

**Interview of Agnes Elaine Osborn Myers on her service in
U.S. Army Nurse Corps during WWI**

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Ruth Banonis: This is an interview with Elaine Myers who was an army nurse during World War I. [00:10] Uh, could you tell us something about, um, how you happened to, uh, join the Nurse Corps?

Agnes Elaine Myers: Well, I had just finished training. I trained in the Philadelphia General Hospital and then I went and took a course in communicable diseases and I had just finished when the war broke out and I went right away and enlisted. And, um, I didn't I, I think I told you I didn't go to any camp and I thought I was cheated because so many of the girls went to camps around and they had such good times.

[laughter]

And I was sent right up to Gun Hill Road, General Hospital #1 but I don't remember. I don't remember doing a lick of work up there. And I roamed around. It was a great big place and I roamed around that hospital for 10 days I guess or 2 weeks and then I was sent down to New York to be fitted for my uniform and our uniforms were the ugliest things.

[laughter]

Ruth Banonis: Tell us about them. [1:41] What were they?

Agnes Elaine Myers: You know, we had, we had to go to Coward shoe store and we had these big clumsy looking shoes. I only wore those shoes when I was going places because all the time I was in France I wore boots.

Ruth Banonis: [2:10] Where did you pick those up? Did you have them before you went?

Agnes Elaine Myers: Before we went, we had everything that we needed. Rain hats, raincoats and we needed them more than anything and, um, boots, rubber boots that came up to our knees and we wore those boots all the time.

Ruth Banonis: Well that would indicate that the fields, the grounds were muddy.

Agnes Elaine Myers: Muddy. It was muddy and dirty. You'd go from a tent to your operating room and you'd just slush through the mud. And that I did.

Ruth Banonis: [2:57] Then what was the rest of the...

1 Agnes Elaine Myers: [Yeah 2:59]
2
3 Ruth Banonis: [2:60] What was the rest of the uniform? Long skirt?
4
5 Agnes Elaine Myers: Our dress uniform was blue, navy blue. We had a navy-blue blouse with a
6 little white turnover collar and white cuffs and a blue, um, Norfolk jacket
7 and a skirt.
8
9 Ruth Banonis: [3:24] The Norfolk jacket? I don't think I've heard about those before.
10
11 Agnes Elaine Myers: You haven't?
12
13 Ruth Banonis: No.
14
15 Agnes Elaine Myers: If you haven't heard about it or seen it, you missed something.
16
17 [laughter]
18
19 Ruth Banonis: [3:36] Can you describe them?
20
21 Agnes Elaine Myers: There was big old tan, Coward shoes. We were very dressed up I'm
22 telling you. And velour hats. We wore blue velour hats.
23
24 Ruth Banonis: Well that sounds very fashionable.
25
26 Agnes Elaine Myers: No.
27
28 Ruth Banonis: The velour hats at least.
29
30 Agnes Elaine Myers: Well they were very fashionable. [laughter] You know, that was in 1917.
31
32 Ruth Banonis: Yes. Yes. Of course. [4:07] Was the, were the skirts woolen?
33
34 Agnes Elaine Myers: Yeah. We had woolen suits and woolen underwear and, you know, when I
35 was in [throat clearing] the few weeks I was in New York before we sailed
36 for [coughing] for overseas, uh, I had a roommate. She was from Fall
37 River, Massachusetts and her mother came down to stay with her before
38 she went overseas and I had an old, uh, mustard colored coat, great heavy
39 coat, and she said "What are you going to do with your coats Elaine?"
40 And I said "Oh, I don't know. I'm just going to give them away I guess."
41 And she said "Maybe I'd better make something out of this for ya." And
42 she made me a penny skirt and I wore that all the time and I almost froze
43 to death. I was never warm one day while I was in France.
44

1 Ruth Banonis: [5:21] Uh, what kind of heating, just wood burning stoves?
2

3 Agnes Elaine Myers: It was cold and rainy and we went from one camp to another. We were in
4 [inaudible 5:34]. And then we went all up to, we went up as far as [Monte
5 Carlo 5:49]. [throat clearing] And when I was up there I was stationed in
6 a hospital in Tulle [inaudible 5:59]. And sometimes I worked in a French
7 hospital and sometimes I worked in a tent. It just was where I was needed.
8 And after the war was over, I would take men that had to be transported
9 immediately down to the port of embarkation and put them on a ship and
10 then I'd go back to some other part of France and pick up some other boys
11 at the hospital.
12

13 Ruth Banonis: [6:38] Do you speak French?
14

15 Agnes Elaine Myers: No. No. I don't speak French or anything.
16
17 [laughter]
18

19 Ruth Banonis: Well it seems you got along very well.
20

21 Agnes Elaine Myers: Well, we in, in the French hospitals I didn't do badly and you know the
22 nurses in the French hospitals in those days I don't know whether they still
23 do or not. They wore veils on their caps that hung way down their back so
24 I took a piece of gauze [laughter] put around my hair and let it hang down
25 my back so I'd have a French cap.
26
27 [laughter]
28

29 Agnes Elaine Myers: But, it, the, uh, laughing time you had you had to make yourself because
30 you were busy. I was busy every minute...
31

32 Ruth Banonis: Yes, I'm sure.
33

34 Agnes Elaine Myers: ...as I remember. And one time on my trip to the, um, port of
35 embarkation I went to, uh, [7A 7:47]. I wanted to go and see a girl I had
36 known in one of the hospitals and that's, there I met [inaudible 7:59]. And
37 she was our chief army nurse. She was quite a person. She was, uh,
38 [throat clearing], she was the, she was the niece to Franklin D. Roosevelt
39 and oh, not a niece, an aunt.
40

41 Ruth Banonis: Oh, I see.
42

1 Agnes Elaine Myers: And I met her in the hospital when she would sit there in [7A 8:30] and I
2 met 2 girls that I later met here in St. Petersburg. They belonged to my
3 American Legion Post. [Inaudible 8:47] in St. Petersburg.
4

5 Ruth Banonis: Um, let's see. We got a little ahead. [08:50] I wanted you to tell us
6 something about the ship you went on.
7

8 Agnes Elaine Myers: We went on the Leviathan.
9

10 Ruth Banonis: The Leviathan. [8:56] And it was a troopship?
11

12 Agnes Elaine Myers: That wasn't it. It was the, uh, German's, one of their prize German
13 steamships and it was beautiful. It was beautiful. It was a beautiful ship.
14 And that's what we, and we went over without a convoy in 4½ days.
15

16 Ruth Banonis: [9:24] 4½?
17

18 Agnes Elaine Myers: Mm-hm.
19

20 Ruth Banonis: I didn't know ships went that rapid. I didn't know that ships were able to,
21 um, pick up that much speed.
22

23 Agnes Elaine Myers: [Inaudible 9:32] sail across the ocean. Well they, we had an entirely, of
24 course, the ar, the navy had taken over the Leviathan and we had an
25 entirely American crew on board. And the captain said we can go over in
26 4½ days if we go without a convoy, and we did. We zig-zagged across
27 that ocean in 4½ days.
28

29 Ruth Banonis: [10:07] Do you know whether these were ships, the German ships, you
30 mentioned that we used, were they ships that had been impounded at the
31 beginning of the war?
32

33 Agnes Elaine Myers: At the beginning of the war.
34

35 Ruth Banonis: We just took them over and used them.
36

37 Agnes Elaine Myers: Turned them into troopships.
38

39 Ruth Banonis: Mm-hm. [10:23] And, uh, I think you said there were 100 nurses?
40

41 Agnes Elaine Myers: There were 100 nurses and I think there were 8,000 men on board.
42

43 Ruth Banonis: [10:39] And the nuns?
44

1 Agnes Elaine Myers: Mm?
2
3 Ruth Banonis: The nuns, you mentioned the nuns. The nuns who were going to France.
4
5 Agnes Elaine Myers: Oh, I don't know. I don't know where they were from. They were from
6 the Order of Saint Joseph.
7
8 Ruth Banonis: [10:55] They were Americans though?
9
10 Agnes Elaine Myers: They were Americans.
11
12 Ruth Banonis: [11:01] And they?
13
14 Agnes Elaine Myers: And they were not in the army. They were going over to a mission school.
15 And I don't know how they got on the army ship. But I think they were
16 needed over there and they just took them.
17
18 Ruth Banonis: Mm-hm.
19
20 Agnes Elaine Myers: I don't know.
21
22 Ruth Banonis: Someone with pull got them on. Um, more about your experiences, uh,
23 working with the men. [11:33] Do you remember any, um, unusual...?
24
25 Agnes Elaine Myers: Yes, I remember working. We worked in, um, we worked in [inaudible
26 11:43]. We worked in tents at first and then we went to a French hospital.
27 I don't know the name. And, uh, then we went on wherever they were
28 having a major offensive. And Dr. [Kralle 12:04] who was from
29 Cleveland I think. Did you, are you from Cleveland?
30
31 Ruth Banonis: No. No. I have a brother who's living there.
32
33 Agnes Elaine Myers: Well I think Dr. [Kralle 12:15] was a very noted, isn't there a [Kralle
34 12:19] Clinic in Cleveland?
35
36 Ruth Banonis: There may be. I don't know the city that well. I just visit occasionally.
37
38 Agnes Elaine Myers: Well anyway, he was a very noted man here in the United States. Up
39 there on my wall I have a picture of my old colonel. Over there.
40
41 Ruth Banonis: I'll have to look at those when I get up. Sorry I dropped something.
42
43 Agnes Elaine Myers: But, he was the colonel of our base. We would, we would be up the front
44 for 2 weeks then we had to go back to our base because, the, my colonel

1 wouldn't allow his nurses, his team of nurses [throat clearing] to go up to
2 the front for more than 2 weeks at a time. And then we'd go back to our
3 base and stay for 2 weeks or so and then we'd be sent up to another, when
4 they were having another offensive [inaudible 13:29] we went to
5 [inaudible 13:34] and that was, uh, that was right on the [inaudible 13:38]
6 border. Do you know that part of France at all?
7
8 Ruth Banonis: No, I don't.
9
10 Agnes Elaine Myers: I was in a French hospital in Tulle for a long time. I would go from there
11 and work where ever I was needed [throat clearing]. But, uh, I don't
12 remember too much about the work I did. I know I was busy every minute
13 and cold every minute. Cold. I suffered from the cold terribly. I say that
14 I never even got warm.
15
16 Ruth Banonis: Mm, I'm not surprised.
17
18 Agnes Elaine Myers: But I met my husband in [Monte Carlo, Monte Carlo 14:30], and as soon
19 as we got back to the states we were married.
20
21 Ruth Banonis: [14:40] He was with our troops? He was with, with the American troops?
22
23 Agnes Elaine Myers: Yes. He was a captain in the, um, 78th Division.
24
25 Ruth Banonis: [14:56] And, uh, so then you came back to the states and, uh, if you could
26 go on about that?
27
28 Agnes Elaine Myers: And then, when I was married, I lived in Maryland. I lived in Annapolis,
29 Maryland. My husband was born and [buried 15:16] in Annapolis and
30 you couldn't get him away from there for anything. Except the war. And,
31 um, he was 1 of 6 brothers and they were all in the service excepting 1 and
32 Walter had a large family and he stayed home and took care of the
33 business while the other boys went in the service.
34
35 Ruth Banonis: [15:49] Did they all come back? Did all those who...
36
37 Agnes Elaine Myers: Yeah, they all came back. [Louis 15:56] came back with, I don't know
38 [Louis 15:59] never went overseas but he developed TB and he just
39 worked in camps around the United States here. But he never gave up
40 working. He worked all the time and, um, he eventually died just about 6
41 years ago of lung cancer. But Charles and, um, Henry and George were
42 all overseas.
43
44 Ruth Banonis: [16:43] And you met, you met your husband there?

1

2 Agnes Elaine Myers: Uh-huh.

3

4 Ruth Banonis: [16:47] Um, was he a patient or did you just, uh, was he a patient of
5 yours?

6

7 Agnes Elaine Myers: No. No. I just met him. I don't know how I met him. You met so many
8 and it was, it was just a casual acquaintance at first. And, you know, when
9 I wrote to my sister and told her I met this man and I had become engaged
10 to him, and she wrote back and she said to me "What is his background?"
11 And I thought my golly I don't know. [laughter] And so, I wrote and told
12 her how he looked and all about him. I said "He's superintendent of his
13 Sunday school and he's a good Presbyterian", which I was.

14

15 Ruth Banonis: How fortunate. [laughter]

16

17 Agnes Elaine Myers: I don't know whether I was [inaudible 17:47] or not but I thought I had to
18 say something else about him and I said, at the very end I wrote and a
19 good Republican because my family were all Republicans. [laughter]
20 And, you know, I was married to the man 2 months before I knew he
21 wasn't a Republican. [laughter]

22

23 [laughter]

24

25 Agnes Elaine Myers: But it didn't make any difference.

26

27 Ruth Banonis: No, I'm sure it didn't make any with you but it might have made a
28 difference with the family, a slight difference.

29

30 Agnes Elaine Myers: Well now, you know, it didn't. I, uh, my brother-in-law came. He was
31 the brother-in-law that took care of everything and everybody. He called
32 me up when they were having an election. And he said "Elaine, are you
33 registered?" And I said, "No, I'm not but I'd like to be." So he said "I'll
34 come down and getcha so you can register." And going up the hill, I lived
35 way down [inaudible 19:00] going up the hill in the car Walter said to me
36 "Now Elaine, I don't know what your affiliation is" but he said "I'm going
37 to tell you it would be wise for you to register as a Democrat because only
38 they, niggers and the white trash are registered Republicans." [laughter]

39

40 Ruth Banonis: Oh my.

41

42 Agnes Elaine Myers: So I said "What did you say?" And he repeated himself. And I couldn't
43 imagine my brother-in-law saying anything like that. [laughter]. When I
44 got up to City Hall, out in the corridor there's full of men and 1 woman

1 and she was a sister-in-law of mine and she was sitting clerk. And they
2 were all patting me on the back and saying “Oh, it’s so nice to know you
3 Ms. George” so on and so forth. And so, I went in to register and the girl
4 said to me “Are you Ms. George Myers” and I said “Yes, I am” and she
5 said “Oh, you know, I’ve known George since he was a little boy. We
6 went to school together” and so on and so forth. And, uh, so she took my
7 name and all of my history and then she said “And your affiliation is?” I
8 said Republican [laughter]. She said “Did you say republican?” and I said
9 [laughter] “Yes, I did.” So I went out and I said to my brother-in-law “I
10 just joined the niggers and the white trash.” [laughter].
11

12 Ruth Banonis: Good for you. [laughter]

13

14 Agnes Elaine Myers: So when my husband came home I was up in the sitting room and I didn’t
15 go down to meet him at the door and he came running up the stairs and he
16 stopped in the doorway and he threw his head back and he laughed. He
17 said “I hear you gave my brother a jolt [laughter] and I said “I did why?
18 How?” And, uh, so he said “You know, this town is very democratic and I
19 said “Well you don’t mean to tell me all your brothers are Democrats?”
20 and he said “They were born and reared Democrats and I guess that’s why
21 we are Democrats.” So I said “Well it doesn’t make any difference, does
22 it?? And he said [laughter] “Not to me it doesn’t.” So we would go to
23 vote together and he would vote as he wanted to vote and I’d would vote
24 as, we never talked about it.
25

26 Ruth Banonis: Good way to keep peace in the family.

27

28 Agnes Elaine Myers: Yeah. [laughter]

29

30 Ruth Banonis: Oh, uh, you mentioned that you, uh, conducted a tourist, a travel business
31 for several years.
32

33 Agnes Elaine Myers: I did, I didn’t conduct a business. Now I went to work for the Franco
34 [inaudible 22:29] Travel Company. I took 1 tour for them and I took 11
35 girls from Sweet Briar College. We were to be gone and we were gone 3
36 months. We were gone over 3 months. We visited 11 countries and, you
37 know, I never done anything in my life before. I didn’t know a thing
38 about conducting a tour. And, uh, but we had a, we had a very good time
39 and I had wonderful girls with me.
40

41 Ruth Banonis: [23:05] Well I hope you had someone else to take care of the tickets and
42 travel arrangements from country to country?
43

1 Agnes Elaine Myers: They were all taken care of in New York before I went and they were just
2 given. Our bills were paid, our hotel bills and things of that sort. And I
3 had all these papers. They didn't mean a thing to me but they, we went
4 over on the Vulcania which was an Italian ship. It was a beautiful ship.
5 And they told us we were spending an entire day in Gibraltar. We were
6 not scheduled for Gibraltar but the girls all said to me "Let's get off the
7 boat Ms. Myers and spend the day on Gibraltar" which we did. [throat
8 clearing] And we walked all around. We saw the monkeys and everything
9 [laughter] and the girls said to me, uh, we went up [top side 24:18] where
10 the British soldiers were [inaudible 24:23] and, uh, they were so delighted,
11 you know, to see all these pretty American girls that they just wanted to do
12 things for us. And there were 2 young lieutenants and the sergeant. They
13 said "Let us show you Gibraltar." So we said fine. I said well now I'll tell
14 you, "I'll let you show us Gibraltar if you will let me take you all to
15 dinner, to luncheon." Oh yes, they were glad. And we saw Gibraltar from
16 one end to the other.

17
18 Ruth Banonis: This concludes the interview with Agnes Elaine Myers who served with
19 the Army Nurse Corps during WWI from September 1917 until after the
20 end of the war. The interview was done by Ruth Banonis of the WOSL
21 Tampa Bay Unit.

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