

**Interview of retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Therese Slone-Baker
on her work with the Veterans Administration Voluntary Services Committee
and her efforts to start a program to serve hospitalized women veterans
at a veteran hospital in San Antonio, Texas**

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7 Ruth Stewart: [Recording 00:02] under the auspices of the Women's Overseas Service
8 League - San Antonio, Texas Unit. We are interviewing Terri Slone-
9 Baker, uh, in relation to the work she did to initiate recognition of and the
10 needs of women veterans when they were patients in veterans hospitals.
11 Um, I am Ruth Stewart, of the WOSL Unit, as interviewer. This is March
12 26, 2005.

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14 [00:41] Terri, you've been telling me about your early work in the mid-
15 1980s, um, with the – now tell me again – Veteran's Administration
16 Voluntary Services Committee.

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18 Ms. Slone-Baker: ...Services Committee. Yeah. VA, commonly known as, [throat clearing]
19 commonly known as the VAVS Committee.

20
21 Ruth Stewart: [1:03] Mm-hm.

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23 Ms. Slone-Baker: I was appointed as the, um, San Antonio Unit of Women's Overseas
24 Service League as their representative to serve on the VAVS Committee at
25 the, um, Audie L. Murphy Memorial Hospital here in San Antonio. And
26 as, um, as a member of that, that committee, uh, it was my responsibility
27 to, uh, attend monthly meetings, uh, which were held at the hospital by
28 the, uh, hospital administrator. [Ike 1:41], was that Jose Coronado at that
29 time?

30
31 Female: Hm?

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33 Ms. Slone-Baker: The hospital administrator, was that Jose Coronado?

34
35 Female: Yes, Mr. Coronado. Uh, Nice guy. [laughter]

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37 Ms. Slone-Baker: I really liked him. Um, I had attended about 4 or 5 meetings and it seemed
38 to me that all I kept hearing at these meetings were the words, "the
39 veterans," "he," and it occurred to me whether there were any veteran
40 "she"s also patients at the hospital. I went to see Mr., um, Joe [Zebko
41 2:24] who, at that time, was the Director of Voluntary Services at the
42 hospital. I went to see him to ask him about whether there were women
43 veterans patients in the hospital. He said he really wasn't sure but that
44 perhaps we could go down and, um, talk to the chief nurse, her name was

1 Marguerite Burt, uh, to find out about that. So, Mr. [Zebko 2:53] and I
2 went down to see Ms. Burt and she said, yes, there were about 2, maybe 3,
3 women patients at the hospital, um, at the present time. Um, after that, I,
4 um, when I attended the next meeting of the Women's Overseas Service
5 League, um, I suggested to the unit members that we establish a project to
6 visit the women patients at the hospital, because most of them, those that,
7 the few that were there, were alone. They were unmarried women and they
8 were World War II women, uh, and I thought that it would be nice to just
9 visit them, let them know that they're not as alone as they must have felt
10 they are, being in an all-male atmosphere, so to speak. So, the unit did
11 agree to, es-, to establish a new project like that. Um, I was the one, of
12 course, [laughter] because I had suggested the project, uh, who was to do
13 the visiting.

14
15 I started to visit the women veterans to find out how they were doing and
16 just to let them know that there were others in the area who were there to
17 help them if they needed any help. And it seemed to me that, with most of
18 I-, my visits, their main complaint was the lack of privacy, privacy issues.
19 I went down to see Ms. Burt after each visit to let her know what the
20 women said and I mentioned the fact that the, the biggest problem seemed
21 to be, for them, uh, the lack of privacy in the hospital. Ms. Burt then
22 decided that that should be something the hospital should look into. And,
23 uh, she established an ad hoc committee and placed me on the
24 membership, and our job was to, uh, review the facilities in the hospital to
25 see how they pertain to women's health needs. And we went, doing things
26 such as, um, visiting latrines [laughter], and, uh, showers. And it seemed
27 that the showers were the big problem because there were no curtains,
28 dividing curtains, in the main shower room and the women, in order to
29 take a shower, had to walk down the hallway, uh, and, um, into that
30 shower room. And some of them were surprised at times by men coming
31 in, who did not know that a woman was occupying the shower room at the
32 time. So, we did things, such as, simple things – we could not put, um, a,
33 uh, lock on the shower room facility because that would, um, be rather a
34 hazard, in case someone had a medical problem while showering. So, we
35 did simple things, such as devising signs, which said "Occupied," uh, and,
36 um, that started this whole project of doing things, checking out the
37 facilities to see whether they meet the needs of the women.

38
39 The women did not have any, um, clothing, other than men's pajamas, to
40 wear. Um, the, many of them, um, came, of course, if they were in an, on
41 an emergency situation, came without, um, without their own personal
42 clothing so they had to wear women's, uh, men's clothing. And, um, this
43 ad hoc committee decided that perhaps they should look into purchasing
44 women's garments for the hos-, for the women in the hospital. And this

1 went on for quite a few years as an ad hoc committee and then here, it
2 was...
3
4 Ruth Stewart: [7:26] Terri, just a m-, a minute here. Um, did you mention about the, um,
5 uh, lack of, uh, personal items in the canteen?
6
7 Ms. Slone-Baker: Oh, no, not yet. No...
8
9 Ruth Stewart: [7:40] Mm. I think that's a pretty critical [inaudible 7:42].
10
11 Ms. Slone-Baker: Yeah. Yeah. Um, another item that this ad hoc committee, uh, investigated
12 was the fact that in the, um, hospital canteen there were no items of, uh,
13 personal hygiene items for women, such as Kotex, uh, and things of that
14 nature. Uh, the hospital canteen then started to, um, stock items that
15 women, you know, pertaining to women's personal hygiene. Uh, shortly
16 after that, the ad hoc committee was dissolved and, instead, a Women
17 Veterans Advisory Council was established at the, at the Audie Murphy
18 Hospital and this, um, council consisted of, um, the chiefs of various
19 departments, uh, as well as a representative of a women's veterans
20 organization and that was [big 8:49].
21
22 Ruth Stewart: [8:50] Hm.
23
24 Ms. Slone-Baker: Ms. Burt was a very supportive, uh, individual, uh – when, uh, she had to
25 attend a, um, a regional nurses conference, a VA Conference, in New
26 Orleans and, uh, while there, [throat clearing] she mentioned and asked the
27 various [throat clearing] attendees whether they did anything for women in
28 their, whether they had any women in their hospitals and, if so, what were
29 they doing for the women veteran patients? And she found out that they
30 were not aware if they h-, if they had any women veterans in the hospital,
31 they were not aware of what would, they would be doing in case a woman
32 veteran was in the hospital. It, uh, coincidentally happened that a
33 representative from headquarters, uh, uh, the Department of Veterans
34 Affairs - Washington, attended this conference and when, and she picked
35 up on that. And when she went back to Washington, she checked this out
36 with the Washington people, then she came to San Antonio to get further
37 information and I was asked to attend a meeting with her and to explain
38 our project and, uh, what we were doing at the Audie Murphy Hospital.
39 This, I believe, eventually evolved into the establishment of a Women
40 Veterans Coordinator in every VA Hospital in the United States.
41
42 Audience: [inaudible 10:53]
43
44 Ms. Slone-Baker: What are you asking?

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2 Ruth Stewart: [10:55] Terri, uh, I understand that you've been recognized in San
3 Antonio, uh, through a nomination to the San Antonio Women's Hall of
4 Fame for, among other volunteer efforts, many of which have been
5 directed toward military and women, uh, uh, veterans' groups, but, but this
6 particular project is one of them where you were the initiator, as far as we
7 know, of all services in VA Hospitals, um, beginning an initiation of
8 service for women specifically.
9
10 Ms. Slone-Baker: Mm-hm. Yeah.
11
12 Ruth Stewart: [11:36] Women as women and not just simply among a bunch of male
13 veterans.
14
15 Ms. Slone-Baker: That's right, yes.
16
17 Ruth Stewart: [11:41] So, tell us a little bit about that.
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19 Ms. Slone-Baker: The, uh, nomination for the Hall of Fame was the fact that I had worked
20 with the women veterans hos-, you know, in the hospital and that, as a
21 result of the work that myself and, um, our, our, um, Women's Overseas
22 Service League were doing locally that the, um, that the Department of
23 Veterans Affairs established the position of the, um, Women Veterans
24 Coordinator at each hospital, each veterans hospital, in the country.
25
26 Ruth Stewart: [12:27] Mm-hm. Mm-hm. Um, and then the WOSL - San Antonio Unit
27 has continued to work with the local hospital...
28
29 Ms. Slone-Baker: That's right. We, we still, um, we've been doing this now for over 25
30 years. We visit the, um, women veterans. We talk to them, we, um, we
31 just, um, we find out if they have any problems. If they do have problems,
32 we refer those problems to the chief nurse who, uh, who looks into it and
33 takes care of these things. But, um, with the Women Veterans Coordinator
34 now, she's responsible for doing that primarily. What we do now is just to
35 afford the women in the hospital a, a few minutes of, um, conversation,
36 talk, get, talk, uh, war stories with them and let them know, if they are
37 alone, that if they need any help our unit will be pleased to help them. As a
38 matter of fact, I recall one incident when, uh, a woman who had came in
39 on emergency leave and, um, she didn't have any clothes with her at all,
40 not even shoes, and one of our unit members loaned her a pair, gave her a
41 pair of shoes so she could go out of the hospital wearing a pair of shoes.
42 [laughter] That was funny.
43

1 Ruth Stewart: [13:58] Yeah. Were there other kind of anecdotes like that that you
2 remember?
3

4 Ms. Slone-Baker: I just remember when, uh, when I was talk-, when I was doing the visiting
5 and, um, would, uh, talk to them about their experiences, uh, in the
6 military, they, they seemed to relax a little more. They, uh, they laughed a
7 little more and, uh, they always said, "Do come back again. We'd love to
8 have, you know, I'd love to you back and just to talk to you."
9

10 Ruth Stewart: [14:31] Mm-hm.
11

12 Ms. Slone-Baker: Um, because basically, uh, no matter how many, uh, when you have only
13 2 women at that time when this whole thing started to where now, they
14 must, they have maybe about 20 or 30 women, that's still 20 or 30 women
15 in a hospital of 600 men.
16

17 Ruth Stewart: 14:51] Mm-hm.
18

19 Ms. Slone-Baker: So, they're still in the minority and a program such as this program lets
20 them fe-, uh, gives them the feeling that they are not in the minority but
21 they are still being thought of as, that women are veterans, too.
22

23 Ruth Stewart: [15:08] Many, many veterans.
24

25 Ms. Slone-Baker: Yeah.
26

27 Ruth Stewart: [15:10] Yes. The, um, rooms that were the private rooms at the end of the
28 ward with a, they did have a private room, initially, and then later
29 probably had far more, um, rooms for women that are separate from the
30 wo-, men's rooms.
31

32 Ms. Slone-Baker: Mm-hm.
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34 Ruth Stewart: [15:32] But you described the separate rooms originally – the showers
35 were communal, everybody used...
36

37 Ms. Slone-Baker: Yeah, same showers, yeah.
38

39 Ruth Stewart: [15:41] ...but they did have their own room and toilet.
40

41 Ms. Slone-Baker: Well, women did have a private room. There were 2 private rooms at the
42 end of each ward and the, they were separated by a ba-, a bathroom in the
43 center, a toilet and a basin only. Uh, so the women were afforded that

1 consideration, which for the Audie Murphy Hospital, I thought, was very
2 good.
3
4 Ruth Stewart: [16:06] Mm-hm.
5
6 Ms. Slone-Baker: The administrator there, Mr. Coronado, was very, um, considerate of the
7 fact that women were in the minority there and should be looked into so I,
8 I always appreciated what he did for the women veterans.
9
10 Ruth Stewart: [16:23] This has been a very interesting story, Terri, of, um, how this all
11 got initiated and is really a notable example of one woman, Terri Slone-
12 Baker, in this case, making a difference for women throughout the
13 veterans', um, system, um, and thereby making an impact on poor women,
14 generally. Um, we do all appreciate this and this has been very interesting
15 and I appreciate the fact that you've taken the time to, um, record this for
16 us. Do you have anything more to say?
17
18 Ms. Slone-Baker: Nope. I think I've covered the, uh, the years that I spent doing that. Um, I
19 enjoyed doing it, um, uh, I, if I have done anything to improve the
20 condition of the women veterans, especially the hospitalized women
21 veterans, I, I'm happy I could do something like that. Thank you.
22
23 Ruth Stewart: [17:26] Thank you.
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