

1 **Interview of Helene Finston Denny on her service in England and France as a part of the**
2 **Red Cross during WWII**

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4
5 Ruth Banonis: This is an interview with Helene Denny, who was with the American Red
6 Cross in WWII. [00:09] Helene?

7
8 Helene Denny: Thank you, Ruth. Uh, I would like to share with you some of the things
9 that happened to me at that period of time in my life. Some were
10 interesting, some were tragic. Believe it or not, the majority was hilarious
11 and I had a tremendous culture impact, uh.

12
13 Ruth Banonis: This experience started in 1941, I think you said.

14
15 Helene Denny: I was a student nurse when we were giving aid to Britain, when Britain
16 was standing [inaudible 00:38] against the axis impact. And I had gotten
17 myself engaged to a young British Marine, and I knew at that point in time
18 he had been injured in the Pacific when Singapore fell. And I became an
19 avid Anglophile, which was a case of practically treason. I come from the
20 Scots-Irish American. [laughter] But, uh, it was a lovely time to me in
21 New York. Let me just give you a little bit about New York before we go
22 into my overseas duty, Ruth. This was the times of the Bundles for Britain
23 and everybody was working so hard to help the cause. And, of course, the
24 USO was in full swing in New York, the Stage Door Canteen. And even
25 though we were only as student nurses permitted out from 7 to 10 at night,
26 we went out every single [inaudible 01:32]. I come from the generation of
27 white gloves and the dance craze, and it was a marvelous time to be
28 young. I finished my nurses training in September 1942. I had married
29 the prior July 9. My husband had come to the United States being
30 repatriated [inaudible 01:50] Great Britain. And after graduation in
31 September, I took my State Boards to become a registered professional
32 nurse in October 2, 3, and 4; and at 19 years of age, sailed to North Africa
33 on October 18, 1942.

34
35 Ruth Banonis: [02:11] Was it exciting?

36
37 Helene Denny: I was on the old Hope. The first service I saw overseas was on the USS
38 Hope.

39
40 Ruth Banonis: [02:17] And that was the hospital ship?

41
42 Helene Denny: Yes. And, uh, I was such a credit to be such an asset and the world's worst
43 sailor. They sent me back to Great Britain and they attached me to British
44 Civil Defense. I arrived in time just to sit in my State Boards there and I

1 became [inaudible 02:36] registered nurse in Great Britain and they
2 immediately sent me back to school in Edinburgh and I studied [inaudible
3 02:43] the University of Edinburgh in triage. I celebrated my 20th birthday
4 at this period of time. And as soon as I had furthered my education in
5 triage, I was assigned to a unit of mobile hospital and triage, mostly triage,
6 in that I needed some experience in that area and this was from the
7 [inaudible 03:09] all the way down to South Hampton. And most of the
8 work I did was in that area of Great Britain. Several times our contingent
9 was called up to London. I was called down to Plymouth. It was terrible,
10 horrible [inaudible 03:25] time that they had where Plymouth was
11 practically destroyed. I was also in Portsmouth for their 18-day raid.
12 [inaudible 03:36] never seen so many airplanes in my life.
13
14 Ruth Banonis: I don't remember too much about that [inaudible 03:43].
15
16 Helene Denny: Uh, yes. That was, that was in, um, just after 1943. In fact, it happened
17 over the Christmas of '42, and before I went back to school they sent me
18 down and that was my baptism of fire. And why I chose to learn triage, I
19 felt my education here in America as a hospital nurse would not prepare
20 me for the type of nursing that was needed there at that point in time and
21 [inaudible 04:11]. I learned a tremendous amount. Um, one of the most
22 amazing things that happened, that I think happens is that you can learn to
23 tolerate anything. I had decided, I made a pact with myself if I was going
24 to be killed in one of these raids, I was going to be warm in bed, not in a
25 cold, damp, miserable shelter. [chuckle] As a result, I was always in
26 trouble with my superiors for not going to the shelters. [chuckle] I
27 happened to be the only American with my contingent for almost 2 years.
28 Most of us were quite a mixed bag. It was very interesting. There were a
29 couple of Australians and Canadians, and of course, British personnel, uh.
30
31 Ruth Banonis: [04:53] Well, who recruited? Uh, International Red Cross?
32
33 Helene Denny: The International Red Cross assigned people from other ca-, other
34 countries within the Red Cross.
35
36 Ruth Banonis: I see.
37
38 Helene Denny: And you had a choice. I could have gone to Germany. They would have
39 sent me to wherever I felt that I wanted to go.
40
41 Ruth Banonis: Mm-hm.
42
43 Helene Denny: Um, needless to say, I chose Britain hoping that my husband would
44 eventually come to Britain. We, um, it was very unique. Many of the

1 Canadian nurses had the same type of training that I did, which was vastly
2 different from how they trained abroad. We had to make an adjustment
3 there, but being that I didn't work in hospitals, it really didn't make that
4 much difference.

5

6Ruth Banonis: Yes.

7

8Helene Denny: Uh, what I learned there helped me and stayed for the rest of my career. I
9 stayed in the emergency triage disaster-type of nursing right to this day,
10 right here in [inaudible 05:56]. Um, several very amusing things
11 happened to me. I decided at that point in time like most very young
12 people, somebody who has terrible [inaudible 06:08] I had a set of twins
13 [inaudible 06:10] the Radcliffe Infirmary. [chuckle] And a very dear
14 friend of mine was evacuated with her children and my babies and I
15 rejoined my contingent immediately and we invaded in 1944. I was
16 transferred from British Civil Defense to the American Army. And the
17 whole period of the invasion from over 24 hours adrift, we, we should
18 have invaded on a Sunday. We actually didn't bomb until the Monday. I
19 was down on the docks in Portsmouth Dockyard. And originally we were
20 there for triage when we were bringing back the LSTs and the destroyer
21 [inaudible 06:55] and practically anything that they were bringing back
22 [inaudible 06:58]. I continued working with the American Army right into
23 the [inaudible 07:02]. And then they, I guess it was D-Day [inaudible
24 07:08] a friend of mine took me on an official airplane ride and we went
25 over the beaches. He showed me where all my work had been coming
26 from [inaudible 07:19] and, uh, we had to be very young to be able to
27 assimilate such a thing. I don't think I could do that today.

28

29Ruth Banonis: Very hard [inaudible 07:30].

30

31Helene Denny: I worked on the Capricorn [inaudible 07:32] 26 men [inaudible 07:36],
32 um, like everything else, [inaudible 07:42]...

33

34Ruth Banonis: [07:43] I think, uh, maybe since this is for historical purposes, you might,
35 uh, say more about the Capricorn incident.

36

37Helene Denny: Well, that will bring us 40 years later. Do you want that now?

38

39Ruth Banonis: Well, yes, but, uh...

40

41Helene Denny: Fine. The Capricorn was an American Coast Guard cutter that had been
42 into our – into the Tampa Bay area for repairs and was returning to its
43 base in Galveston, Texas. And the first night out on a beautiful calm
44 moonlight night going down the channel and had just gone under our very

1 famous Skyway Bridge, it collided and actually crawled up the side of a
2 huge tanker, found itself impaled upon the anchor and was capsized and
3 tossed back and sank immediately and everybody below deck was
4 captured below deck and did drown. Only 1 body floated away.
5 Everybody who was above deck was thrown clear and was – there were
6 survivors which were brought to one of our local hospitals. Um, let me
7 give you an interesting point of view what happened with that. This
8 occurred in the middle of a channel and the – it included 3 of our counties
9 in the Tampa Bay area. On the north side of the county it was Pinellas
10 County, on the south side it was Manatee and Hillsborough which is
11 where the city of Tampa is located. It cuts right through what they call the
12 shipping channel.
13
14Ruth Banonis: Mm-hm.
15
16Helene Denny: And there was quite a controversy over whose territory all of this occurred
17 in. When the American Red Cross called us out the first night, the bodies
18 were brought to Pinellas County [inaudible 09:26] and that's where we set
19 up our first aid post, our [inaudible 09:30] details, and of course the police
20 etc. All the other authorities involved in this, the Coast Guard, all had
21 their stations there. Now when it was decided that this had happened in
22 Hillsborough County, then Hillsborough Red Cross moved in. [chuckle]
23
24Ruth Banonis: Oh dear.
25
26Helene Denny: And Manatee County Police and of course all, all of the Hillsborough
27 people and Pinellas [inaudible 09:56] 24 hours later had navy divers. The
28 U.S. Navy became involved in this because [inaudible 10:03] divers
29 [inaudible 10:04]. I stayed down there a whole week. The rest of my
30 contemporaries at the Red Cross dealt with a lot of the military dependents
31 who had come from New Orleans, from all parts of Texas, without waiting
32 for any transportation. Some of them were absolutely destitute. One
33 pregnant girl came on a bus with 2 infants and the Red Cross – and of
34 course I must admit the, uh, personnel in our Coast Guard stations were
35 just fabulous to these people, finding them accommodations.
36
37Ruth Banonis: [10:42] But it was the, the condition of the bodies that reminded you of,
38 uh, of, uh...
39
40Helene Denny: Uh, these were perfectly...
41
42Ruth Banonis: [inaudible 10:49].
43
44Helene Denny: ...healthy, normal young men.

1
2Ruth Banonis: Yes.
3
4Helene Denny: What horrified me was the fact that 26 people upset me in comparison to
5 the thousands I had taken care of during the war.
6
7Ruth Banonis: Hm.
8
9Helene Denny: I, I was in one raid where we had over 1500 people killed in 2 nights plus
10 all the evacuation of the wounded, and I was taking this in my stride
11 [sneeze] [inaudible 11:14]. Of course, it was what I was there to do. I
12 really didn't come to Florida to [inaudible 11:21]. I sympathize with the
13 people who had never seen anything like this before.
14
15Ruth Banonis: Terrible disaster.
16
17Helene Denny: Several of our police were very horribly affected by this.
18
19Ruth Banonis: I guess when it gets close to home like that.
20
21Helene Denny: Um, another interesting point, when I first went overseas, Ruth, we were,
22 we were down in Camp Dix, a group that I was going overseas with. One
23 of them had already met there as a staging area. Everything the American
24 Army was doing for security in those days [inaudible 11:59] now we get
25 hysterical. In the middle of the night they came in their 2-ton trucks and
26 we all thought we were going down to the piers in New York [inaudible
27 12:07]. No way. They brought us up to Central Park South [chuckle] to
28 the Barbizon-Plaza Hotel. And as a native New Yorker, I have never even
29 been in this very posh hotel. You know, it was way above what I had been
30 accustomed to. And we stayed there a whole week, and again in the
31 middle of the night they came and put us back in the same 2-ton truck
32 and... [chuckle]
33
34Ruth Banonis: I guess this was a treat for you prior to, uh...
35
36Helene Denny: It was, we were, we were confined to the hotel.
37
38Ruth Banonis: Oh.
39
40Helene Denny: This was the security. We were confined to the hotel. We were confined
41 to the rooms that we were stationed to.
42
43Ruth Banonis: [inaudible 12:45].
44

1 Helene Denny: They brought our meals to the rooms and everything. And this was all
2 part of security.
3

4 Ruth Banonis: Oh. I see.
5

6 Helene Denny: The, um, when we, when they brought us to the piers, I'll never know how
7 it happened. I did not cross the Atlantic in convoy. I was 1 of 10 nurses
8 that was put upon a Swedish freighter and the only thing in this little
9 freighter was 10 Red Cross nurses, [inaudible 13:11]. And we went over
10 the South Atlantic. We did not go the North Atlantic route. And I did not
11 know it until many years later that I crossed the Atlantic during the
12 heaviest time of the submarine [inaudible 13:29]. They sunk more
13 tonnage the month that I crossed the Atlantic...
14

15 Ruth Banonis: It...
16

17 Helene Denny: ...than any other month.
18

19 Ruth Banonis: [13:34] It was in 1941?
20

21 Helene Denny: October 1942.
22

23 Ruth Banonis: '42.
24

25 Helene Denny: And, uh, it was my husband who pointed this out to me. I did not know
26 that. As a naval personnel, he had all of this information [inaudible
27 13:46]. Um, it was very interesting. Nobody, the crew did not speak any
28 English. The food was superb as only Norwegian food could possibly be.
29

30 Ruth Banonis: Hm.
31

32 Helene Denny: And when we left, the captain gave us each a little personal gift and they
33 were the inevitable brown paper bags and it contained soap and toilet
34 tissue, [inaudible 14:15] for each of us. [chuckle] Swedish [inaudible
35 14:19]. Things that we never, ever – and also we each had a dozen
36 oranges, and that was from the cook. The cook gave us each a dozen
37 oranges [inaudible 14:33]. I arrived in Liverpool in the middle of a raid
38 and nobody had told me that the Mersey docks [inaudible 14:42]...
39

40 Ruth Banonis: Mm-hm.
41

42 Helene Denny: ...flowed with the tide.
43

44 Ruth Banonis: Mm-hm.

1
2 Helene Denny: As a New Yorker, I was not prepared for that where we had stationed for
3 repairs. Everything fascinated me. I was so young.
4
5 Ruth Banonis: Well, it fascinates me now too. Um, it reminds me of a lot of things too.
6
7 Helene Denny: Um, you want me to say something else about...?
8
9 Ruth Banonis: [15:04] 1942, uh, was those the buzz [inaudible 15:07] the V-2...?
10
11 Helene Denny: That did not come until '44.
12
13 Ruth Banonis: '44.
14
15 Helene Denny: That was another...
16
17 Ruth Banonis: I'm very hazy on dates now.
18
19 Helene Denny: Um, believe it or not, I have great admiration for the British people – I
20 will clarify that statement if I may – for the British women. When I first
21 went to Great Britain in '42, there were very few men there. The majority
22 of their men were either in the navy or in the northern [inaudible 15:30].
23
24 Ruth Banonis: Mm-hm.
25
26 Helene Denny: And, um, it was the women who literally kept that island going. They
27 were defeated and would never give in. There was completely no question
28 about it. And they hadn't only taken over all our heavy munition and
29 industries and that type of thing, the land army was in full swing when I
30 arrived. In between the Italian prisoners of war and the British girls, they
31 were doing their best. They were growing Brussels sprouts in the cracks
32 of the sidewalk [inaudible 16:02] GI's who came later. They were
33 fantastic. And of course I learned to admire these women, so.
34
35 One of the first places I was based in Portsmouth was a public school and
36 it was both our living quarters, a classroom, as well as our, uh, post. Also
37 based at this first aid station was the [inaudible 16:25] by young girls,
38 most of them just out of high school. Their average age was 18-20, and
39 they were usually the, the commanding officer would be 1 meal with all of
40 these females and fortunately all their school mit-, mistresses answered the
41 call [chuckle] and they put these young girls, practically everybody I met
42 who was in the, um, any type of administrative or supervisory post had
43 been a school mistress in charge of the girls. And it was just a carryover
44 from their schooldays. They had no problem with these youngsters at all.

1 The other people [inaudible 17:11]. There were several first aid posts
2 when I was on [inaudible 17:17] to triage. They would bring these people
3 back too and they would give them emergency treatment there and they
4 put them on evacuation [inaudible 17:25]. Sitting on top of the first aid
5 post and on top of all the buildings was also a cathedral [inaudible 17:33].
6 All of these youngsters, 16-18, doing fire watch but the older men
7 [inaudible 17:40] the grandfather, the old man next door. My driver was a
8 young man who had been injured in the North African desert and he had
9 lost a leg and he actually managed. When his stump was bothering him,
10 he used his crutches and he, he would...
11
12 Ruth Banonis: Drag [inaudible 18:02].
13
14 Helene Denny: Or when we would go to an incident, it would usually be for a collapsed
15 building and they would be digging out people or a fire when somebody
16 had been injured. For instance, one night we had to go answer a call
17 where an airplane came in [inaudible 18:21] and my driver was out of the
18 ambulance I swear before we stopped and he was halfway across the field
19 on his one leg while I was trying to get [inaudible 18:35] organized.
20 Fantastic individual. And he, as I said, he was quite a young man, but I
21 was that much younger than he was that he could – he didn't even
22 consider me a contemporary and he treated me as he probably did his
23 younger sisters [inaudible 18:54]. He used to say if your mother knew
24 what you were doing here. [chuckle] He made sure everybody used
25 perfect language and nobody was allowed to use [inaudible 19:04].
26
27 Ruth Banonis: Truly [inaudible 19:07].
28
29 Helene Denny: Very, very good care of me. And that situation lasted, he and I, he was my
30 driver the whole time until they assigned me to the Americans and I had
31 an American Red Cross girl. [inaudible 19:21]. And I use the term girl
32 loosely. She was a 40-year-old woman. [chuckle]. You know, to my 22
33 at that point in time she was ancient.
34
35 Ruth Banonis: Oh yes.
36
37 Helene Denny: Older than God. And, uh, it was a very, um, for, for me it was
38 emancipation from a way I had been brought up in New York. I had gone
39 to all parochial schools. I was totally restricted. Remember, Ruth, in
40 those days we had nice girls and the other kind.
41
42 Ruth Banonis: Yes.
43
44 Helene Denny: And you were...

1
2Ruth Banonis: And most of them were nice girls.
3
4Helene Denny: Yes. And very, very well cared for by everybody. Um, may I give you an
5 example of how well cared for we were...?
6
7Ruth Banonis: Yes.
8
9Helene Denny: ... in comparison to what's happening today in our [inaudible 20:15]
10 society? I was in high school when I first met the boy I eventually
11 married and he was a cadet in their naval academy of [inaudible 20:26]
12 and he came over with the King and Queen in '39 as part of the [inaudible
13 20:37] group of student that they sent over in those days. I went to school.
14 We used to have these tea dances where they entertained not only these
15 foreigners, but mostly students from other states, other countries, etc.
16 And, uh, I had to go down to the Brooklyn Navy Yard where he had been
17 [inaudible 20:58] for this period of time. He was [inaudible 21:02]. Of
18 course we wouldn't even attempt to give him directions to come to my
19 mother's home. And I can still see my father taking out an envelope and
20 writing me instructions for me how to get to the Brooklyn Navy Yard and
21 my parents gave me, are you ready for this, 30 cents which was his car
22 fare and my car fare and I did fine.
23
24 I took the bus to the subway. When I got off the subway, I was in an area
25 of the city I had never been before and I had to wait for a trolley car. And
26 when I got on the trolley car, the conductor looked me up and down and I
27 had on my white horsehair hat and my white gloves and my black and
28 white [inaudible 21:46]. [chuckle] Very grown up at 16 years of age.
29
30Ruth Banonis: Smartly dressed.
31
32Helene Denny: And he looked me up and down and he said and where do you think
33 you're going, young woman? And I looked at my envelope and I said
34 "My daddy said..." [laughter]. And he says "All right, young lady. If
35 that's what your father said to you, you're going to sit right there and I'll
36 tell you when to get off this trolley car." And we were – oh, I was
37 fascinated. I realize now the area of Brooklyn I was going through was
38 pre-revolutionary and of course it was a very poor element at that point of
39 time as far as living condition. Of course, the depression did nothing to
40 help this area along. When we got to the Sands Street gate of the
41 Brooklyn Navy Yard, a very famous area I'm told, the trolley car
42 [inaudible 22:39] said to me "All right, young lady. You ought to go
43 outside. You're going to go through the gates and there's an American
44 Marine on sentry duty. You want to stay right by him until you see the

1 trolley car coming in the other direction to take you back to the subway.”
2 I thanked him very much and I tripped out. And the trolley car stayed
3 there until I went through the gate. And when I told the marine on duty
4 what I wanted, he sent for my husband and so it shouldn’t be a lost cause,
5 Ruth, I started making time with the American Marine. [laughter]
6
7 When my young man finally joined us and he took my arm to go through
8 the gate and I said, in all my innocence, “I can’t go out there.” He says
9 “What do you mean you can’t go out there?” in his marvelous English
10 voice. I said “The [inaudible] 23:27] on the trolley car said [chuckle] I was
11 to wait right here until I could see the trolley car.”
12
13 Ruth Banonis: And his was the voice of authority.
14
15 Helene Denny: That’s right. It never occurred to me to disobey an older individual. I had
16 been so well trained.
17
18 Ruth Banonis: Yes.
19
20 Helene Denny: Behavior modification wasn’t in my lexicon in those days. I can still see
21 the 2 young marines looking at each other over my head and I can still –
22 and I think this is what we did [inaudible] 24:01] young Englishman, he
23 says “All right, my girl.” He said “If this is what you were told to do, and
24 this is what your conscience dictates you should do, we will wait right
25 here.” And we did until the trolley car came. [laughter] He teased me
26 about that right up until the day he died. He never could believe what the
27 United States did to me after that because they took me into a hangar and
28 taught me to throw my voice. I was never known to raise my voice. And
29 they gave us officer status as you know, Ruth, and we had to work with
30 people, but we were told they would not take orders from us simply
31 because we were women and that would be mostly [inaudible] 24:43]
32 American.
33
34 Ruth Banonis: Yes.
35
36 Helene Denny: And when I went overseas they were contemplating already [inaudible]
37 24:50]. The GIs had landed in – they landed in North Africa, but they
38 weren’t in Great Britain at that point in time and didn’t come for a good
39 18 months later. Um, I understood later on why you had to be today what
40 we call assertive, in those days was aggressive. And I can turn it on and
41 off. I know all the language...
42
43 Ruth Banonis: You had to.
44

1 Helene Denny: ...but I don't use it. I, I find I can really express myself without it, but I
2 can pull rank. They taught me well.
3
4 Ruth Banonis: You've come a certain...
5
6 Helene Denny: Yes.
7
8 Ruth Banonis: ...distance, maybe not a long, long way.
9
10 Helene Denny: And I use the word trained. I was trained to nurse and they trained me in
11 triage. They trained me to be a midwife. They trained me in public health
12 nursing because of all the shelter nursing we did during those years and
13 working [inaudible 25:43] with the civilian populace after disasters. They,
14 uh, I wasn't educated until I returned to the States [inaudible 25:51].
15
16 Ruth Banonis: [inaudible 25:52] well, you were educated in nursing.
17
18 Helene Denny: Advanced education. I mean my baccalaureate...
19
20 Ruth Banonis: Yes.
21
22 Helene Denny: ...my master's, and I'm working on my doctorate now for years. Uh, I
23 always tell everybody it's a good thing they trained me first. They
24 educated me first and I was trained [inaudible 26:08]. I never had any
25 problem anywhere I lived, Ruth. I could live in the barracks. We used to
26 be [inaudible 26:16]. Some of my greatest friends today are the children.
27 Most of the women I was [inaudible 26:23] since have died and I keep in
28 contact with their children. When I go to Britain, I visit, um, the Quonset
29 huts [inaudible 26:33] in the world to live in that I've ever come across,
30 but I shall never really complain. I did complain, I was today what we call
31 a burnout. I was experiencing this just before I had my children. The
32 British are fantastic. Their attitude is a change is as good as a rest.
33 [inaudible 26:53] didn't send me away for a rest to anyone's seaside
34 resort. They put me on an evacuation train to Troon, Scotland. I have
35 never complained to this day about anything. It was the coldest, most
36 miserable. We had very little to work with and oddly enough the whole
37 contingent on the, on the train were American servicemen they were
38 transporting up there. They were not – have not as yet recuperated
39 sufficiently to make the sea voyage. They were keeping [inaudible 27:30]
40 better health to make the sea voyage. Um, when I finally – I went back
41 down on a motor convoy through choice. I wasn't going to get back on
42 that train if I could avoid it for anything.
43

1 When we were up in Troon I thought it was very interesting. It was the
2 middle of winter and Troon as you know is where the St. Andrew's Golf
3 Course is located, and all over that fabulous golf course they had either
4 canvas tents or using Quonset huts. The whole thing was a – it had been
5 originally a staging area on the way over and at this point in time it was
6 for evac, medical evacuees, evac hospital. And they still had [inaudible
7 28:18] trains. And their idea when we trained was a pit with canvas from
8 your knees to your shoulders and the coldest, rainiest, you name it
9 weather. How I don't have a bladder problem to this day because...
10 [laughter]
11
12 Ruth Banonis: You're a survivor.
13
14 Helene Denny: One thing, I did get something out of that trip. The quartermasters up
15 there they gave me a beautiful pair, a brand new pair of shoes [inaudible
16 28:48]. [chuckle]
17
18 Ruth Banonis: Yeah. It's still going.
19
20 Helene Denny: I, I'm rambling, Ruth, and you know...
21
22 Ruth Banonis: Well, that's...
23
24 Helene Denny: ...I ramble.
25
26 Ruth Banonis: No. Well, no. That's, that's fine.
27
28 Helene Denny: Do you want me to mention the...?
29
30 Ruth Banonis: Uh, [inaudible 29:01].
31
32 Helene Denny: The reason I mentioned accommodations, it seems to be...
33
34 Ruth Banonis: Well, yes. Accommodations are interesting.
35
36 Helene Denny: Right. Um, I more or less told you pretty well what I did over there.
37
38 Ruth Banonis: Yes.
39
40 Helene Denny: Uh, did I expect this experience to prepare me for a career? I didn't even
41 expect to live. [chuckle] I didn't think we'd ever get through some of
42 those raids, but actually it did help me much later in life to this day. My
43 pay, Ruth, was my husband's, um, [inaudible 29:33] paid what I was

1 entitled to as married to a British serviceman. I was a volunteer American
2 Red Cross nurse.
3
4 Ruth Banonis: Well, that's interesting.
5
6 Helene Denny: Yes.
7
8 Ruth Banonis: [inaudible 29:45].
9
10 Helene Denny: Yes.
11
12 Ruth Banonis: [29:46] For the duration did that [inaudible 29:49] for the duration?
13
14 Helene Denny: I, I, I – no. I did draw a pay in the beginning and my British husband
15 objected to his wife working. I could volunteer, do the same work. And
16 it's true, uh, with his income. Everything found as they used to say in
17 those days, including my clothing. They put me into battledress and,
18 um...
19
20 Ruth Banonis: Oh. [30:14] Did you wear a British uniform?
21
22 Helene Denny: No. I wore – we all wore battledress. Everybody wore, you know, the
23 Eisenhower jacket and everything.
24
25 Ruth Banonis: Oh, yes.
26
27 Helene Denny: And, uh, I had my American flag on my sleeves. I did have my blues. I
28 had dress blues that I used to wear on State occasions. But no, when I was
29 over there we still dressed for dinner in the evening if we were going out.
30 And of course, my husband's family lived this way. Um, I remember my
31 mother-in-law cutting up we're convinced it was her wedding dress, and
32 made me a beautiful [inaudible 30:51] blouse and she had managed to get
33 a velvet piece of probably an old cloak somewhere and made me an
34 evening skirt.
35
36 Ruth Banonis: Sounds beautiful.
37
38 Helene Denny: [inaudible 31:03] London. [chuckle] I wore my nurse's cape over
39 everything or my gray coat. I still have my student nurse's cape [inaudible
40 31:15]. But I wouldn't part with it because it was pure flannel wool, so
41 warm, [inaudible 31:22]. It's a different world over there today. You
42 would never believe that they had any conflict. I went all through
43 Netherlands and Belgium this past spring and I went to some of the
44 battlefields from WWI which they have left as a memorial to the

1 tremendous loss of life there, but there is nothing from WWII except very,
2 very regimented American, British, and French cemeteries. There is no
3 battlefields per se as there were in WWI.
4
5Ruth Banonis: Yes. I do wonder why that is.
6
7Helene Denny: [inaudible 32:02] beaches.
8
9Ruth Banonis: [inaudible 32:02] never thought of this.
10
11Helene Denny: It would have been the beaches. When you fly over the beaches today in
12 Normandy and up to Gold and Juno, which for the American, uh, the
13 British precipices that they had to scale, they're all seaside resorts again
14 today. In fact, some of the bunkers that the Germans built in those days
15 that weren't destroyed are summer cottages and things of that description.
16 In Portsmouth, the Eastney Barracks, the World Marine barracks where
17 they had the little cockleshell kayaks that [inaudible 32:37] prior to the
18 invasion both to do survey work for the oncoming invasion of the huge,
19 big Mulberry Harbour that they had or to do [inaudible 32:50] sabotage to
20 their shipping and what have you in Cherbourg Harbour. The installation
21 where they trained the cockleshell heroes as we called them, the Royal
22 Marines who did this work, it is now a rose garden and it's dedicated to
23 children and they built right over. You can go down where they built
24 these things and see how they trained and everything, but the whole top of
25 it is a park and a rose garden.
26
27Ruth Banonis: [inaudible 33:19].
28
29Helene Denny: Oh, I, I, I constantly underestimate the English. They always do beautiful
30 things like that. The, uh, World Marine, the barracks in Eastney World
31 Marines is no longer an active barracks. It is a museum and a hospital
32 convalescent home for old soldiers [inaudible 33:37]. And they never
33 waste a thing. What had been barracks for young men is now barracks for
34 the elderly. They don't have a VA [inaudible 33:46] as you know like we
35 do here. They have socialized medicine.
36
37Ruth Banonis: Yes.
38
39Helene Denny: But it's amusing to go and see all these old, old men still in their Royal
40 Marine uniforms.
41
42Ruth Banonis: That's incredible.
43

1 Helene Denny: They, they had another lovely thing that happened there. I used to love to
2 watch [inaudible 34:09] took a plane coming in straight [inaudible 34:13]
3 stop it. They used to watch from the barracks down what we could call
4 the main road to the docks to go on the transports to go overseas and as
5 they go they would whistle. Of course, they had their full packs and their
6 [inaudible 34:27] divisions, brigades, what have you, and they would
7 whistle as they left and it's what we know as The Bridge on the River
8 Kwai song.
9

10 Ruth Banonis: Yes.
11

12 Helene Denny: The so-called Colonel Bogey. [laughter]
13

14 Ruth Banonis: Yeah. Co-, Colonel Bogey's March I think is the horrible title.
15

16 Helene Denny: [inaudible 34:45]. I can remember standing with my pram, my twins in
17 the pram, and as soon as my little daughter would hear the whistle she
18 would be jumping up and down [inaudible 34:56] rocking like crazy. And
19 the German plane came one day and sprayed gun. I don't know how
20 many the Germans killed. So they from then on in they moved them out
21 in trucks until after the war and then they reverted back. It's beautiful.
22 Let me tell you something else that happened to me that really doesn't...
23

24 Ruth Banonis: Sure.
25

26 Helene Denny: ...have to do with WWII. We were posted to Bermuda right after the war.
27 I first joined him in [inaudible 35:23] in time to get a telegram.
28

29 Ruth Banonis: [35:27] Was he in the United States...?
30

31 Helene Denny: He was a British [inaudible 35:29].
32

33 Ruth Banonis: But...
34

35 Helene Denny: My husband was in the British Royal Marines.
36

37 Ruth Banonis: But you met him...
38

39 Helene Denny: In high school in New York State.
40

41 Ruth Banonis: I see. Yes. I got a little mixed up here.
42

43 Helene Denny: I went to [inaudible 35:39] in time to repack and leave because he had
44 been reassigned to another train going to the Atlantic fleet. [inaudible]

1 35:45] to Bermuda. The bus stopped in New York on the way home to
2 visit my family and for 2 years in Bermuda I was 1 of 3 wives on the
3 station [inaudible 35:59] ...
4
5 Ruth Banonis: [inaudible 35:59].
6
7 Helene Denny: ...42 ships.
8
9 Ruth Banonis: [inaudible 36:01].
10
11 Helene Denny: And 3 wives, the admiral's wife, [chuckle] the chaplain's, and me.
12 [inaudible 36:08] the only American. But I was always the only American
13 wife of a British serviceman the whole 5 years I was in Bermuda. And we
14 stayed there until they went to Korea.
15
16 And, uh, while we were in Bermuda, there was a problem down it what
17 was then British Guiana in South America and because the Britain's, the
18 Navies, the British Navy was going to send down a cruiser with a
19 contingent of Royal Marines aboard to show the flag and take care of
20 whatever was happening down there. And I went down to the American
21 consulate in Bermuda and told them I was an American Red Cross nurse.
22 I could not nurse in Bermuda. It was against their law. I was an American
23 citizen. I heard that they were having a big problem down in British
24 Guiana and I had all this expertise [chuckle] [inaudible 37:03] evacuation
25 and if there was anything I could do and they notified Washington D.C.
26 and I found myself the next morning on a British overseas plane. And
27 when my husband [inaudible 37:16] British Guiana, there I was on the
28 jetty way. I had taken all my, you know, had taken all my gear [inaudible
29 37:26]. I – it was – I did leave a message in Bermuda for them to signal
30 my husband I was going, but there was some mishap. It was – it didn't
31 arrive until after I did. Um, that was the first time my husband really
32 realized from that point that he had married a stable who you call a woman
33 who could definitely take care of herself and he never worried about me.
34
35 Ruth Banonis: And [inaudible 37:52] too.
36
37 Helene Denny: He never worried about me after that. [inaudible 37:55] older [inaudible
38 37:56]. He, he never – he still had that very, very old fashioned, and I use
39 the term old fashioned [inaudible 38:05] attitude that women must be
40 protected.
41
42 Ruth Banonis: And maybe he remembered the little incident at Brooklyn Navy Yard.
43
44 Helene Denny: Almost [inaudible 38:13].

1
2Ruth Banonis: When you couldn't take a...
3
4Helene Denny: Yes.
5
6Ruth Banonis: ...streetcar without [inaudible 38:16].
7
8Helene Denny: Oh yes. It, uh, it was very difficult to assert myself that I did not need this
9 type of protection that children need [inaudible 38:30]. By the way, the
10 British in 24 hours went to Korea and I made the decision to [inaudible
11 38:44] every war marine of all the ships from all the various places down
12 in Caribbean, Guam, United States in 24 hours they sailed for Korea.
13
14Ruth Banonis: [inaudible 39:00].
15
16Helene Denny: And I was sitting on a hunk of [inaudible 39:01] with the children.
17
18Ruth Banonis: [39:06] And you didn't go to Korea [inaudible 39:08]?
19
20Helene Denny: I had to stay. I was pregnant by that time. No, I returned to the States in
21 September of 1951.
22
23Ruth Banonis: You had a long stretch over there [inaudible 39:22].
24
25Helene Denny: They thought that Korea was going to last 3 weeks, and we all know what
26 happened there. I did not – I, when I came home in 1952, I again went
27 back and I worked at Mitchel Field in Roosevelt, Long Island, which was,
28 um, at that point in time an Air Force base. It had originally been an
29 Army Air Force base, but it was just Air Force. And, uh, the majority of
30 the patients that they flew in and by this time we were flying our boys
31 across [inaudible 40:00] from Korea to Guam, to Hawaii, to Travis in San
32 Francisco and then to, to as close to home as you can get them. And of
33 course the New York Brooklyn Naval Hospital, the New York Naval
34 Hospital, and St. Albans, and all the VA Hospitals in the [inaudible 40:17]
35 taking care of patients as close to home as possible in the whole New York
36 area. And I again did evacuation, which was interesting [inaudible 40:31].
37
38Ruth Banonis: I can't think of anything else. You've given us quite a few memorable
39 experiences.
40
41Helene Denny: I – did I experience conflict with being [inaudible 40:51] and a military
42 professional. I think in, in those days there was a tremendous demarcation
43 of what was expected of us as women. One of the things that was drilled
44 into me as a student nurse, as a professional woman I was to be what they

1 considered a lady at all times. Nothing less and it would be [inaudible]
2 41:15] behavior and dismissal if I would do anything [inaudible 41:19]. I
3 had loved the term sham. [chuckle] I wasn't entitled to the GI Bill of
4 Rights as I had mentioned to you before. They only thing they would
5 have done was bury me.
6
7 Ruth Banonis: I love that.
8
9 Helene Denny: Uh, the greatest adjustment, believe it or not, was to whomever [inaudible]
10 41:46]. As a student nurse I was accustomed to [inaudible 41:50]. Um,
11 like all people in those trying times in Great Britain, I real-, I was hungry.
12 I was always hungry. I was young enough to have the appetite of a
13 teenager.
14
15 Ruth Banonis: Yes [inaudible 42:07].
16
17 Helene Denny: And then between that and my pregnancy [inaudible 42:09]. The rations
18 were appalling in Great Britain.
19
20 Ruth Banonis: [42:14] Were you dependent then on British rations?
21
22 Helene Denny: Yes.
23
24 Ruth Banonis: Yes, at the beginning it would have been [inaudible 42:20].
25
26 Helene Denny: Yes. [inaudible 42:21]. I didn't have it made until my own uncle came
27 over, um, my father's youngest, my father's youngest brother came over
28 with the American forces in 1944. And from then on in between my Red
29 Cross packages for expectant mothers, new mothers or again expectant
30 mothers [chuckle] and this connection with the American services, I was
31 all right, but up until then I was [inaudible 42:51] for food. And it's not
32 that there wasn't sufficient to eat, it was [inaudible 42:56]. Although there
33 were several things that I really liked. For instance, I still enjoy Brussels
34 sprouts. Most people I know who were over there don't even [inaudible]
35 43:07]. And lamb, I enjoyed the lamb. When I see the price of lamb
36 today in the stores...
37
38 Ruth Banonis: Horrible.
39
40 Helene Denny: Have you any idea what the rations were for a civilian at that point in time
41 in Great Britain?
42
43 Ruth Banonis: Not in Britain. No. I know that they, they had rationed well after the war
44 too [inaudible 43:26].

1
2 Helene Denny: Yes. It extended right into the 50s. Uh, when I first was assigned, I –
3 being that I was with the [inaudible 43:37] contingent and a nurse, I had
4 the privilege of going into any nurse's home for any meal and they were
5 compelled to feed us. We were – we did not have to give up any of our
6 rations [inaudible 43:51].
7
8 Ruth Banonis: I hope [inaudible 43:53]. I don't imagine [inaudible 43:55].
9
10 Helene Denny: Sometimes they weren't prepared for it and they would have to short
11 change other people [inaudible 44:01], but they were always good for a
12 cup of cocoa, a cup of – back every time I stepped off my ambulance,
13 somebody was there putting a mug of tea in my hand. Um, the – when I
14 was expecting my children, when I first I was entitled to a ration and a
15 half. And my ration as an adult was 2 slices of bacon [inaudible 44:27]
16 week, 2 glasses of tea, 2 ounces of sugar, 2 ounces of butter, 4 ounces of
17 margarine, and 20 points a month which went for my cookies, biscuits,
18 and canned food. And for instance, a tin of peaches was 16 points so I
19 only bought [inaudible 44:49] cookies. My downfall as an American was
20 biscuits. I couldn't – I could only get perhaps a quarter of a pound if I
21 wanted both a tin of fruit and biscuits. I wish they gave up the tin of fruit
22 and got all biscuits if I could. Uh, there was – you ate everything in
23 season. For instance, when apples were in season we had apples morning,
24 noon, and night, cooked, uncooked, raw, [inaudible 45:16]. Um, we never
25 saw a banana. I didn't see eggs until the Americans became involved and
26 they started [inaudible 45:25] Britain glorious powdered egg.
27
28 Ruth Banonis: Yes [inaudible 45:31].
29
30 Helene Denny: A fond remembrance. Um, I can remember one year the daffodils were
31 growing wild all over the place and the Italian prisoners of war were
32 bringing them in and giving them away. Another thing that they did that I
33 was very impressed with, they had leave but no place to go, no money,
34 nothing to do, and they had all these flowers [inaudible 45:58]. This
35 particular train came in from the wine region and they went to the
36 cemetery and laid flowers on the graves.
37
38 Ruth Banonis: The Italian prisoners...
39
40 Helene Denny: Prisoners of war. It must have been some Italian remembrance day or
41 something else. Um, I was on a train leaving. I was going to another post.
42 And that's another thing, sometimes we went in convoys. Sometimes we
43 broke up into groups and we were our usual standbys, you know, first call,
44 second call, third call, whatever [inaudible 45:34]. We were capable, we

1 were servicing a 475-bed hospital evacuation [inaudible 46:43]. They
2 trained you for a certain amount of evacuation training. That was a
3 fallacy. You just packed as many people and children as you possibly
4 could. My ambulance was supposed to carry 6 stretcher cages. Well, we
5 would have 12 stretcher cages and 10 standing if necessary, and I'd be
6 carrying babies on my back. They taught me how to sling babies in
7 harnesses. Babies [inaudible 47:10]. We found a child who couldn't be
8 identified and I really wanted [inaudible 47:16] Social Services [inaudible
9 47:21]. One of the things they did was to keep everything as much with
10 the civilians, in the civilian capacity [inaudible 47:32]. I keep digressing
11 into other areas but keep coming back to the war. [chuckle]
12
13 Ruth Banonis: This concludes the interview with Helene Denny. Bye. Ruth Banonis.
14 Unfortunately, the background noise was unavoidable.
15
16
17/mlc