

1 **Interview of Betty C. Taylor Thompson talks about**
2 **her service in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps during WWII**

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4

5Lilah Ramsey: [0:01] Your name is?

6

7Betty Thompson: Uh, Betty Thompson now. Betty Taylor when I went into service.

8

9Lilah Ramsey: [0:10] What year did ya go into service?

10

11Betty Thompson: In nineteen, uh, forty-three. I was working in Chicago, found it [sighing]
12 hard to keep body and soul together as a single person not too well-paid.
13 Uh. I'm a physical therapist, was doing that at Michael Reese Hospital
14 when some of my friends joined [sighing] service and so one day I went
15 down to the, um, naval office but they didn't – weren't s-, letting women go
16 overseas and that was one thing that I knew I wanted to do, so then I went to
17 the Army and they took my application, and I quit my job at Chicago and in
18 August I got a call asking if I would go out to San Francisco – or Santa Rosa
19 and work with polio patients; they were having an epidemic out there. The
20 national foundation wanted me to go and I did. While I was there, my
21 orders came to report to Memphis. Tsk. This was, [sighing] of course,
22 when transportation was hard to come by so they told me to go to Fort
23 Mason and take my oath of office and that way I would get a military
24 priority. Tsk, so I did and was given a 3rd class priority on the railroad.
25 Took me three days and three nights to get to Chicago and then reported to
26 Memphis and discovered to my astonishment that I was the first woman to
27 join the 48th General Hospital. There were 17 male officers, 83 enlisted
28 men, and me, and for [sighing] two months, um, we waited for the rest of
29 the group. Finally, four nurses joined us and then our colonel and he was a
30 gentleman who did not believe in women being in the Service, so he treated
31 us as if we were men, which meant that we went on the – all of the training
32 hikes, did the same calisthenics, wore the same packs...

33

34Lilah Ramsey: Oh dear. [laughter]

35

36Betty Thompson: ...helmets...

37

38Lilah Ramsey: Oh. [laughter]

39

40Betty Thompson: ...boots, bivouacked, marched in extreme heat, and...

41

42Lilah Ramsey: Nice guy.

43

1 Betty Thompson: ...um, he never changed his attitude, really. We met him later back at Percy
2 Jones Hospital, and he was thrilled to see us and you'd of thought we had
3 been the best of friends.
4

5 Lilah Ramsey: [laughter]
6

7 Betty Thompson: He apparently didn't remember all the things that we did.
8

9 Lilah Ramsey: [laughter]
10

11 Betty Thompson: Then we were in Memphis just two months when we received our orders to
12 go overseas, went to the East Coast, finally got our orders to go to a port of
13 embarkation. We went off to strains of "Over There" and much fanfare,
14 marched down [sighing] to the pier, saw the Queen Mary on the left and to
15 our horror, they turned us to the right and put us on the Île de France. One
16 week later, [sighing] we had a – there was a fire in the hold so they took us
17 all off and back to Camp Kilmer we went.
18

19 Lilah Ramsey: [4: 01] You [stayed 4:01] one week onboard ship?
20

21 Betty Thompson: One week.
22

23 Lilah Ramsey: [4:04] [Where] were you [inaudible 4:04]?
24

25 Betty Thompson: Came back to Camp Kilmer on Christmas Eve; tsk, this was great for many
26 of the people who lived in the area because anyone who lived within 100
27 miles or something like that was given a 3-day pass. The rest of us were
28 allowed to make a phone call to someplace of our choice. We were not
29 supposed to tell, of course, where we were or how come we were there.
30 Then on New Year's [sighing] Day, they – we went off again by train. This
31 time there was no "Over There," no farewell, but this time when we got to
32 the pier, um, they put us on the Queen Elizabeth. There were 15,000 of us
33 on the ship, which normally was – uh, would carry 2000. There were 15 of
34 us in a stateroom for two, five triple bunks, but we really had a great trip.
35 The ship went as fast as it was able to. We traveled without convoy,
36 zigzagged, [sighing] uh, to avoid the ever-present submarines, had 75-foot
37 seas, [sighing] and it was during that kind of weather that we would get a
38 seat in the officers' lounge because there were enough that were seasick and
39 confined to their bunks. Tsk, uh, we were on two meals a day, which didn't
40 help the people who were seasick because you – if you can keep your
41 stomach full, you don't get too sick.
42

43 Landed in Glasgow, put us on a train. The bagpipers greeted us. We went
44 down through, uh, Reading, Bath, to, um, tsk, Swindon, I think, where we

1 were billeted in private homes for three weeks. When I was sent to the
2 place that I was supposed to go, I got into bed, looked up, and was looking
3 at the sky. There had been a hole bombed in the roof of that house. It was
4 cold, so the next day I – uh, somebody with a little influence got me into a
5 little warmer setup. Tsk. We were there for three weeks, then went down to
6 Petworth, a little village where we [sighing] were sent to a camp that had
7 been used by the Canadians. The physical therapists, the Red Cross, and the
8 dieticians were always at the end of the roster and that night when the nurses
9 were sent to their quarters for housing, they came up nine short, tsk, so –
10 and of course, we were – PTs were in these, um, ones that had no home, so
11 they put us in the dispensary, tsk, with – so we took – uh, there were two to
12 a room. These were actually examining rooms, but there were, um, cots –
13 hospital cots that – in case they had to have patients that they had to keep,
14 but there was no heat, [sighing] uh, so we got undressed, got in bed, and
15 decided that was not going to work, so we got up, got dressed, and went
16 back to bed. We were issued two blankets and that was it.

17
18 Then we were sent down to Stockbridge, England, where we took over – or
19 set up a hospital. Some of the time we did some temporary duty in
20 Salisbury or Winchester but, um, then we – our hospital got underway in
21 earnest and [sighing] they began to practice for what we knew would be the
22 big invasion and, of course, the night came and we will never forget the sky
23 being filled with planes and gliders and you name it. Twelve hours later, we
24 had our first patients. Um. Pilots shot down from some of the fighter planes
25 and about that time we began to be very, very busy and so they put us on 12
26 hours on, 12 hours off. We were there [sighing] until D +71 and we were
27 sent down to Southampton, where we had the only real respite from duty
28 that, uh, we were to have until the end of the war, tsk, finally put us on
29 [sighing], um, a Libyan ship, I believe, tsk, and you guess it, there were
30 again six of us this time that – there were no, uh, quarters for, so some of
31 our nurse friends said they would share the – their bunks with us, which
32 meant that one of ya slept a while and then got up and went wherever you
33 could, which was usually the latrine since it was the only place that was
34 warm enough, and – while the other person slept, but it – we were
35 fortunately only I think three days and three nights on that ship.

36
37 We were taken off the ship in very high seas in, uh, Ducks and walked the
38 last several feet through the water. Those didn't get us clear up to shore.
39 And we staged then in Normandy and rain never quit. Some of our enlisted
40 men had litters for beds, not cots, and those litters were almost floating.
41 This is [throat clearing], excuse me, Betty Taylor Thompson again. I see I
42 failed to give any dates or many dates. The day I went into service was –
43 and arrived at Memphis, Tennessee, reporting to the Kennedy General
44 Hospital where our unit, [sighing] um, tsk, had some of the grounds out in

1 back of the hospital where our hospital was gradually being assembled, that
2 date was October 16, 1943. Tsk. We were there, as I said, for two months
3 plus a little, received orders to go overseas, tried to sail, as I said, on the Île
4 de France on – um, around the 20th of December, then learned that there
5 was a fire in the hold and we had to be taken off and, again, as I mentioned,
6 we went back to Camp Kilmer, arriving there on New Year’s – on
7 Christmas Eve 1943. Then we finally did sail on the Queen Elizabeth on
8 New Year’s Day, 1944. We arrived in Glasgow January 9th, having made
9 one of the faster trips across, um, the ocean. Tsk. Then we proceeded down
10 to Swindon, where we stayed for three weeks, tsk, uh, and reported into
11 Petworth, where we were for probably another three weeks, [sighing] which
12 brings us close to March of 1944. Our hospital in Stockbridge was ready for
13 service, uh, late in May. In the meantime, many of us had been sent to
14 nearby hospitals, some of’ m English, uh, but those hospitals, particularly in
15 Salisbury, were taking care of American, um, casualties; twice I did TDY
16 there.

17
18 And [sighing] then we stayed in Stockbridge until August of n-, or ju-, July,
19 D +71, which would be – make it around August of l-, [sighing], hm,
20 August 15th or so when we received our orders to proceed to the continent
21 and after a week or so in – actually, it was in Lyme Regis, a little, tsk, um,
22 tsk – what had been a British summer resort in [Seatown 13:32] by the sea.
23 We had sort of individual cabins, two or three of us, um, tsk, to each one,
24 and this was one of our more carefree times. We had lots of sunshine, were
25 able to rest because we had been working hard; however, it was also one of
26 the times when I got a very severe sunburn, tsk, and [sighing] then was sent
27 up to Salisbury for temporary duty again and apparently the sun had done
28 more than burned me because I fainted one day while I was helping a patient
29 exercise. Um, this was in a ward where everybody had a fractured femur
30 and all but one soldier was – um, were in traction, tsk, and I was helping
31 him learn how to work and exercise his quadriceps, I proceeded to faint.
32 When I woke up, [sighing] they had summoned a nurse from somewhere
33 and I had my head in her lap, and the first thing I saw was this fellow in
34 traction who was leaning half out of bed worrying, wondering what wrong
35 with me, and I sat up with a start and said, “Oh, you can’t twist like that!
36 That’s – you’re in traction.” And promptly fainted again. Tsk. They later
37 kidded him a lot because it seems one of the British therapists who, uh,
38 worked there had done almost the same thing and so they teased him, said
39 he certainly did have a devastating effect on women.

40
41 Tsk. Then [sighing] we sailed for – tsk, from Southampton, uh, in the
42 middle of August of ’44 – I think it was ’44. Right, and staged in Eaubonne
43 in Paris – outside of Paris, went into Paris shortly after it was liberated. I
44 think that date was September 8th, and we moved into Paris on the 23rd of

1 September 1944, where we [sighing] operated, um, tsk, the hospital, as I
2 recounted, and [sighing] although we were extremely busy, we did, uh,
3 enjoy our time in Paris. Had a lot of snow, which was unusual, but we –
4 that enabled us to make snow ice cream. Tsk. During the Battle of the
5 Bulge, we had [sighing] more patients than we had beds, so they took over
6 our officers' mess and made it into a ward. We also – the halls were all full
7 of, of people who had trench foot. The halls were, of course, unheated and
8 this was an ideal setup for their feet to gradually, hopefully come back to
9 life. Tsk. We, um, tsk, were in Paris until after V-E Day. This would've
10 been [sighing] June of '45 when they split us up [sighing] and, tsk, um,
11 some of us – well, our hospitals went to Marseille where, as I've said, we
12 took over two station hospitals and gradually [sighing] our people were
13 assigned to units [sighing], um, tsk, elsewhere and [sighing] except for a 3-
14 or 4-day pass, uh, to Cannes, we – it was a sad time because we were saying
15 farewell to people that we knew we probably – many of whom we'd never
16 see again and it was like saying goodbye to members of your family, tsk,
17 except when you see your – when you say goodbye to members of your
18 family, you know you're going to see them again.

19
20 I was sent up to Reims and it so happened that – to the 94th General
21 Hospital, and it so happened that about that time, the mess officer of whom
22 I've spoken often, was sent to the 83rd General which was not very far from
23 Reims. Tsk. His commanding officer was named Taylor and was quite
24 intrigued that my name was Taylor and so he made a car available to my
25 husband to be for – so that he could visit me every now and then, [sighing]
26 which was, tsk, uh, nice because we also knew that soon we would be
27 separated, tsk, and then as, um, I said or you will hear, um, orders for many
28 physical therapists to come home were [sighing] dispatched, and I did arrive
29 back in the States almost two years to the day from the day I entered service,
30 uh, October 16, now it is 1945. Tsk. As did most of the other therapists, I
31 took a discharge and with my terminal leave, I was then out of service as of
32 January 1, 1946, after some 26 months plus a few days in the U.S. Army.
33 Tsk.

34
35 My, uh, tsk, identification number was M886, which when I have repeated
36 that to people, they always think I've forgotten half of it, but – uh, and I'm
37 not just sure whether that meant that I was the 886th woman to be sworn
38 into the, um, army, but that's what I was told. By the way, I misspoken
39 when I said I was always treated specially because I was the first woman in
40 service; I meant in service in the 48th General Hospital, and, tsk, that did
41 give me a little, um – get me a little special attention because they all
42 remembered - some of them I'm sure because I wasn't very good at saluting
43 until one of the officers got a hold of me and when we were going into town

1 said, "I want you to salute correctly because you're going to have to return a
2 lot of salutes." Tsk, so that was, uh, how I learned.

3
4 This was recorded in 1983 and this edition was done May 14, 1984. I just
5 will add that since I've been out of the Service, I've – we've had four
6 children and most of the time I have continued working. Nineteen – in
7 1946, we were married and in August of '47, I organized the physical
8 therapy department at Community Hospital here in Battle Creek, Michigan,
9 where I worked off and on between children – uh, the children's arrivals,
10 until '54 or so, and then I worked out of my home, continuing to take care of
11 polio patients and in September of '55, I went to the employ of two
12 orthopedic doctors in their office, where – from where I will retire this – at
13 the end of June in 1984. I now work for the three doctors who have
14 succeeded the two I originally – um, for whom I originally went to work.
15 My days in my – the Service are still – are among the happiest of my, uh,
16 career and also probably very informative, and I learned a lot of things I
17 could do for people with fresh injuries and it has – this time has helped me a
18 good deal in my civilian career. Thank you.

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