

**Interview of Florence Bernstein McChesney on her service
as a flight nurse in the U.S. Army Air Corps during and after WWII**

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5 Interviewer: [audio cut off 00:01] histories for the Pittsburgh Unit Women's
6 Overseas Service League. Today, I'm going to interview Florence
7 McChesney, a member of the Pittsburgh Unit since about 1971.
8 Florence is actually my first guest for oral histories, and we are both
9 anticipating an interesting time with it. [00:25] Florence, what branch
10 of the service did you serve?
11
12 Florence McChesney: I was in the army air corps, and I served for five years.
13
14 Interviewer: [00:36] And, um, what – where, where were you assigned? What was
15 the nature of your, um, assignment?
16
17 Florence McChesney: I was working in Mich-, Detroit, Michigan, and I signed up in April of
18 '43 to go to the air corps.
19
20 Interviewer: [00:57] Uh-huh. Um, what influenced you to volunteer for the service?
21
22 Florence McChesney: At that time, we were at war and you heard all these ads requesting
23 nurses to join, and I was influenced, I guess, by that.
24
25 Interviewer: [01:17] Yes. Did you have any resistance from the family or
26 encouragement?
27
28 Florence McChesney: My mother really did not want me to go into the service because she
29 thought, you know, I might get killed.
30
31 Interviewer: Uh-huh.
32
33 Florence McChesney: Other than that, everybody was happy I was goin'.
34
35 Interviewer: [01:37] What did you do prior to your, uh, enlistment?
36
37 Florence McChesney: I worked in Michigan for one year in a TB hospital, Herman Kiefer,
38 and I – that's why I enlisted, and I did wanna get out of workin' in TB
39 because it was, you know, it's a contagious disease, and I thought a
40 year was enough.
41
42 Interviewer: [01:59] Okay. Now, you mentioned – now, you were in the air force
43 branch. Now, what exactly did you do while you were, you know, on
44 your assignment with the...

1
2 Florence McChesney: My first assignment was [stuck at Arkansas 02:11]. And there, I
3 worked in the – we had a little air corps hospital. It wasn't very much
4 because it was a small place. And, um, I worked there for a year, and
5 then I went into training to become a flight nurse. It was very hard to
6 get in to be a flight nurse because that was my main [objection 02:36]
7 when I went in. And it took me a year to get...
8
9 Interviewer: [02:42] What, what did you have to do? What was the training for
10 flight nurse? What did that, uh, consist of?
11
12 Florence McChesney: The training was – we had the same training as the men. We learned
13 how to shoot a pistol. We learned how to go under the barbwire
14 fences. We had to do all the things that the men had to do because, uh,
15 they – at that time, they wanted you to be prepared in case you got into
16 enemy territory.
17
18 Interviewer: [03:11] Did, did they, uh, were most of the flight nurses – were they
19 women or did they have men flight nurses during your experience?
20
21 Florence McChesney: No, they were all women.
22
23 Interviewer: [03:24] Now, when you became a flight nurse, what transpired then in
24 your assignment?
25
26 Florence McChesney: When I became a flight nurse, then I traveled over the United States.
27 We'd go from one place, like we'd go to New York and pick up
28 patients and bring'm to one of the hospitals in the States. And I did
29 that for about six months. And I really enjoyed that because I got to
30 see the United States. I went almost [a week 03:54], uh, place where
31 there was an airfield and we would pick up patients from the different
32 hospitals and transfer'm from one hospital to another.
33
34 Interviewer: [04:08] Well, where did you get some overseas experience, since the
35 Women's Overseas Service League is a, is a, um, requires a...
36
37 Florence McChesney: After doing some work with the United States, then I was assigned to
38 go to the South Pacific. And, uh, we went to Hawaii, and from Hawaii
39 we went – we traveled, we, we traveled to Saipan, Guam, Okinawa,
40 Manila, and all the areas in the South Pacific. Once a month, I made a
41 trip to United States, and we would take the men back to the stat-, in
42 California. And, uh, sometimes you would go on a trip – I have my,
43 uh, I brought down my, uh, records to show you how many –
44 sometimes a flight was 7½ hours. Sometimes it was, uh, thirteen hours.

1 It would depend on where you were goin'. Of course, when you were
2 flyin', you would always stop off at different, from different little
3 airfields, you know. Mostly in the States, we used the C-47s, but in,
4 uh, overseas, we used the 54s, which was a much bigger plane.
5

6Interviewer: [05:34] In, in recounting your, um, your, or else in retrospect for your,
7 of your experience, what would you say were the more memorable
8 things that happened while you were doing this, uh, work?
9

10Florence McChesney: Well, one thing, when you were doing flight nursing and you were on
11 your own on a plane, you might have two enlisted men, maybe you
12 might have one aide with ya; you did not have a doctor. And before
13 the flight, you would have to go over all the patients you were pickin'
14 up and see what kind of medicine they needed and have all their
15 medicine and everything you would need for the flight for them.
16

17 We always – now, in the South Pacific, when we were flyin' back
18 home to take them to the States, we would always have five
19 psychiatric patients, and they were strapped down. They had – we had
20 them in full restraints, and it was up to the nurse to decide how to treat
21 them on the plane. You were fully responsible for their whole care. If
22 you had blood transfusions, you had IVs goin', and sometimes when
23 you were on a flight, you would be busy from the minute you got on
24 the plane until you left because you would have sometimes as many as
25 40 to 50 patients.
26

27Interviewer: [06:51] And you say you were the only nurse on the flight with, uh,
28 two, uh...
29

30Florence McChesney: Two attendants. Sometimes only one attendant. It depended on how
31 many patients ya had.
32

33Interviewer: [07:04] Well, did you have like critically ill patients too? Did, did your
34 particular flights include the very critically...
35

36Florence McChesney: Yeah, you would have, you had people with – they were, uh, with, uh,
37 head injuries, psychiatric patients on every flight back to the States.
38 You always had psychiatric patients. And sometimes – but before we
39 would take a psychiatric patient, we used to, at that time, give'm
40 sodium amytal IV, and they would have an injection before you took
41 them on a plane to keep them quiet most of the time, but many times,
42 some of'm you'd – and they would be in full restraints, so you would
43 have to relieve their hands, relieve their feet from restraints so that

1 they could – you, you’d give’m, uh, some, uh, [exercise 07:51] while
2 they were on the plane.
3
4 And, uh, you would have – you really were busy because – and then
5 you had to give peop-, patients morphine. We were allowed to carry
6 morphine and codeine, and we had a little spoon that ya had to heat it
7 in at that time. And, uh, then besides that you’d have to give’m their
8 meals, which we had soup and sandwiches or whatever we took on the
9 plane. Everybody would have to be fed. So, what – really time would
10 go very, very fast when you were makin’ a flight.
11
12 Interviewer: Yeah, it’s apparent. Yeah, with the limited personnel, you really were
13 busy. [08:31] Did, did you have anything unusual happen throughout –
14 whether it was related to patient care or not, but did anything unusual
15 happen during your, um, military experience that you...
16
17 Florence McChesney: One time, while I was on a flight, that one of the windows blew open
18 to the airplane. And we always carried them, uh, orange vests for – and
19 one of’m fell out the window. I must’ve counted them patients 50
20 times to make sure none of the patients fell out because that really
21 brings a big draft. And I was...
22
23 Interviewer: With the suction reaction.
24
25 Florence McChesney: Yeah, the suction. And, oh, was I scared! I counted’m over and over
26 [laughter].
27
28 Interviewer: That would’ve been a, would’ve been a very difficult moment. [09:18]
29 Um, what was the nature of your housing when you were a – of
30 course, obviously when you’re in flight, but outside of your, uh, flight
31 times, what – where did you stay?
32
33 Florence McChesney: Most of the time, we had apartments. In Hawaii, there was five of us
34 lived in one apartment, might have been three bedrooms, so we’d have
35 to share, you know –
36
37 Interviewer: [09:38] Was this military housing?
38
39 Florence McChesney: Military housing, yes. Very nice apartments. We had it very nice.
40 When I was stationed at Guadalcanal, though, we lived in little huts.
41 And I was in Guadalcanal for a whole, uh, year practically. Well,
42 flying back and forth, you know, I– but that was my – where I stayed.
43 And we had, uh, the, uh, natives there used to try to jump over the

1 fence because they always wanted a white woman, and that was – we
2 had a special care for there in Guadalcanal.
3

4Interviewer: [10:18] But what about in the United States? What...
5

6Florence McChesney: In United States, we always had very, very nice apartments. We lived
7 in very beautiful ha-, we had, usually houses, and they all were
8 subdivided into apartments.
9

10Interviewer: [10:33] Now, this housing, was it just strictly for the, uh, female
11 officers or, or did you have, uh, was it housing also which included,
12 uh, you know, male officers?
13

14Florence McChesney: No. This was just for the flight nurses because we had – we'd have our
15 own little area. We lived near the commanders or whoever had homes
16 around there, we always had a home too. Only for the flight nurses.
17

18Interviewer: [10:59] Now, when you needed medical attention, did you – how, how
19 did – how was that handled, uh, say if the flight nurse became ill or
20 suffered some other sort of sickness?
21

22Florence McChesney: Well, wherever we were at, we would just go to the [dispensary
23 11:12]. If we needed to be in a hospital, they would put us in a hospital
24 and we were treated the same as the males.
25

26Interviewer: [11:19] Did you have – did, uh, many of the flight nurses – were, were
27 they, uh, was the number of nurses – were there many casualties or, or
28 nurses that came down with illness, you know, uh, motion sickness or
29 something of that sort?
30

31Florence McChesney: As far as I can recall, there was very little sickness among the nurses.
32 Once in a while, someone would get a case of virus or diarrhea, and –
33 but other than that, there was very little sickness.
34

35Interviewer: That's very good. [11:51] What about your, your uniform? What –
36 can, can you tell us what you started out with and, and if there was any
37 change while you were, you know, after you became a flight nurse?
38

39Florence McChesney: When I first went in the service, we wore the blue uniform. It was –
40 we had the skirts and jackets with the white shirt. Then later it changed
41 to olive, and we had to get all new uniforms because [we was out
42 12:18]. As far as the dress, we had a dress that was beige, but we
43 always had to wear air corps insignia on all uniforms. The same with

1 their hats. We had the little overseas cap, and then we had a big – the
2 regular dress cap like the men wore.
3
4Interviewer: [12:41] Did, did you wear the seersuckers at any time since you were,
5 you know, flying out of Sou-, the South Pacific area because they were
6 using seersucker slacks and...
7
8Florence McChesney: We had the seersuckers, yeah. In the summertime, we did wear them,
9 and, uh, we mainly didn't wear them for dress, so they were more for
10 working.
11
12Interviewer: For duty.
13
14Florence McChesney: Duty, yes.
15
16Interviewer: Yes, your duty uniform. [13:06] Can you compare your, your nursing
17 in the service with, with the – your, uh, nursing following, you know,
18 your military, uh, service?
19
20Florence McChesney: Well, I think nursing in – being in the air corps was altogether
21 different than in, uh, following because in the air corps, you were the
22 one who was in charge of everything. In fact, when you were flying, if
23 a patient got sick, you could tell the pilot to even go – fly lower. Or if
24 it was too cold and you didn't wanna take – when I was up in Alaska,
25 one time it was so cold that we couldn't – on the plane, that I refused
26 to take patients because it was just too cold on the plane to take them.
27 And, uh, so you were really responsible for the patients on the plane,
28 and you could tell the pilot go – you know, little things that you were
29 allowed to tell'm. Like if you had a patient that was very sick, you
30 might tell the pilot, you know, not to fly as high.
31
32 And another thing was, uh, up in Alaska when you were flying – well,
33 before you would come to the hospital, you'd always have to give, uh,
34 the, uh, pilot a note tellin' him to tell – call the hospital ahead of time
35 and tell'm how many patients you were bringin' and have the
36 ambulances there. You would – we would call the hospital from the
37 plane before you landed and you would give the pilot this information.
38
39Interviewer: You, you certainly, uh, had, uh, need for considerable more initiative
40 than probably you experienced, I guess, subsequent to your military
41 service, you know, the type because, you know, in hospitals and so
42 forth, you always have the physicians there too.
43

1 Florence McChesney: Yeah. Like when you wanted to give morphine, you had to – that was
2 on your own. You gave the patient the morphine. Of course, his record
3 says he was allowed to have it, but, uh, when you would be
4 responsible for seeing that they got all their medicines, same way with
5 the IVs on a plane. You always had one or two IVs goin', and if a
6 patient needed blood, he would get blood on the plane, and you were
7 responsible for seein' that they got all this.
8

9 Interviewer: [15:22] As a flight nurse, did, did you, uh, what was your, uh, rank and
10 your pay, do you recall?
11

12 Florence McChesney: I don't recall the pay, but I do, uh, I was supposed to – first, when you
13 become a nurse in the Army, at that time, you were a second
14 lieutenant. Then I got to be first lieutenant.
15

16 Interviewer: [15:40] Was that when you became a flight nurse? Did you get the –?
17

18 Florence McChesney: Yeah, I was first lieutenant when I became a flight nurse. And then as I
19 was leavin' it was a regulation that everybody was captain but, you
20 know, they were promoting us automatically, and I was a captain for
21 two days, but I was discharged and they rescinded the order.
22

23 Interviewer: Oh. [15:59] So, you came out as a first lieutenant?
24

25 Florence McChesney: As a first lieutenant.
26

27 Interviewer: So, you really – [16:03] and then when, when did you come out of the
28 service then? When did you terminate your...?
29

30 Florence McChesney: Well, at first, when I was in the South Pacific, I was in from '43 to '46,
31 and I got out of the service for one year. And I deci-, after working at
32 home, I didn't like it, so I went back in the service from '47 to '49.
33 And when I went back in the second time, I told'm the only way I
34 would come back is if I could get back into the flight nursing, and I
35 was very fortunate. They wrote back and says, "We have only one
36 place you can go, and that is to Alaska." So, I took that Alaska
37 assignment.
38

39 Interviewer: [16:45] And you were there the, then the – you're second assi-, you're
40 second tour of duty was all in Alaska?
41

42 Florence McChesney: All in Alaska.
43

1Interviewer: [16:52] And that went – and where did, where did, how did, I mean,
2 how – what was the nature of that assignment? Where were you taking
3 patients then in Alaska?
4

5Florence McChesney: Well, in Alaska we went – I went to Nome, Fairbanks, Adak, which
6 was quite a distance away, and, uh, we were based at Anchorage
7 though.
8

9Interviewer: Well, that was very interesting. [17:16] So, you really had two tours of
10 duty?
11

12Florence McChesney: Yes, uh-huh.
13

14Interviewer: [17:20] Did, did you experience any conflict, uh, about being a, a
15 female officer and being a military person?
16

17Florence McChesney: No. That was one thing that was very nice because everybody treated
18 us very well. The men were very glad to see us. They carried our
19 suitcases whenever we were on a flight, and they did a lot of little
20 things for us that – I was surprised, but they did a lot of – they were
21 gentleman.
22

23Interviewer: Yeah, personal services.
24

25Florence McChesney: Mm-hm.
26

27Interviewer: Yeah, if you – [17:54] do, do you think that was, uh, true when, uh, uh,
28 when the WACs came into, uh, you know, into, um, the service? Did
29 you – was, were they offered the same kind or do you think that the
30 courtesies were, uh, offered you because you were a nurse and, and
31 perhaps held in a different esteem?
32

33Florence McChesney: Well, being in the air corps, anywhere we went, as far as the WACs
34 were concerned, they had very nice quarters in the South Pacific, and
35 the – we were very friendly with them because, uh, and I think, uh, the
36 same thing with the men there, the ones I knew anyhow, all had, uh,
37 good relationships.
38

39Interviewer: [18:37] Now, we'll – now, let's see. Now, you actually – then your,
40 your, uh, your second tour of duty terminated in 19...
41

42Florence McChesney: Forty-nine.
43

1Interviewer: Forty-nine. Okay. [18:46] Then is that when you, uh, uh, uh, began
2 your, uh university experience? Did – was that part of the GI Bill or
3 were, uh, did you...
4

5Florence McChesney: No. Before I went into the, uh, my, uh, GI Bill, I went to the visiting
6 nursing and, uh, I worked a couple years and then I went to Pitt under
7 the GI Bill, yes.
8

9Interviewer: Uh-huh. [19:11] And you got your, you got your bachelor's degree?
10

11Florence McChesney: I got my bachelor's. Then I went back...
12

13Interviewer: [19:17] What was that in? What was the, um, what did you get your –
14

15Florence McChesney: Nursing administration. And then I went back in and I got my master's
16 degree, but part of that I had to pay on my own because I was, uh...
17

18Interviewer: You had already exhausted your...
19

20Florence McChesney: I, uh, dropped out and went back later and finished up.
21

22Interviewer: [19:36] Oh, was that after the GI Bill was in effect then? Is that how –
23 or did you exhaust your benefits, your educational benefits?
24

25Florence McChesney: I can't recall but part of it I know I had to pay part of that.
26

27Interviewer: [19:48] When, uh, when – to get back to the, um, uh, to the service,
28 what – did you, did you, did you feel that any part of it was, uh, was
29 difficult or required more adjustment, you know, whether like the
30 uniform or living with others or the regulations or the, the restriction,
31 you know, of movement? Did you, did you find any part of it...
32

33Florence McChesney: I didn't have any trouble in the service. I, I first of all, I think I, I was a
34 pretty good nurse. And I didn't have any trouble in the service. And,
35 um, I made some very good friends that I'm still – we see each other –
36 some of the pilots and some of the nurses. I see'm, we write to quite
37 often. And, uh, one thing I forgot to tell ya but I wanna tell ya this – I
38 was one of the first nurses to go to Okinawa to pick up the injured
39 patients there.
40

41 When we landed in Okinawa, we, uh, right away there was a raid, and
42 we had to go into a shelter. When I picked up the patients to take them
43 back home, I had a bunch of candy that the Red Cross gave me, and of
44 course, we had hard-boiled eggs and some other stuff. I don't recall

1 that, but those men were so glad to get that hard candy that they – I
2 didn't have a thing left when I landed in, uh, back home.
3
4Interviewer: Back in the States?
5
6Florence McChesney: Yeah.
7
8Interviewer: [21:19] Then, did, did you get any battle stars? You mentioned
9 Okinawa, that apparently was still a, um, a battle zone. Did you get
10 any battle stars when...?
11
12Florence McChesney: Well, I got the, uh...
13
14Interviewer: Go ahead.
15
16Florence McChesney: I can't recall, but I know I got somethin' from the air corps. You
17 know, when you flew twel-, you had to fly 12 hours and you got a
18 medal for flying for overseas. And then I also got several ribbons but I
19 don't remember what they were.
20
21Interviewer: Okay. Well, let's go back to the GI Bill. Now, you mentioned you did
22 use the educational part of the GI Bill. [21:58] Did you use any of the
23 other services that were available under the, uh, uh, that were covered
24 under the GI Bill?
25
26Florence McChesney: I...
27
28Interviewer: Like housing or...
29
30Florence McChesney: I might have used the GI Bill when I first bought my ho-, uh, my first
31 home, and I went through the GI Bill for that.
32
33Interviewer: Okay. Now, uh, let's see. Now, you came – now, actually your second
34 tour of duty was completed in, um, terminated in 1949, and you did
35 mention you, you worked with the Visiting Nurse Association and you
36 mentioned also going to the University of Pittsburgh for your, for
37 your, uh, baccalaureate and your master's degree. [22:41] Uh, what, uh
38 what's followed subsequent?
39
40Florence McChesney: I went to the veteran's hospital at Leech Farm here in Pittsburgh, and I
41 worked there for 20 years in the psychiatric hospital. And I be-, wa-, I
42 was first supervisor of a building, and then later we changed over and
43 we became clinical specialists, all the ones that had their master's

1 degree were entitled to be clinical specialists, and that's – [we didn't
2 have supervisors 23:13].
3
4Interviewer: [23:13] And, and what's, what was, what was involved in your clinical
5 specialist, uh, work?
6
7Florence McChesney: In the psychiatric hospital, it's a little different than the general
8 hospitals in the fact that you did, um, you interviewed patients, you
9 did, uh, one-to-one with them. You had individual therapy. You had
10 group therapy with patients. You were responsible – instead of being
11 called a supervisor, you took charge just like a supervisor would of a
12 dif-, of a building.
13
14Interviewer: [23:49] Did, uh, and you – did your, um, your hosp-, your work at the
15 Veteran's Administration Hospital – it, you, and you retired from the
16 Veteran's Administration Hospital? You remained there until your
17 retirement?
18
19Florence McChesney: Yes. Yes, I retired from – my mother was ill, and I had to retire
20 because I had – wanted to stay...
21
22Interviewer: [audio cut off 24:09] 1974. Did you experience any, any, um, conflict
23 or, or losses, you know, leaving the nursing field or did, or did you do
24 any, any – did you, did you continue in any aspect?
25
26Florence McChesney: Well, since my mother was sick and I wanted to spend some time with
27 her. I really didn't wanna leave, but I did want to spend time with my
28 mother. I did have, uh, ambivalent feeling about quittin', but today I'm
29 glad I did because I understand there's so many changes and all up at
30 the veteran's hospital. I still keep in touch with them and we get to –
31 [phone ringing] we have – they have a reunion once a year for all the
32 retirees, so I see [phone ringing] [see many of m then 24:54].
33
34Interviewer: Now, the only question I think that remains – we know you're a very
35 active member with the Pittsburgh Unit Women's Overseas Service
36 League. [25:04] Just what does it mean being a member of the
37 Women's Overseas Service League?
38
39Florence McChesney: First of all, when I was approached to join the Women's Overseas
40 Service League, I was still working at, uh, Leech Farm Hospital, and I
41 did not want to get involved. They were havin' a special meeting
42 [coughing] – excuse me. [throat clearing] with Dr. Pat Smith bein' a
43 guest there, so I decided I would go to this meeting, and it was such a
44 nice group of people there I joined. And, uh [throat clearing], I am an

1 active worker. I like to keep busy, so I do get involved with whatever's
2 goin' on, but the one thing is, the ladies in Pittsburgh are very good
3 workers, and I enjoy going to the meetings.
4

5Interviewer: Well, we know that you have been an officer of the unit in, in, in
6 different capacities and also chairman of some of the, uh, committees.
7 [26:06] Do you want to, uh, do you want to make any reference to, uh,
8 some of the nature of those activities?
9

10Florence McChesney: Well, I was president for two years, and I'm now on the, uh, I'm the
11 service chairman, and I visit all the sick people right now, and I also
12 see the – send birthday cards to all the members. And not – one other
13 thing I do is I go to the Aspinwall VA Hospital because we give a
14 birthday gift to all the female patients there on their birthday, so I have
15 to check this out quite often, and I present them either with a gown or
16 a sweater or somethin' that they might need on their birthday.
17

18Interviewer: Well, uh, Florence, this has really been very interesting. I just hope
19 that all this was recorded, that, that we had, um, you know, talked
20 about during this period of time, and thank you very, very much.
21
22
23/tl