

**Interview of Josephine Boecker on her service in the
American Red Cross in the South Pacific during WWII**

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Josephine Boecker: For the Library of Radcliffe College regarding war service of women during World War II. My name is Josephine Boecker, spelled B-O-E-C-K-E-R, and I'm a member of the Women's Overseas Service League of Orange County in California. My service lasted 3 years, from September '43 to September '46 in New Guinea, the Philippines, and Japan. [inaudible 0:37]. In the summer of 1943, I received a letter from the National Headquarters of the American Red Cross in Washington, DC, asking if I were available for military welfare work in hospitals and camps. Their files indicated that I had served on 2 disaster re-, relief, um, projects for them, and they wondered if I could come to Washington for 3 months training at the American University, which they had taken over. They could not guarantee what or where the jobs would be but suggested I buy enough clothes to last for 2 years in any climate and buy a footlocker to put them in. It was a flat trunk that could be carried like a large metal suitcase. It was a challenge to buy shoes, underwear, and clothing, so I prepared for the coldest climate and wound up in a tropical jungle. My first interview was in San Francisco Headquarters followed by an investigation presumably by the FBI. After clearance was received, I was granted a year's leave of absence from teaching in Los Angeles, but it eventually had to be extended to 3 years.

Besides teaching, I was doing 3 types of war service. After working hours, I made investigations of people applying for commissions in the armed forces and strategic industries, issued ration books and riveted parts for bombers during the vacation. On going into the service, I took a h-, a thousand dollar a year cut in salary but was glad to do it as the Red Cross had 400 volunteers for each paid worker. I traveled to Washington, DC, on the train with other recruits from California. We lived at the dormitory of the American University, and our lectures were usually conducted by people who had just returned from various warfronts describing actual conditions. Both the lectures and assignments were very time consuming, and we were graded on many projects simulating possible situations we would encounter. After 3 months, some recruits were dropped, some were assigned to overseas, uh, locations in either camps or hospitals, and the rest were assigned to, uh, u-, United States' posts. Some of the students had, uh, served 2 weeks assignments at St. Elizabeths Psychiatric Hospital, but another girl and I were sent to p-, Camp Patrick Henry Hospital in Virginia instead. It was good experience with patients in the wards, and there were also prisoners of war that were taken from enemy ships. The,

1 uh, 2 weeks of training at the hospital were very valuable in taking of
2 many of the patient's needs.
3

4 We had been issued, uh, 1 winter uniform, 1 summer uniform, and 2
5 seersucker dresses. All were in shades of gray with folding caps to match.
6 We bought regulation white blouses and black shoulder strap bags for
7 personal things. On returning to Washington, I was placed in a hotel and
8 went to the Pentagon almost daily for various shots against strange-
9 sounding diseases. Uh, on passing the Whitehouse, it was very dramatic to
10 see people from all over the world in colorful uniforms coming and going.
11 Finally, a member of our training staff assembled 50 girls and put us on a
12 train headed west. That was a surprise as we expected to be sent to North
13 Africa or Europe. The train was quite antiquated and crowded with troops.
14 They could only provide 2 meals a day for us, and we sat up all the way
15 across the States. On reaching Chicago, we were taken to a hotel for a few
16 hours so we could clean up from the coal smoke and rest a bit. Then we
17 learned we had been directed to the wrong train earlier, so we were put on
18 a newer one, but it was still very crowded. The nicest experience across
19 country was a beautiful snowstorm in the Rockies. On reaching San
20 Francisco, we were taken to a hotel where the 50 girls were placed in 3
21 suites with the beds just 3 feet apart and all our gear beside us in case we
22 got sudden orders to move out.
23

24 It was the Christmas season, and we were allowed to phone our families
25 but not tell them why we could not be home for the holidays. I simply told
26 my folks I was waiting to be assigned for more training at a hospital. We
27 could go out in small groups so as not to attract attention but had to call in
28 every 4 hours if away from the hotel. Since none of us knew where in the
29 world we were going, it was easy to keep that a secret if anyone inquired.
30 Mrs. Roosevelt had come to our graduation just after a trip to the South
31 Pacific, and she told us not to go overseas if we had any doubts in our
32 minds about being able to cope with any situation in which we might find
33 ourselves. Finally, on January 3, 1943, we were assembled in the hotel
34 lobby with all our gear, including helmets, gasmasks, pistol belts, uh, hung
35 with first-aid kit, canteen, mess kit, and, uh, but no guns. A truck had
36 picked up our bedrolls and pup tents to deliver to a ship, but we were
37 loaded down with our suitcases, musette bag, shelter, bags of personal
38 things, plus many layers of uniform, including rain gear. A bus took us to
39 the docks at Pittsburg near San Francisco, where we found 2,500 men
40 waiting to board the ship Nord-, Noordam, N-O-O-R-D-A-M, a Dutch
41 ship. The men were mainly for the air corps and the CB, uh, meaning
42 Construction Battalion.
43

1 It took hours to examine our papers, and while standing in line each of the
2 Red Cross girls was handed one more thing to carry. It was a case of
3 phonograph records. Our ship was of the Holland American line on
4 contract to the US, and it had not been to Holland for 4 years, as the Nazis
5 occupied their homeland. When it was a cruise ship, it carried 400
6 passengers but now had over 6 times that many aboard, so we got only 2
7 meals a day and often had to put a roll or fruit in our pocket as we got so
8 hungry during the next 4 weeks at sea. The women had 6 persons to a
9 cabin instead of 2 with bunks 3, 3 deep, but the men had bunks 6 deep,
10 many in the hold of the ship with so little air they spent almost all their
11 time on the deck. One could hardly walk on the deck without stepping on
12 somebody, but cooperation was very good. We had only saltwater for
13 bathing or laundry but were able to fill our con-, canteens with fresh water
14 at a place on the deck. One boy was thought to be seasick until he died of
15 pneumonia, so there was a military burial at sea for him. Strict blackouts
16 were needed at night with portholes closed, and it got very hot as we went
17 on south.

18
19 The ship's chaplain asked the girls to scout talent aboard and organize
20 shows, contests, games, and boxing matches for daytime activities, but no
21 lights were allowed on deck at night. The ship had a pump organ and a set
22 of drums, which helped, as well as, um, um, many instruments that the
23 boys had brought, such as guitars. We distributed playing cards, books,
24 and magazines the chaplain had brought, so everybody seemed to share
25 activities. Our nearest alternative to, um, Australia was New Guinea, so
26 when food and water were getting low because of electrical failures to
27 provide for fresh water and food, the captain headed for mil-, Milne Bay,
28 M-I-L-N-E, it's spelled, which was Base A for our forces in the South
29 Pacific, and that is where the Japanese were finally stopped in their
30 conquest of the Pacific countries heading south. Engineers who were
31 building an airstrip stopped the Japanese as they emerged over the Owen
32 Stanley range of mountains. Everybody said no human could survive that
33 bad a jungle, but somehow they had and surprised the engineers who
34 stopped them. We had seen the and, uh, and heard bombing before
35 reaching Milne Bay at night but stayed below for a blackout. Because of
36 the terrible reefs there, docks could not be built, so we anchored in the
37 deep bay and were quite surprised the next morning to find 200 other ships
38 waiting there ahead of us to unload by landing barges.

39
40 Our, uh, captain heard the air force boys were badly needed up at a port
41 called L-A-E, Lae, so he delivered them the next day, but the rest of us
42 were still waiting for orders. Standing in trucks, the women were taken on
43 a tour of the jungle and tent camps at Lae. I shall never forget the thrill of
44 hearing Beethoven's Fifth Concerto being played at a Red Cross palm-

1 thatched hut in the dense jungle by a g-, a GI who was somehow able to
2 get music out of a beat-up, old [Aussie 12:04] piano that had survived that
3 steaming climate. While there, they introduced us to battery acid, their
4 name for powdered lemon aid, which toast-, tasted wonderful in our hot,
5 dirty state. They also had huge tin cans of Aussie biscuits, which were
6 plain, thin cookies. We were made very welcome, but alas, orders took us
7 back on the ship to return to m-, Milne Bay. At midnight in a heavy rain,
8 we heard the often repeated "Now hear this, all Red Cross personnel will
9 assemble your gear and go ashore in landing barges." We were so loaded
10 down with clothing and our gear, we could hardly make it to the barges.
11 We were also so hot and wet. I tried to find a happy thought to carry us
12 through, but all I could think of was they're probably doing this for your
13 own good because the rain will camouflage your arrival.

14
15 When we hit the beach and waded ashore, we had to climb up an incline
16 and then began to fall into foxholes dug for protection of the personnel
17 there during the raids. Tents had been put up for us with 4 canvas folding
18 cots to a tent and 1 nail for each on center pole for our clothes. There were
19 no floors, so our gear went on the wet ground. We opened our cots and
20 collapsed [chuckle] on them. After a short rest, the port authority mess
21 boys next to us sent word to come over for chocolate cake and coffee.
22 That caused a revival. The boys had heard we were coming, bless their
23 hearts, and stayed up to welcome us. When they asked where each of us
24 was from and I said from near San Pedro, California, a cheer went up as
25 their local hero was from there. They were so proud of him and the
26 wonderful job he had done in moving equipment in and out of that base
27 day and night, no matter what the size. They said they would have gone
28 anywhere with him to get the job done that lie ahead. Unfortunately, he
29 had gone home for a rest. Then they remembered he had a name besides
30 the Big Swede. He was Colonel Harold [Nerving 14:36], my classmate in
31 high school, and we were student body officers together.

32
33 At graduation, we each received a ring for service and took the same oath
34 that ancient Athenians took, to leave their city better than they found it.
35 However, this was stretching our city limits several thousand miles away.
36 The only water at our women's compound was in a canvas lister bag, uh,
37 with a spigot on it. We had to share it with the guard at the gate to the
38 main road. Later a scaffold was built and a drum or water installed, which
39 helped us wash up a bit, but helmets were the best thing for holding water
40 and trying to keep clean. Finally, a bucket was given us along with a big
41 wooden board and scrub brush to help get our kaki clothes clean. We were
42 put into men's clothes almost immediately because the constant rain and
43 red mud made our city clothes and shoes impossible. Because of the
44 severe malarial conditions, no containers could be used to capture the

1 rainwater, and box-shaped mosquito nets were fitted over T-shaped sticks
2 on our cots. We also had to take a malarial suppressant drug each day
3 called Atabrine. The insects were so large crawling under our cots, we
4 wondered when we should we should call 'em [boars 16:14] or when we
5 should call 'em animals. Are dense jungle there had 15-foot python, wild
6 boars with tusks, and all kinds of snakes, uh, land crabs, and scorpions,
7 just to mention a few.
8

9 Many of the 50 girls in our group were flown out almost immediately to
10 various parts of the Pacific, but I was told to stand by to join a hospital
11 unit coming from, uh, Los Angeles. In the meantime, I got busy helping a
12 Red Cross man set up some recreation centers for the 100 thousand men at
13 our base who were waiting to be sent into action or helping to maintain the
14 base. There was no town whatever, not even a store or PX, and there were
15 no supplies available. Some logs had been rolled in to provide seats for a
16 few outdoor movies at night, but they were usually rained out. Bulldozers
17 were too busy making roads and airstrips for us to have access to them
18 very often for clearing enough jungle to, to make a recreation center. First
19 we turned a deserted mess hall at the center of the base into a club by
20 breaking up packing boxes and building stages, cupboards, tables,
21 counters, and so forth to dispense games, refreshments, and talent shows.
22 It had open sides and a palm-thatched roof. By mooching paint from odd
23 sources, we made it bright and cheerful. The men came immediately to see
24 what was going on and were soon put to work. They had great ideas and
25 fulfilled our mission for being there, which was to involve them in
26 activities so they would not have time to brood over their circumstances.
27

28 As soon as club number 1 was finished, uh, it opened for activities from
29 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., and became so overcrowded we knew immediately that
30 every outfit on the base needed its own club where they could use their
31 spare time and hold some activity. With no supplies, we decided to send
32 for Captain Marley, the Australian in charge of a native labor camp.
33 Papuan women had been taken over the mountains into protective camps,
34 but the men were avail-, were available for work when we needed them.
35 Since they had, uh, used palm trees to construct their large buildings for
36 generations, we asked them to help us by using pigeoning, er, English and
37 drawing in, um, the dirt. Using palm trunks for the framework and bracing
38 of the roof all tied together with tough strips of braided palm leaves, they
39 were very secure. Then layers of palm thatching covered the roof, and any
40 partitions needed were woven or palm strips. An artillery outfit soon had
41 its own club, then an antiaircraft club, and an all-negro unit of 500, with
42 5,000 men, which were housed next to us had a, a good, um, club set up
43 for them, and some colored girls came to run it for them. Talent of all
44 kinds was found among the men and traded between all the different

1 groups. Contests and discussion groups were also popular. So we really
2 tried to keep them all busy.
3

4 Finally, the hospital I was scheduled to join was finished up on the
5 mountainside, and I moved there. It was called the 47th General Hospital of
6 a thousand beds with screening and, uh, sides of a prefab, uh, material, uh,
7 which was also used for the roof. Patients came to us from former tent
8 hospitals, from ships, planes, and all over the Pacific. There were 19
9 women on the staff, and we all slept in 1 ward, which was something like
10 a long shed. Eventually we opened a nice recreation center for the
11 ambulatory patients and made daily ward visits to the bed patients. We
12 had a team of 5 Red Cross workers headed by a social worker, a secretary
13 to handle the paperwork, and 3 recreation workers to visit wards as well as
14 keep the program going, uh, from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., at night in the hall.
15 After a year in New Guinea, I hitchhiked to ride on a hospital plane to
16 Australia for a week's leave and was very graciously received. Being in
17 uniform plus having a yellow complexion from the malaria-suppressant
18 Atabrine, strangers on the street invited me to their homes. They expressed
19 gratitude for our help to their people in New Guinea and protection of
20 their homeland, which had also been bombed. On returning to my hospital,
21 I noticed a big reduction in patient load and convoys moving out for action
22 in the Philippines.
23

24 We, too, were to be headed there as soon as a tres-, transport was available
25 and eventually had to take some patients with us, who had no way to, uh,
26 get home. On arriving in Manilla, we found terrible devastation. Beautiful,
27 old government buildings were a heap of rubble crushed into the streets.
28 People took shelter where ever they could in bombed-out areas. Things
29 were in a paralyzed state with water available only spasmodically, and
30 food lines were long. We helped out at various hospitals, often operating
31 in schools, which had been sus-, h-, uh, suspended. But we were soon put
32 on a little train and sent to San Fabian where we lived in tents again and
33 worked in field hospitals. The climate was very hot and steamy, but the
34 people were so appreciative. They held a dinner for us in the town square
35 with dancing and singing and speeches of thanks for the Americans. The
36 Red Cross Directory, pardon me, a Red Cross director visited me there and
37 said that the hospital staff from Los Angeles was ending its tour-of-duty,
38 uh, promise to the army and my term had also almost expired, but she said
39 that although they could not hold me longer, there was no way they could
40 send inexperienced people into the invasion of Japan. She asked if I were
41 willing to join another girl and report to a strategic unit on the north coast
42 planning the invasion. If so, it would be greatly appreciated.
43

1 I finally agreed to go and reported to Manilla for outfitting in winter
2 clothes for the cold climate in Japan. In Manilla, he, I met my new Red
3 Cross helper, and we traveled to a camp near San Fernando North where a
4 little bamboo house had been built for us on the beach. We set up a
5 recreation then, uh, a room for the men attached to the unit and, uh, also
6 worked at a nearby field hospital. When we inquired of the officials there
7 what our duties would be in the invasion, we were told that we would have
8 a mobile unit and we would know what to do when the time came, which
9 left it rather vague. Very soon, while on duty at a hospital nearby, we
10 heard that an invention called an atom bomb had been dropped in Japan,
11 which might end the war because of its enormous power. The patients
12 were unbelieving until a US Army radio confirmed it later. Within a few
13 days, the surrender from Hirohito came. We were soon asked to report to
14 the hospital ship Comfort to join nurses going to Tokyo to see up a
15 hospital in the, uh, center called the [inaudible 26:03], s-, uh, uh, area, and
16 ours was to be the 172nd Station Hospital of 500 beds. Our hospital ship
17 had been hit by a kamikaze suicide pilot earlier and repaired at one of the
18 islands, so the giant red crosses on the, uh, decks and sides were no
19 protection then, but we hoped they would be now on entering Japanese
20 waters.

21
22 As the plane came out from Tokyo to meet us, we were glad to see the
23 American insignia as it in-, escorted us to Yokohama docks. We occupied,
24 occupied a Tokyo Hospital that looked quite modern on the outside but
25 had to have a lot of renovation. The city, which had held 7-million
26 population, was almost entirely leveled except for the buildings the, uh,
27 occupational forces expected to use and a few protected by protocol. After
28 setting up the Red Cross recreation room at the hospital for occupation
29 forces, it soon became too small, so an engineer suggested we build one
30 on the roof, mainly of glass, and it was a big success. We organized a
31 trade of talent among the US units in Japan and accepted offers of
32 Japanese too, so they had a very active center. A contest was started called
33 Eye to the Future, and the patients used many creative ideas to compete
34 for a free trip to Shanghai by the courtesy of the army. It was a very
35 enlightening experience to see how the cultural and political patterns
36 changed under democratic influence. In the schools, in journalism, in all
37 government institutions reforms were at work to free many futile systems.
38 Health facilities were started for inoculations, vaccinations, and education
39 against many diseases. This move is estimated to have saved more lives in
40 the first 2 years of the occupation than all those lost by Japan in the war.

41
42 During my year in the first year of the occupation, I was able to meet a
43 number of leaders both American and Japanese through the lease-, liaison
44 work of General MacArthur's public relations officer. I shall be forever

1 grateful to the American Red Cross for allowing me to do what needed to
2 be done both during the war and in a reconstruction period that followed.
3 It was such a powerful experience that words are inad-adequate to express
4 it. I was not able to keep a diary, so this record is entirely from memory
5 and giving only the practical side of the war during service in World War
6 II. This is Jo Boecker signing off from the hills, uh, Laguna Hills,
7 California, and saying sayonara for now.
8

9 I should like to make a, a small correction in the date given for our sailing
10 overseas. It was January 3, 4-, 1944, instead of '43.
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