the chief of
34 surgery and the surgeon was Major Collum (C-O-L-L-U-M), from Texarkana, and the operating
35 room supervisor was [Francis Stewart 14:32]. There was also a nurse anesthetist. I, of course,
36 was serving as operating room nurse, surgical nurse.

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38 We had other amputees, of course, including the quadruple amputee from Kentucky, who was a
39 boy from Corbin, I believe. He lost both arms and both legs. He eventually came back to
40 Kentucky and I think he went to Alabama or Georgia on a farm. I've seen pictures of him driving
41 a tractor with his artificial arms and his artificial legs.

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43 One of the things that I remember quite well was the Anzio push. I don't remember where I was,
44 but I was not at the hospital. But I came back to see about 500 people being put into our hospital

1 on stretchers, and so on and so forth, and working some 23 hours at a stretch. We had lulls, when
2 we did nothing, and we had our times when we worked 24 hours around the clock. The death rate
3 in our hospital was better than any civilian hospital in the United States. It was terrifically low. It
4 was almost unbelievably low, probably because the men that we treated were strong, young men
5 and in the best of health. Oh, I don't remember a dozen or so deaths in the 3 years that we were
6 there. It really was amazing. Most of our patients stayed in the hospital until they were
7 transportable, until we had done all the surgery that was necessary – except reconstructive
8 surgery; we were not set up to do this. They stayed until they were walking or able to travel
9 safely by boat. Actually, the death rate was far lower than Norton Baptist or St. Joseph today. It
10 was really quite amazing.

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12 You have asked me what the, uh, civilian help was like in the hospital and that was really quite
13 an interesting experience. Um, we did have civilians to help us clean, um, and we were very
14 surprised that the, uh, theft of our materials was so great. Uh, the women would tie bags of sugar
15 or bread or whatnot inside their clothing, taped onto their legs, and so get out of the building.
16 Hundreds of ground bags of sugar and provisions (flour and whatnot) went out in ambulances as
17 corpses. Since we were attached to a TB hospital with a very high death rate, that was a very
18 easy thing to accomplish because the morgue was in the reception floor underground and they
19 would disguise the 100-pound bags as corpses and would take them out in the ambulances, uh,
20 uh, out of the hospital.

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22 As far as romances between patients and nursing staff were concerned, well, we, we didn't have
23 any. We did have romances between staff and staff, however, and we had several marriages. We
24 had one marriage that did not take place until we came back to the United States between a
25 doctor, uh, who was a Catholic and a girl who was a Protestant. He had been married. His
26 marriage, so he said, had never been consummated so what he did was to go to Rome through
27 our chaplain, it was really sort of out of this world. He had an audience with the Pope and his
28 marriage with his wife was annulled. And when he and his Protestant sweetheart returned to the
29 United States, they were married, and they now live in Lexington and have 2 children. I've seen
30 them numerous times since I've been back so that was one of our romances.

31

32 I also saw the Pope. Um, it was under interesting circumstances. You see, when Rome was
33 declared an open city and the warfront was on up further, we could go to Rome on leave. I, I
34 went to Rome with a colonel in the Sanitation Department of the United States Army. He was
35 going on up and he took me along and I stayed in one of the real modern hotels and we went
36 down to an audience with the Pope. It was quite fascinating. He was a very small individual and
37 they carried him in on a dais, or whatever you might say. It was about 12 noon when they
38 brought him in and they set him up on this platform. Not being Catholic, I don't know what all
39 this means but, at any rate, he talked in about 3 languages for about 10 minutes. He spoke in
40 French and German and English, besides his Italian. Uh, after he had made his little speeches, he
41 came down off the dais, or chair, to the edge of the little platform and everyone had a chance to
42 go up and talk to him. Uh, as I've said, not being Catholic, I wasn't awed by it, but you'd go up
43 and he'd ask you where you were from and why you were there and so on.

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1He was most fascinating and a very brilliant little man. In fact, I have a picture and a rosary that
2was blessed, and I still have it. The rosaries weren't very, weren't very good then, because the
3metals weren't good, but I still, I still have it. When he spoke to me, I told him I was from the
4United States of America and from Kentucky and he knew where Kentucky was, and he knew
5what Kentucky was famous for. And he wanted to know why, uh, we were there. And I told him
6I was a nurse and he thought it was very wonderful what we were doing and then he gave us the
7little rosary that I've mentioned. I don't know where he got them from. He didn't ask you what
8religion you were, he just, he just gave them. He didn't get the rosaries out of his pocket or
9anything, he just, they were handed to him by one of the men who were standing near him.

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11Uh, at first, the people who were Catholic kissed his ring, uh, before they got their rosaries. But,
12of course we d-, we didn't. All of the w-, women who were there had their heads covered and, of
13course, we were strictly in uniform, which included a cap. We wore it indoors and outdoors, so
14we were properly dressed. We were received in a room; it was about 16x20, um, a very
15beautifully ornamented room. And, of course, the Pope's robes were gorgeous. There was, and
16the, and the men who st-, stood near him were also equally beautiful. They were red and white
17and gold. And, he wore this little cap – I think it was red, as far as I remember, and all of the
18Swiss guards were just out of this world with, with the metal hemlets, helmets. I don't see how
19they walked with all the stuff they carried. And then, of course, the men in this audience went
20through the Vatican, which we could not do. I mean, you know, it's off limits to women, so we
21did not go through. We were able to see the Sistine Chapel. We also saw St. Peter's. It has no
22seats in it. I mean, it's marble; there are a few benches sitting around but, well, there's just
23practically nothing in it. It is more like a museum with a marble bench here and there. If you've
24never been to St. Peter's, you just have no idea what it's like.

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26I left Naples in August of 1945, and, after a voyage of 14 days, landed in Virginia. From
27Virginia, I went to Chicago, and from Chicago to Battle Creek, Michigan, and was finally
28discharged in October of 1945.

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30This concludes the recollections of Catherine Corbin of her experiences. You will notice that, in,
31uh, rec-, in recording this tape, I read without much interruption, uh, a portion of her, um,
32memories. And, uh, then our script changed from, uh, an effort to turn the interview that we had
33with her into a, uh, formalized, uh, autobiography, into a question and answer session. And so,
34where my, um, speech was hesitant and interrupted from time to time and you could hear the
35tape recorder going off and on, it was because I was trying to make a continuation of the, of the
36narrative style rather than, uh, put it out in questions and answers. I think I covered all of the
37questions and her answers, uh, uh, in that we had received from her. And so this ends the portion
38on Anna Catherine Corbin.

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40This tape has been made in, uh, October of 1983.

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