

**Interview of Erma Flitsch on her service
as a nurse in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps during WWII**

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5 Ruth Stewart: ...at Air Force Village 1 in San Antonio, Texas on February the 16th, 2004.
6 Erma Flitsch is being interviewed by Ruth Stewart, assisted by Mary Anne
7 Rogers for the Women's Overseas Service League, San Antonio Unit.
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9 [00:22] Erma, start out by telling us where you were born and a little bit about
10 your early life, and then how you got interested in nursing and where that took
11 place, your training.
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13 Erma Flitsch: Uh, I'm Erma Flitsch and I was born in Wisconsin, and my early years were
14 in Milwaukee. I lived with the family over there as a child. And then I, uh,
15 became interested in nursing due to influence by friends and, uh, people that
16 were in nursing. And then I, uh, went to, uh, Mount Sinai School of Nursing
17 in Milwaukee, which also had a hospital in Chicago, uh. And from there, I
18 worked in that hospital for a number of years and then I decided to join the
19 Air Force, which I did, and my first assignment was Bergstrom at Austin,
20 Texas.
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22 Ruth Stewart: [1:21] Erma, what year was it that you went to Bergstrom?
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24 Erma Flitsch: Uh, it was 1955, about that time, and following that, I went to the Philippines
25 to Clark Air Base, which was an interesting assignment and, um, was there
26 until '58 or fift-, let's see, '55, '56, probably about '58 or '59 when I was
27 transferred to Japan after being at Clark. And, following that time, um, then,
28 let's see, I was at Tachikawa in Japan and, uh, that was also interesting
29 assignment. And, I was on Air Evac duty during that time. Uh, that area, uh,
30 Japan and Korea, the Philippines, Okinawa.
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32 Ruth Stewart: [2:19] That was throughout the Pacific, then?
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34 Erma Flitsch: Yes, yes. It was, uh, that I remember, 9th Air Evac that was in that area, and
35 then there was another, uh, group that transferred patients from Tachikawa to
36 the U.S., to Hawaii, and then to the U.S., Travis Air Base. Uh, after Japan, I
37 was assigned to Lackland Air Base, here in San Antonio, Texas, and I was
38 there from probably about '60 to '63 or '64 and, following that time, I was
39 transferred to, uh, Pakistan and, uh, that was an assignment, uh, that was a
40 very small air base near the [Tiger 3:13] Pass and, following that assignment,
41 I was assigned to Andrews Air Base in Washington, D.C. I was there for
42 several years and, following that assignment, uh, then I [forgot 3:33].
43 Following, uh, Andrews, I was transferred to Germany and, uh, I was at Hahn

1 Air Base in Germany for 3 years. And, following that assignment, I was
2 transferred to March Air Base in, uh, California, at which time, I retired.
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4 Ruth Stewart: [3:57] What year was that, then?
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6 Erma Flitsch: Uh, I retired in January of 1977.
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8 Ruth Stewart: [4:05] In what air force base in California were...
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10 Erma Flitsch: March Air Base.
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12 Ruth Stewart: [4:09] M-A-R-C-H?
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14 Erma Flitsch: Yes. At San Bernardino/Riverside area [inaudible 4:14].
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16 Ruth Stewart: [4:15] Okay. Let's go back to the time when you were in the Pacific area and,
17 what was it like for you, serving in that area and going from place to place in
18 the Pacific? How did you live?
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20 Erma Flitsch: Well, Air Evac duty into Korea was interesting, and we did have to stay there,
21 uh, TDY, for 6 weeks or maybe it was longer, uh, and get the patients
22 prepared for Air Evac to Japan. And, uh, it was cold while I was there, uh, real
23 cold. And, the only other person I remember being there, there, only one nurse
24 was there, was a Special Services worker by the name of Mary Mitchell. And,
25 every GI knew Mary Mitchell during that period of history. And, she had a
26 very interesting, a very worthwhile service club while there. And, she loved
27 the Korean people and she would arrange trips to orphanages and to old
28 Buddhist remains and, uh, she just knew the history very well and she would
29 get buses to transport the GIs to these different locations. And, there's nothing
30 more generous, as we know, than a GI, no matter what his pay scale is, he
31 always has money for an orphanage or for some poor soul around. And, uh, it
32 was very cold in the wintertime, extremely cold, but, uh, where I lived had an
33 oil burner that was quite warm. Uh, I'd get it, I'd turn it off at night, but I had
34 it on in the daytime or whenever I was in this room. And this was a building
35 occupied by Mary Mitchell, of Special Services, and myself. And, every 3
36 months, or maybe it was more often, there was another, um, nurse come in
37 TDY to this, to assist in preparing patients for Air Evac. And, most of these
38 patients went on from Tachikawa to the U.S.
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40 Ruth Stewart: [6:37] These were wounded soldiers?
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42 Erma Flitsch: Oh yes, yes. [throat clearing] Or, uh, medically [throat clearing] incapacitated.
43 I think a lot of 'm were older, uh, service people that had medical conditions –
44 heart attacks and things of that nature.

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2Ruth Stewart: [6:57] Your own living when you were there, how did you adjust to, you
3 telling us about how cold it was – how did you dress for that when you were
4 out? What kind of foods did you have? How were they prepared?

5

6Erma Flitsch: Um, I think I ate most of the time at the officer's club, which was nearby and,
7 uh, occasionally I would eat just in the dining room of the ma-, of the mess
8 hall, as they called it, of the GIs. They said, no, I could eat down there, too,
9 but most of the time I ate at the officer's club. And, there was a way of having
10 sandwiches or something in between times or I had ways of, uh, of, I could get
11 down to the dining room of the GIs and, uh, I don't remember how I managed
12 this financially but they had some adjustment for these 2 people that were
13 there, Mary Mitchell and myself, and every nurse that was there during the
14 '50s knew this Mary Mitchell. And, I'm sure she's long gone. But, um, she
15 was an interesting character and loved her GIs and would plead for buses, she
16 would make herself acquainted with the commander. As soon as he got there,
17 she would make an appointment to visit him and get a bus so, uh, she needed
18 that for the GIs. I, I was at Kimpo Air Base, uh, which was very small at the
19 time, but it was an international airport. Um, winters were very cold there and,
20 uh, summers could be very hot. And, during the time I was there, probably
21 about 1960, uh, President Eisenhower visited there, uh, which brought out all
22 the Korean nationals and they had a big celebration for this occasion. Um...
23 that's about all...

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25Ruth Stewart: [9:11] It was an interesting time for you to be there, then?

26

27Erma Flitsch: Mm-hm.

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29Ruth Stewart: [9:15] Tell us a little more about your role in preparing the, uh, combatants to
30 go to Japan for care there. What did you, as a nurse, do for them?

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32Erma Flitsch: Well, on Air Evac, we had to be sure that they had their, everything with them
33 for transfer to Tachikawa Air Base in Japan, and then to continue on to the
34 States. Uh, many of'm were due for retirement and they had to have the
35 medical treatment for whatever they were suffering from. And, uh, they
36 would, we would have to be sure they had, uh, medication with them for this
37 trip, uh, uh, back to the States. And, perhaps, probably 90% or more were due
38 to go back for, uh, retirement or for reassignment due to their illness. So, we
39 had to be sure that they had everything with'm and that they had their, they
40 were leaving permanently. There were very few that were just being
41 transferred to, uh, Japan for other treatment. There was a hospital, uh, run by
42 the army at Seoul, which was very modern and very well-equipped, but it was
43 not a big installation and that took care of the military that were injured over
44 there due to physical traumatic injuries. And, they did not have to be

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1 transferred to Japan, and then they could be reassigned, or they would be
2 going back to their units. And, it seemed like there were a lot of army troops
3 while I was over there, uh, assigned to the various bases, uh, in Korea. That's
4 about it, as far as Korea. So...

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6Ms. Rogers: [11:10] Could you talk about your trip to the DMZ [inaudible 11:12]
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8Erma Flitsch: Oh, oh, now Mary Mitchell would always arrange for, uh, a bus to go to the
9 DMZ and the DMZ, uh, trip, uh, had to be set up with the base commander
10 and the authorities at the DMZ, the militar-, the U.S. military and the North
11 Korean, uh, military. And, they would have guides up there and we could,
12 there was definitely a dividing line, uh, between the, South Korea and North
13 Korea. And, uh, it was a very tense period and they did have a big conference
14 room they showed us and, um, that was where the conferences were held and
15 what would be allowed and what would not be allowed and, uh, um, it was set
16 up for the, for the, uh, conference, uh, meetings that they would have.
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18Ruth Stewart: [12:16] Did you participate in any way as a nurse there?
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20Erma Flitsch: No, no. There was no, uh, parti-, this was just merely a trip to show the GIs
21 and myself included what this dividing line was like and it definitely was a
22 dividing line. And, uh...
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24Ruth Stewart: [12:34] Describe it to us.
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26Erma Flitsch: Well, uh, the, I don't remember, as there was a fence, but there were guards,
27 North Korean guards, that were on one side and, uh, they would walk back
28 and forth and, of course, the, uh, U.N. forces were on our side, uh, guarding
29 and there was no contact between these guards, none whatsoever. But, we had
30 no conversation with this at all, and, I'm sure it's still going on much the same
31 way and, uh, I know at the conference tables there was always a big dispute
32 about the, the height of the flags and, uh, whether the U.S. flag, if it was a
33 fraction higher than the, uh, Korean flag and, uh, but it was ultimately settled
34 and was even.
35

36Ruth Stewart: [13:34] Okay. How did you maintain contact with your family and friends
37 here in the States when you were overseas?
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39Erma Flitsch: There was, uh, there was mail service, APO mail service during that time and
40 I don't know the exact route of mail at that time, but I would suspect it took
41 about 7 days, um, I, I can't recall, uh, any particular problems and I never
42 made any telephone calls, as I recall. Uh, I'm trying to think of what means –
43 there was a way you could telephone between the bases, oh, it was called
44 WATS line, I think, at the time, and that provided, uh, a way of

1 communicating between Korea and Japan, but I never made any calls, uh,
2 personal calls, but I did make calls to the squadron to tell them what I needed
3 or what the GIs needed and usually the, the medics would say, get such and
4 such, or if we needed something special for a flight, uh, they would let me
5 know and I would go to their orderly room and they would help make the call
6 back to Japan and, uh, it never presented any big problem.
7

8Ruth Stewart: [15:04] What was your recreation for you, as an individual female, overseas
9 during this period? You must have had some fun someplace.
10

11Erma Flitsch: At Kimpo, they had various, um, activities for the GI and I remember they had
12 a photogra-, a photography shop and they had supplied them with, uh, ways
13 and means of developing pictures. Now, they were only black and white, but
14 we had a lot of fun developing pic-, pictures of whatever you would snap
15 pictures – and I did not have a car over there, but the GIs would take me into
16 the towns, the little villages, for, uh, just snapping pictures. And there were no
17 rules against snapping pictures there, uh, of the Koreans. And, uh, some of the
18 Koreans on the post would, they'd allow you to snap their pictures and they
19 wanted a picture of the Americans, too, so it was a give-and-take situation.
20 But, there was not a lot of entertainment. We did not have television. Um,
21 there just was not a lot of entertainment. But there was homemade
22 entertainment, like this photography shop and I got involved in that. They also
23 had a ceramic shop and the GI would go there and, uh, do ceramics but, uh,
24 that was about it, as far as what I remember. An-, and they would occasionally
25 get a Jeep and have some reason to go out to the villages and, or go down to, I
26 think they went down to Seoul or, uh, Osan occasionally and I'd ask to go
27 along. And, uh, there was a big army hospital, a MASH unit, nearby and, uh, I
28 did go up there at times. Well, that's where I would visit patients to see what
29 all they needed to come back with and get their, uh, all their equipment and
30 their foot lockers packed up. I didn't do it but be sure to have everything in
31 there and they had their duffle bags all packed and it was a big move.
32

33Ruth Stewart: [17:23] So then, you're moving around from one, one place to another, which
34 you did fairly often. Um, how did you react to that? Did it work out okay for
35 you?
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37Erma Flitsch: Oh yes, it was fine.
38

39Ruth Stewart: [17:38] Made contact with people each place that you could?
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41Erma Flitsch: Mm-hm, mm-hm. There was usually a few people that you would get to know
42 or that knew somebody that I knew someplace else, so, that was never a
43 problem.
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1 Ruth Stewart: [17:51] Mm-hm. So then when you came back – tell us a little about being at
2 Andrews Air Force Base. That’s always one of those places that we hear from
3 the news some rather grim stories about it.
4

5 Erma Flitsch: Uh, that was a – I enjoyed the assignment. Having been from the Midwest, I
6 enjoyed Andrews more than anything else, uh, any other assignment because
7 it had so much history there. And, uh, um, there was just a lot of things to do
8 in the Washington D.C. area that didn’t cost a lot of money. And, uh, I, uh,
9 visited all the downtown Washington, D.C. – the assignment in itself, uh, was
10 good. It had a big hospital with all, uh, services there for whatever was
11 needed. Plus, there were 3 other large hospitals – there was Walter Reed and
12 Bethesda and NIH and, oh, there was other civilian hospitals and so the
13 physicians were in contact with all those doctors for whatever reason, for
14 whatever contact they had to make with, uh, Walter Reed or Bethesda or NIH,
15 the big ones. George Washington, uh, Hospital.
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17 Ruth Stewart: [19:21] And then, you did retire in 1977, in...
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19 Erma Flitsch: Mm-hm. At March.
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21 Ruth Stewart: [19:28] And what did you do from then on? What was your retirement...
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23 Erma Flitsch: [Inaudible 19:32].
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25 Ruth Stewart: [19:32] What was and is your retirement like?
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27 Erma Flitsch: Oh, I, uh, went ba-, oh, I took care of a relative for a period of time but then I,
28 uh, knew that I wanted to come to Austin, Texas and I moved to Austin and,
29 uh, oh, I did some, I took some classes there but then I worked at Prudential,
30 uh, Insurance Company. They had an HMO at that time, which no longer, uh,
31 is, is, uh, in existence, and I worked for them until I retired from that. And, I
32 worked in claims and that’s, was, I had the knowle-, medical knowledge how
33 to do claims. And, uh, uh, well, there was some learning involved, coding and
34 that sort of thing. And then I retired from there and I had bought a home in
35 north Austin and then, in 19-, oh, in 2000, I moved to Air Force Village and
36 that’s where I am now.
37

38 Ruth Stewart: [20:45] This is a very nice place to be, in terms of the easy, easy living.
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40 Erma Flitsch: Mm-hm. It’s easy living, yes. You get used to having things done for you.
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42 Ruth Stewart: [20:55] Well, thank you very much, Erma! We appreciate your taking the time
43 to do this.
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1Erma Flitsch: Yes.

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