

1 **Interview of Betty C. Taylor Thompson on her service**
2 **as a physical therapist in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps during WWII**

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4

5 Betty Thompson: ...issued lots of orange marmalade, which the mess officer couldn't really
6 sell to his people, so he put four big pots out, uh, four different corners
7 from the mess area and that certainly did take away [sighing] a lot of the
8 stinging problems. Then we got our orders to proceed to Paris, which we
9 did in Forty & Eight cars and again, there were those of us who had no
10 space, but the same mess officer was the man who was to become my
11 husband and he managed to find three extra berths in a car that hauled
12 supplies.

13

14 Lilah Ramsey: Oh, like you're extra baggage. [laughter]

15

16 Betty Thompson: We definitely...

17

18 Lilah Ramsey: Excess baggage. [laughter]

19

20 Betty Thompson: ...were not, uh, planned for. [laughter]

21

22 Unidentified speaker: Special baggage, you were.

23

24 Betty Thompson: [inaudible 0:59] [laughter] So, we went to a place east of Paris called
25 Eaubonne and again, we were put in tents where [sighing] we – I think we
26 were forgotten briefly. We dug potatoes that the Germans had planted and
27 that supplemented our rather meagal – meager fare. Our orders came for
28 us to go up to take over a hospital in Liège, Belgium, but before we could
29 get underway, they ordered us into Paris. This was shortly after it was
30 liberated, tsk, and they were getting so many more patients back from the
31 combat zones than they expected, so they took back a hospital that they –
32 that the French had started to take over. At that time, we could only, uh,
33 use buildings that had – uh, that the Germans had occupied, so they gave
34 us, [sighing] uh, the leri-, Lariboisière Hospital, which was near Gare du
35 Nord.

36

37 Lilah Ramsey: [2:15] Were they clean [throat clearing] buildings?

38

39 Betty Thompson: Uh, tsk, well, I didn't get in there until the next day and we already had
40 patients, but, um, we did a lot of painting and a lot of scrubbing, but they
41 were pretty clean. We, we had about 160, uh, civilian – French civilian
42 employees also and we soon did whip it into shape, but they – we had
43 patient – there were patients arriving at the hospital before all of our
44 people got in...

1

2Unidentified speaker: [inaudible 2:50]

3

4Betty Thompson: ...and it was late the day that we were supposed to start working before
5 they finally [sighing], uh, got the remaining nine of us that had been left
6 behind and wondering if we would ever be remembered. We [sighing]
7 were there in Paris then for 16 months, uh, a very, very busy time. We
8 were a triage hospital, which meant that we got all kinds of problems and
9 sorted them out, either sent them home or sent them to other hospitals for
10 care. Eventually there were [sighing], tsk, oh, something like 9 to 14, uh,
11 hospitals in Paris that all were receiving patients, but ours was one of the
12 last to leave. It was a good thing we didn't get sent up to Liège, Belgium,
13 because that's one of the hospitals that was bombed and some of the
14 people may recall that three American nurses were killed in that bombing.
15 I think probably my most [sighing] unforgettable patient is one that was
16 run over by one of our own 2-1/2 ton trucks during the Battle of the Bulge.
17 They were trying to evacuate an area and unfortunately the driver thought
18 everybody was aboard and he backed up.

19

20Lilah Ramsey: Hm.

21

22Betty Thompson: Tsk. This fellow – it happened in December and he lived until March
23 even though he had multiple, multi-, multiple injuries. We were sent down
24 to try and help him be more comfortable and to give him passive [sighing]
25 motion but he was in so much pain that all I could bring myself to do was
26 to help him smoke a cigarette...

27

28Lilah Ramsey: Hm.

29

30Betty Thompson: ...which was his only remaining pleasure. But it's an experience I'll
31 never forget. [sighing] I saw things that you don't see in civilian life, and
32 one of the nicer parts is that our people were in good shape and they got
33 well quickly and most of them were very grateful for the care they
34 received and then after – well, V-E Day, [coughing] Paris irrupted. We all
35 tried to go down to the, uh, Place de l'Opéra around the Opera House and
36 it was just one solid mass of people. I took lots of pictures.
37 Unfortunately, I was so excited that in taking a roll out, I put the same roll
38 back in my film – my camera, so that everything was double exposed, so
39 I...

40

41Lilah Ramsey: [inaudible 5:55]

42

43Betty Thompson: ...that particular moment I don't have any pictorial record. Then we were
44 split up, um, sent – some went home, some went to the Pacific Theater,

1 some of us were assigned to other units, um, because we were now the
2 more experienced people. Our particular hospital went down to the
3 Riviera and took over two station hospitals; one had been – it was full of
4 patients being treated for VD...
5
6Lilah Ramsey: Hm.
7
8Betty Thompson: ... and [sighing] the other was sort of a collecting point for whatever.
9
10Unidentified speaker: [6:36] How'd they treat men for VD? We usually give the girls douches
11 but what do they do with the men?
12
13Lilah Ramsey: Tsk, uh, large shots of bismuth.
14
15Betty Thompson: Penicillin?
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17Lilah Ramsey: Bismuth.
18
19Betty Thompson: Bismuth. That was before...?
20
21Lilah Ramsey: [They got 6:48] Bismuth and chalk and then they got the pens-, penicillin
22 was gonorrhea.
23
24Betty Thompson: Okay. Now we had a little bit of everything.
25
26Lilah Ramsey: Bismuth, I think. Bismuth, I think is what they gave for the others.
27
28Betty Thompson: But we all felt at quite a loss. Our, our chief of – uh, who was in charge of
29 the physical therapy department was sent somewhere else and we inherited
30 an abdominal surgeon as, uh, our chief and as he said, "I – you know more
31 what you're doing than I do, so proceed. I – You will have my backing
32 for whatever you do." Most of our patients then were either, tsk, headed
33 for home they hoped or for the Pacific Theater. We were there just a few
34 months [sighing] and then the orders came for all physical therapists to be
35 sent back to the States, which was a big disappointment to me; I had
36 hoped to go on up to Germany but instead we boarded a weapons carrier
37 and headed for Le Havre where after three days of staging, we boarded a,
38 tsk, liberty ship called the Mariposa...
39
40Lilah Ramsey: Mm-hm.
41
42Betty Thompson: ...and 14 days later came into Camp Standish, which, um, we had just –
43 were geared for coming into New York. When I left New York, I was on
44 the wrong side of the ship, so I didn't see the Statue of Liberty and coming

1 back into Massachusetts, I didn't see it then either. Then after three more
2 days of sitting around, they put us on a train chair car, no roomettes, for
3 Chicago where three days later, I was finally discharged and my – the first
4 thing I did was take off my tie and throw it out the window. [laughter]
5
6Lilah Ramsey: [laughter]
7
8Betty Thompson: And that's the end. [laughter] A few months later, I got my final
9 discharge.
10
11Lilah Ramsey: [8:45] When did you meet – where did you meet President Roosevelt?
12 That's interesting.
13
14Betty Thompson: Well, that was before I was in service...
15
16Lilah Ramsey: Oh.
17
18Betty Thompson: ...tsk, when I worked at Warm Springs Foundation in Georgia. That was
19 my first job after I graduated from University of Wisconsin and the doctor
20 who was our chief there at University accepted the directorship of the
21 physical medicine program at Warm Springs and he took, uh, two of us
22 with him, so that we actually went to work before we graduated. We
23 worked three months before we, uh, got our – before our time was up, but
24 we didn't take our boards until, tsk, almost nine months later.
25
26Lilah Ramsey: Did you benefit off – from the G.I. Bill?
27
28Betty Thompson: Yes, I got my pilot's license and was...
29
30Unidentified speaker: Did we get anything from the G, from the G.I. Bill?
31
32Lilah Ramsey: You could've but it would've been long after World War I.
33
34Unidentified speaker: I haven't, I haven't gotten any...
35
36Lilah Ramsey: I never took, I never took anything from it. But you, you [inaudible 9:55].
37
38Unidentified speaker: They never offered me anything. [laughter]
39
40Betty Thompson: I took flying lessons, got my, uh, private license, and was on my way to
41 getting my commercial license when I discovered that I was pregnant and
42 decided...
43
44Unidentified speaker: That really messed [inaudible 10:07]

1
2 Betty Thompson: ...I did not need to be flying around up in the sky. I incidentally, uh, as I
3 said, married the man who had been our mess officer, special services
4 officer...
5
6 Unidentified speaker: Mm-hm.
7
8 Betty Thompson: ...you name it, three years after we had met.
9
10 Unidentified speaker: Hm. One of the nurses in our unit married our mess officer and her name
11 was [Lyla 10:29]...
12
13 Betty Thompson: Oh.
14
15 Unidentified speaker: ...and she was a twin. We had her twin sister in our unit.
16
17 Betty Thompson: We had twins in our unit whose last name was the same as mine, Taylor.
18 They were from Georgia and unhappily, uh, in Paris, they were out on a
19 date, um, one of the twins was, with two other nurses and the ever-present
20 air force officers, and their car went into the Seine, tsk, and our two
21 nurses, uh, were drowned. They were not found until some weeks later.
22
23 Unidentified speaker: Oh dear.
24
25 Betty Thompson: One of them had made her decision to, um, resign from the Service in
26 order to become a nun, and this was one of her last – um, would have been
27 one of her last evenings there.
28
29 Unidentified speaker: Oh dear.
30
31 Betty Thompson: This was not to be.
32
33 Unidentified speaker: Yeah.
34
35 Lilah Ramsey: Um. Tsk. Did you experience conflict between being feminine and being
36 a military professional? You had a lot of that, I guess.
37
38 Betty Thompson: Well, we were so well treated and of course things were always special for
39 me because I was the first woman in the service. We – um, no, I really
40 would say not.
41
42 Lilah Ramsey: The, uh...
43

1 Betty Thompson: Except for as I said, the way our colonel treated us. He just expected us to
2 do everything the men did and, and we tried.
3

4 Lilah Ramsey: Now, I felt that the men that I met overseas more or less treated us as their
5 sisters. They respected us and they tried to take care of us.
6

7 Betty Thompson: Well, this is...
8

9 Lilah Ramsey: And especially didn't want us to have anything to do with the Australian
10 officers. They were very jealous of us, but they treated us with great
11 respect.
12

13 Betty Thompson: Tsk, yes, I really, um...
14

15 Unidentified speaker: Yeah, I never had much trouble that way.
16

17 Betty Thompson: ...I found that like you say, it was such an artificial situation. It could -
18 can't ever be duplicated, but, um...
19

20 Unidentified speaker: Uh-huh.
21

22 Betty Thompson: ...the experience is just, um, [inaudible 12:42] certainly something that
23 you can't replace, duplicate.
24

25 Lilah Ramsey: What was your most unpopular regulation?
26

27 Betty Thompson: Wearing a tie. [laughter]
28

29 Lilah Ramsey: [laughter]
30

31 Betty Thompson: And the overseas cap. I wore the cap with a - the bill.
32

33 Lilah Ramsey: Bill, yeah. Yeah.
34
35
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