

**Interview of retired U.S. Army Colonel Helen P. Onyett
on her service and the Army Nurse Corps during WWII**

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5 Ruth F. Stewart: [0:02] Helen P. Onyett is being interviewed today, as a member of the
6 Women's Overseas Service League, by Ruth F. Stewart. The date is April
7 the 8th, 2004, and we're at the Air Force Village 1 in San Antonio, Texas.
8
9 [0:20] Colonel Onyett, would you start out by telling a little bit about
10 where you were born and your early life?
11
12 Helen P. Onyett: I was born in Waterbury, Connecticut, uh, August 8-, August 18, 19-,
13 [throat clearing] August 14, 1918. Uh, I was 1 of 3 children. My parents
14 had a laundry in Waterbury, Connecticut.
15
16 Ruth F. Stewart: [0:54] And your schooling there, was that in public schools, or...?
17
18 Helen P. Onyett: I went to, uh, public schools, uh, grammar, as well as high school. I took
19 the [inaudible 1:06] preparatory college course because first they put me
20 in a vocational school but I asked them to change. From then on, I was on
21 my way. After that, I entered the Waterbury Hospital School of Nursing
22 in, I guess it was, uh, 19-, let's see, 30? '38, I think, or '39.
23
24 Ruth F. Stewart: [1:41] 1938?
25
26 Helen P. Onyett: Mm-hm. And I had 8 years at a, um, nursing school education. [inaudible
27 1:53] a graduate nurse [inaudible 1:55]. After that...
28
29 Ruth F. Stewart: [1:59] 8 years?
30
31 Helen P. Onyett: Mm-hm, 8 years.
32
33 Ruth F. Stewart: [2:01] In what? In a hospital?
34
35 Helen P. Onyett: And, no, I was in a grammar school.
36
37 Ruth F. Stewart: [2:06] But, but when you went into the Waterbury Hospital School of
38 Nursing, wasn't that like 3 years, like most of them?
39
40 Helen P. Onyett: That's right.
41
42 Ruth F. Stewart: [2:15] Okay.
43
44 Helen P. Onyett: I'm sorry, back up.

1
2 Ruth F. Stewart: [2:17] Yeah, okay.
3
4 Helen P. Onyett: I went to high school 4 years.
5
6 Ruth F. Stewart: [2:20] Yeah.
7
8 Helen P. Onyett: And then I entered the School of Nursing at Waterbury Hospital. That's
9 the same area where I was born.
10
11 Ruth F. Stewart: [2:28] Mm-hm. And what got you interested in nursing?
12
13 Helen P. Onyett: Well, my [father had a laundry 2:33] and they were trying to [hustle 2:37]
14 me to go to it, what they did and the kind of uniform they wore. They were
15 just lovely women who were World War I army nurse and she wore
16 sparkling white collars and [inaudible 2:53] she brought her [inaudible
17 2:55] and we talked to her a little bit and she told me what she did. I was
18 just enthralled with her and I got interested in it and she was such a picture
19 of, um, knowledge that I just had, I wanted to imitate her. 'Cause most of
20 our people in the town are factory people or some other less, uh,
21 professional jobs. And after that, I saw some other people, they were my
22 [Sunday School 3:33] teachers and my hu-, my brother's teachers and also
23 the principal of the high school. They all took an interest in me because
24 we were sort of [inaudible 3:48]. And my sister and brother are [inaudible
25 3:54] people and, uh, I was the only one who turned school/studious-
26 minded.
27
28 Ruth F. Stewart: [4:01] Were you the oldest?
29
30 Helen P. Onyett: So, I, uh, I spent a couple nights with the school teacher. She got me, uh,
31 acquainted with peers, also more about [homes she'd been in 4:16]. And
32 the Sunday School teacher who I [inaudible 4:21] and, uh, who taught me
33 manners and sometimes would have me [inaudible 4:25]. Um, my parents
34 had very little schooling. And after that, [throat clearing] they taught me
35 how to use silverware, use China, and, uh, at home, it was uncivilized to
36 use anything but chopsticks. So I probably [inaudible 4:46], plus their
37 companionship. Then my principal was remarkable. He wrote a
38 vocabulary book and every student had to take that course. And then
39 [inaudible 5:04]. I could spell like a whiz and I had a good vocabulary
40 with some [inaudible 5:12] and I really admired him. And he gave me the
41 idea of [professionalism 5:19].
42
43 Ruth F. Stewart: [5:21] Mm-hm.
44

1Helen P. Onyett: And, after that, um, when I was in nursing, my [nursing arts 5:28] teacher
2 was a wonderful example of a nurse. She did everything perfect and had
3 the manner of a person that liked people. And she did a beautiful job.
4 Some of the other people who encouraged me were the other teachers in
5 the school, either by [inaudible 5:54] subjects but then some were
6 [inaudible 5:59] because of the lack of a skill. For instance, I, I have to say
7 this, uh, we were a very prudish school. Most of our instructions were
8 from, uh, a nursing school that were very prim and proper.
9

10Ruth F. Stewart: [6:21] Mm-hm.
11

12Helen P. Onyett: And, uh, strict. So, as you know, when we came to study, um, the human
13 re-, re-, reproductive system and, uh, [inaudible 6:34], it was, "Read your
14 book!" That was where we learned. Also, the [inaudible 6:41] I didn't
15 understand, um, pharmacology. She would always make me [inaudible
16 6:49]. [inaudible 6:52]. [inaudible 6:53]. And I said to her, [inaudible
17 7:01].
18

19Ruth F. Stewart: [7:04] [laughter]
20

21Helen P. Onyett: And then after that, there were various teachers in high school and college
22 that, uh, [inaudible 7:12] because of their, uh, knowledge. [You want some
23 more 7:18].
24

25Ruth F. Stewart: [7:20] So then you went through the 3 years at the Waterbury Hospital
26 School of Nursing?
27

28Helen P. Onyett: Mm-hm.
29

30Ruth F. Stewart: [7:25] And what did you do when you got out of that? When you, when
31 you successfully completed that education?
32

33Helen P. Onyett: In the 4 years of high school and, uh, I took a short course in, uh, business
34 because I loved, I loved clerisy. I couldn't go to, uh, work or anything, so,
35 I learned how to type and shorthand. So, anyway, I never worked for any
36 time except for [inaudible 7:53].
37

38Ruth F. Stewart: [7:55] And then h-, what got you interested in the army?
39

40Helen P. Onyett: Well, about that time, unless you wanted to go to the factory or working
41 the 5 & 10, you had to work on [inaudible 8:08] through the army
42 [inaudible 8:10] job and, uh, I was started [inaudible 8:14]. I was going.
43 My brother was also in the army and I wanted to go help him out.
44

1 Ruth F. Stewart: [8:22] That was right at the beginning of World War II, right?
2
3 Helen P. Onyett: Yeah. And so I applied to the Red Cross because they got a new [student
4 8:31] program and did a wonderful job of recruiting. That's why they had
5 so many nurses join the corps. After then, there were not very many
6 nurses. And, of course, it was close to [pushing 8:44] time so it was
7 difficult to do anything without an [inaudible 8:48], which required
8 schooling. After that, I was on my way to the army and I, I started my
9 adventure. It was the most positive experience I've ever had. I did things
10 in the army, which later on developed [inaudible 9:11] and, um,
11 knowledge, experience. Not because, uh, I looked for it but because I
12 happened to be there. And like when we were going across the sea, we
13 were off our ship [inaudible 9:30] and the, the, uh, commander was
14 [inaudible 9:35] by flipping our lights out and all I could do was just brush
15 my teeth and go stay in my [inaudible 9:45] and he laughed and I laughed
16 [inaudible 9:49]. [laughter]
17
18 Ruth F. Stewart: [9:54] [laughter]
19
20 Helen P. Onyett: There were little [inaudible 9:56]. Um, going on our overseas [inaudible
21 10:04]. Of course, uh, [inaudible 10:07], a homebody. And I learned how
22 to meet people, how to know them, how to understand them, and, uh, up
23 to then, I was very shy. But you get along with them when you're on
24 shipboard and all these [inaudible 10:28] are praying by their signals on
25 [inaudible 10:32]. And so we'd pass out the window, uh, on our [inaudible
26 10:42] and they loved this so it a very heavy [population 10:53] of
27 [bluebirds 10:54].
28
29 Ruth F. Stewart: [10:55] Yeah. You shared, you shared the wealth.
30
31 Helen P. Onyett: And, uh, onboard ship, we had, uh, play time or free time on the deck.
32 [inaudible 11:11] and we got to [inaudible 11:18] my hometown. We
33 looked around to see where [inaudible 11:23] Oklahoma! And [inaudible
34 11:27] ask them what they did and, what, how they did it and, uh, what did
35 they learn and [inaudible 11:34] pistol-packing mama. And I said, "Oh,
36 that's your theme song!" and they were all laughing [inaudible 11:46]. Oh
37 no, it's a popular song! And all of us in there [inaudible 11:52]. I didn't
38 know because I'm watching the, in the dormitory and they won't let us
39 [inaudible 11:59]. And they left it there, they didn't [inaudible 12:02] and
40 so we learned it in the [outdoors person 12:06]. And, as a result, I met
41 many friends. One of them was a, uh, the cousin, the, the brother of a chief
42 surgeon of my hospital and when he found out, he told me to stop playing
43 [inaudible 12:26] and he got a little [inaudible 12:30] of the officers and,

1 as [he'd been 12:33] nursing and we had a party every, uh, [10th 12:37]
2 and it was one [inaudible 12:40] the whole time.
3
4 Ruth F. Stewart: [12:42] Now, this was still while you on shipboard?
5
6 Helen P. Onyett: And I just [inaudible 12:45] just sat there on the, and then they were so
7 shy we had to go to the bathroom and so we, uh, kinda [inaudible 12:56]
8 get kind of antsy. One of the colonels said, "Ladies, [inaudible 13:04] um,
9 what's it called? The...
10
11 Ruth F. Stewart: [13:13] Outhouse?
12
13 Helen P. Onyett: The outhouse! And, uh, these gentlemen were escorting us. They will
14 guard you when [inaudible 13:21] other enemies just hanging around.
15
16 Ruth F. Stewart: [13:26] This was after you landed then?
17
18 Helen P. Onyett: Yeah, after we landed. And we [inaudible 13:29].
19
20 Ruth F. Stewart: [13:29] And, was this is north Africa?
21
22 Helen P. Onyett: We didn't know what it was.
23
24 Ruth F. Stewart: [13:32] Oh. [laughter]
25
26 Helen P. Onyett: So, um, when we got there, I [inaudible 13:38] and it was midnight and
27 left them there and it smelled wonderful! I was [inaudible 13:48] trying to
28 smell it. But me and the officer would play back and forth, questioning,
29 "Who's there?" "Who's there?" And, uh, we felt very secure [inaudible
30 14:00]. Unfortunately, I'm one of these people who have [inaudible 14:06]
31 and, as a result, I had to go [inaudible 14:09]. [laughter] Uh, later on...
32
33 Ruth F. Stewart: [14:16] Now was, was this in north Africa that you landed?
34
35 Helen P. Onyett: Yeah.
36
37 Ruth F. Stewart: [14:19] Okay.
38
39 Helen P. Onyett: And so later on, we served with a [inaudible 14:23] 2 or 3 times [inaudible
40 14:25] men. They served in our unit, uh, as outside officers who had, uh,
41 different jobs than nursing. And, uh, we kind of [partied 14:39] around
42 with our, uh, [inaudible 14:42] helping a person be comfortable down to
43 putting on some bandages and controlling [bleeding 14:52]. Then I got
44 [inaudible 14:54] and, um, and people who need surgery right away

1 [inaudible 15:02] of, um, of the, um, different words for [inaudible 15:10].
2 Uh, um, [expectant 15:16] [inaudible 15:18] and those are the ones that
3 don't really need help anymore.
4
5 Ruth F. Stewart: [15:24] The triage?
6
7 Helen P. Onyett: They're just gonna be [inaudible 15:26] away, and the pregnant. 'Cause
8 you couldn't do anything for them 'cause they're just having a baby. And
9 then we had the first aid, which is the imminent, which, uh, those we were
10 to control bleeding and stuff. So, we learned fast and kind of [inaudible
11 15:46] and, uh, learned as you went. And we [inaudible 15:54].
12
13 Ruth F. Stewart: [15:54] Did you have a hospital building? What kind of, what kind of
14 facility [inaudible 15:58]?
15
16 Helen P. Onyett: We were in a tent hospital and it was cold and rainy. And there was a
17 [inaudible 16:04] on a wooden floor. Some people didn't have floors so
18 the wind would creep up under the tents. [inaudible 16:14] some didn't
19 have enough, uh, protection and the boys would be kind of generous and
20 would give us their army blankets [inaudible 16:26]. [laughter] And then
21 we had, uh, German war blankets but the, uh, [inaudible 16:35]. We got
22 our souvenirs. We got 'm [inaudible 16:39] having to go into Germany.
23 And, uh, we got to, um, sleep in our tents 24 hours a day and maybe 1 day
24 a week, uh, we'd get a pass to go to town. And they had a room in one of
25 the hotels, which was a [inaudible 17:02], meaning it was a, like a
26 vacation. And so we'd go in there when [inaudible 17:10] had time and
27 [inaudible 17:13] and then come back to staff. And all of us enjoyed it.
28
29 Ruth F. Stewart: [17:18] Now, uh, you, you lived in tents with wooden floors. Were the
30 patients in tents, too?
31
32 Helen P. Onyett: They were brought in whenever there was a movement. If there was a
33 movement going on, we got an influx of maybe, 100 to 150 patients. We
34 worked night and day [inaudible 17:44] on the way. We had an operating
35 room, we had medical and surgical wards, [inaudible 17:50]. They were
36 all gathered in the tents [inaudible 17:56].
37
38 Ruth F. Stewart: [17:57] They were in tents, too, then?
39
40 Helen P. Onyett: Yeah. There [inaudible 18:00] and, uh, [better acquainted 18:05] with
41 [inaudible 18:06] ordinarily. And we had [inaudible 18:12]. Needless to
42 say, it was very hard to eat overseeing the tents. We didn't have enough
43 food. We had to do rationing. Those were unbearable, sometimes it was
44 impossible. We had to eat. And so, unless officers were eating. We at least

1 had [to eat 18:41]. [inaudible 18:43] and we always had milk and then
2 sometimes [inaudible 18:50] but they took care of us. We always had
3 bread and butter 'cause we had a bakery on the post and, uh, they made
4 butter [inaudible 19:02]. But everyone worked together [inaudible 19:07].
5 And they knew how to [inaudible 19:09] [laughter] each other. I worked,
6 uh, personally 24 hours a day and, uh, all of the nurses did that. We had
7 [inaudible 19:21], we worked hard and then, no griping, no bitching, just
8 go ahead and do it. It's gotta be done. And on night duty, it was the ones
9 [inaudible 19:35] worked 12 hours [inaudible 19:37]. And, um, I
10 remember [inaudible 19:42] and, uh, I'll send, uh, [inaudible 19:50].
11 [inaudible 20:00]. They were just wonderful. And then for the patients I
12 always made cocoa or [inaudible 20:13] or, uh, some other snack once an
13 evening and I made them work. They had to get out of bed and stir cocoa
14 or watch the, uh, flies [inaudible 20:28] so, really, it was good play time in
15 a country that was being [inaudible 20:34]. And the [inaudible 20:36],
16 they didn't have anybody who was out of order or griped. And, um, I
17 really enjoyed it. Only, it was cold. So then when I go to bed, I have [57
18 20:51] blankets on me and they did manage to get them in [laughter] and I
19 wore long johns under my fatigues under my [inaudible 21:02] uniform.
20 And then they got more in – I was shedding'm off. I [inaudible 21:10]
21 when all of a sudden, [inaudible 21:15] alert, you're going to go home!" I
22 said, "Oh no, no, no [inaudible 21:20]." Then I got done and they said,
23 [inaudible 21:27]. Oh, they did that so many times. I got to the, uh, the
24 point where I didn't care. "I'll come, I'll come, I'll come!" and it was
25 kinda funny because the girls had, uh, a [inaudible 21:42].

26
27 Ruth F. Stewart: [21:44] Had what?

28
29 Helen P. Onyett: An [inaudible 21:45], like, uh, weapons and, um, [inaudible 21:50], a
30 silver tool sort of thing. We all learned how to live that. And it's now a
31 shame to go [inaudible 22:01] and then to get'm but we wore'm and we
32 shared'm and were comfortable. So, uh, most of the girls [inaudible 22:10]
33 humor and, uh, [inaudible 22:13] had one had to be sent home because of,
34 uh, they were pregnant or some other reason. But, uh, they had to go
35 home. [inaudible 22:25] And, um, but [inaudible 22:28], but of course, so
36 are they.

37
38 Ruth F. Stewart: [22:38] Did, um, did you have a chief nurse there or who was in charge of
39 your nursing there?

40
41 Helen P. Onyett: Well, we had, uh, a captain at that time [inaudible 22:48] chief nurse and
42 she'd go around and give, uh, pep speeches and then sometimes we'd, uh,
43 rally around it, um, [inaudible 23:01] and, uh, we looked at her and go,
44 "Oh dear..." one of those things. And then, I had to go to the [inaudible

1 23:13] sometimes. [inaudible 23:14]. Sometimes they're out, which
2 [inaudible 23:20] preparation [inaudible 23:23] to put'm in the [bedroll
3 23:35]. I [inaudible 23:26] did that. But I was [inaudible 23:29] and I had
4 about 23 boxes of [inaudible 23:33] but I had talcum powder and the cans
5 [became burst 23:42] and there was [inaudible 23:44]. [laughter] I smelled
6 wonderful for about 3 months. [laughter] But anyway [inaudible 23:52]
7 we packed, uh, extra diapers 'cause of that [inaudible 23:56]. But most of
8 us were well-prepared for our tour of duty because in the, uh, overseas talk
9 they would tell us what we'd need and what we should bring. And not too
10 much, you always had 2 bedrolls.
11
12 Ruth F. Stewart: [24:22] How long were you in north Africa, then?
13
14 Helen P. Onyett: I had, um, a good 2½ years on duty. Uh, on, in the, um, army. Then I
15 [reupped 24:37] and...
16
17 Ruth F. Stewart: [24:40] And that was through World War II? For your 3½ years?
18
19 Helen P. Onyett: Yeah. Yeah, we were discharged at the end of 3 years.
20
21 Ruth F. Stewart: [24:47] Were you in north Africa the whole time?
22
23 Helen P. Onyett: I came back to, uh, Virginia, uh, for the last year and I was stuck there for
24 almost a year. And, um, I thought, "Well, I'll [inaudible 25:02] stay put,"
25 and so I [reupped 25:06]. And I didn't have any [terms 25:08] that
26 [legislated 25:09], uh, indefinite. So I stayed more, about 5 or 6 years. But
27 all the time we went from [prison camps 25:20] and then I got married.
28 And we were able to be [inaudible 25:27] and since I'm [inaudible 25:30].
29
30 Ruth F. Stewart: [25:31] He was in the army, too?
31
32 Helen P. Onyett: Yeah. [inaudible 25:33].
33
34 Ruth F. Stewart: [25:37] We'll look at that – we'll look at the pictures afterward.
35
36 Helen P. Onyett: He was the medical supply officer for the camp that I was [inaudible
37 25:45]. And then, we didn't know each other until almost the last year we
38 were there. [inaudible 25:53].
39
40 Ruth F. Stewart: [26:00] Mm-hm. Mm-hm.
41
42 Helen P. Onyett: We [inaudible 26:02], we had some [pre-med 26:05] and when he got out,
43 he went to medical school. So, when I got out, I went into a, a basic, uh,
44 college. [inaudible 26:20]. I was gonna go to nursing then I found out they

1 wouldn't let you take, uh, OB nursing. I wanted to, uh, move, uh, but they
2 said, "Oh no! The course now is basic nursing. [inaudible 26:39]." I said,
3 "Heck, I've had enough of that!" I wanted [inaudible 26:44]. I said,
4 "Okay." I left. I said, "Thank you!" And I think they were horrified but at
5 that time, you almost wanted [inaudible 26:56] have it. And, uh, I went on
6 to school and decided I would take, uh, something [inaudible 27:03]. So I
7 have a degree in, uh, medical technology [inaudible 27:09] service. So I
8 took, uh, 3 years and I took another year, uh, getting my BS in medical
9 technology. But this is the same thing as the [inaudible 27:30] course.
10 [inaudible 27:32] I didn't go there last year. I was in some of my classes
11 [inaudible 27:38]. And I beat'm [inaudible 27:41]. [laughter] [inaudible
12 27:46], he didn't say. [inaudible 27:50].
13
14 Ruth F. Stewart: [27:52] [inaudible 27:52].
15
16 Helen P. Onyett: I have to [inaudible 27:55]. And, uh, so I've been with medical technology
17 [inaudible 28:02] hospital after that. And all this time, I, uh, got out of the
18 army, I stayed in the reserves. I kept it all on [inaudible 28:17] for about
19 [inaudible 28:20] years in the reserve.
20
21 Ruth F. Stewart: [28:24] But you were in the, uh, regular army for how long?
22
23 Helen P. Onyett: Uh, it was about 5 years.
24
25 Ruth F. Stewart: [28:32] Just during the war and shortly thereafter?
26
27 Helen P. Onyett: Mm-hm.
28
29 Ruth F. Stewart: [28:35] And then the reserves for, let's see, for about 5 years and then the
30 reserves for about 10?
31
32 Helen P. Onyett: Well, I returned. That was [inaudible 28:47].
33
34 Ruth F. Stewart: [28:49] When?
35
36 Helen P. Onyett: Age 60.
37
38 Ruth F. Stewart: [28:51] When you were 60?
39
40 Helen P. Onyett: [inaudible 28:52] never get out.
41
42 Ruth F. Stewart: [28:53] Okay. Okay. And at age 60, then, that was in, uh, '74? You were
43 born in 1918, so it would be '78.
44

1Helen P. Onyett: [In the 80s 29:07].
2
3Ruth F. Stewart: [29:14] Okay.
4
5Helen P. Onyett: [inaudible 29:15]. My, uh, stroke got in there somewhere.
6
7Ruth F. Stewart: [29:21] Yeah.
8
9Helen P. Onyett: I have a little lapses where I can't remember but I remember doing things,
10 but not all...
11
12Ruth F. Stewart: [29:28] Mm-hm.
13
14Helen P. Onyett: I remember most of it but not in the hospital, some of it comes back
15 almost, uh, slowly but my memory's good!
16
17Ruth F. Stewart: [29:38] Good. Good.
18
19Helen P. Onyett: I'm surprised I [inaudible 29:40] but, and, uh, [inaudible 29:44]! And, you
20 know, I, I [inaudible 29:49] about 10 to 12 years.
21
22Ruth F. Stewart: [29:52] Now, how did you get to be a colonel if you weren't in all that
23 long?
24
25Helen P. Onyett: I was in there, in the reserves.
26
27Ruth F. Stewart: [29:58] Through the reserves, you got to be a colonel?
28
29Helen P. Onyett: Mm-hm. [inaudible 30:01].
30
31Ruth F. Stewart: [30:01] And where were you in the reserves then?
32
33Helen P. Onyett: I, that would be '50, '55, I spent in [inaudible 30:09], maybe 10 or 12
34 years.
35
36Ruth F. Stewart: [30:18] Mm-hm. And, um, where were you there? What, where were you
37 located there?
38
39Helen P. Onyett: Uh, I was in, uh, Connecticut.
40
41Ruth F. Stewart: [30:27] Back in Waterbury? Okay. Okay then, um, basically then, after,
42 during the reserves though, you were involved with the regular, training
43 regularly?
44

1Helen P. Onyett: Mm-hm. In the reserves, I was in a General Hospital Unit and with
2 [inaudible 30:53] Hospital. And, at that time, we were [inaudible 31:00]
3 from World War II [inaudible 31:04]. I'm trying to think [inaudible 31:06]
4 conquered the world and they weren't gonna go to school. They just
5 wanted to play. And I was pretty hard on them because I said, "You
6 [inaudible 31:17] or you can stay another year. Are you going to
7 [inaudible 31:25]?" and I became a [inaudible 31:29] really pushed it
8 because there was no, uh, [inaudible 31:34]. And all the officers in the unit
9 were World War II and they didn't want, uh, to, uh, go back [and shiver
10 31:46] and why should they [inaudible 31:48] military? And we had a
11 wonderful team [inaudible 31:54], uh, we liked each other and we did
12 things [inaudible 31:58].
13
14Ruth F. Stewart: [31:59] Mm-hm.
15
16Helen P. Onyett: Well, we, uh, had so many, uh, [inaudible 32:03]. First, we have a seasick
17 corpsman and we had to [develop 32:11] a teaching program. And, uh,
18 since I was the only one, I'd be really restless. I was working there, I was
19 probably the best student. In the meantime, I just took it to heart because I
20 love [inaudible 32:28]. I love teaching and I liked the fellows and I got to
21 where I knew their quirks and a lot of'm were, uh, meds, med-student
22 [image 32:39] and they were working their way through school. Some of
23 them were gong to college. I said, "Excuse me [fellas 32:47], you're going
24 to have to spend a certain number of years, you might as well come in
25 nursing and learn the procedures and then get promoted." I got so many
26 of'm promoted. [inaudible 33:00].
27
28Ruth F. Stewart: [33:09] [laughter]
29
30Helen P. Onyett: And they loved it. And, one particular time was good. We had [inaudible
31 33:17]. It was kind of [inaudible 33:20], "I can't do that! They're dirty!"
32 We'd say, "You don't wear gloves!" and I said [inaudible 33:30].
33 [inaudible 33:33] he didn't want anybody to change their mind. I said,
34 "We're gonna have [inaudible 33:38]. It was [fascinating 33:45]. He got to
35 be a doctor. [laughter] And, uh, [inaudible 33:51]. And, uh, he got
36 promoted right out. And I, I turned in [inaudible 33:57]. Uh, helped their
37 curve a little bit. And then they just wanted to get it over with. They
38 quickly did their job. And then [inaudible 34:07] a, a non-com. So,
39 whenever I [inaudible 34:13], they were wonderful because, uh, I wanted
40 to, [inaudible 34:17] one time. And all of the [inaudible 34:20] stand
41 attention [inaudible 34:23] and, uh, [inaudible 34:26] salute [inaudible
42 34:32]. [inaudible 34:33] [laughter] [inaudible 34:46] for a colonel.
43 [inaudible 34:50].
44

1 Ruth F. Stewart: [34:50] [inaudible 34:50].
2
3 Helen P. Onyett: Do you ever get an [inaudible 34:52]?
4
5 Ruth F. Stewart: [34:53] I've heard bird colonel but not chicken colonel. [laughter]
6
7 Helen P. Onyett: [inaudible 34:56] uh, whatchamacallit. 'Cause she was a lady during one
8 of her [inaudible 35:03] [laughter].
9
10 Ruth F. Stewart: [35:04] [laughter]
11
12 Helen P. Onyett: And I thought that was so funny! No, he was telling me and I thought,
13 "Well, that's great!" [inaudible 35:12].
14
15 Ruth F. Stewart: [35:14] Now, you were in the reserves back Waterbury during that period.
16 What were you doing the time that you were not in the reserves? You
17 were, you had a full-time job besides the reserves, didn't you?
18
19 Helen P. Onyett: Well, I [inaudible 35:27] have, um, 2 years, I was teaching the School of
20 Nursing.
21
22 Ruth F. Stewart: [35:32] Oh!
23
24 Helen P. Onyett: I went to uh, uh, [Indiana University 35:34]. I taught about, uh, 3 or 4
25 years and then when they were [inaudible 35:41] events, in, instructors
26 they picked their friends so I decided I didn't [inaudible 35:53] if they're
27 going to show favoritism. Then I went to General Hospital [inaudible
28 35:58] and I knew some people there [inaudible 36:03] and so I got a good
29 job there. I stayed about 3 years. I went from [inaudible 36:15] because I
30 don't see any sense in staying if I didn't like it.
31
32 Ruth F. Stewart: [36:20] Mm-hm.
33
34 Helen P. Onyett: That's because I, uh, got this job [inaudible 36:27].
35
36 Ruth F. Stewart: [36:29] Employee's Insurance...
37
38 Helen P. Onyett: ...of [Wausau 36:31] [inaudible 36:33].
39
40 Ruth F. Stewart: [36:33] Warsaw?
41
42 Helen P. Onyett: [inaudible 36:34], what? It's a [inaudible 36:36] insurance company. It's
43 changing and they call it [Wausau Story 36:42]. And so, uh, that became
44 the [company 36:47].

1
2 Ruth F. Stewart: [36:47] How do you spell that?
3
4 Helen P. Onyett: W-A-U-S-A-U.
5
6 Ruth F. Stewart: [36:52] Okay.
7
8 Helen P. Onyett: It's in Wausau, Wisconsin.
9
10 Ruth F. Stewart: [36:57] Okay.
11
12 Helen P. Onyett: You know, you talk about cold!
13
14 Ruth F. Stewart: [36:59] [laughter]
15
16 Helen P. Onyett: At first, I thought, you know, [inaudible 37:02]. I stayed there 15 years.
17
18 Ruth F. Stewart: [37:10] Mm.
19
20 Helen P. Onyett: And I said, "I'll never stay here that long!" but I kept [inaudible 37:16]. I
21 had a lot of friends there.
22
23 Ruth F. Stewart: [37:19] That was occupational nursing, then?
24
25 Helen P. Onyett: Yeah, this was, uh, occupational plus, uh, the other nursing I did, just on
26 medicine. I was teaching about [inaudible 37:32], uh, [inaudible 37:34],
27 um, [battery 37:37]. We'd go into [inaudible 37:39]. And [inaudible
28 37:41] I knew these things and they were [inaudible 37:45] and I said,
29 "Oh, hell, I didn't know you knew this!" I said, "Well, I just [inaudible
30 37:51] and so I taught them. So, [inaudible 37:57] did most of the teaching
31 there. Uh, I stayed because [inaudible 38:03] nursing in the [inaudible
32 38:08].
33
34 Ruth F. Stewart: [38:09] Mm-hm.
35
36 Helen P. Onyett: They have a [inaudible 38:10] because, at that time, that new, uh,
37 insurance, uh, [inaudible 38:23] where you could be, uh, fired or, uh, fined
38 for doing the wrong thing at all, [inaudible 38:38]. So, [inaudible 38:46]
39 teaching and I did a lot of the [inaudible 38:50] because, uh, I was kind of
40 concerned about [inaudible 38:55]. I wanted them on my own so I would
41 listen more and I knew the professor and he taught me a lot. So, we put on
42 a school and we taught nurses who would like to come in and, uh,
43 [inaudible 39:10]. And then I told the doctors. They said, "I didn't know
44 [inaudible 39:16]." I said, "Well, come in our class and, uh, we'll go over

1 the, uh, basic [inaudible 39:23].” They loved it! Some of them were
2 [inaudible 39:25].
3
4 Ruth F. Stewart: [39:25] You were in the reserves then throughout all of this time on
5 weekends and [inaudible 39:29]?
6
7 Helen P. Onyett: Yeah, I was [inaudible 39:29]. I would also, I took time off from one to go
8 to the other.
9
10 Ruth F. Stewart: [39:33] Mm-hm.
11
12 Helen P. Onyett: I’d have to leave or...
13
14 Ruth F. Stewart: [39:35] Were, did you, um, where you involved in any veterans’
15 organizations? Were you involved with veterans’ groups?
16
17 Helen P. Onyett: [Veterans 39:44]?
18
19 Ruth F. Stewart: [39:45] Veterans. Military veterans?
20
21 Helen P. Onyett: No.
22
23 Ruth F. Stewart: Did you join any of the organizations, other than WOSL (Women’s
24 Overseas Service League)?
25
26 Helen P. Onyett: No, I didn’t like’m because I had a bad, uh, situation, uh, when I wanted
27 to, they weren’t interested in me.
28
29 Ruth F. Stewart: [40:03] No women? They didn’t want women?
30
31 Helen P. Onyett: And I, I fell in love and wanted them [inaudible 40:08] and I didn’t like
32 what they were doing all the while [inaudible 40:12] and, you know,
33 [inaudible 40:15] medical work.
34
35 Ruth F. Stewart: [40:21] Do you think it was because you were a woman? Was that when
36 they were not allowing women in?
37
38 Helen P. Onyett: Well, not only that but [inaudible 40:27]. There is a level of men who, uh,
39 who like to pretend and like to talk. And then so all that you’re doing,
40 really, is talk [inaudible 40:40] and I [inaudible 40:42].
41
42 Ruth F. Stewart: [40:44] Mm-hm. Well, I sure do appreciate your giving me all this
43 information for the Library of Congress Project. It’s been very interesting.
44 You had a great career, didn’t you?

1
2Helen P. Onyett: I had a wonderful career! Because of, uh, my friends in the army and my
3 other job [inaudible 41:03] led to the point where I am now, where I know
4 a lot of things about many things and hopefully keep putting it to good
5 use. Up to now, I haven't seen it but I have [inaudible 41:19] people I've
6 helped. [inaudible 41:21].
7
8Ruth F. Stewart: [41:23] Mm-hm.
9
10Helen P. Onyett: And, uh, help them there [inaudible 41:26].
11
12Ruth F. Stewart: [41:27] So you're still doing nursing?
13
14Helen P. Onyett: Yeah. I'm a recruiter.
15
16Ruth F. Stewart: [41:31] Yeah?
17
18Helen P. Onyett: I did that and that's how I got that [inaudible 41:34].
19
20Ruth F. Stewart: [41:35] Yeah. Uh-huh.
21
22Helen P. Onyett: They did that because I was very [inaudible 41:39].
23
24Ruth F. Stewart: [41:41] Mm-hm.
25
26Helen P. Onyett: [inaudible 41:42] I recruited 20 people.
27
28Ruth F. Stewart: [41:50] Mm-hm.
29
30Helen P. Onyett: Nurses, as well as men.
31
32Ruth F. Stewart: [41:52] Good!
33
34Helen P. Onyett: Who were interested in, uh, the, uh, kind of work we had. [inaudible
35 41:58]. So then I was a [inaudible 42:00] Washington.
36
37Ruth F. Stewart: [42:03] Mm-hm.
38
39Helen P. Onyett: [inaudible 42:04].
40
41
42/ab