

**Interview of Ellen Marie Johnson on her service
with the Army Nurse Corps in France during WWI**

Interviewer: ...home in Oakland on a gray, dreary day, the date being the 27th of December 1984. And Ellen's going to share with us her written notes that she made as a nurse in World War I. [0:21] Ellen, would you like to tell us more about it with your diary, please?

Ellen Johnson: Well I, I'll just read it along and you write down what you want, uh, 1918 August and then up at 4:30. Waited till noon for the train for Dijon. At 2 p.m., officers called me Venus De Milo. [laughter] You can leave that out. [Reece Leon Lyons 1:02], whichever way they-, 3 a.m. on March say Hotel Petit, danced a Camp Covington. Sightseeing cathedral castle Monte Cristo [Reece niece] at 2 a.m. to, uh, the Nigeria hotel old casino Mount Round little, little they called it. Train to, uh, Monte Carlo through the mountains, beautiful buildings. Saw Lauren Anderson, oh that, oh that, that was a friend of my sister's – leave that out. Nice promenade band concert and a movie [inaudible 02:11] *The House of Hate*. Train 3 m – 3 p.m. to, uh, [inaudible] village in the mountains. Train 4 a.m. to, uh, Dijon, moonlight on the mountains to Grenoble, snow storm. Train to Lyon, to Lyon for a pair of – arrive 7 p.m. hotel Paris.

Do you want all of this? You do? To Hotel Richmond via subway. Panthéon de la Guerre – oh that was something. Mac, uh, that was a friend that I [inaudible 03:00] got passed from the officer for Château-Thierry. Napoleon's tomb, uh, and then we went to Dayna Castle and Bastille, Eiffel Tower and the Seine River. Train to Château-Thierry – wooden crosses. That was sad. Barbed wire trenches to [Reims 03:32] they called it [Reims], city in the ruins. Cathedral [dugout] got shell, got shell rose [window 03:45] inlay in Paris. Left Paris for Chélan, come by truck. Yeah we rode in on trucks. Ms. [Reading 04:02] scolded us for hospital – for something we did at the hospital. That was our head nurse.

Waited all day for, uh, going home list – Captain [Moore 04:27] left. He wa, was one of the nurses that I knew from Omaha. Fifty girls transferred to 97, Unit 97, and we walked to [Berdone 04:40]. To Bonne by ambulance, to the trench hospital. Signed up for Germany Army of Occupation. To station 10 PMs. Stopped at Saint A-i-g-n-a-n – Aignan. Reached tour 7:30 p.m. Our duty [inaudible 05:10] on duty ladies ward. Walked to [inaudible] the tour. That wasn't very far. On duty Ward 11. Contagious ward. Busy, very busy. Theater [inaudible 05:29] given by the boys. Many got home orders, hm, 1919 that was.

1 [To tour 05:43] with Gretchen. That was my friend. To Base 27. Mary
2 [left] – that's a girl I knew – for U.S. also. 49 left. To board 41 nurses and
3 civilians to patients, both I guess. To [château made 06:09] by the
4 Romans. A cave made with - [inaudible 6:17] and [inaudible] . [Inaudible]
5 that was a boyfriend that we didn't – weren't allowed to go out with
6 because he was a private. He wasn't an officer.
7
8 Walk to Mount [inaudible 06:35] again. Gretchen and Warner – that was
9 her boyfriend. Well home at 2 a.m. I don't know how I ever – we ever got
10 by and to bed. To Trianon. Traveling salesman, very good. Took tour,
11 took boys to dinner. Bernard left – that's my boyfriend [inaudible 07:04].
12 To Trianon [inaudible 07:08]. This was after the war, of course, [left] tour
13 to Paris to dinner.
14
15 Interviewer: [7:20] Ellen, let's stop for just a minute. I'd like to ask ya a couple
16 questions.
17
18 Ellen Johnson: Yeah.
19
20 Interviewer: [7:24] When you talked of your hospital, how big was your hospital ward
21 that you were working in? Do you remember?
22
23 Ellen Johnson: Well there were beds on both sides, and it was a long barracks. They were
24 all barracks. And I don't know how many we had in there; 30 or 40 sick,
25 wounded men.
26
27 Interviewer: [8:03] How many of medical personnel were assigned? You were the
28 nurse in charge? Did you have corpsmen? How many corpsmen were
29 helping you?
30
31 Ellen Johnson: Oh I can't remem... [chuckle]
32
33 Interviewer: There were some though, huh?
34
35 Ellen Johnson: There were corpsmen around and I don't know. I can't say that I was in
36 charge there were several others working our heads off part of the time.
37
38 Interviewer: [8:25] Well did you have plenty supplies or were there shortage of those
39 too?
40
41 Ellen Johnson: There was a shortage of everything.
42
43 Interviewer: Well what...
44

1 Ellen Johnson: We did get by with supplies.
2

3 Interviewer: [8:40] Well how about the food? W-, Was it adequate, good, bad,
4 indifferent, or what?
5

6 Ellen Johnson: It was just eatable and that was about all.
7

8 Interviewer: [8:50] How about those patients on a special diet? Were they...
9

10 Ellen Johnson: I don't think they got a special diet.
11

12 Interviewer: They just ate what you had, huh?
13

14 Ellen Johnson: Yes. [chuckle]
15

16 Interviewer: On the other tape, we were talking about the types of wounded, you said
17 you were on a contagious ward.
18

19 Ellen Johnson: I was for a while.
20

21 Interviewer: But...
22

23 Ellen Johnson: What was it they had? Was it diphtheria or something rather serious, and I
24 was with them. I wasn't allowed out of the ward at all. I had to eat my
25 meals right there with the...
26

27 Interviewer: [9:25] You were isolated right along with them, huh?
28

29 Ellen Johnson: Yes I was, of course I wasn't allowed out. That was later wasn't it?
30

31 Interviewer: Well now with the hospital laundry, for example, did the hospital wash it
32 or was it sent out to the city you were [satellited 09:43] on?
33

34 Ellen Johnson: Well I think the hospital had to do it all. I don't think the city helped us at
35 all.
36

37 Interviewer: Because sometimes...
38

39 Ellen Johnson: But, uh, we didn't always have the best clean laundry, we didn't get – we
40 couldn't change the sheets every day certainly. I'd kind of forgotten about
41 that but, uh, sometimes I know it wasn't good.
42

43 Interviewer: [10:14] Well your hospital saw obviously many types of patients, and
44 what was the normal stay before they were either sent back to duty or sent

1 back further to what we would call a general hospital in World War II or
2 back to the states?
3
4 Ellen Johnson: Well that's a question impossible to answer. They had to wait for trains,
5 you know, and transportation. They were ready to go home but they had to
6 wait and then later – well even [mine 10:45] later was sent down to rest
7 and we had to wait there a week for transportation home. Even when they
8 were well enough to, uh, go.
9
10 Interviewer: [11:07] Well did we have hospital ships as such at that time? They just
11 sent them on regular troop carriers?
12
13 Ellen Johnson: Well I, I, it was a troop, uh-, they turned over some of these, I don't know
14 where they got, I went on the [Emperoder 11:23] and it was entirely
15 armies, army tr-, uh, conducted and all. Isn't that funny I, I can't remember
16 much about how we got home. We got home by boat of course, and as
17 soon as they could, they tried to take the men over to, uh, New York and
18 then they sent a lot of them out to Walter Reed, which is a government
19 hospital.
20
21 Interviewer: Was that even then one of the largest governmental hospitals, Walter
22 Reed?
23
24 Ellen Johnson: I think so, yes I think so.
25
26 Interviewer: Well let me turn you around just a little bit 'cause we talked the other day
27 and you were – when you went overseas, you went obviously by ship.
28 [12:25] Did you go in convoy?
29
30 Ellen Johnson: Yeah, oh yes and, uh, we had to, uh, change our, uh, route because there
31 was a submarine that was following us and all ready to blow us up, so we
32 had to change course very quickly.
33
34 Interviewer: [12:45] Were any of the ships in your convoy lost or were you able to get
35 to get to – well where'd you go? England? Or did you go to France
36 directly?
37
38 Ellen Johnson: We went to England and stayed for a week and then we had, uh, it was a
39 very dangerous crossing across the Engli-, English Channel to get over to,
40 uh, France.
41
42 Interviewer: Was that because, again, of the submarines?
43
44 Ellen Johnson: Oh yes.

1
2Interviewer: How about the dirigibles that they had at that time? Were you bothered by
3 them?
4
5Ellen Johnson: No I don't think we were very much.
6
7Interviewer: [13:17] Well the parts of France that you visited in your diary, had they
8 been pretty well destroyed through the war, or had they been, some of it,
9 salvaged where they hadn't bombed it?
10
11Ellen Johnson: Well no Paris – we went AWOL into Paris, another girl, and I and, as I
12 said, the army man met us and said, "I'll give ya 24 hours to get out," so
13 we got out. And, uh, that's how it was, you know, everybody wanted to go
14 to Paris [chuckle], but we didn't see much, naturally.
15
16Interviewer: Well since then, you have finally gotten to Paris, haven't you? Later years.
17
18Ellen Johnson: Well I, uh, I took a trip to, um, into Paris, but I went primarily to go
19 Denmark. That was my mother's birthplace, but I stayed over in Paris, uh,
20 a couple of days and then went on to Denmark.
21
22Interviewer: [14:30] Well to refresh my memory, Ellen, how close was your base
23 hospital to the actual combat zone?
24
25Ellen Johnson: I don't know in miles but...
26
27Interviewer: But could you hear the, uh, sound's reverberation?
28
29Ellen Johnson: ...there was a first aid station where they were taken right off the
30 battlefield, and from there we the – were the first army, large army base
31 that would take them and take care of them. And of course, they were
32 pretty shot to pieces a lot of them. A lot of them. They were young men.
33
34Interviewer: [15:13] Trench foot was pretty bad then too wasn't it?
35
36Ellen Johnson: Oh yes.
37
38Interviewer: [15:17] What was the biggest casualty? Was it from, uh, nervous collapse,
39 trench foot, gunshot wounds, what?
40
41Ellen Johnson: Well it was wounded and, uh, trench, uh, living in the trenches. They
42 practically lived in the trenches, you know, for quite a long time, and that
43 affected their health. And then the average –you know, they have – some
44 places they had so much flu that – we were fortunate in a way because we

1 didn't have much flu, but flu took on – took a lot of the men. That was
2 very shortly after the war as I recall.
3
4 Interviewer: That was that horrible flu epidemic that...
5
6 Ellen Johnson: Yes.
7
8 Interviewer: ...and we didn't fight it then as we do combat it now.
9
10 Ellen Johnson: Oh it was terrible over here, and we didn't – I told you we didn't give the
11 men their letters because they would write and say how many in the
12 family had passed away here in this country with flu and, and [it doubts
13 16:31] all the men became despondent naturally over there and doing
14 nothing and their family over here dying.
15
16 Interviewer: [16:40] Well getting to the mail, was the mail service fairly adequate at
17 that time? Did...
18
19 Ellen Johnson: [Inaudible 16:48:]
20
21 Interviewer: ...fellas get their mail?
22
23 Ellen Johnson: You know it really was. When I think of it, it seems to me we got letters.
24 Course they were late and you weren't always sure you would get them all
25 but, uh, we did get mail.
26
27 Interviewer: [17:07] Well on your writing to family and friends in the states, were your
28 letters censored?
29
30 Ellen Johnson: Oh yes.
31
32 Interviewer: They had to go through a base censor...
33
34 Ellen Johnson: [Inaudible 17:16] oh yes.
35
36 Interviewer: ...or was it censored at the hospital?
37
38 Ellen Johnson: They – we couldn't, uh, close them. They censored them over there before
39 they sent [them 17:24].
40
41 Interviewer: [17:25] Ellen, during World War II and the Korean war and Vietnam, I
42 know we've had USO and camp shows. What about during World War I?
43 What was for the entertainment of the hospitals and the troops?
44

1 Ellen Johnson: I don't think there was much, but after the war was over it – there were a
2 few of the stars that came in and put on a show but not many. It was too
3 early.
4

5 Interviewer: Did your ambulatory patients ever try to entertain the other patients on the
6 wards or...
7

8 Ellen Johnson: Yes.
9

10 Interviewer: ...anything for the morale as such?
11

12 Ellen Johnson: As I recall they put on a, a show once. Pretty good.
13

14 Interviewer: Was it?
15

16 Ellen Johnson: As I recall. See if I can find...
17

18 Interviewer: Well let's go on with your diary. I've interrupted quite a bit now. Let's
19 stop. [18:32] We have you with about the first 2 groups of people
20 returning to the states and where are you now on your diary?
21

22 Ellen Johnson: Well in 1919, I went to Paris and to Versailles by train and saw Marie
23 Antoinette and, uh, peace treaties signed and where the peace treaty was
24 signed and, uh, to the Louvre. Wonderful paintings to [Inaudible 19:07] in
25 the evening. That was a movie I think. Battle Creek – oh, here I'm leaving,
26 uh, leaving France. This was 1919 in April, arrived at Battle Creek. This
27 was [Inaudible 19:30]. There a Hall of Justice and Notre Dame [inaudible
28 19:37] the opera house, [Casper and Pollock]. We saw a lot of things after
29 the war was over.
30

31 Interviewer: Well I'm gonna jar your memory again. [19:48] Where were you when
32 you heard the armistice? Was not the false armistice but the real armistice?
33

34 Ellen Johnson: Well the false armistice was one day and then all of the men got – went
35 out and got drunk and then the next day the armistice was signed and half
36 of them were still under and didn't know that...[chuckle] That's, uh, that
37 was over there [in camp 20:17].
38

39 Interviewer: Well as a result, did everybody think now we're going home in about 2
40 hours, that type of thing?
41

42 Ellen Johnson: Yeah. But, uh, we were in camp quite a while and then we had to go down
43 to [Inaudible 20:32] and we waited a week there just roaming around. And

1 people did try to entertain us a little, but we had to wait for a, a boat, you
2 know, because they couldn't take everybody home at once.
3
4Interviewer: [20:48] Well now your hospital itself, was it alerted then to go in the army
5 of occupation, or did it terminate its tour of duty and come back to the
6 states?
7
8Ellen Johnson: Well the army of occupation was another place. I've forgotten just where
9 that, they kept that, down near the, uh, ocean. Let's see if I have [inaudible]
10 21:20] [chuckle]. Wrong train [inaudible] Paris, back to Paris. [chuckle]
11 They put us on the wrong train and then they drove us back.
12
13Interviewer: [21:39] Was Paris truly the City of Light?
14
15Ellen Johnson: We weren't in it enough to know much about it.
16
17Interviewer: [21:47] Were blackouts observed during World War I as strongly as they
18 were during World War II? In England especially?
19
20Ellen Johnson: Well first I wasn't in England.
21
22Interviewer: No but I mean in France during the war, were the blackouts observed?
23
24Ellen Johnson: Not especially, [no 22:02].
25
26Interviewer: You didn't have wardens going around saying, "Douse your lights and pull
27 your curtains," things like that?
28
29Ellen Johnson: No, no.
30
31Interviewer: [22:12] When was the first time you were aware of air type of combat?
32 Did you have any if the airmen come through your hospital?
33
34Ellen Johnson: We didn't have much doing about air at that time, the First World War.
35 Well that's about all of that I guess.
36
37Interviewer: All right, I've got another question for ya. I seem to be finding –
38 everything you say I think I've got another question, and this is a good
39 one.
40
41Ellen Johnson: All right.
42
43Interviewer: [22:45] Had you thought when you had served your time with the nurses
44 that you would like to stay in the army as a military nurse?

1
2Ellen Johnson: No, I didn't.
3
4Interviewer: Why?
5
6Ellen Johnson: Well I didn't care for military life actually and, uh, I came home, and we
7 came out to California. And I was very fortunate because I got into public
8 health work. And after spending yea-, 3 years as a nurse, training to be a
9 nurse, I got out of the nurse and then I was put on a case with 1 woman
10 and I sat there and just watched her, had almost nothing to do and I said
11 that's not for me, so I got out of that as quickly as I could. And then I had
12 the chance to get into public health. I had to go a year or 2 [inaudible
13 24:00] get my degree, so I wasn't really an actual bedside nurse [inaudible
14 24:08].
15
16Interviewer: But you really fulfilled more by being a public health nurse. You kept a
17 service to others through that particular field of nursing.
18
19Ellen Johnson: Yeah but it wasn't my life just to sit around and take care of one patient.
20 That wasn't for me. [chuckle]
21
22Interviewer: Well...
23
24Ellen Johnson: So I was fortunate.
25
26Interviewer: Yep. [24:32] Two more questions and I'm going to ask you to sing along
27 with me. Um, when you left New York Harbor, can you remember your
28 feelings when you saw the Statue of Liberty?
29
30Ellen Johnson: Well I cried.
31
32Interviewer: Join me. Okay now, let's look at it coming back.
33
34Ellen Johnson: That's when I cried.
35
36Interviewer: Both times or just when you came back?
37
38Ellen Johnson: Oh going out, no. I was, uh, all full of this idea of going to France and
39 taking care of the wounded. I didn't cry at all. I was just excited and
40 anxious to get over there and get out of – but coming back [pause] – so
41 glad to get home and that Statue of Liberty does something to me anyhow
42 when I look at it. [chuckle]
43
44Interviewer: You're a big marshmallow too, huh?

1
2Ellen Johnson: [chuckle] Yes.
3
4Interviewer: [chuckle] Now it's something, uh, to see her standing there waiting for
5 you.
6
7Ellen Johnson: Yes.
8
9Interviewer: Isn't it though?
10
11Ellen Johnson: It's just a beautiful thing to have, and I [think 25:42] so much of our
12 country in so many ways and that the different times I've seen it I've
13 always cried or felt like it, one or the other. [chuckle]
14
15Interviewer: Maybe you're one of these people that when the flag goes by you get a
16 lump in your throat too.
17
18Ellen Johnson: I do, I certainly do.
19
20Both [singing]: *Our smiles that make us happy, there are smiles that make us blue, there*
21 *are smiles that have a tender meaning [inaudible 26:17] and the smiles*
22 *that fill my...*
23
24Ellen Johnson: *And the styles that Eve wore in the garden are the styles that appeal to*
25 *me. Didn't you ever sing that?*
26
27Interviewer: No. Can you sing it all the way? Start at the beginning.
28
29Ellen Johnson: That's all there was to it.
30
31Interviewer: Just those 2 lines?
32
33Ellen Johnson: Yes.
34
35Interviewer: All right.
36
37Ellen Johnson: [chuckle] That's what we used to sing.
38
39Interviewer: All right, how 'bout *Casey Would Waltz with a Strawberry Blonde*?
40
41Ellen Johnson: I don't know that one.
42
43Interviewer: You don't?
44

1Ellen Johnson: You sing it.
2
3Interviewer: No. How 'bout *Smile the while you...*
4
5Both [singing]: *...kiss me sad adieu, When the clouds roll by I'll come to you, Then the*
6 *skies will seem more blue, Down in Lover's Lane, my dearie. Wedding*
7 *bells will ring so merrily, Ev'ry tear will be a memory, So wait and pray*
8 *each night for me, Till we meet again.*
9
10
11/hm