

1 **Interview of retired Army Colonel Mildred Caroline Fritz talks about her 29-year career in**
2 **the U.S. Army Nursing Corps and serving in the Korean and Vietnam conflicts**

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5 Mildred C. Fritz: You [repeat 00:07] the questions, I'm ready to answer.

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7 Ruth Stewart: M-, Mildred Fritz is being interviewed as a member of the Women's
8 Overseas Service League – San Antonio, Texas Unit, at San Antonio on
9 January 13, 2004. Ruth Stewart is interviewing, assisted by Carol
10 Habgood.

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12 [00:26] Millie, tell us a little bit about your early life and just where you
13 grew up and went to school.

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15 Mildred C. Fritz: I grew, I was born in...

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17 Ruth Stewart: [00:37] Okay.

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19 Mildred C. Fritz: ...where are we now?

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21 Ruth Stewart: [00:38] Let me [throat clearing], let me start over, just in case. Um,
22 Mildred Fritz is being interviewed this morning as a member of the San
23 Antonio Unit of the Women's Overseas Service League. Um, this is, uh,
24 January 13, 2004. Ruth Stewart is interviewing, assisted by Carol
25 Habgood.

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27 [1:03] Okay, Millie, would you tell us a little bit again about your early
28 life?

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30 Mildred C. Fritz: I, uh, was born and raised in Collingswood, New Jersey, which is South
31 Jersey, just outside of Camden. I, uh, as a youngster, early on, decided I
32 wanted to be a nurse and, uh, when the war broke out in 1941, I guess it
33 was, uh, that made me determined to be an army nurse. I, uh, directly after
34 high school entered Hahnemann Hospital School of Nursing, a 3-year
35 program. Uh, as far as that time, after I became a cadet nurse, one of those.
36 Uh, I didn't affiliate with any of the, uh, of the military hospitals but
37 stayed on and was given the position of night supervisor. I stayed at that
38 job for 5 years and at that point, uh, my friend, [Jane Shiffman 2:10], who
39 was also a classmate, uh, came through and said that she was joining the
40 army. I said, uh, "When you get home on leave the next time, come and
41 tell me all about it," which she did, along with the paperwork, so I applied
42 for a commission at that time and I was, uh, sworn in on the 5th of
43 December in 1951. Uh, then in February, I left to go to Fort Sam Houston
44 to, for basic officer training. Uh, aspiring to do everything that was so

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1 very, very proper, I said, "I'd like to be assigned to the Walter Reed Army
2 Medical C-, General Hospital, I think it was at that time. I'm not sure if it
3 was a medical center or not. But I thought that would be the place to learn
4 all about army nursing. I was, I was assigned to a female surgical ward, of
5 all things, but shortly thereafter, I was reassigned and became head nurse
6 of an OR surgical ward. Uh, not too long after that, I was, uh, given orders
7 – let's see, I stayed there about a year and a half, I guess – uh, I was, uh,
8 given orders to go to, uh, the Orient. Uh, once I got there, I was assigned
9 to the 382nd General Hospital outside of Osaka, Japan, where, uh, I was
10 made surg. nurse, staff nurse, and, uh, there was a group of us, all the
11 same age, same kind of experiences, and we had a pretty good time
12 learning all about the horticulture of rice for, uh, the 2 years that I was
13 there. Didn't want to land and was ready to get back on a plane to come
14 home as soon as I saw the dark rooftops of Tokyo, but I was in tears when
15 I left the country. Uh, not knowing that I should have put in for an
16 assignment afterwards, uh, I was designated to go to Fort Hood, which is
17 also in Texas. Um, I got there and, uh, was assigned to pediatrics, the
18 furthest thing from my mind, but it wasn't too long and I became the head
19 nurse of the pediatric ward. Um, about a year into that, I was tol-, asked if,
20 uh, to go to a ward administration supervisor course at Fort Sam Houston,
21 which I did. And, uh, that was an experience in itself. We, uh, we had,
22 what can I say, we had a good time, as well as we learned a lot.

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24 Ruth Stewart: [05:21] What was your training there?

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26 Mildred C. Fritz: Ward supervision – ward administration supervision course. We, uh, we
27 were kind of penalized, we thought afterward, because we all had to go on
28 Operation King Cole in the swamps of Louisiana, which we did during
29 horrible rainfall and playing in the mud and wet tents and all that sort of
30 thing. That was my big field experience. I, uh, following that, I went to
31 Fitzsimmons General Hospital out in Denver, Colorado, and when I got
32 there, the chief nurse said, "Oh, we need a nurse in the recovery room," so
33 I went to the recovery room at that point and one of my classmates from,
34 uh, Fort Sam Houston was there and she said, "Oh, you're going to take
35 care of open-heart surgery patients today." I said, well, I kind of gulped at
36 that.

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38 Ruth Stewart: [6:20] You got a little bit of everything in there, didn't you? [laughter]

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40 Mildred C. Fritz: I went on to become a, the assistant head nurse of the recovery room and
41 developed a program whereby, uh, I oriented and supervised the nurses
42 that were designated, uh, to take care of the open-heart surgery patients.
43 Now, this was in the very, very early days of cardiac surgery, and nobody
44 knew too much about what they were doing. They only knew that they had

1 to realize what they were doing when they were taking care of these
2 patients. Uh, while I was doing this, I was getting my bachelor's degree in
3 nursing education from the University of Denver. The, uh, SGO thought
4 so much of this developmental course that they sent another person from
5 Washington to determine the value of it and this, in turn, became a, a
6 program. Uh, well, which went on to become the med-surg course because
7 the nurses that were coming into the army at that time did not have that
8 much experience. At any rate, after I developed, after I got my degree
9 from Denver U, um, I was, I was asked, uh, did I want to go on to graduate
10 school? [throat clearing] Uh, another friend of mine said that Catholic
11 University in Washington, D.C. had a course in cardiovascular nursing, so
12 I applied for only it and I was accepted. I spent 3 semesters and a summer
13 session getting my master's in cardiovascular nursing, cardiovascular
14 diseases. Following that, I was sent to Germany and, en route, I was
15 promoted to major along the way. Uh, I was designated to go to 2nd
16 General Hospital in Landstuhl. Um, that was an experience in itself. They,
17 uh, I became the head nurse of the unit – that was intensive care and, uh,
18 we were the intensive care unit for all of Europe. We used to get cases
19 from all over Europe. And, one of my additional duties while there was to
20 be a train nurse so, about once a month, I'd take off to be on the train with
21 the patients being evacuated to the United States.

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23 After that tour of duty, I was sent to Brooke Army Medical Center and
24 became head nurse of the thoracic/cardiovascular unit, which was also the
25 recovery/intensive care area. We did a bang-up business there. That was,
26 uh, busy, busy, busy. And, this is the time that, uh, things were developing
27 in Vietnam.

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29Ruth Stewart: [9:51] Ahh.
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31Mildred C. Fritz: I was replaced on the ward and put into evening and night supervisor by
32 the chief nurse so that I would have additional experience in
33 administration. And, before long, I had orders to go to Vietnam. When I
34 arrived there, I was assigned to the 24th Evacuation Hospital. Uh, this was
35 on Long Binh; it was a very safe area, but we worked like dogs. Uh,
36 initially, I was a med-surg supervisor and then I became the assistant chief
37 nurse of the unit.

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39Ruth Stewart: [10:28] Was this caring for combatants?
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41Mildred C. Fritz: Yes, definitely. We, they'd air evac'm in and we worked through the night
42 trying to repair them. Uh, it was...

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44Ruth Stewart: [10:39] What kind of a facility...

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2Mildred C. Fritz: It was, um, maxillofacial, uh, uh, and, uh, neurosurgery center. Uh, very
3 few medical patients, per se, but a lot of extensive surgeries. They used to
4 refer to some of the big cases as career cases. We'd be in the operating
5 room 8 to 10 hours at a time. It was, uh, I think the saddest part about that
6 was, and it never failed, that when I was on nights and we'd be, they'd
7 come with the choppers about 5:00 in the morning to evacuate the patients
8 to Sai-, uh, Saigon and invariably when taking the patients out to the, to
9 the helicopter I'd break down in tears. I was promoted to lieutenant
10 colonel when I left, uh, Vietnam and was assigned to Fitzsimmons again.
11 At this point, I was told by Colonel [Tracey 11:47] that I knew more about
12 intensive care than anybody else and they wanted me to develop the med-
13 surg course into an intensive care nursing course. This, I did from January
14 '70 to August of '74, when I left Fitzsimmons to, again, return to
15 Germany. This time, to the 130th uh, Station Hospital in Heidelberg, where
16 I was chief nurse. Oh, a very interesting assignment, to say the very least.
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18Ruth Stewart: [12:26] What was the most interesting part of it?
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20Mildred C. Fritz: It's hard to say. It w-, it was kind of an isolated, uh, assignment and as
21 much as I had to live on the economy, uh, there were a few others, all the
22 other nurses were much younger than I was, so it was, it was kind of
23 isolated, from that standpoint. Uh, that was when I got into volksmarching
24 and I...
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26Ruth Stewart: [12:59] Was that your major recreation?
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28Mildred C. Fritz: Yes, definitely. Uh, in, uh, January of '76, I was promoted to [corps
29 13:17] colonel and was reassigned then to, they want-, let's see,
30 Washington wanted me to go to, uh, Georgia and I said no, I wanted to go
31 back to Fort Sam Houston because I had a home in San Antonio and, uh,
32 I'd rather go back to Brooke Army Medical Center, which they did and,
33 uh, I said I'd stay on duty indefinitely at that point in time. Uh, so I
34 became chief of education training [advancing 13:57] and I stayed on until
35 I retired in September of '79.
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37Ruth Stewart: [14:13] What were the memorable parts of your career in the Army Nurse
38 Corps?
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40Mildred C. Fritz: I think it was becoming involved with cardiac surgery patients. Uh...
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42Ruth Stewart: [14:29] You were in the forefront of that, for sure.
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1Mildred C. Fritz: Very much so. Um, Fitzsimmons was the only hospital that was doing it. I
2 have maintained, um, maintained at that time, records of the cases and I'm
3 about to get all that stuff together, uh, to take to the Army Medical
4 Museum, the data from that. This is the days when we did cardiac surgery
5 nursing with a stethoscope and a, a blood pressure cuff.
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7Ruth Stewart: [15:06] And your judgment.
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9Mildred C. Fritz: And judgment. That was, uh, not all the marvelous mechanical means and
10 electronics that they use today but, to me, that was, I guess you could say
11 that was frontier nursing.
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13Ruth Stewart: [15:25] It was real nursing.
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15Mildred C. Fritz: Definitely.
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17Ruth Stewart: [15:27] You were using your nursing rather than equipment.
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19Mildred C. Fritz: And it was truly bedside nursing, which we don't see too much of today,
20 I'm afraid.
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22Ruth Stewart: [15:38] That sounds like it was very satisfying to you.
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24Mildred C. Fritz: It was. Uh, but, you know, it had its sad points, too, because there were
25 many youngsters that just didn't make it. But that's, that's how progress is
26 made.
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28Ruth Stewart: [15:56] Mm-hm. In the program that you developed in cardiovascular
29 nursing, um, how did that evolve and, and where did it go?
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31Mildred C. Fritz: Well, the initial program evolved into becoming a, first, I think they called
32 in a recovery room course so that they would know what to do with
33 postoperative patients. And then, in as much as the nurses had such little
34 experience when they came on active duty with their bachelor's degrees,
35 uh, it became a med-surg nursing ca-, course. Uh, it was, while I was,
36 when I came back from Vietnam that I was told to make it into an
37 intensive care course, which I did through, we had, uh, upwards of 12
38 students twice a year and, uh, I still see some of them, many of them have
39 retired by now though. It was interesting work.
40

41Ruth Stewart: [17:05] And, so you've had a major impact, in terms of nursing and
42 developing new areas, specifically in the army but, of course, that is often
43 the, um, cutting edge, if you will, of moving into civilian when...
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1Mildred C. Fritz: My initial thought when I went on active duty was to see the people that
2 are coming back that have been in the army are getting good jobs and, uh,
3 I was thinking I didn't want to stay in night supervision for the rest of my
4 life so that, that's one of the reasons I went in the army. And, uh, then I
5 found it to my liking much better than anything else that I had seen. The
6 intensive care course is still being given. I'm not sure where.
7

8Ruth Stewart: [17:59] Basically, the same one you developed?
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10Mildred C. Fritz: I think so. Well, of course, it's made progress since then, as well, as more
11 developments have taken place.
12

13Ruth Stewart: [18:07] You have to teach that equipment. [laughter]
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15Mildred C. Fritz: That's right. [laughter] Right. What else can I tell you?
16

17Ruth Stewart: [18:16] What, what about your living conditions as an individual? You
18 mentioned a little bit in Kor-, in Vietnam but, back in Japan, what was
19 your living like there?
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21Mildred C. Fritz: It was a cantonment-type hospital. Um, it was, uh, 2 girls to a room and a
22 community bathroom situation in one of those cantonment buildings. And,
23 if you were on night duty, you know, it was just tough. Everything was
24 going on around you at the same time. Um, it, it was a fascinating, uh,
25 type of nursing, in that we would get them directly from Korea. They
26 would have had their wounds debrided but we would get them for
27 secondary closure. And there were nights when we'd get as many as 50 to
28 75 evacuation patients at the same time. They would all have to be seen
29 and designated for the wards. I was into night supervision at that point,
30 well, one of the chores that I did with my med-surg rotation was
31 supervision there. It, it, it didn't leave you much time to think about – you
32 were busy all the time. When you did have days off, if you were lucky
33 enough to be able to get into Osaka and to Kobe and Kyoto so we
34 absorbed quite a bit of, uh, Japanese culture at the time.
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36Ruth Stewart: [20:03] And then in Vietnam you had a, you said you were rather isolated
37 there and had a...
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39Mildred C. Fritz: No, no, we weren't particularly isolated on Long Binh. Uh, again, we were
40 in, uh, semi-permanent buildings, I guess you'd say. The hospital itself
41 was a collection of Quonset huts and these, these wooden, tropical-type
42 buildings that we lived in were, uh, single rooms with community bath
43 accommodations. Uh, with, with maids, of course, Vietnamese maids
44 roaming around. Um, but it was, it was tough from the standpoint that

1 you're on 12-hour duty. Uh, virtually 6 days out of 7. And, nothing to do
2 besides that. You're too exhausted,
3
4Ruth Stewart: [21:00] Mm-hm.
5
6Mildred C. Fritz: Uh, you couldn't go anyplace. Uh, you could go, one time, on R&R but
7 that didn't ta-, that didn't erase any of the sights that you had seen there.
8
9Ruth Stewart: [21:14] Mm-hm, mm-hm. So then after getting out of the Army Nurse
10 Corps, uh, you had a full, how many years there in the army?
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12Mildred C. Fritz: In the army? Almost 29.
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14Ruth Stewart: [21:28] 29 years. That's a long career there. Was it a real challenge to you
15 then to adjust to civilian life after that?
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17Mildred C. Fritz: Uh, perhaps it was, I, I, I've never given it much thought. Uh, I came back
18 to my home that I had purchased back in, oh, 1964, and proceeded to
19 update it and bring it to all the additional things that one does to a home to
20 make'm livable. Uh, so that I could retire in, at ease, and not have to do
21 too much work on the outside. I spent a lot of time gardening. I became
22 quite an active gardener. Uh, and then, a consid-, considerable amount of
23 traveling, as well.
24
25Ruth Stewart: [22:23] Did you continue your volksmarching?
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27Mildred C. Fritz: I did until, uh, [laughter] my knees gave out on me. And, uh, so I slacked
28 off on that.
29
30Ruth Stewart: [22:35] Mm-hm. Did you work in, uh, join any military or veteran's
31 organizations other than WOSL?
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33Mildred C. Fritz: I, I've, uh, belonged to the Retired Army Nurse Corps Association, which
34 is now no longer considered retired; it's Army Nurse Corps Association, I
35 think. I joined the Military Order of World War II, but I've never attended
36 a meeting. Uh, TROA.
37
38Ruth Stewart: [23:09] What was that?
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40Mildred C. Fritz: TROA. That's got a different name now, too, though. Retired Officers
41 Association. That's it.
42

1Ruth Stewart: [23:20] And, of your memories of your entire career, are there any that
2 stand out especially as being very important to you or even numerous
3 events that came up?
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5Mildred C. Fritz: It seems that all of my life was, involved cardiac surgery nursing and
6 intensive care, so I've-, uh, I've gotten completely away from hospitals at
7 this point, other than the volunteer work I do on Friday mornings at, at, at
8 Brooke Army Medical Center.
9

10Ruth Stewart: [23:56] What do you do as a volunteer?
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12Mildred C. Fritz: I sit at the information desk and tell people how to get to the different
13 clinics and listen to their sad stories.
14

15Ruth Stewart: [24:06] Well, probably that latter part is the most important part. You're
16 still a nurse. [laughter]
17

18Mildred C. Fritz: I commiserate, yes.
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20Ruth Stewart: [24:11] Yeah, okay. Um, did your career through 2 wars and caring for
21 combatants affect your view of war in any way?
22

23Mildred C. Fritz: I don't think it has. Uh, I don't know what I would have done if I'd have
24 been a civilian. I would probably have been in a very deep rut, uh, back in
25 Philadelphia. Um, and not, uh, not enjoyed life near as much as I have
26 since then. And, when you've got that itchy foot as a youngster, I can
27 remember as a student nurse, uh, going to the post office in Johnny
28 Wanamaker's and they'd have all these positions open overseas for nurses
29 and other personnel and I'd think, "Gee, wouldn't it be fun to sign up to
30 go to some of those countries?" So, joining the army took care of all that.
31

32Ruth Stewart: [25:28] So it's been an interesting and full life for you as an army nurse?
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34Mildred C. Fritz: I think it has. I think it has.
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36Ruth Stewart: [25:35] Thank you very, very much, Millie.
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