

1 **Interview of retired Colonel Esther Jane McNeil**
2 **on her long career in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps**
3
4

5Doris Cobb: This is Wednesday, October 22, 2003, and this is the beginning of an
6 interview with Esther Jane McNeil as a member of the Women's Overseas
7 Service League at the Army Residence Community, 7400 Crestway, San
8 Antonio, TX. [Jenny 00:22] was 84 years old, having been born on June
9 16, 1919. My name is Doris Cobb and I will be the interviewer.
10

11Esther McNeil: I was brought up on a farm in [Sligo 00:34], Pennsylvania. I had 7 siblings
12 (5 brothers and 2 sisters). I was number 6 in the group. There are 22 years'
13 difference between the oldest and the youngest. I attended a 1-room
14 schoolhouse and started school when I was 5 years old. Finished when I
15 was 16 from a 4-year high school. Stayed home for a year and then I went
16 to University Hospital of Pennsylvania for a 3-year course in nursing.
17 Upon graduation, I stayed on and worked in the operating room for a little
18 over, well, 2½ years. I finished nursing in 1940. And, Pearl Harbor came
19 along in 1941, and that day I will never forget. I was working in the
20 operating room and I'd been on call the night before, so I was taking a
21 snooze in the afternoon.
22

23 And I was living in the nurses' quarters at the time. The student nurses
24 weren't allowed to have radios and they came in and woke me up because
25 I had a radio and they wanted to hear what was going on – that Pearl
26 Harbor had been bombed. That evening, I had a date with my boyfriend.
27 He called and asked me to get 2 other gals. We went out and the
28 conversation was absolutely [backwards 2:11] because all 3 of us were
29 signed up with our hospital units and they were ship builders [laughter].
30 And, the one I was dating, he was a graduate of MIT and he wanted to get
31 in the navy in the worst kind of way and they would not release him from
32 his duties at the shipyard. He helped design the Battleship Misso-
33 Missouri. And, one of the saddest days of my life came a few months later
34 when his unit was called to active duty, I was rejected because of
35 [inaudible 2:46] and, that's bad. All my friends were going off to fight the
36 big war and there I was, left in Philadelphia.
37

38 Well, about 6 months later, I got a letter from the army asking me if I
39 wouldn't volunteer and I really wrote a rather smarty letter back, that I
40 volunteered once and they rejected me, but I would volunteer again if
41 they'd take me immediately. And, by golly, I had a letter back in a few
42 days [laughter] – I was to go for my physical and I followed'm right
43 through and saw that that medical officer passed me. And I went down and
44 told the chief of nurses the next day that I had this chance and she said,

1 “Oh, Ms. McNeil, don’t be [in a hurry 3:34] about these things. If you
2 have health to, uh, pass the physical, why don’t you go and have them call
3 again?” Well, they took my letter seriously because I said I’d be available
4 after February the 5th – I was called back on February the 6th! [laughter]
5 And I said if I was accepted, I’d like a Western airbase. Well, sure enough,
6 I got one – Davis-Monthan field. I was so lucky because a lot of those
7 airbases were at horrible places, but Davis-Monthan is a nice spot.
8

9 Well, I was there for about 9 months and one of our friends had been
10 transferred up to Colorado Springs to the chief’s office of the division and
11 she was lonesome, so she asked if I’d be called up to Fort Pueblo. So
12 [Jenny Haines 4:29] and I, who was one of my friends, we were
13 transferred up to Pueblo, Colorado. Well, by this time, the [standards 4:36]
14 were changing for overseas, so they were asking for volunteers for
15 overseas, so I volunteered again, and they passed me, with a blood
16 pressure of 80/60. At first, they didn’t pass me and said, “Well, come back
17 in a day or two.” I went back, and it was up to 84, [laughter] and they said,
18 “Well, you can go.” [laughter] So I went down to Camp Swift, Texas,
19 where I activated at Camp Swift, 69th General Hospital. And we were a
20 little different than other hospital units because we were all taken from the
21 air corps, so we were from all over the United States. And, it was a good
22 unit. And, they shipped our men to the Mediterranean, but they didn’t
23 want to ship the women to the Mediterranean, so we went by South Africa
24 on a ship that my ship-builder friends in Philadelphia had helped build.
25 [laughter] Been built in Philadelphia.
26

27 And we went around by Cape Town, South Africa into [inaudible 5:44]
28 Bombay. Took a train across India. It took us days to get across. In one
29 spot, we stopped. We stopped for our meals and would line up outside
30 [inaudible 5:58] ration and, this one place we stopped, the birds came
31 down and took our food right off [inaudible 6:05]. When we got over to
32 Calcutta, we spent a few days there and then we got on a train and a boat
33 again and went up to Ledo, India. And that’s where the 20th General, the
34 University of Pennsylvania Unit, was stationed. So here’s all my friends at
35 the 20th. After we signed in, I stopped at the 20th and I asked somebody
36 where [Corey Sheets 6:35] was working and [inaudible 6:38] and I looked
37 it at I said, “Where’s the, where’s the general’s office?” Well, I walked
38 into the general’s office and the secretary announced that I was out. He
39 came out and he looked me and said, “Ms. [Mac 6:51]! How did you get
40 here? You can’t see!” [laughter] And asked me if I wanted transferred to
41 the 20th, because I’d been his scrub nurse at the University of
42 Pennsylvania. I said, “No, I came over with the 69th, I’d better stick with
43 them.” He said, “Well, I have some of the gals here on TDY, I might just
44 as well have you.” And I said, “You can ask for me, but I won’t ask.” Sure

1 enough, he called the chief nurse up. She called me in the next day,
2 “You’ve been asked by the general of the 20th if you’d transfer up there.” I
3 said, “Yes, I know.” I said, “I used to be his scrub nurse.” So I was there
4 until we got our hospital set up and then I was set, sent up to our hospital
5 to open up the operating room and I became the head of the operating
6 room and CNS. The worst part of our work was doing those gas gangrene
7 cases. To this day, I say gas gangrene and I can smell it. And I think I was
8 the only one who was ever called out at night to do a gas gangrene case.
9 And we had a separate operating room to get them in.

10
11 Well, we were there I guess I little over a year and my roommate, Martha
12 [inaudible 8:22] and I, we went on leave up to Darjeeling and that was a
13 great experience. And while we were in Darjeeling, we got orders to move
14 [out to 8:31] Europe, to head for the invasion of Japan. And we were at
15 sea for 73 days. The war ended en route, before we got to the Phil-
16 Philippines. And we sat in the Philippines, at the bay there, for 4 or 5 days
17 waiting to, we had something [onboard 8:57] the ship that we were to
18 deliver to the Philippines and nobody wanted to take it before the war was
19 over. None of us knew what this was, you know, and then one day they
20 came out in a little boat and they took off a box about 6 feet square and
21 after that, we sailed. To this day, I wonder what was in that box. [laughter]
22 And, we get to Okinawa and the day we were getting offboard the ship, a
23 typhoon came up. So we went out to sea for 3 more days and bounced
24 around like a rubber ball out to sea. And then we went ashore, and we had
25 500 nurses on the hill there came in from the United States and the Pacific
26 and the, and Europe.

27
28 And we had nothing to do, we were just waiting. And, finally, they
29 decided we could go home, depending on how many points you had. So I
30 was in one of the first groups that got to go home. And the day that we
31 were processed, we went, took our foot locker and everything like that,
32 processed and went back to our tents. We were in tents and another
33 typhoon came up! And everything went flat. So then there was a ship that
34 came in that wasn’t unloaded yet and then we [either 10:29] had enough
35 points so they decided they’d take us in and put us on the ship until they
36 got it unloaded and then we could sail. So that’s what happened. And we
37 came home, uh, came into Portland, Oregon, Port Vancouver. And they
38 sent us to Fort Des Moines for the nurses to be discharged because all the
39 other discharge centers were filled. Well then, we get to Fort Des Moines
40 and they’re filled up, so they sent us home on TDY for a few days. So we
41 went back to Pennsylvania for, I think, 5 days and then had to go all the
42 way back to Fort Des Moines to be discharged on Thanksgiving Day. On
43 the way back from Fort Des Moines, I stopped in Cleveland – Case West-,

1 Western Reserve University to see about entering and I was accepted
2 there. And 5 days after my [inaudible 11:33] was up, I was in school.
3

4 Then, when I finished there, I majored in public health and went to work
5 for the DC Health Department. Then, one of my friends there was in the
6 navy reserve and she always talked about how much fun they had at the
7 reserve meetings, so I decided maybe I'd better join the reserves. So I
8 joined the reserves and I was with a general hospital and some of the gals
9 when Korea started had volunteered to go back, and I thought, "No, I'm
10 not gonna volunteer. If I go back, I'm gonna join the regular army because
11 they had a special bill left that year for veterans to join the regular army
12 and there were some nice incentives. A month before that bill expired, I
13 got my letter [laughter] to return and I got in on the very last group of
14 nurses on that bill. And it put our promotion date back to the day we
15 entered the army the first time, so that was a big help.
16

17 So I went to Fort Belvoir and then they wanted a health nurse down at Fort
18 Hood, so I transferred to Fort Hood. And one of my friends wanted to go
19 to Europe. She wanted to, didn't want to go by herself so she talked, and I
20 was going with a fellow that was with the 2nd Armory and he was going to
21 Europe or he'd gone. So I thought, 'Okay, I'll go to Europe. So I told
22 [Jenny 13:07] I wasn't going to walk down to the chief nurse's to sign up,
23 but she could do it, give her my name. So that was, what? '51? '50? 1950.
24 And I got [inaudible 13:25] orders for St. Louis and Fort [Marguerite
25 13:27]. My friend, she didn't get them for 2½ years later. I was about
26 ready to go home when she got her orders. And I had worked, oh, I was
27 with the field training school there for, went to France, and that was the
28 hardest year of my military career, was that year in France because we
29 didn't have enough work to do and the unit – I was with a horrible unit –
30 the unit was from Chicago, the CO was sent home [prematurely 13:59]
31 about 3 months after we got there. It wasn't a happy situation at all in
32 France. The French didn't want us. When we first got down to southern
33 France, we get "Go home!" painted on our car. We had [inaudible 14:14]
34 area twice because there was a lot of communist activity in southern
35 France at that time. We get to [Ridgeway 14:22] [inaudible 14:23] taken
36 over the Korean War.
37

38 And so, I asked for a transfer in Germany after a while. And, I went over
39 to field training school down in Dassendorf – beautiful little spot! Right at
40 the bottom of the Wendelstein Mountain. We were there about a year and
41 then that school was moved up to [inaudible 14:50], Germany. So we went
42 to [inaudible 14:53], Germany and I taught up there [inaudible 14:58].
43 And then I came back to the States to Fort Sheridan. Did army health
44 nursing there and I decided it was time I should go for a master's degree.

1 So I asked the chief of personnel how, about it. She said, “Well, you get
2 yourself accepted at a university and then you apply to us and we’ll decide
3 whether you go or not.” I went up to the University of Michigan, got
4 accepted, got my orders for University of Minnesota. [laughter] And, I
5 never questioned it, I just got busy and applied at Minnesota and they
6 accepted me. And, you know, after working in the FPO, I bet you \$10 that
7 clerk made a mistake that was writing out the orders, you know, because
8 at that time, most of the nurses were sent to Minnesota or Columbia. And
9 [laughter] I think that’s how I got to Minnesota. I never questioned it, I
10 just got accepted at Minnesota and went to Minnesota for my master’s in
11 public health. And that was a 9-month course.

12
13 So [inaudible 16:13], I got orders for Fort Sam Houston. And, got
14 [inaudible 16:19] down there and I was supposed to set up a health nursing
15 program there, but the health nurse at the school was going off to school
16 and they had nobody to replace her. [Mercedes Fisher 16:31] was to
17 replace her but she had to do some work in that summer before she
18 finished her master’s, so I got assigned to the school instead of the
19 hospital. So I spent 2 or 3 years there at the school and then I went to
20 Korea.

21
22 In Korea, I went over there as a health nurse [for the area 17:01], then I
23 went back [inaudible 17:04] health nurse and then one day the chief nurse
24 called me over to the office and she said, “Gladys Johnson from the SGO
25 office is calling you this afternoon. She’ll be calling you tomorrow
26 morning, so stay in your office.” I said, “What’s so important that Gladys
27 is calling me all the way from Washington?” She said, “Well, she didn’t
28 tell me not to tell you, but,” she said, “they want you to go to Fort Polk as
29 chief nurse.” Now, that was never, never in my career path, as far as
30 [laughter] I was concerned [laughter]. When Gladys called me the next
31 morning, [laughter] and they were sending [Hank Pfeffer 17:47] out to
32 replace me and I said, “Why don’t you drop Hank off at Fort Polk and let
33 me stay here? Would save you a lot of money,” because Hank was
34 stationed back east someplace. “Nope, Colonel Clark wants you to go to
35 Fort Polk.” So I went to Fort Polk. Close to the worst assignment in the
36 United States. And I really enjoyed Fort Polk and, you know, it wasn’t so
37 bad being chief nurse. I had, walked in there and had a bunch of [inaudible
38 18:19] older than I was. I think we had one captain and one lieutenant and
39 everybody else was a major.

40
41 [laughter] Christmastime came and they had, uh, quite a few finish their
42 basic training at Fort Sam and after Christmas we got in 5 people – 4
43 males and 1 female, all second lieutenants. [laughter] So I spent over 2
44 years at Fort Polk and then I went back to Europe. Chief nurse at

1 [inaudible 19:00]. See, that as never in any of my career plans, to be a
2 chief nurse. But, as I look back on it, you know, I had a pretty good time
3 being chief nurse. I always had good, loyal nurses and then from then, I
4 went to the Surgeon General's office and [inaudible 19:20] medicine.
5
6Doris Cobb: [19:21] What year was that?
7
8Esther McNeil: That was 19-, let's see, I retired in '71. That must have been 1968 or '69.
9 And from there, I retired.
10
11Doris Cobb: [19:43] Year?
12
13Esther McNeil: 1971. I met some fine people in the army.
14
15Doris Cobb: [19:57] And what have you done since you retired?
16
17Esther McNeil: Play.
18
19Doris Cobb: [20:02] In what way?
20
21Esther McNeil: [laughter] Well, I took, well, I played golf for a while and then finally
22 made golf my work. Then it wasn't any fun. I had played golf while I was
23 in the service and it was great to go out and play 9 holes after being in the
24 chief nurse's office all day long, listening to problems. And...
25
26Doris Cobb: [20:26] Where did you retire to?
27
28Esther McNeil: San Diego, California. And I learned at Fort Polk that I'd like to get
29 interested in bird watching. My mother was coming to visit me and I
30 thought what could we do that mother and I could do together? Well, there
31 was always a bunch of birds in my backyard and I had no idea what kind
32 of birds those were. My mother always talked, the birds in the yard, you
33 know? And, so I thought, "Well, huh, I'll have mother feed the birds!"
34 And, luckily, there's a wildlife fellow that lives next door to me. He
35 worked for the state, so he told me what to do – he put peanut butter
36 behind the bark on pine trees, for one thing. [laughter] And I got some bird
37 [inaudible 21:11]. And I really got interested in birding. But I didn't, I
38 didn't get out of my backyard, really.
39
40 And so, I knew that I wanted to do that when I retired, so I was fortunate
41 in meeting a nice little old lady in California. She must have been, oh, in
42 her late 70s, somewhere in there. [Shot 21:32] wonderful birds. She took
43 me under her wing and, I tell ya, she had me in every backyard in San
44 Diego County. She had more [projects 21:43] we had to count all of the

1 hawk's nests and how many [inaudible 21:48]. And she did work for U.S.
2 Fish and Wildlife, she had surveys she did and I'd go over there on her
3 surveys and she kept probing me, you know? First thing I knew, she was
4 having me take over her surveys. And I had plenty of time for birding. I
5 met a lot of wonderful people. We organized planning an Audubon Club
6 in our area, instead of having to go 22 miles to [inaudible 22:19], so I
7 helped organize that. So I spent my time in San Diego birding.
8

9Doris Cobb: [22:31] And playing golf.

10

11Esther McNeil: Well, I quit golf after about, for a while, after I got into birding. For that, I
12 had so many projects we had to do, you know, we were out 4 or 5 days a
13 week chasing birds! And so, I quit golf and then I went back to it though
14 after about 4 or 5 years. So playing golf and birding until I came here.
15

16Doris Cobb: [22:58] And when did you move to San Antonio?

17

18Esther McNeil: I moved to San An-, 3 years ago. That was, this is, 2000.

19

20Doris Cobb: [23:11] What made you decide to come to San Antonio?

21

22Esther McNeil: Oh, because of people like you; I had some friends here and, it wasn't
23 quite as expensive as [laughter] a retirement home. I looked at retirement
24 homes all the way from Pennsylvania to California. And, I came here
25 mainly because I thought, "Well, we have all of those nurses and doctors
26 living there, they ought to have a good healthcare system here." That was,
27 that was the determining factor. Are you still recording what I'm saying?
28

29Doris Cobb: [23:43] Mm-hm

30

31Esther McNeil: [laughter] I won't say it anymore.

32

33Doris Cobb: [23:49] Any, uh, anything else you want to say?

34

35Esther McNeil: No, but I'm glad I'm here. And I'm glad I was in the service.

36

37Doris Cobb: [23:59] Um, anything special about your attitude toward the service, other
38 than you're, you were glad you were in it? Did you learn something that
39 helped you to adjust to the rest, to civilian life? Your attitude toward
40 what's going on in the world now?
41

42Esther McNeil: Oh, I suppose so. I don't like what's going on in the world now. I think
43 you learn a lot about people in the service. And, I'm glad I went in the
44 service. A good career. Lots of opportunities if you applied yourself.

1
2
3/ab