

Interview of Elaine Carlton on her service in the U.S. Army during WWII

Elaine Carlton: ...member of Evergreen Chapter 63, Tacoma, Washington.

My name, July 1944, was Olive Milborne, living in Belfast, Northern Ireland, with my family, who had gone from Hagerstown, Maryland, to open a business building pipe organs. Received a quest for me to join our army as it was my patriotic duty and to report for my physical at an army hospital in a county outside Belfast. There were two of us taking our physicals. We were both very excited and apprehensive. But we both passed with no trouble. It was such a treat to see so much food in the mess hall. All was delicious to us. Some of the food we hadn't seen for years as food was very short in supply and variety.

August 1944, we got our orders to report to Lichfield, England, where we had three weeks basic training. The officers decided that 30 of us there for training had seen and experienced war for so long that we didn't need the regular training. So we had to pass the rifle range, which we all did. We never did receive the medal for it. Then each of us were interviewed by reporters and correspondents for local newspapers in all the states of the U.S.A. September 1944, we packed our duffel bags and blanket rolls, dressed in fatigues and helmets. I must have been a comical sight. I had to have safety pins everywhere on the fatigues as they were all so big for me. I only weighed 98 pounds. Had to wear a helmet liner and helmet, which was too large. At least the field jacket fitted quite well, so hid the safety pins. The girls had a lot of fun helping me to get on my feet after I got the pack – backpack and blanket roll on my back.

We were taken to Southampton. There we boarded a ship that sailed as soon as it got dark. We had to keep quiet – couldn't smoke, or sho-, show lights. They had discovered a German sub was in the vicin-, vicinity. Next day, late afternoon, we arrived in Omaha Beach, France. We put on our backpacks with help from my friends again, went over the side of the ship where the rope ladders were. It was quite scary and thrilling going over the side of the ship on a rope ladder. Halfway down, we had to jump into the army landing boat. I was so top-heavy, if the guys hadn't caught me I would have been in the water. But we had a great laugh after they found out I was okay. They told me later, when they saw me coming down, they thought it was just bags. They couldn't see me. Anyway, we made it to the beach. It was a wet landing. There was still remnants and ravages of war. We climbed up a hill. Some of us were put into canvas tents, two to each. The other girls loaded onto trucks. Found out later they were taken to Paris. We spent two nights and one day. Weather was pretty good but it had rained so much it was so muddy, about up to our knees.

1 Second day, we were put on trucks. End of trip we find ourselves in Cherbourg,
2 France. We were put into war-damaged houses. Some of our servicemen had
3 tried to repair them to be livable. Four of us were in a big house with half the
4 roof gone. When it rained, we had some unwelcome showers. But we did have
5 a little heat most of the time. They had fixed heaters in our rooms.
6

7 I was fortunate to be assigned to the chaplain's office. Worked as Chaplain's
8 Assistant. Having been a professional musician, and also schooled in secretarial
9 work all came in handy. Also had to play as hostess for any of the chaplains
10 that had to entertain visiting VIPs. This lasted until I came home in November
11 '46, to Fort Dix, New Jersey.
12

13 Our stay in Cherbourg was quite exciting at times, as there were German
14 snipers. If we had to go out after dark, we had to have a GI to be with us with a
15 carbine. Most of us had one, but not many of us wanted to carry it. I always
16 had one in the Jeep when I had to drive, which wasn't too often as I always
17 generally had a GI driver assigned to us.
18

19 Headquarters had given the chaplain's office building, which we found out later
20 had once been a Madame Boudoir. The furnishings had been beautiful. But of
21 course, by the time I had got there, it had all been stripped. The chaplains had
22 left a few things like beautiful, heavy velvet drapes. The colors were just
23 gorgeous. Reds, lilac, gold, and blue. It was lovely seeing a little glamour and
24 brightness in amongst all the destruction. Being with Chaplain I sometimes
25 went with him to give Protestant service. I would – I worked for Protestant,
26 Catholic, and a rabbi.
27

28 In the field only a few miles from the front line, had it in any kind of weather,
29 was fun trying to keep music on our little portable organ when it was raining
30 and windy. Generally some of the guys fixed some kind of a shelter for me. I
31 was always treated like a VIP. We would stay around for a few hours. The
32 boys loved to just sit and talk, just to have someone to talk to. As they said, just
33 having an [American 06:37] girl around lifted their spirits. Then they always
34 wanted me to sing some favorite songs, which I really enjoyed.
35

36 Even though we could hear all the gunfire and tank blasts, we were lucky we
37 were never any – never had any close calls. I'd had it worse when I used to be
38 in London and Belfast, Northern Ireland, when I had a – had a bomb dropped
39 just a block away. That was scary. That was before we came into the war,
40 when I was a civilian.
41

42 While in Cherbourg, some of us girls had been invited to share a meal with a
43 submarine crew. Was sometime around Christmas. Still don't know why they
44 didn't laugh at us, for we were a sight. We had to wear field uniforms plus

1 helmet with liner and – and boots, which we called Li'l Abners. When we
2 arrived at the port, all of them were on the submarine. What a cheer went up.
3 There were about 10 of us. After riding in the truck we were really glad to
4 [inaudible 07:44]. The men came and helped us on board, then down into the
5 sub. That was the strangest feeling. It first felt like we couldn't get any breath.
6 After a while and a drink, we had – we had got used to it. What a meal the cook
7 had fixed in such tight quarters! It was amazing. What a great time we had. As
8 usual they just seemed to like hearing us talk. And listening to them. When we
9 had, when we had to live – leave, they made us promise to come back. Of
10 course we never did. There was still a war to fight.

11
12 After such a wonderful afternoon, we were in for quite a shock. On our way
13 back to our quarters, we heard a terrible explosion. We saw a big ball of fire out
14 on the water. Our driver thought we better try to see if we were needed on the
15 beach. By the time we got there we found bodies coming out of the water,
16 looking awful. Some with arms off. Faces smashed and some more horrible
17 looking. Sometime we got there – same time we got there, some medical staff
18 were there too so we helped as much as we could.

19
20 Hours later the doctors told us to go, as we had done as much as we could. And
21 that we had been there long enough. None of us had had any medical training.
22 None of us felt anything until a couple days later when we realized what had
23 happened. It was quite a feeling. Had one of the doctors came and thanked us
24 and said how great we had been in such emergency. And he asked if any of us
25 would like to go home and train as a nurse. But none of us took him up on it as
26 far as I know. Found out that it had been one of our hospital ships that was
27 sitting in the harbor, getting ready to take the wounded back home. A German
28 sub got in and torpedoed it. Never did find out if there was any saved. I don't
29 know how some of the ones we treated and helped survived. Heard later that
30 the sub we had been on had taken off right after we left. I guess, looking for the
31 German sub.

32
33 Our church services were held in a building that had about half a roof. When it
34 rained, sometimes there would be water up to our ankles. We were lucky. Had
35 a little stage so the choir and organist had cover and dry feet. Had some funny
36 things happen.

37
38 One day, to go the headquarters building, I was run-, never walked, always
39 running. Always getting in trouble with my First Sergeant. Was coming out of
40 an office, was running around the corner when I ran smack dab into a solid wall,
41 I thought. But the wall fell down on the top of me. When the wall got up I
42 found it was a one-star general. Oh, what a feeling that was. Believe me, I
43 thought I'd had it. He looked so stern for a second, then all of a sudden he was
44 laughing. Thank goodness he wasn't hurt. All he said was that I'd better slow

1 down in the future. Couple days later, who should walk into our office, but the
2 general. Of course he had to tell the chaplains what I had done. Believe me, I
3 took a lot of ribbing about that.
4

5 Father [Folay 11:21] had been invited into the home of a French family. He
6 invited our driver and myself to go with him. I spoke a little French so it was a
7 very interesting visit. They had fixed a very interesting meal from – they had,
8 which wasn't much, but was very enjoyable. But the thing they were most
9 excited about, they had wine and champagne, which they had hid from the
10 Germans. We had the pleasure of sharing it with them. It was the first
11 champagne I'd ever had. I don't remember going back to quarters, so you can
12 tell I enjoyed it.
13

14 We visited the family at least once a week when we could take time off. That is
15 why I loved my job as the chaplains generally took me with them when they
16 were invited out. And I acted as hostess when they entertained, was very
17 interesting work. One day we were told there was a very important VIP coming
18 to the office, a Dr. [Pauling 12:30]. He showed up in the evening. There were a
19 few of us just sitting around singing. By that time, we had been lucky to have
20 an organist from Vassar College assigned to our office. He had been listening –
21 Dr. [Pauling 12:45] had been listening for quite a while before we realized who
22 he was. He talked to each of us, said he would get in touch with all our
23 families, which he did. We never could tell our folks where we were. So
24 finally they got to know. We also had quite a write-up in our local papers in the
25 states.
26

27 Few months later we were all loaded into trucks with our belongings. Next
28 place was Deauville, France. WACs had a hotel in Trouville, just about a [four
29 to five 13:19] mile march. Deauville, where headquarters was set up, used to be
30 a casino right on the beach. We couldn't walk up on the beaches, as they still
31 had booby traps. Every day one or two would go off by some animal,
32 sometimes a person. Quite a few killed. Trouville beaches had been cleared, so
33 we had a nice beach to relax on. It was a fishing port so there was always a
34 smell of fish. Was a very beautiful spot. Didn't see too much war damage
35 there. We used to use bikes to get around the countryside. Was real pretty. We
36 were there during the summer months. They made it a retreat for our boys, who
37 would spend about two weeks, then go back to the front. That time my job was
38 to help them get word to their folks at home and again, listen to them. Had
39 quite a busy time.
40

41 From there we were trucked to Brussels, Belgium. Our services were held in
42 the [inaudible 14:21] Chapel, which was beautiful. Had a wonderful pipe organ
43 to play. There, chaplains and I were invited to quite a few of the civilian homes.
44 Then my job was to go to Saint-Lô, France, to look for graves of our boys killed

1 in Europe, for families who wrote us requesting photos. By that time, we were
2 allowed to [inaudible 14:43] have cameras. Saint-Lô was quite a place, was all
3 rubble but folks were living in there. Little children so skinny with big
4 stomachs and mostly bones. So we all tried to help them as much as possible.
5 With all that, we would go to the field where some of our boys were laid to rest.
6 There would be a bunch of flowers on each marker. Believe me, I shed a few
7 tears. It was quite impressive to think that all their property they could do such
8 a thing. By this time we had got quite a few more office personnel including
9 two civilians.

10
11 So I got a chance to travel to lots of interesting places, mostly with the
12 chaplains. Also went with them to Paris on business many times. We'd spend
13 at least three days each time we went. Three of us went on leave to Belfast,
14 Northern Ireland: the girl that started with me from Belfast and one that became
15 to be like a big sister. I still keep in touch with them both. On our way back, we
16 had got a lift on a bomber that was going to England. I had to sit in the bomb
17 bay for while. Then they told me to sit out with the pilot. They put earphones
18 on me and I would be having quite a conversation with the ground crew when
19 all of a sudden he said there was a message coming in. I thought he had been
20 hit up or something. Couldn't make sense for a while. Then he yelled, "The
21 war's over!" Then I started yelling. The crew thought I had lost my sense.

22
23 Finally I gave them the news. Then I gave the phones over to the pilot. After
24 we had all calmed down, by then we were all about ready to land. But then we
25 were told we couldn't land, as every airport was closed. Took the pilot about an
26 hour to convince an airport that we had to land. We were running out of fuel.
27 We made it fine. Everybody was going crazy so we joined in the celebration.
28 We finally got ourselves to Paris, but I cannot remember it all. I remember
29 celebrating in Paris. We had folks trying to get buttons off our uniforms. We
30 were saved by a French policeman.

31
32 We got back to our outfit. We had been AWOL for four days, but they excused
33 us for they had known what had happened. Brussels was a very interesting
34 place for it had not suffered the ravages of war quite as much. Lots of beautiful
35 places still standing, and it was a country of flowers. Was wonderful to see the
36 flower carts on mostly all street corners. So much color really cheered a person
37 up. Also our living quarters were so much better.

38
39 Then came the time when lots of our personnel were able to go home on points.
40 Had some very happy, yet sad partings. From Brussels we were loaded again
41 on those awful trucks and taken to Frankfurt, Germany. There we joined
42 General Eisenhower's headquarters. What a greeting we got! What a surprise
43 we had when we were shown our living quarters in an apartment building.
44 Three to an apartment. Had a bedroom each with a real bed and chest of

1 drawers for our clothes. It turned out we even had a Polish girl displaced person
2 to do all our cleaning. Even cleaned our uniforms and shoes. Believe me, it
3 was quite a shock. Headquarters was very secure. It had to have special parsons
4 – special passes to go out of the boundary. Our chaplain's office was just
5 outside for a while, until we finally got a room on the [Favian 18:34] Building,
6 which had been taken over for the European headquarters.
7

8 The women who had got there before us (most of them had just arrived from the
9 States) had really fixed things up for us, even to having started making a lovely
10 club for us to relax in. We finally got it where we had dances, we had ping
11 pong tables and billiards, plus places to read or listen to music. By the time I
12 left to come home, it was a very busy place. We could even entertain friends
13 there. General Eisenhower, who'd come and join us to talk and listen to us. He
14 was like a father figure to a lot of us girls. He really tried to help. I got to know
15 him quite well, as the chaplains, who were very involved with them, as he was
16 very keen to have the men interested in their religious beliefs.
17

18 September 1946, there was talk about some of us having to go home, as they
19 decided we had been there long enough. November 1, 1946, about 20 of us
20 were taken to Bremerhaven where we boarded a ship that was home for us for
21 15 days. Was a war brides transport. So the powers to be each let us carry our
22 orders so we were able to do what we wanted. Most of us really enjoyed the
23 voyage, as the weather was beautiful. It was almost like a cruise, except for all
24 the young war brides. Some had children.
25

26 Arrived New York, November 15, 1946. Of course the brides got quite a
27 welcome; bands, etc. But we had down – go down a gangplank, another part of
28 the ship. Loaded onto trucks, taken to Fort Dix, New Jersey.
29

30 1947 saw me in Camp Kilmer. Got married May 1st, '48, and was discharged
31 July 1948.
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