

**Interview of retired Colonel Mary Patricia Laughlin
on her service as a nurse in U.S. Air Force and Army**

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5 Ruth Stewart: Mary Patricia Laughlin is being interviewed today, as a member of the
6 Women's Overseas Service League – San Antonio, Texas Unit. This is
7 being recorded at the Army Residence Community in San Antonio. Pat is,
8 was born in, uh, on February 27, 1925. Ruth Stewart is interviewing,
9 assisted by Carol Habgood.

10
11 [00:30] Now Pat, would you start by just telling us a little bit about your
12 early life and how you got into nursing and then into, um, the military?
13

14 Mary P. Laughlin: Ready? Okay. I was born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska. Um, I got into
15 nursing, uh, because I had so many cousins that were in nursing, for one
16 thing, and the other is the other choices for women at the time was
17 teaching or, uh, what's the word I want? A secretary. And, uh, I didn't
18 want any, either of those. Um, went to St., uh, St. Joseph's Hospital
19 School of Nursing in Omaha and graduated in, uh, '46. I was a cadet
20 nurse, if anybody remembers what cadet nurses were, but, in 1946, the war
21 was over and they didn't want anybody in the service. They were getting
22 rid of'm as much as they could. So, my folks by that time had moved to
23 Denver. Dad's job was changed and so I was in Denver. I did my last 6
24 months of training at the Marine Hospital in Seattle as part of the cadet
25 nurse program. And, uh, while we were in Seattle, my friend and I, uh, the
26 nurses there went on strike. They wanted more money. And they got their
27 salaries raised to 2-, \$220 a month – that's a 6-day week and no
28 evenings/nights considered at all. And when I got to Denver, they were
29 paying their nurses \$160. So, my father kept saying – my father was a
30 cattle buyer, by the way – he kept saying, "You can make more money
31 cuttin' bacon and you only have to work Monday through Friday!" "But,
32 Dad, I don't wanna cut bacon!" and finally he heard on the radio that they
33 were looking for nurses to take care of polio patients then through the
34 NFIP. The NFIP? Do you know any [inaudible 3:06]?
35

36 Ruth Stewart: [3:07] [inaudible 3:07].
37

38 Mary P. Laughlin: Uh, [inaudible 3:08]. Um, we got paid extra, so that we were paid, uh, \$10
39 a day and \$5 on our day off, which was a better salary. I was at the [Z
40 3:24] Children's Hospital in Denver and the, the accent is on the ["Z"
41 3:30] at that hospital. Um, after 11, there were some, lots of nurses there,
42 some from Chicago and other places, and some had left, uh, when we had
43 been there about 11 months and they called us into the chief nurse's office
44 and asked us if we would care to stay on regular spot, uh, regular status,

um, which would be still \$160 and we all said no. And since we hadn't done a full year, we didn't get any vacation for that year.

Uh, but I did continue to do polio nursing, uh, for just 1951. I was into 14 different places. Uh, in the valley, uh, Nebraska, uh, uh all around the middle west. Uh, so, then in '51 I was at the, at Dallas, and had friends in, uh, Waco that I used to go visit. And that's what gave me the idea of maybe, now that there was a war on, we could go to, I could get into and did get into the air force. I asked to go to east or west coast. Of course, they sent me to Sheppard Air Force Base, Wichita Falls, Texas.

After 3 years, which is what I had signed up for, I got out because there were, this, that hospital was a cantonment hospital of 100 and-, 1,000 beds, and there were 12, 12, uh, yeah, 112 nurses, all of whom had their name on the list to go anywhere, except the chief. She didn't dare try that! Uh, so, at the end of 3 years, I got out of the air force. I went to Chicago, um, and wound up there working with polio patients who had been on respirators and things of that sort and we were trying to wean them from the respirators and get them so they could go home. And, uh, then, of course, in what, about fifty-, '56, '55, '56, the, the, the Sabin and Salk vaccines came along and polio was almost a thing of the past immediately. And so the chief nurse there was looking for a job that she thought I would like and found me one at the, um, (hold it a minute), a new hospital that took care of patients who had had strokes and things of that sort. And, uh, they had just 32 beds at the time. When I left there, they had 60-some beds. I went back a few years later, they had 4 stories with Northwestern. But, in the meantime, I had decided to go to see if I could get back, get in the army and I did, so that was '63. In January, I think it was January, um, I had, was sent to, again having asked east and west, I got to sh-, to, uh, San Antonio. And I, I asked to, I knew, uh, I should say that I used the GI Bill and got my baccalaureate. And then, after I...

[7:55] Where was it that you did that?

In Chicago.

[7:58] Oh, before that thing.

Yeah. Yeah.

[7:59] You did that in Chicago? Okay.

Yeah, I did that in Chicago. Uh, Loyola, of Chicago, if you want that. Then, uh, whoops, there I lost where I was. Um, oh! I asked the chief

1 nurse there what I had to do to get to go to school for a master's because
2 that was, you could see the writing on the wall, as far as that was
3 concerned. And she told me that I'd have to have an overseas tour. So, I
4 asked for the shortest overseas tour that I could and got, uh, the one to
5 many at, in, uh, I, I'm missing the name again, Ruth. Next to, next to, uh,
6 Japan is, uh...
7
8 Ruth Stewart: [9:07] Okinawa? Or...
9
10 Mary P. Laughlin: No.
11
12 Ruth Stewart: [9:09] Taiwan?
13
14 Mary P. Laughlin: No, no. The simple one. The one where the north is now trying to, north
15 and south...
16
17 Ruth Stewart: [9:17] Korea.
18
19 Mary P. Laughlin: Korea! Could not think Korea! [laughter]
20
21 Ruth Stewart: [9:20] [laughter]
22
23 Mary P. Laughlin: Uh, I was there for 13 months and got to come back to, uh, Fitzsimmons
24 because I wa-, wanted to go to school at the University of Colorado.
25
26 Ruth Stewart: [9:35] Let's back up and talk about your tour in Korea.
27
28 Mary P. Laughlin: Okay. What about it? [laughter]
29
30 Ruth Stewart: [9:41] Tell us about the type of patients you were taking care of, the way
31 you lived there, your recreation.
32
33 Mary P. Laughlin: We lived in cantonment huts. You know, back to cantonment huts. We
34 had a cantonment-type place, um, the 121st was the biggest hospital that
35 we had in K-, in Korea. They had some small places and then they had the
36 one down at, uh, the big city. [inaudible 10:20].
37
38 Ruth Stewart: [10:21] Seoul?
39
40 Mary P. Laughlin: Seoul. And, uh, there wa-, you know, it was '64. It was just the same, it
41 was kind of just the same everything, like any hospital. They, we didn't
42 get people very much that were hurt, except kids, little kids who managed
43 to get hurt when the truck ran over'm at 3:00 in the morning when there
44 were no trucks on the, out. But, uh, just the ordinary stuff. It was, but we

1 liked Korea. At least Maria and I did. And, uh, we got to see a lot of
2 things.
3

4Ruth Stewart: [11:10] You traveled outside of Korea?
5

6Mary P. Laughlin: We went to Japan for, but we didn't do anything other than that. We went
7 for a few days.
8

9Ruth Stewart: [11:21] And how did you live in Korea?
10

11Mary P. Laughlin: In, in Quonset huts. They were very nice. We, we, they had just fixed over
12 our new Quonset huts and so everybody had their own sink. We just had
13 to go for the showers and the toilet. We had a nice area and mamasans to
14 take care of everything, all your ironing and stuff like that. Uh, it was an
15 interesting, it was 13 months that I would not necessarily can do 2 or 3
16 times but for 1 time, it was very interesting. But I don't have a lot of...
17

18Ruth Stewart: [12:10] So then you came back to Denver?
19

20Mary P. Laughlin: I came to Denver and, um, was at Fitz and because I was older than they
21 allowed for people to be, uh, now what's the term? Uh, regular army. Uh,
22 I had to stay as a reservist and so that made it a little difficult when it came
23 to going to school. I did a lot of it in the evenings and, uh, things like that
24 out of my own money and then asked when I could be sent to school and
25 they decided they would send me for a, one semester. And I was not be,
26 would not be going to, until the second semester of the season. Until, all of
27 the sudden, when it was just about, uh, 10 days before school started
28 somebody else who had gotten the spot decided they weren't going to go
29 to school and, all of the sudden, I went for the full s-, full term.
30

31Ruth Stewart: [13:34] So this was the University of Colorado?
32

33Mary P. Laughlin: Mm-hm.
34

35Ruth Stewart: [13:36] And it was your master's you were working for?
36

37Mary P. Laughlin: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.
38

39Ruth Stewart: [13:39] Okay. In what area?
40

41Mary P. Laughlin: Um, medsed-, med-surg, [laughter]. Uh, and, uh, I didn't want to teach so
42 I took the, uh, what's the word I want?
43

44Ruth Stewart: [14:00] Administrative?

1
2 Mary P. Laughlin: Yeah, administrative. And, after I got out of school, they were gonna send
3 me to [inaudible 14:13] 'cause I didn't go there. They, the hospital fell
4 apart and so they closed it in, uh, the, the, skip it. It's not worth keeping,
5 uh, so, I, they didn't know what they were gonna do with me so they sent
6 me to the [career course 14:39] for 6 months. And from the [career course
7 14:47], where did I go? Where did I go? All of a sudden, I... Japan! And I
8 had asked to go to Vietnam but they said no, we need the gray hairs,
9 [inaudible 15:11] old ladies, in Japan and so I was in s-, I was a major at
10 the time and I went to one of the hospitals there, the one that, [inaudible
11 15:29]. I think, maybe I'll think of the name of it later. It begins with a,
12 it's 3 words beginning with a C, with a U, with a – I can't even say what I
13 want to say – 2. But I don't recall it right now. Um, I was there for 2 years
14 and got to go to, um, Madigan, which I wanted to go back to because I
15 liked the north, the northwest from my experience as a cadet nurse. I was
16 that, I left, uh, Japan on February and in, uh, January, no, November, they
17 st-, they needed an old gray-haired lady at Walter Reed. I really didn't
18 want to go but I had turned down a couple other ones and I thought I better
19 not try that too much. So, I went to Walter Reed. They told me that there
20 would be some-, that they needed me, they needed me. When I got there,
21 the chief nurse asked me what it was I wanted to do. And I said I didn't
22 want to do anything. [laughter] They, they told me that I was needed.
23 Anyhow, um, they turned out that they had a doctor and a nurse who were
24 doing a little s-, work on the side, and they were wanting to keep track of
25 that so, with that taken care of...
26
27 Ruth Stewart: [17:16] So, what year was this? About?
28
29 Mary P. Laughlin: About, well let's see, '60-, must've been '71. Um, I was at Walter Reed
30 for 4½ years. I wound up being the, what was the term that they used for
31 the nurses who were supposed to be helping the others get their education
32 to...
33
34 Ruth Stewart: [17:48] Instructors?
35
36 Mary P. Laughlin: No, it wasn't instructor, it was, uh, hm. Anyhow, that's what I wound up
37 being. By that time, I was a lieutenant colonel. Um, what next? I asked to
38 go, to get out of al-, Walter Reed because I thought I'd been there long
39 enough and Jim [Downy 18:19] told me that the only place I could go was
40 to the far east because my eyes [laughter] [inaudible 18:28]. But, anyhow,
41 um, they sent me to Alaska. Fairbanks. And it was a 50-bed hospital that
42 had very little to do. Uh, I was there for 19 months. I was the ranking
43 officer in the BOQ, so I got to help get the, it was a new BOQ and the men
44 and the women were all in it and they were all younger than me and the

1 men didn't like the idea that I had to tell them to clean the sidewalk of the
2 snow. These young, young kids.
3
4 The first winter was cold. There was no problem. Uh, the snow just, uh –
5 the second winter, we had spells in which it got warm and everything that,
6 the BOQ was such that when the snow melted off of the roof, it melted on
7 the sidewalk. I was there, as I said, 19 months. I was there when they were
8 building the, uh, power-, uh, the...
9
10 Ruth Stewart: [19:47] Pipeline?
11
12 Mary P. Laughlin: The, the, the, ba-ba-ba-, let me get a drink. I was there when they were
13 building the pipeline. And you get to find out that people are very greedy.
14
15 Ruth Stewart: [20:06] Explain that a little further.
16
17 Mary P. Laughlin: Um, the people, the people in town who had businesses had raised their
18 prices considerably. Um, the people coming down from the pipeline for a
19 week, or, I mean for a couple of days came into town and got drunk and
20 they get their money. Um, the people who were on a fixed income were
21 really not getting any help at all from anybody. Um, it just, the, was very
22 disconcerting. Uh, one of my sergeants, he was the one in charge of the,
23 uh, of one of the wards, he went to work every, went to sleep every night
24 in one of the buildings where they, he kept track of everything that came
25 in on the telephone. He got paid \$10 a day, night, to go there and sleep and
26 watch that. Uh, one of the other sergeants, um, had his wife, well, he
27 happened to be black and she was, too, but she was, her family was up in
28 Alaska for some time and he had been, uh, he had more than 20 years, and
29 when they told him he was going back to the States, he told them no
30 because he was making a very good salary, also at night.
31
32 Ruth Stewart: [21:48] Mm-hm.
33
34 Mary P. Laughlin: And that sort of thing. Um, but it was a lot of interesting things to do, too.
35 And, uh, I did go up to see the pipeline, the top [inaudible 22:03] in an
36 airplane and that sort of thing. The Denali and, uh, and then I asked to co-,
37 when I came home, I would like it to be my last assignment because I just
38 had 3 years left. And I went to, um, what's the one? Silas B. Hays, which
39 is Monterey. I can't remember the name of the post but the, the hospital
40 was Silas B. Hays. That was an interesting time. Uh, I'm not particularly
41 fond of California, uh, it's not my style but, um, around that area were
42 some very interesting things and I have since seen, uh, San Diego and, and
43 that's a different time but the other parts of – San Francisco is too busy,

1 uh, too everything. So, it, it was fun to be there and see it but I didn't go
2 for that.

3

4Ruth Stewart: [23:25] So, how long were you in the service totally?

5

6Mary P. Laughlin: I have 20, 20 for the time I was in and 2 for, uh, where's my paper? Before
7 I got in the air force, you know, after I got started, they put me in and then
8 after I left, I had, I got 2 years of reserve time. I also got my, uh, O6 from
9 the air, from that time, from the reserve. I was an O6 by, Jan-, December
10 of '75. I was still a lieutenant colonel when I retired in, in February of '80.
11 But I was, that was also the day I was 55 years old and so I had been paid
12 on the, uh, full colonel since I...

13

14Ruth Stewart: [24:47] So, for people...

15

16Mary P. Laughlin: ...don't, don't understand that. See, 'cause they knew me on active duty
17 and I had O6, I mean, not, I did not have the O6 is what I was trying...

18

19Ruth Stewart: [25:05] And what does O6 refer to?

20

21Mary P. Laughlin: Full colonel.

22

23Ruth Stewart: [25:10] Okay.

24

25Mary P. Laughlin: And, see, I was only a, I was not a full colonel on active duty and some
26 people can't understand why I now say full colonel and get the pay for it.

27

28Ruth Stewart: [25:24] And, tell us about your life since then, after '50, after '80, when
29 you retired from the military.

30

31Mary P. Laughlin: My mother came to live with me. Uh, that had been planned. But she came
32 when I, I had my parade here in San Antonio. I happened to be the only
33 one that wanted to have the parade that, that month. And my mother came
34 down for that. Um, and then she went back to Omaha where she had lived.
35 After my father died, they lived down in Kansas, uh, she stayed for just a
36 while but then she went back to Omaha because she had a lot of friends
37 there, a lot of people she played bridge with, people she had worked with.
38 Um, being of the age and everything that she was, she wasn't ready to
39 come to be with me yet because she had an agreement with the apartment
40 that she was going to be there for so long and she didn't, you know, how
41 those people were. So, uh, along in May, I kept get-, started getting from
42 her friends calling me and telling me that she was not, she was not doing
43 well. She was getting up in the middle of the night and thinking she had to
44 go to the doctor and things of that sort and then I talked to the doctor so I

1 went up to Omaha and got her. We went up to Iowa where all of her
2 relatives, where most of her relatives were, and came down in time for the
3 4th of July. I don't know whether you want this on the tape but when I
4 cleaned out the apartment for my mother, she had at the end of the tub a, a
5 place that she could keep things like linens and [inaudible 27:28] and up in
6 the very top, it had toilet paper, lots of toilet paper. And I said, "Mother,
7 what are you doing with so much toilet paper?" She said, "I had a
8 coupon."
9

10Ruth Stewart: [27:42] [laughter]
11

12Mary P. Laughlin: So, I, she had a sewing machine and I had a sewing machine so I took and
13 wrapped up the sewing machine to my brother's wife in Chicago and used
14 toilet paper so that everything would go right. My other brother came from
15 Colorado and he used a lot of toilet paper. I took a lot of paper home. And
16 my mother died then in October. She had been 90-, 95, uh, the 13th of
17 October and she died in that same year. I still had toilet paper. You know?
18 I'm sorry that she didn't, uh, didn't live longer but it really was good that
19 she went as fast as she did. She, uh, had got, washed her hair one morning
20 and then wasn't feeling well. Pretty soon, she started to vomit. We got the,
21 got the 911 here and, uh, took her and she died during the night. My
22 father, this is one thing I hope is good for me, my father also died very
23 suddenly. They had been to a wake and then to dinner and he, they came
24 home and Mother had gone to bed and she heard him fall in the bathroom
25 and, that's while I was in Korea, and, uh, when I, I came home for the
26 funeral, uh, the doctor across the street said that, although they took him to
27 the hospital, the ambulance did, he was dead before he left home.
28

29Ruth Stewart: [29:40] Mm-hm. Since you...
30

31Mary P. Laughlin: [inaudible 29:41] that's real nice.
32

33Ruth Stewart: [29:43] Yes. Since you've been out, have you belonged, have you joined
34 any veterans' organizations?
35

36Mary P. Laughlin: I belong to the Windcrest Post 612 of the American Legion. I belong to
37 this op, of course. Um, seems like I'm leaving something out. I work,
38 now, this was not a veterans' organization but I work every Tuesday from
39 10-1 at the AMEDD Museum for [inaudible 30:15]. Um, and this doesn't
40 have anything to do with veterans' organizations but, since May of '84, I
41 have been driving Cancer Society, uh, cancer patients for the American
42 Cancer Society to about 2,500 or so, uh, miles a year.
43

44Ruth Stewart: [30:44] And you help people here, too.

1
2 Mary P. Laughlin: Yes. We just made \$5,817 and 11 pennies in our thrift, thrifts deal. Now,
3 part of it, uh, Millie does the jewelry and she made \$2700+ in her jewelry
4 and then the, with the all the other stuff, we made \$3,000+. And that's for
5 our activities. That's the money [inaudible 31:28].
6
7 Ruth Stewart: [31:29] Here, at the Army Residence Community?
8
9 Mary P. Laughlin: Yeah. They, they, uh, have parties and they have, uh, the movies and they
10 have, we have a children's Christmas party coming up. Um, all sorts of
11 things like that. And this is the biggest fundraiser...
12
13 Ruth Stewart: [31:52] Mention briefly about the recognition you've had this spring.
14
15 Mary P. Laughlin: Mm, uh...what does, what – mention briefly about'm – uh, I don't know
16 where to start. Uh, it was very, uh, how, what – it was very nice. It really
17 was very inspiring that, uh, I don't know how to...
18
19 Ruth Stewart: [32:33] It was recognition by a community organization for all your
20 volunteer efforts.
21
22 Mary P. Laughlin: Right. Yeah.
23
24 Ruth Stewart: [32:38] You've been nominated for that.
25
26 Mary P. Laughlin: Yeah, yeah. You got all of that. Do you need it in the...?
27
28 Ruth Stewart: [32:43] I just think it's useful to add this in here because otherwise it
29 would not be noted.
30
31 Mary P. Laughlin: Oh, okay. You can't just take and get the, her deal out of the, the, yeah,
32 okay. That was a complete surprise to me! I had no idea.
33
34 Ruth Stewart: [33:09] Mm-hm.
35
36 Mary P. Laughlin: And then, what was it, 7:30 in the morning that we had, had to be there?
37 Yes. Yes.
38
39 Ruth Stewart: [33:19] It was a breakfast event.
40
41 Mary P. Laughlin: I'd had a lot of people come. That was, that was very good. I was
42 surprised.
43

1 Ruth Stewart: [33:27] When you were in the military, uh, did you receive citations or
2 medals in the military?
3

4 Mary P. Laughlin: Mm, nothing special. But I did, uh, the usual things but I would have to go
5 look'm up because they were, you know, I didn't do anything extra special
6 to, I didn't even get a Purple Heart. It was just the ordinary, usual thing.
7

8 Ruth Stewart: [33:56] Mm-hm. Okay, uh, what about your, um, um, time in the military?
9 Did that affect the way you think now about the military or the war or
10 wars that go on?
11

12 Mary P. Laughlin: No. I, I, I thought that they, we gave very good care. I thought that we had
13 good equipment and, uh, things of that sort, in any of the places that I've
14 been. And, but the people, the people were mostly very good, but like any
15 place, you know, there are some that you don't agree with as well as
16 others and, uh, so on. But mostly it was very satisfactory. Uh, I was, uh,
17 they asked me while I was at Fort Ord, um, to take another assignment,
18 which would have been, been extending my time. And, when I came into
19 the army, I knew at that time that I would be leaving at a certain time
20 because of my age. I had to leave when I was 55. And they said they could
21 get a waiver for that. And this was so close to the time that I was going to
22 be getting out that I said I really didn't wanna do that. I thought I'd stick
23 with what I had.
24

25 Ruth Stewart: [35:41] Mm-hm.
26

27 Mary P. Laughlin: And I'm glad I didn't now because of my mother, for one thing. Uh, and
28 this one it reminds me that I should say that I was Volunteer of the Year of
29 2003 and it was the San Antonio, that wasn't 2003, was it?
30

31 Ruth Stewart: [36:02] Mm-hm.
32

33 Mary P. Laughlin: No, I thought it was 2002. You talking about the Women's Federation?
34 That was the year bef-, what was the one the year before?
35

36 Ruth Stewart: [36:24] What we could...
37

38 Mary P. Laughlin: This just says that the profile...
39

40 Carol Habgood: [inaudible 36:27].
41

42 Mary P. Laughlin: Profile, profiles, huh?
43

1 Carol Habgood [36:29] That was the Parade of Nations this last year. This was a
2 [inaudible 36:32], right?
3
4 Mary P. Laughlin: Yeah.
5
6 Ruth Stewart: [36:40] What we can do, Pat, is, is write this in and put the written
7 material in, in your, uh, envelope that will have all this information,
8 including [inaudible 36:50].
9
10 Mary P. Laughlin: Profiles and Leadership Award was in, in 2002. Uh, that's a Mission City
11 business and professional women. But I thought that other one was the
12 year before.
13
14 Ruth Stewart: [37:06] Okay. That's okay. We'll get that in wri-, in hard copy to add in.
15 Uh, is there anything else you'd like to add in as we wind this up?
16
17 Mary P. Laughlin: Uh, well, what would I like to add in? I don't know that there's anything
18 in particular. I, I have a busy life. I got a few aches and pains here and
19 there. Um, and lot, I'm absolutely spoiled from living here. You couldn't,
20 uh, it never, ever entered my mind that it would be as easy and as nice as it
21 is for us here.
22
23 Ruth Stewart: [37:55] You deserve to have some comfort at this point. And we certainly
24 thank you for sharing your memories with us. We appreciate it very much.
25
26
27/ab