

1 **Interview of Gertrude Neff Gay on her service in**
2 **the U.S. Army Nurse Corps during WWII**
3
4

5 Virginia Emrick: ...in '85. Virginia Emrick, Louisville Unit, Women's Overseas Service
6 League, interviewing Mrs. Gertrude N. Gay, Women's Overseas Service
7 League. Gertrude, will you tell us something about – first of all, I think,
8 uh, give us a little bit of what you were doing, where you were, and when
9 you decided to join the service and what group you did, uh, attach to.

10
11 Gertrude Gay: When I joined the service, I was just completing my nurses' training at
12 Jewish Hospital in Louisville, Kentucky, and, uh, I went in – uh, I joined
13 the service through the American Red Cross. I completed all my, uh,
14 various paperwork and had my physical and was waiting for my state
15 board finals to come back and as soon as I did receive those, I went
16 immediately into service and had my basic training at Fort Benjamin
17 Harrison in Indianapolis, Indiana. I went in in May 1944. Uh. I was –
18 after basic training I was sent back to Fort Knox in Louisville and worked
19 at the, um, [inaudible 1:29] hospitals on Fort Knox base and thought I did
20 not join the Army just to see Kentucky. So, the first unit that they had
21 volunteers, um, listings up on the board for, I added my name to the list
22 that I wanted to go overseas and when the unit – when they called us for
23 service overseas was in September of 1944. We were sent to Fort – uh, up
24 to Camp Kilmer, uh, where we, um, the whole unit was brought together
25 and that was the first time as a unit that we had even gotten to know each
26 other, meet each other. We were pulled from several different places in
27 the country. We came together for – at, uh, Camp Kilmer [sighing] for a
28 couple weeks of training and then we were – uh, left for overseas service
29 on October the 12th, 1944. We left on [inaudible 2:47].

30
31 Virginia Emrick: [2:49] Uh, Gertrude, uh, what made you volunteer to go into service?
32

33 Gertrude Gay: As I was getting toward the, um, end of my nurses' training, they were
34 telling us – uh, uh, they were doing a lot of pep talking about, uh, we need
35 nurses in the Army, we're very short of nurses, uh, if you all – we don't
36 get enough nurses to go into the Army, we're going to have to start
37 drafting. Uh. I was interested in going into service. I was interested, uh,
38 because my dad had been a Spanish-American War veteran and I, uh, was
39 very proud of his service and had, uh, always, uh, been interested in his
40 tales of war when he was in service. I had been active in veterans'
41 organizations. Uh. I had practically grown up in the, uh, Spanish-
42 American War Veterans Auxiliary on the color team and had gone to state
43 conventions, so I was interested in serving and, uh, I decided that there
44 was no sense in me starting a career as long as my country needed me so I

1 went on, uh, into service, uh, completed the – completing all of the
2 paperwork and getting ready at the time that my state board said that I was
3 a registered nurse and I could go ahead and, and be [served 4:22].
4

5Virginia Emrick: [4:23] Well, let me ask you this. Did, uh, you, your, was your pay
6 comparable to what you'd had at – in civilian life if you'd continued as a
7 civilian when you went into the military?
8

9Gertrude Gay: The first job that I was offered as a, um, and I had not, um, completed my
10 state – I had completed my state boards but the grades had not come back
11 but I was hired by the [Mobile 4:48] General Hospital in the psychiatric
12 unit as a nurse. Um. Which was one of the highest paying, uh, general
13 duty positions that was available at that time. The, um, nur – uh, the
14 Army pay was in excess of the civilian pay that I would've been receiving
15 at that time.
16

17Virginia Emrick: Mm-hm.
18

19Gertrude Gay: It was something like \$120 a month was the [laughter] base pay that I
20 went to work at General Hospital for. The, uh, Army pay was \$150 plus
21 your maintenance and housing and uniforms.
22

23Virginia Emrick: I see. [5:36] What about, uh, your opportunities in the service?
24 [coughing] Was it too, um, advanced or – for further education? Uh.
25 Were there those, uh, opportunities that...
26

27Gertrude Gay: Those opportunities were not stressed at that time. Uh. We were in the
28 midst of the fighting, uh, war was, uh, very, uh, heated at that time in
29 Europe. The, the need for nurses and medical personnel was such that
30 they were not stressing the education factors at that particular time.
31

32Virginia Emrick: [6:14] Uh. What assignment when you were – uh, got a placement
33 overseas. What was your particular assignment?
34

35Gertrude Gay: In the hospital unit [sighing] that, um, I was shipped over with, which
36 happened to be the 196th General Hospital, uh, we, uh, we knew that we
37 were going to be, uh, operating as a full General Hospital. My
38 background and my, uh, favorite line of work at that time, I had done a lot
39 of, uh, scrubbing in the, uh, in surgery and loved surgery so I was
40 interested in doing scrub –, uh, being a scrub nurse in surgery and this is,
41 uh, the type of, uh, a job that I was doing when we first set up. Later as,
42 uh, the injuries became less, I left the emer – uh, the, uh, operating room
43 and went ba – onto the units and, uh, went to work in the psychiatric area,

1 which of course was – I had a little bit of background. Being a new nurse,
2 I had very little background in anything other than just nurses’ training.
3
4 Virginia Emrick: I see. [7:39] But now, where – what was the site of this hospital?
5
6 Gertrude Gay: Um, 196th – when we left New York on October the 12th, we thought we
7 were headed for England. We were told we were going to set up as a
8 general hospital in the rear echelons of the fighting in England. Uh. We
9 left on the Queen Mary. It took us 5 days to cross and it was – uh, there
10 were several hospital units on the, uh, ship as well as many other units on
11 that, uh, ship. Uh. By the time that we docked in Europe, uh, we found
12 out no, we were not going to England. They were going to send us on
13 over to France. So, we docked in Scotland, they loaded us on a train, we
14 took the train to, um, England, um, and got off at Southampton into a lo –
15 uh, cattle loading shed [laughter] right by the docks and waited for the
16 boats, uh, to be bo – uh, to be boarded and to cross the Channel. And the
17 3 days – the crossing the Channel was probably the most happy – unhappy
18 time of our lives because it was a dirty boat, the conditions on the boat
19 were, uh, most unsatisfactory. We were sleeping in the regular, um, uh,
20 crew, uh, sailor-type of, uh, hammocks, um, 4 tiers. Uh. There was
21 insufficient, uh, facilities for, um, uh, sanitary conditions, uh, in the
22 restrooms or at the, uh, dining facilities. They could not – uh, nurses in
23 the Army were – went in as First Lieu – as Second Lieutenants but, uh, we
24 were, uh, they told us that they could not mess us with the rest of the
25 officers, that we were messed with the enlisted personnel and they
26 definitely were unsatisfactory conditions...
27
28 Virginia Emrick: Uh-huh.
29
30 Gertrude Gay: ... [for the posting 10:01]. We were glad to get off the boat. [laughter]
31
32 Virginia Emrick: [laughter] [inaudible 10:06] unpleasant.
33
34 Gertrude Gay: But we got off the boat. When we landed, we were told that we had to
35 land in Class A uniform, which meant low-cut shoes and your skirts and
36 full dress uniform. We came over the sides of the boat...
37
38 Virginia Emrick: Oh no.
39
40 Gertrude Gay: ..., and these were the landing boats, in – on, uh, ropes into your LSTs and
41 went up to the, uh, shores on LSTs, landing on the muddy banks of
42 France. We landed at Omaha Beach.
43

1 Virginia Emrick: [10:42] Were you all, uh, dressed in your dress uniforms when you
2 boarded the ship or did you have to change on the boat?
3

4 Gertrude Gay: Well, we were on the boat for 5 – uh, for 3 days and so, um...
5

6 Virginia Emrick: Uh, crossing the Channel.
7

8 Gertrude Gay: Crossing the channel. We were in Class A uniform but, uh, uh, we had
9 to...
10

11 Virginia Emrick: Will – uh, you’ll have to explain Class A [inaudible 11:05]
12

13 Gertrude Gay: Class A uniform meant the full dress green uniform with the brown shirt
14 and the tie and the low-cut shoes and, um, uh, it was a most unsatisfactory
15 type of uniform [laughter] to be landing on the muddy shores of France for
16 the simple reason that it had been raining all that summer in France.
17

18 Virginia Emrick: Oh. Is that so?
19

20 Gertrude Gay: And, uh, Omaha Beach was pretty much of a, um, uh, um, a muddy area.
21 Uh. They had, uh, ramps down. Uh. The army, uh, had made a, um, uh,
22 landing strips for us to land. Uh. In fact, all of, uh, the various Army, uh,
23 personnel and equipment was coming in on Omaha Beach on these, uh,
24 landing strips that had been made by the engineers.
25

26 Virginia Emrick: [12:01] While we’re on the subject of uniform, what other type of clothing
27 did you wear during the time you were in service and, uh, uh, did you like
28 the type of uniform they had? Did you think it was appropriate?
29

30 Gertrude Gay: When we went into service, we were issued all of our white uniforms and
31 we did not get the blue uniform that was worn by nurses in World War I
32 but we did get the blue cape. We were issued the new OD uniforms that
33 were just coming out for the nurses. Uh. When they decided that they
34 were getting us ready to go overseas as a unit, before I left Fort Knox I
35 was issued the brown and white stripe wraparound uniforms rather than
36 the white uniforms and we were given the – uh, our OD cape and the rest
37 of our uniform that we had not received when we initially came into
38 service.
39

40 Virginia Emrick: [13:12] Uh. After you landed, what sort of housing were you put in? In
41 fact, what sort of housing did you have along the way? Were there
42 immense differences in the places?
43

1 Gertrude Gay: Um. After we landed in Europe, um, immediately we – um, they didn't
2 know what to do with us. We waited for a, a long time in a staging area,
3 the whole unit, because we were brought over unexpectedly on new orders
4 that had been cut. Thinking we were going to England, these new orders
5 had not apparently ca – caught up with us too long ahead of us and, uh, so
6 they had to go, uh, and pitch tents, uh, for us and, uh, get things ready and
7 get trucks to haul us, so we, we stayed in a staging area which was a big,
8 open field for almost, uh, the greater part of a day before the trucks ca –
9 arrived to pick us up and take us to this, um, place where we were going to
10 ma – uh, call home for the next month. We were – later we learned we
11 were going to take over the 5th General Hospital which had been over
12 since, uh, right after the invasion and they were moving up with Patton's
13 unit and we were going to take over the hospital that they had established
14 but there not enough quarters for us to go into with the hospital still there
15 so they housed us in an apple orchard about a mile away from the hospital.
16 They threw up tents on wet ground, uh, big hospital tents that would house
17 about 20 nurses in a tent, and, uh, they had to put the little potbellied
18 stoves at either end of the tent, uh, and, um, make facilities for us to go
19 into, so when we did go in, uh, were taken by the trucks to this area, we
20 were cold, wet, hungry, and the tents were most disappointing because
21 they were placed over wet ground, they were – um, uh, they had been
22 equipped with just the little hospital, uh, the, um, canvas, uh, [beddi 15:47]
23 – um, cots and, uh, each nurse was issued 2 blankets. That was it.
24

25 Virginia Emrick: Uh-huh.

26

27 Gertrude Gay: So, the first night, 3 of us slept with 2 cots thrown together and all of our
28 blankets shared; the 6 blankets among the 3 nurses. Somebody slept on
29 the rails and I think I hit the rails most of the time but, uh, there were 3
30 nurses to 2 cots with 6 blankets, 3 underneath and 3 over us, [laughter]
31 that first night.
32

33 Virginia Emrick: Uh-huh.

34

35 Gertrude Gay: Very little sleeping was done, I assure you.
36

37 Virginia Emrick: Uh-huh. Youth can stand that. [laughter] [16:29] Then – uh, continue
38 with your journey and give us some idea [inaudible 16:32].
39

40 Gertrude Gay: Uh. We stayed in this, uh, area for a month and, uh, we would go back
41 and forth. We had to walk to the hospital for meals. We walked to the
42 hospital and worked with the unit that was occupying the area, uh,
43 learning the patients and the equipment that they were leaving for our, for
44 our use and, uh, for our care. And, um. Then we would have to walk back

1 to these cold, miserable tents at night but we got to work more as a unit. I
2 think because of the discomfort, we became a unit and, uh, about 2 weeks
3 later, they took part of our nurses and sent them up to Paris because they
4 needed more nurses in the hospitals up there. Those of us that were left
5 back at the unit really got to know our people. We, uh, our chaplains, uh,
6 they were our steadying forces for us. They, uh, they had the recreation
7 tent. We would gather together and huddle and, and play cards or sing.
8 We did a lot of singing then. And, um, uh, met, uh, nightly actually for
9 the social activities and got to know each other on first name basis. We
10 really got to be good friends.
11

12Virginia Emrick: [18:13] Well let me ask you this. What hours did you put in at – what
13 were your free hours?
14

15Gertrude Gay: We would go to the hospital and would work a 8-hour day and then when
16 we got back to – after meals and all, we would go back to this apple
17 orchard at night...
18

19Virginia Emrick: Uh-huh.
20

21Gertrude Gay: ...and it was during this evening time that we really had the social, uh,
22 activities going on. In 1 big tent, the chaplains tried to make as much of a
23 social tent as they could and, uh, it was here that we really, uh, we gelled
24 as a unit.
25

26Virginia Emrick: Mm-hm. Alright. [18:57] Well, after you put in your, your time there,
27 where did they move you or where did you go?
28

29Gertrude Gay: We were, uh, in this apple orchard until – I remember eating Thanksgiving
30 dinner [out 19:10] and, uh. Oh, and, and one thing I forgot to mention is
31 that later, our, um, our mess cooks and, uh, our, uh, dietician and the, um,
32 um, uh, ma – uh, the officers got, uh, a mess tent set up that we were doing
33 our own cooking finally in this apple orchard area and – but we were
34 eating in mess gear out just standing. We didn't have table and chairs to
35 sit down to. And I remember thanksgiving dinner sitting, um, or standing
36 out in the rain with the mess gear having probably as much water in the
37 mess gear as we had food but, uh, we still were eating the food prepared
38 by our own, um cooks and, uh, under the directions of our dietician.
39

40Virginia Emrick: [20:04] Were you able to keep, keep warm? Keep yourself – did you have
41 a heavy enough clothing...
42

43Gertrude Gay: Uh...
44

1 Virginia Emrick: ... when you worked?
2

3 Gertrude Gay: They had to issue us some, some male, uh, some of the male equipment.
4 Uh. The, uh, the pants and, uh, and the, uh, combat boots and this sort of
5 thing because as we came over the Channel, some of our luggage did not
6 follow us. Bed rolls were lost, uh, footlockers were lost, uh, so that most
7 of us got 1 piece of the 2 pieces of luggage. We either got a bedroll or we
8 got our footlocker. We didn't get both so we had some of our equipment
9 lost and to make due, they did issue us, uh, men's trousers, um, men's
10 combat boots, uh, field jackets, this sort of thing, to make up for what had
11 been lost. But we were warm. As warm as we could be. I can remember
12 some letters going home to my mother telling that I was cold and I can
13 remember her sending me, in one of the first packages I received from her,
14 a pair of long-legged, long-sleeved underwear. [laughter]
15

16 Virginia Emrick: Well, you did use it, didn't you? [laughter]
17

18 Gertrude Gay: By that time, it had gotten warmer. [laughter]
19

20 Virginia Emrick: Oh! [laughter] Alright. Um. [21:31] While you were in that group, did
21 you have any other memorable experiences that you want to – before you
22 talk about moving on?
23

24 Gertrude Gay: Um. Do you [inaudible 21:43]
25

26 Virginia Emrick: [21:43] Do you keep in touch with any of those people anymore, by the
27 way?
28

29 Gertrude Gay: Yes, we, uh, we still have a newsletter that comes out once a year. Uh.
30 One of our, um, uh, ladies, Captain Walker, um, and, um, and [Ma Bennet
31 22:01] who lives down in St. Petersburg, Florida, uh, have sent for many
32 years a newsletter of those people who are still – they have contact with.
33 We hear a little bit of news of each of, uh, people that, uh, are still keeping
34 in contact with her. We, we get a little bit of news fed to us each year
35 about what they're doing, how many children they have...
36

37 Virginia Emrick: Oh yeah.
38

39 Gertrude Gay: ...uh, how many operations they had, who's retiring, whose grandchildren
40 are doing what; this sort of thing. So, we do – uh, there is a yearly
41 newsletter that comes out.
42

43 Virginia Emrick: I see. [inaudible] [22:41] Well, from then – uh, there, where did you go?
44 Did you go as a unit or were – did you go separately?

1
2 Gertrude Gay: We stayed at – um, this hospital we took over was at Carentan in France,
3 and Carentan was not too far from Omaha Beach. Uh. I have had, uh, the
4 pleasure of going back last year on a trip to Normandy and actually visited
5 Carentan. The bus driver made a little detour and went to Carentan. It's
6 not the little country town anymore. There – they have a nice big
7 shopping center and there's very little that remains of the, uh, of where the
8 old unit had set up at – right outside the town.
9
10 Virginia Emrick: Uh-huh. Yeah.
11
12 Gertrude Gay: But we stayed there as, uh, during the war, we were there from when we
13 took over right after Thanksgiving until in May of the next year. Uh. We
14 stayed there and took care of our wounded that were coming back on
15 hospital trains and, uh, were coming back also in ambulances but mostly
16 on the hospital trains.
17
18 Virginia Emrick: [23:57] Where were the battles being fought at that time?
19
20 Gertrude Gay: The battles, uh, were gradually moving on, uh, past Paris. Um. They had
21 gotten up to Paris and then after that on – uh, had moved on up, uh, and of
22 course the big b – uh, the Battle of the Bulge, we got a lot of wounded
23 back. And then it wasn't too long after that that we started getting not the
24 wounded – not our wounded, but we were getting German wounded back.
25
26 Virginia Emrick: [24:31] How come?
27
28 Gertrude Gay: And we became a POW hospital.
29
30 Virginia Emrick: I see. Uh-huh
31
32 Gertrude Gay: And before we left Carentan, we became a POW hospital with the POW
33 doctors and corpsmen. And, um...
34
35 Virginia Emrick: [24:54] Was language a barrier?
36
37 Gertrude Gay: No – uh, it – not really because, uh, there were a lot of corpsmen who had
38 a little bit of knowledge of English. Uh. Also, the friendly smile and the
39 – uh, knowing that we were willing to help them I think did a lot to help
40 the language barrier. I have never learned German. Even though I since
41 have lived in Germany for several years, I never have learned Germany,
42 German. But I have been able to communicate with the Germans very
43 [inaudible 25:37]. I feel we are very much a part of their heritage because
44 my background is German.

1
2 Virginia Emrick: [inaudible] [25:46] Um. Alright. Then you went –, after you –, or how
3 long were you there in the POW?
4
5 Gertrude Gay: We, uh, left the POW unit finally, um, with all Ger – uh, German doctors
6 and corpsmen with a very small, um, crew of Americans left in
7 supervisory positions and we moved to Cherbourg and here again took
8 over another general hospital that was being sent to the Pacific and we
9 took their hospital and, uh, operated it as a, um, a hospital for our mentally
10 ill patients. We actually were the last water evac hospital out of that area.
11 A lot of our mental patients, at that time they were not sending by airplane
12 home when they were, um, discharged or when they were coming back to
13 the States for more care and, uh, rather than send ‘em by plane, they were
14 sending them by ship. So, in Cherbourg, [why 27:08], we operated the
15 last hospital there. A water evac hospital.
16
17 Virginia Emrick: I see. [27:13] Did you have any contact with any well-known officers or,
18 or people who in their service, uh, have become national figures? Any
19 that you remember?
20
21 Gertrude Gay: Not that I can recall. I am sure that some of our doctors have later con –
22 uh, gone on to become well-known in their various services but, uh,
23 personally I do not recall any.
24
25 Virginia Emrick: Okay. [27:42] Well while, uh, what was the attitude of the POWs? Uh.
26 Where they thankful also and did you receive...
27
28 Gertrude Gay: They were thankful to be out of the war.
29
30 Virginia Emrick: Oh. I see. Yes. Oh, they were [just thankful] [inaudible 27:56].
31
32 Gertrude Gay: And they, they w –...
33
34 Virginia Emrick: [27:58] Where would they go from your hospital? Where would they send
35 ‘em after they were ready to leave?
36
37 Gertrude Gay: Uh. Well, if they were maimed enough, they were rehabilitated, uh, back
38 into their own country because they knew that, uh, if they lost arms and
39 legs and so on that they would not be put back into service...
40
41 Virginia Emrick: Uh-huh.
42
43 Gertrude Gay: ...so that they were sent back. And they were – they did not want to go
44 back. Uh. Uh. They would – uh, they were well-housed and getting good

1 food and this is something that many of those troops had not had for some
2 months. Uh.
3
4 Virginia Emrick: Well...
5
6 Gertrude Gay: Your German, your German patient actually was, uh, in a lot worse shape
7 than many of our American soldiers because they had gone on very slim
8 rations and their frontline soldiers were not getting the, uh, best food or
9 equipment. They were – um, many of them were your, um, uh, patient –
10 uh, were your soldiers that had, uh, come from the countries that Germany
11 had overrun; Austria and Czechoslovakia and their – and those people
12 were the frontline soldiers. They were not your SS troops.
13
14 Virginia Emrick: I see. Huh. [29:19] So, did – uh, would they go into camps set up for
15 them when they became able-bodied again?
16
17 Gertrude Gay: They would, uh, they would be sent to, uh, POW camps if they became
18 well enough that they could. There were, there were camps around in the
19 area of France where we were. There were POW camps.
20
21 Virginia Emrick: I see.
22
23 Gertrude Gay: And then later they were repatriated.
24
25 Virginia Emrick: [29:43] But did you get into France at any time on leave or any free time
26 or anything?
27
28 Gertrude Gay: I had 2 leaves to Paris. In fact, I spent my 22nd birthday going to Paris,
29 had a 3-day pass, and we went up on the train but you would never think
30 that we were going to Paris. We had 4-buckle [arctics 30:07] on, big field
31 coats with the linings in which we used – the linings could be unbuttoned
32 and used as bathrobes. We had 2 Army blankets under our arms and 3
33 days of K-rations.
34
35 Virginia Emrick: [30:23] You had to take that on your way into Paris?
36
37 Gertrude Gay: [laughter] [So we did. 30:25] And made sure we had a flashlight because
38 the lights were not on in Paris.
39
40 Virginia Emrick: Oh. [30:31] So where did you stay in Paris?
41
42 Gertrude Gay: We stayed in some of the very best hotels at that time. There was a
43 officers', uh, hotel and then there was a, uh, another hotel that was

1 designated for female officers and this is where we stayed. I, I don't
2 remember the name...

3

4 Um, we, uh, wanted to see Paris. We had heard of Pigalle and we had
5 heard of the, uh, Folies. Uh. We wanted to see many of the sites of Paris
6 and we did take several tours that were being offered, uh, to, um, the, um,
7 [old and – 31:16], uh, Eiffel Tower and, uh, Arc of Triumph, and all of the
8 various things. We did these, uh, these tours during the day but we, we
9 wanted to go to some of the night spots and we finally imposed on our
10 very good chaplain to take us to the Folies Bergère and to see Pigalle. He
11 certainly was a very good friend and still is. I still correspond with him
12 and his wife. He has since retired and lives in – over in [inaudible 31:55].
13

14 Virginia Emrick: [31:57] Were any of these tours that – uh, taken by civilians or were there
15 any civilians moving around in Paris at that time?
16

17 Gertrude Gay: There were, um, civilians, but you didn't see a lot of the civilians. They
18 were, they were really, uh, interested in finding food and, uh, and taking
19 care of themselves. They were very poor, um, and it was a real day-to-day
20 struggle just to exist for them. They – there were, uh, tours that were set
21 up by Red Cross and by, uh, the, uh, Army organizations for us to take
22 and, uh, there were tour buses being operated, not on the scale that you
23 think of tours nowadays, but, um, they were – there was something, at
24 least, to be, uh, to do while we were in Paris that was organized by the
25 Army. So, they were trying to give us a little bit of sightseeing tours on
26 our leave. So...
27

28 Virginia Emrick: [33:01] How did you get up to Paris from your hospital?
29

30 Gertrude Gay: We went on a train.
31

32 Virginia Emrick: Oh. On the train. Okay. [33:09] Was that comfortable? [laughter]
33

34 Gertrude Gay: The train was comfortable. Uh. They did not have dining cars on the
35 train; that was why we had to carry the K-rations for the trip up and then
36 the trip home. Uh. The train took a long time to go to Paris and, uh, it's
37 surprising what a short distance it really is to cover, uh, since I have
38 traveled it in peacetime. But at that time, it took us a long time because
39 we kept being sided, uh, to let the express trains go through that were
40 carrying the, uh, frontline equipment and, uh, to our soldiers. Um. So, the
41 Red Ball trains were getting through and we would be sided, so, uh, and
42 this happened 3 or 4 times on the way up and it was a, a long, slow trip
43 going up to Paris. I remember coming, uh, into sight of Paris and the first
44 thing you saw was the Eiffel Tower. When I went back to Paris just, uh,

1 last year, you don't see Paris –, uh, you don't see the Eiffel Tower as you
2 come into Paris. There's a lot of skyscrapers now, but the Eiffel Tower
3 was a huge, um, thing to be seen against the, um, uh, sky as we came into
4 Paris in '44, '45, er, actually it was in '45. That was my first trip up there.
5
6Virginia Emrick: Mm-hm. Well, um...
7
8Gertrude Gay: The railroads also were not in too good a shape. There were times when
9 they had to mend a track and so on [laughter] as we went up too.
10
11Virginia Emrick: I see. Oh. [35:00] Tell me about, uh, in working – were there any
12 memorable things in working in that hospital that you can think of before
13 you move on to your next location.
14
15Gertrude Gay: Those were the only 2 hospital...
16
17Virginia Emrick: Oh.
18
19Gertrude Gay: ...sites that I, I served in overseas.
20
21Virginia Emrick: Oh, right. Oh. [35:15] Well then, besides Paris, did you get to any other
22 spot in France?
23
24Gertrude Gay: I did get to several spots on leaves. I got to Mont Saint-Michel. I went to,
25 um, um, [Greenwich 35:31] and, uh, which was a seaside, um...
26
27Virginia Emrick: Resort-type place.
28
29Gertrude Gay: ...resort-type place. Um. And then I'm – I did some day trips around in
30 the area, uh, where we were stationed but for the most part, uh, unless you
31 had a day leave or a 3-day pass, uh, you were on duty and at first, we were
32 doing 12-hour duty. When we actually finally got set up and got our
33 hospital going, we did 12-hour night duty, 8-hour day duty.
34
35Virginia Emrick: I see.
36
37Gertrude Gay: And, um, I can – one of my most memorable times that I can recall is the
38 Christmas of 1944. We were at Carentan. Uh. There were –, uh, we
39 already had German POWs in stockade and they were helping with many
40 of the task in the unit. Um. Our soldiers were – we were getting a lot of
41 trains back with wounded and we were trying to do what we could to
42 make it seem Christmasy for them and I can remember us painting regular
43 white, uh, light globes colors so that we could put them on the tree and
44 decorate a tree with colored bulbs. Uh, we – uh, our chaplains went out

1 and got some trees. Trees were very hard to come by in France. There
2 were very few trees left because people had used them as firewood and,
3 uh, of course we had, we had cut down some trees for wood – uh, heat, too.
4 But, um, we –, they –, chaplains were able to locate some evergreen trees
5 that we were able to have a tree on every ward and we got the ward active
6 to make ornaments and it was really – it's really something to see grown
7 men sitting there making paper chains to dress up a Christmas tree but
8 they, they threw all their heart and soul into dressing up those trees and
9 they were some of the most beautiful trees, I'm sure, that, um, we had seen
10 for a while.
11
12 Uh. I can remember the chaplain being very active in organizing the
13 choir. Nurses, uh, our enlisted personnel, and some of our doctors and,
14 um, officers joined that choir and we took – we had gotten our field organ
15 and we started aft – just at dusk and went from tent to tent singing
16 Christmas carols and it was an experience to hear some of these German
17 prisoners of war that were on the various units singing their "Silent Night"
18 in German while we were singing ours in English.
19
20 Virginia Emrick: [38:54] You mentioned tents. You mean the hospital set up for...?
21
22 Gertrude Gay: Our hospital, our hospital was never in permanent buildings. We never
23 lived in permanent buildings. We were always in tents.
24
25 Virginia Emrick: Oh. [inaudible 39:07]
26
27 Gertrude Gay: There were concrete blocks poured for a general hospital. A plan. And
28 then the tents were thrown up over these concrete blocks.
29
30 Virginia Emrick: Oh. [39:17] So about how many men were you, uh, serving as patients?
31
32 Gertrude Gay: We, uh, [sighing] had anywhere...
33
34 Virginia Emrick: [39:27] I say men. Where there any women?
35
36 Gertrude Gay: Uh. I can remember very few women. Uh. A few women who, uh, some
37 of our, uh, French people who had been injured by, uh, some of the, um,
38 uh, field bombs that were, uh, as they had tried to, uh, do their plowing of
39 their fields and all, they had set off these Bouncing Betties and all and
40 had gotten injured...
41
42 Virginia Emrick: Oh, yeah? Yeah.
43

1 Gertrude Gay: ...from them. There were, uh, things that had been left by the Germans as
2 they retreated.
3

4 Virginia Emrick: Uh-huh.
5

6 Gertrude Gay: And, uh, of course, we nev – were warned not to go into the hedgerows in-
7 between the various fields that divided – in, uh, in France, you don't have
8 fences. You have field – uh, hedgerows and those hedgerows were all
9 mined and so you didn't go off the beaten path.
10

11 Virginia Emrick: Mm-hm.
12

13 Gertrude Gay: Um. But we would get, um, maybe a, uh, daughter, uh, and her mother
14 had been out gathering wood for their fire and the, the little girl had
15 strayed off into hedgerow and become injured. We had several of these
16 come in. While I was still doing in – working in surgery we had some
17 very bad cases of – that came in with injuries.
18

19 Virginia Emrick: Oh. Uh-huh.
20

21 Gertrude Gay: But, uh...
22

23 Virginia Emrick: [40:47] But what was the number you thought that...?
24

25 Gertrude Gay: The hospital was set up as a thousand-bed hospital. Uh. Actually, before
26 [sighing] we turned it over to the, um, German POWs to operate as a POW
27 hospital, it was a 1500-bed hospital.
28

29 Virginia Emrick: Okay.
30

31 Gertrude Gay: But it was all set up in tents. We never had any permanent buildings at all.
32 Uh. We had a, uh, uh, one of these, uh, uh, metal huts that was set up as
33 surgery, but that was the only metal hut in the whole building, uh, of the
34 hospital.
35

36 Virginia Emrick: Well, uh, would you have – [inaudible 41:25] in the physical setup then,
37 would you have a nurses' headquarters, something in each tent [inaudible
38 41:32].
39

40 Gertrude Gay: You would have a nurses' station and then you would have 6 hospital
41 tents.
42

43 Virginia Emrick: I see.
44

1 Gertrude Gay: And, uh.
2
3 Virginia Emrick: [41:41] One nurse to 6...?
4
5 Gertrude Gay: The nursing – uh, the – one nurse to 6 tents.
6
7 Virginia Emrick: Uh-huh. Six tents...
8
9 Gertrude Gay: And, uh, 6 tents, uh, uh, uh, uh, hospital tents, and a hospital tent would
10 house about, um, I would say 20 to 30 beds, patient beds.
11
12 Virginia Emrick: Uh-huh.
13
14 Gertrude Gay: And when we took over our hospital, uh, here again, we had to set up –
15 um, there were just the bare necessities in the hospital. We, uh, made, uh,
16 ashtrays from, uh, tuna fish cans. Uh. I know when we set up our central
17 supply, for sterile dressings, why, we were – for tiny dressings and, uh, all
18 – uh, a lot of our cosmetic cases and jars, uh, we would – we cleaned up
19 and were using for our sterile supplies. Uh.
20
21 Virginia Emrick: Oh.
22
23 Gertrude Gay: There were a lot of makeshift – you learned how to make due.
24
25 Virginia Emrick: Mm-hm.
26
27 Gertrude Gay: The basic hospital unit came over with beds, sheets, mattresses, and
28 pillows and, uh, ...
29
30 Virginia Emrick: [42:55] Their drugs followed or did you get ‘em on – in the country?
31
32 Gertrude Gay: The, and, and the drugs, they were, uh, they were from the supply too.
33
34 Virginia Emrick: Oh. Alright.
35
36 Gertrude Gay: But as far as the nice conveniences of garbage cans and sterile jars and,
37 and sterile trays and, uh, this sort of thing, there was v – very basic type of
38 supplies and then you added to [them 43:22].
39
40 Virginia Emrick: [43:22] Were the tents connect – or covered from, uh, in, uh, any way? I
41 mean from one tent to the other?
42
43 Gertrude Gay: We didn’t have corridors from one tent to another. No, we had just
44 paths...

1
2Virginia Emrick: Just paths.
3
4Gertrude Gay: ...and, uh, during the very wet weather when we first set up, we were –
5 our, uh, enlisted personnel were making paths of twigs actually woven
6 together and, uh, it was nothing to go out and pull up the walk in the
7 morning, you have the mud, and put it on top because it was muddy.
8 [laughter]
9
10Virginia Emrick: And consequently...
11
12Gertrude Gay: Those – until it got really cold and froze, there was mud everywhere. And then it
13 was frozen ground and ice.
14
15Virginia Emrick: [44:04] And you were living in tents; the nurses, also.
16
17Gertrude Gay: We lived in tents. And our tents that we lived in were not heated. There was a
18 stove there, but there was no fuel. We got a ration of fuel so we kinda pooled it
19 and would put it into, uh, one of the big tents and – uh, social tents and meet
20 there and, uh, meet for social activities.
21
22Virginia Emrick: [44:29] Did you sleep in your clothes? [laughter]
23
24Gertrude Gay: And then we slept, we slept with our clothes in our bedding roll with us.
25 Otherwise, they would be...
26
27Virginia Emrick: [44:36] You slept in a bedroll on the cot on this...
28
29Gertrude Gay: On the cot. Uh-huh.
30
31Virginia Emrick: Right.
32
33Gertrude Gay: And we laid – we made very good friends with one of the supply units and, uh,
34 were able to talk them out of mattresses [laughter] so that we finally ended up
35 with mattresses on our cots.
36
37Virginia Emrick: Moonlight requisitioning.
38
39Gertrude Gay: Definitely. That was how we got a lot of our first vehicles for our unit, too.
40
41Virginia Emrick: It helped everybody. We learned, in, in, in a hurry that [inaudible 45:06]. Uh.
42 [45:07] What about your relationship with the personnel? Were you allowed to
43 mingle with – socially with all or only officers since you were an officer?
44
45Gertrude Gay: We were supposed to only mingle with officers. Our unit was unusual because
46 our unit was one of the units that was made up when the war was in progress for
47 a while so we had older doctors and our chief nurse was an older woman and of

1 course, some of, uh, the nurses were very young, as I was, just out of nurses'
2 training so that, uh, [sighing], uh, there was not a whole lot of socializing. We,
3 we did socialize with our officers but most of 'em were married. Most of 'em
4 had families at home and of course, they would've like to have socialized more
5 and we discouraged it. And in many instances, we did see our, uh, enlisted
6 personnel. We would gather together for social activities either with the
7 chaplain's blessing in a social environment so that we were with people our own
8 age. But, um. That's why the chaplain was so important to our unit. It was not
9 just one chaplain; we had a, uh, 2 chaplains. Two protestant chaplains and a
10 priest in our unit and, uh, they worked together and really made, uh, it made it
11 bearable and livable for us.
12
13 Virginia Emrick: Mm-hm. Um. [47:00] Any people that you want to mention? Any special
14 person, er, you worked with or patient or someone you met or a happening that
15 stands out?
16
17 Gertrude Gay: I think I've men – I've mentioned the chaplains so much...
18
19 Virginia Emrick: You have.
20
21 Gertrude Gay: ...that it might be nice to just name Reverend, uh, he is, uh, Chaplain [Rickard
22 47:22]. Uh. We also had a had a Chaplain [inaudible 27:29] that was, uh, he is
23 now a minister in Indianapolis, Indiana. And these two really were very vital to
24 our unit. They were good morale builders.
25
26 Virginia Emrick: Um. [47:51] Did, did you see others, uh, like Red Cross working or, or, uh,
27 Salvation Army, or any other group who was – did have units working for our
28 military?
29
30 Gertrude Gay: We had 6, we had 6 Red Cross workers with our unit.
31
32 Virginia Emrick: Oh, did you?
33
34 Gertrude Gay: Our unit was made up of 400 enlisted men, um, 55 officers, 86 nurses, and 6 Red
35 Cross workers.
36
37 Virginia Emrick: I see. That was [inaudible 48:26]...
38
39 Gertrude Gay: That was a General Hospital unit.
40
41 Virginia Emrick: Uh-huh. And so that they – you stayed together for the most part...
42
43 Gertrude Gay: Right. Uh-huh.
44
45 Virginia Emrick: ...but you, you moved [inaudible 48:33]...
46
47 Gertrude Gay: And even those that were sent on to Paris, when we did finally take over our
48 hospital, they came back from Paris. When, uh, we first went over and they were

1 taken to Paris while we were in the, uh, apple orchard. Uh, when we finally took
2 over the 5th General Hospital, they came back in to, uh, to work with us.
3
4 Virginia Emrick: I see. [48:56] Well now, how long were you supposed – how long did you sign
5 up for? Or was there such a thing as signing for a period – a length of time?
6
7 Gertrude Gay: You did not sign up for a length of time at that time. It was for the duration.
8
9 Virginia Emrick: I see.
10
11 Gertrude Gay: And then as – after V-E Day, things were easing off a little bit and then after V-J
12 Day, definitely they were talking about coming home on points and many of us
13 came home on points after that. I had a mother back home that I felt that I
14 needed – she was anxious for me to come back and, uh, I guess it was just a
15 feeling of I wanted to get on with my life, so I came back on points and did get
16 discharged from the service.
17
18 Virginia Emrick: I see. You returned to State knowing you were going to stay in the States when
19 you came back on, on points [and such] [inaudible 49:50]. Uh. [49:52] Did you
20 have any unpleasant moments or, or for one reason or another or anything you'd
21 like to change about the, the setup for the nurses during World War II or any
22 conflicts you felt?
23
24 Gertrude Gay: I think that the promotion system probably was in some instances not as fair as it
25 should have been. I know I, I was a Second Lieutenant. I went in as a Second
26 Lieutenant and I was discharged as a Second Lieutenant. Um. It seemed that,
27 uh, because I had, uh, failed an inspection of our unit when I was, uh, uh, an
28 inspection of my quarters when I was at Fort Benjamin [Harris 50:47] as a,
29 um, when I was in Basic; this was on my permanent record and was sort of
30 used against me. They had found a, a Coke bottle in my room when they
31 did a regular inspection; it was not mine. It was left there by somebody
32 else but it was on my record but, uh, I did not pass the inspection and this
33 was always, uh, I was told, uh, against my record of getting a promotion.
34 Uh. I guess I was a little bit immature just out of nurses' training. Uh. I
35 probably was not as mature as some of the other people in the...
36
37 Virginia Emrick: Were the...
38
39 Gertrude Gay: ...unit. I was one of the youngest in our unit.
40
41 Virginia Emrick: ...the av – I was just gonna ask you if the average was older than you.
42
43 Gertrude Gay: I was one of the youngest.
44
45 Virginia Emrick: I see.
46

1 Gertrude Gay: And, uh, I think that, uh, uh, having been in a nurses' training program,
2 you had lived in a hospital unit where you did not go out without a pass
3 and you lived, you know, you were under the chief nurse's eye all the
4 time. Uh. Going from that into an Army situation, um, probably I was not
5 as grown up as I should have been. It would've helped if I'd had a few
6 years of experience behind me before I went to, uh, the Army but at the
7 time, they needed us and so we went.
8

9 Virginia Emrick: Mm-hm. [52:16] What about the – your food generally? You didn't come
10 home malnourished [laughter] or anything of that sort, did ya?
11

12 Gertrude Gay: Definitely not. Uh. We had some things that we didn't – that we
13 would've like to have had that we did not get. We were getting the canned
14 butter that had mostly the, uh, taste of wax in it. Uh. We got very little
15 milk because powdered milk at that time was not that good as it has been
16 perfected now, um, so our, our, uh, diet of milk was, I think, lacking. Uh.
17 Eggs, we did get the powdered eggs. Our bread supplies, uh, were, uh,
18 baked for us right at, uh, nearby our unit and were the – a homemade
19 bread-style rather than the bread that you think of as bought bread. But
20 considering the time that we were living in and the amount of supplies that
21 were being gotten from the States to the, the man in the field, I think they
22 did a real good job of supplying us because they were not only supplying
23 Europe, but they were also supplying the Pacific [inaudible 53:42].
24

25 Virginia Emrick: [53:44] Well, when you, um, [coughing] accumulated enough points to
26 come home, how much time had you put in service [inaudible 53:52].
27

28 Gertrude Gay: I had, uh, served 1 month less than 2 years.
29

30 Virginia Emrick: I see. [53:58] Well, uh, how did you come back? How did you return to
31 the States?
32

33 Gertrude Gay: I flew back.
34

35 Virginia Emrick: Oh, well, the joy. [laughter]
36

37 Gertrude Gay: I went over on the Queen Mary and I flew back on one of the large planes.
38

39 Virginia Emrick: Sounds like the Queen Mary would've been luxurious [laughter] but as
40 you told us, it wasn't. It had been converted I suppose...
41

42 Gertrude Gay: It had been converted.
43

44 Virginia Emrick: ...[as were 54:14] most of the ships and such.

1
2Gertrude Gay: Yes.
3
4Virginia Emrick: [54:16] Uh. Where did you muster out, or whatever the word is, for your
5 separation?
6
7Gertrude Gay: Uh, I was discharged in Chicago. Right out of Chicago. I can't remember
8 the name of the camp up there, but that was where I went for discharge.
9
10Virginia Emrick: Did, uh, how, how many people in your unit did you come back with? Or
11 did you all ...
12
13Gertrude Gay: No one.
14
15Virginia Emrick: ...just come back singly? Uh.
16
17Gertrude Gay: I came back – I had contracted a infection and I was being treated for this
18 infection at Fort, uh, [Nichols 54:43] Hospital and then I was sent to
19 Chicago for discharge.
20
21Virginia Emrick: Did you have any ser – or any of your group have any serious illnesses
22 because of their, uh, work there because of...
23
24Gertrude Gay: None that I have heard of.
25
26Virginia Emrick: Good. [inaudible 54:56]
27
28Gertrude Gay: I, I think that probably we were all suffering a little bit from the arthritis
29 due to the dampness and the cold. I think our arthritis flare-ups that, uh,
30 we probably could date back to the time that we lived in those cold, wet
31 fields. But our medical records will not stand up for inspection. You
32 didn't worry about it then.
33
34Virginia Emrick: Mm-hm.
35
36Gertrude Gay: You might'a had a, a, a rash. You might'a had a cold. You, uh, you got it
37 over with and treated and tried to get back on duty as soon as possible.
38
39Virginia Emrick: I see.
40
41Gertrude Gay: And so, uh, you didn't try to document things. It would'a helped if we
42 had documented a lot of the things. I know I had a lot of rashes. Uh. I
43 would break out in hives due to the French doing my laundry and, uh, the
44 filthy water [laughter] that they were using from the river and I would

1 flare-up with these rashes and would have to go to the emergency room
2 and get a, uh, injection of calcium gluconate was the way that they...
3
4 Virginia Emrick: Oh.
5
6 Gertrude Gay: ...treated it then and, um, uh, get back on duty.
7
8 Virginia Emrick: [56:11] Did you have, did you have occasion to visit, uh, any of the
9 natives in their home – in a – at a nice, comfortable situation? Uh. Was
10 there anything like that?
11
12 Gertrude Gay: We visited several homes in the, um, areas, uh, around our camp, uh,
13 going into the homes. They were – they had some lovely homes. A lot of
14 tile inside their kitchens and things like this. Uh, but, uh.
15
16 Virginia Emrick: [56:40] Were these, uh, people who held positions in the towns or cities?
17 Were they mayors or councilmen or any authority of that sort...
18
19 Gertrude Gay: [sighing]
20
21 Virginia Emrick: ...[inaudible 56:50] that you had access to?
22
23 Gertrude Gay: No. Now, uh, probably some of our unit did, but I did not.
24
25 Virginia Emrick: I see.
26
27 Gertrude Gay: Um. I know one of our officers actually, uh, is married – uh, he married
28 one our nurses and they are living in France. He came from the area right
29 around Carentan and lives in that area and is a doctor in that area and has
30 raised a family.
31
32 Virginia Emrick: Well, that [inaudible 57:21]
33
34 Gertrude Gay: But, um. Uh. Other than that, why, uh, I'm sure that some of our unit got
35 to visit homes with them.
36
37 Virginia Emrick: Uh-huh. [57:32] Well what – where did you, uh, continue your practice
38 then when you – after you came home?
39
40 Gertrude Gay: When I came home, I, uh, went to work with the, uh, Visiting Nursing
41 service which was a, um, [community chest 57:50] organization at that
42 time and it was private – uh, it was nursing going into the homes, um, and
43 caring – doing public health nursing care in the homes. Uh. As against
44 the public health nurse who is a county, uh, employee. Um.

1
2Virginia Emrick: [58:14] And the war was still going on?
3
4Gertrude Gay: The war was still going on and at that time we were doing – um, going
5 into the homes, getting mothers ready for delivery of their babies. Uh.
6 Louisville was doing home deliveries out of the General Hospital. The
7 interns at General Hospital were going into the homes of patients
8 delivering all but their firstborns, uh, children. If there was no
9 complications, then the home – it was a home delivery. We were getting
10 the families ready for this. I did public health nursing as a Visiting Nurse
11 for 6 months and then I decided that I had GI Bill, um...
12
13Virginia Emrick: Rights.
14
15Gertrude Gay: ...coming, uh, to me and I wanted to go back to school. I just had my RN
16 3-year nurses' training in back of me and I, uh, was interested in public
17 health and decided to go on to – an, and get a degree in public health, so I
18 enrolled at Peabody College in Nashville, Tennessee, and I did complete
19 my, uh, degree program there and I have a B.S. in, uh, B., uh, S. in
20 Nursing with a Public Health major.
21
22Virginia Emrick: I see. [59:38] So that was the end of your serv – uh, uh, your contact with
23 any military service after you came home, you...
24
25Gertrude Gay: Right.
26
27Virginia Emrick: ...uh, uh, professionally, that is.
28
29Gertrude Gay: Yes.
30
31Virginia Emrick: But do you have any contact with military groups, uh, other than as a
32 nurse? Have you continued your interest in veterans and such?
33
34Gertrude Gay: Oh, when I came back from service, I was interested in, uh, and I became
35 a member of the American Legion. There was a nurses' post in Louisville
36 and I became a member of the nurses' post, American Legions. I also, uh,
37 was the, um, a member of the, um, World War II veterans. AMVETS.
38 And, um, was active with those 2 groups and also renewed my
39 acquaintance with the Spanish-American War Veterans Axiliary until I
40 married. Uh. After coming back, um, uh, from, uh, the Army and nurses'
41 training and all, um, and going right to work here, I didn't have a whole
42 lotta time. I also wanted to go back to school. Before I went to Peabody, I
43 acquired a few credits going to, uh, what was – what is Catherine Spalding
44 College now, but was Nazareth College then. I took some night courses.

1 So, I was a very busy person those 6 months even before I went down to
2 Peabody.
3
4 Virginia Emrick: Yeah. [1:01:13] So you took advantage of the GI bill.
5
6 Gertrude Gay: Oh yes.
7
8 Virginia Emrick: Well that, that's good. I, I wondered about [inaudible 1:01:17].
9
10 Gertrude Gay: But that's the only part of my veteran's benefits that I've taken advantage
11 of. Uh. I think nurses have hesitated to take advantage of any of the
12 veterans' rights as far as hospitalization or medical care. I think we have
13 come back to jobs that usually – uh, or we got married and had, uh,
14 medical benefits so that we have not used our VA [recording ends
15 abruptly]
16
17
18/ad