

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH LT (ret.) RUBY BROOKS, USN

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TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW

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Telephone interview with Ruby Brooks, nurse aboard USS Haven during the evacuation of defeated French survivors of Dien Bien Phu from Saigon in September 1954.

Tell us a little about your career.

I'm proud to tell you that I had the best Navy nursing career that anyone could have anywhere in this world.

I think we should use you as one of our recruiters.

I was so thankful for those marvelous 26 years that I spent in the Navy Nurse Corps.

Where are you from originally?

Missouri. I just got home from a trip there. I'm from the southern city of Hornersville, MO. I was born there. I went all through school and trained in St. Louis.

Where did you go to nursing school?

Washington University School of Nursing.

When did you decide you wanted to be a Navy nurse?

While I was in training the government had a cadet nurse program. My roommate and I both decided that we wanted to be a part of that. She came from a Navy family. My father was in the Army in World War I but I really didn't know that much about the Army so I really didn't care. But because she was so insistent on the Navy and we wanted to go together, I joined the Navy along with her.

When did you join?

In 1945. I was shipped to Great Lakes for my orientation in the Navy Nurse Corps and I spent about 6 months there and then transferred to San Diego. I absolutely loved San Diego and never really intended to get out of the Navy Nurse Corps but when World War II was finished all reserves were automatically discharged. So I thought well, I'll go home to St. Louis and see all my friends and family and then I'll come back into the Navy Nurse Corps. But it didn't work out that way.

I went back to my home hospital, Barnes Hospital in St. Louis, and went back to the operating room where I was a student nurse and people there were still the same as when I was there as a student. And before I left that day, I had signed a contract to work in the operating room.

But at some point, you rejoined the Navy.

Yes. Then Korea came along and I got that big, brown envelope

that said. "Dear Miss Brooks. We want you back." And at that time I was working in Texas in a private clinic with a friend of mine who was a doctor. When I got that big, brown envelope I wasn't too distressed by having to go back in the Navy because I truly loved the Navy Nurse Corps. I accepted my orders and reported to Corpus Christi in 1951. I was stationed there for about 14 months and then I got orders to Yokosuka. I absolutely loved Yokosuka, Japan. I think I had one of the nicest, most rewarding nursing experiences of my life at Naval Hospital Yokosuka. I was charge nurse on a neurosurgical ward, which I think, was the busiest ward at the hospital. My chief nurse and I were in absolute agreement that the most effective care is given by nurses and corpsmen assigned to the same wards day in and day out. They give the best care because they get to know all the routines, get to know all the patients. The wards actually ran like a clock.

Then I came home from Yokosuka and was sent to Bethesda, MD. That was my first assignment in the OR, which I truly enjoyed. That was my specialty and my favorite. I came home from Japan in 1954 so it was in '55 and '56 that I was at Bethesda. My sister, who was also a Navy nurse, was assigned to Bethesda and in the operating room when I got home from Japan. The two of us were stationed together for the only time in our Navy careers. She, too, is a retired Navy nurse.

Where does she live?

In Jacksonville, FL. She didn't stay at Bethesda too long. She was transferred to Bainbridge and got married while there. Her husband was also a Navy man. While at Bethesda, I got orders for recruiting duty. I covered Texas, New Mexico, and Oklahoma. I visited all the nursing schools in those states trying to recruit nurses. I wasn't very successful; I don't know why.

How were you assigned to the *Haven*?

When I was stationed in Yokosuka, and I was there 26 months. At the end of that time I had my orders, along with Anna Corcoran and Martha Bruce, to come home by commercial airline. At that time, the USS *Haven* had also gotten orders to go down to Saigon to pick up prisoners from the fighting at Dien Bien Phu. Some nurses aboard the hospital ship had finished their tours of duty and had already gone home. So when the ship got orders to proceed to Saigon they knew they would be picking up all these casualties and prisoners, and they realized their nursing staff would be short-handed. So they asked all of us at Yokosuka who already had orders home to agree not to leave by commercial airline but instead accept tours aboard the *Haven* and come home aboard the hospital ship helping to take care

of these patients.

So we boarded the ship at Yokosuka in September of 1954 and sailed down to Saigon to pick up 725 prisoners from Dienbienphu. No one could speak French so when we got to Saigon, we had interpreters assigned to make the trip with us.

Were you up on deck during any of that time? Do you remember your first impressions of Saigon?

It's all very vague. I think we were so busy preparing for those patients that we really didn't have time to go on deck and observe. I just don't have a good memory of that at all.

Once the patients had boarded the ship we were assigned to our separate wards and I was charge nurse on a ward that was designated "Dirty surgery." Because all the patients on my ward had intestinal parasites, we had to observe an isolation technique. Some of my patients were very, very ill. Most, however, were ambulatory. There was one man who was probably the most critically ill of all. But he improved tremendously in our care during those 2 months of coming home.

In my letter to you, I told you about how the nurses worked. I know that everyone aboard that ship had working assignments on the way home. Nurses went on duty every morning at 6:30 and prepared the patients for breakfast and then we served breakfast. We nurses, then went back to the wardroom and had our own breakfast. Then we went back to the wards and gave morning care to all the patients. We stayed on duty until we served them lunch. After lunch we went back to our wardroom and had our own lunch. Then after lunch, the assignment was split. Half our nurses went back to the wards and worked until 3:00. And the other half rested. At 3:00 those who had rested went to the wards and those who had been on the wards returned to their quarters to rest. We stayed on duty until we served the evening meal. Then we returned to our wardroom for our evening meal. Then we went back to the wards and prepared our patients for the night.

What do you remember about your first encounter with those people? What shape were they in?

They were thin and looked like they had been prisoners but they didn't look like they had been abused. They just looked like they'd been neglected. Of course, they couldn't speak English and we couldn't speak their language. But it was amazing how you can communicate with people just with smiles or with hand gestures. It really wasn't too difficult. I guess maybe I learned from the interpreters that they didn't like our food. They also didn't like the early hour at which we served the evening meal. Now I don't know

how they were treated as prisoners in Dien Bien Phu but it couldn't have been in an elegant hotel. So why they complained about an early meal, I don't know. But they did.

All in all, it was a very fulfilling assignment knowing that they were improving. One thing I noticed was when they were served their meal, they would hide food under their pillow as if they weren't going to be fed the next day.

After we had gone a certain distance on the way home, I suppose it was discovered that the members of the French Foreign Legion aboard the ship were not permitted to put their feet on French soil for 7 years. So the ship went down to Oran, Africa. We debarked 125 patients there because they weren't allowed on French soil. We didn't see much of Oran because we were kept busy cleaning up, etc. It was a working tour but I never regretted it.

Once we debarked those patients, we took the rest of them to Marseille, France. That was the first time that the ship had really docked since we left Japan so everyone aboard was allowed to go on liberty for 24 hours. Martha Bruce and I flew to Paris. We got there at about 1:00 in the morning and we had time to see the Follies, and then we went to the hotel and slept for maybe 2 hours. Then we toured around until it was time to get the plane back to the ship.

Even though there was a language barrier between you and the patients, did you ever have an opportunity to discuss their ordeal through an interpreter?

No. I never even thought about it. But I did mention in my letter to you that the man who was so critically ill on my ward . . . I grew fond of him and he gave me some sort of a memento when he was departing at Marseille but I don't remember now what it was. I do remember giving him one of my seersucker nursing caps as a memento.

What was really disappointing was that I never saw any thankfulness on the part of those patients toward the United States for making it possible for them to get out of their circumstances and going back to their homelands. I never felt that they cared one whit about all we were doing for them.

Once we reboarded the ship in Marseille, we made the trip straight home. We went through the Panama Canal and I was up on deck watching the ship rise in the locks.

Getting back to the patients for a moment. What kind of diseases did you see? Was it mainly malaria and malnutrition?

I only know about the patients on my ward. I do know that they had some very critically ill patients. And we did lose some. I recall hearing about a fight among the patients one night. And at

some point, we lost someone overboard. I cannot prove that. I only heard about it.

When we left the Panama Canal we sailed straight through to Long Beach and got there about the first of December. It was a 2-month trip from Yokosuka to Long Beach. It was a good experience for me.

Where did you go after you got back?

That's when I went to Bethesda. I was there almost 2 years. I had 26 years of active duty and I must have moved every 2 years. The only time I spent more than 2 years any place was when I was stationed at Newport, RI, and I was there for 4 wonderful, delightful years.

Newport was my first assignment as an operating room supervisor. I was there until 1969. From there, I went to St. Albans as OR supervisor. And that's where we got all the casualties from the fighting in Vietnam. Let me tell you, that was one working assignment at St. Albans. But the thing that pleased me so much about St. Albans, was that no matter how many hours we had to work, I never remember anybody ever complaining about the hours we had to work. And sometimes that operating room went 24 hours a day. I was there for 2 years.

And then I got orders to Bethesda and I was there until I retired in '74.

Additional material sent by letter, June 2004

Memories of My Trip Home From Yokosuka, Japan Aboard the USS Haven

In September 1954 some of us Navy Nurses had completed our tour in Japan and had received orders home via commercial airlines. At the same time the USS Haven was completing its tour in the far east and some of its personnel had already left the ship on their way back to the states. Therefore when the ship received orders to sail to Saigon, Vietnam to pick up 725 prisoners from the fighting in Dien Bien Phu it was realized that the complement of nurses was short in order to provide the nursing care required by these patients. To meet this need the nurses at Yokosuka were offered the opportunity to change their way of returning home and accept orders aboard the USS Haven. My memory does not serve me well enough to remember how many of our number agreed to accept orders aboard the hospital ship. I know that Anna Corcoran, Martha Bruce, and I joined the nursing staff aboard the ship for the two month sail to Long Beach, CA.

We sailed from Yokosuka, Japan to Saigon, Vietnam where the patients were brought aboard our ship. It was then we learned there were seven nationalities in our numbers which required help from interpreters. The majority of these people had been members of the French Foreign Legion.

The next morning we were assigned to our respective wards. I was charge nurse on a ward designated "dirty surgery: because our patients were infected with intestinal parasites. Some were critically ill. In spite of the fact we could not communicate in language we did well with smiles, hand gestures and using objects.

All personnel experienced a working tour home. Nurses went on duty @ 0630 every day in order to prepare patients for breakfast and then serve breakfast. Then we returned to our ward room for our breakfast. Following breakfast we returned to our wards to give nursing care. We remained on duty until lunch was served to the patients. Then it was back to our ward room for our lunch. After lunch the nursing shift split into two. Half went back to their respective wards until 1500 while the other half rested. At 1500 the rested half returned to the wards and the working half rested. At 1700 all nurses went back on duty to serve supper. Then we had our supper then returned to duty until 2100 to prepare patients for sleep. After 2100 the evening was ours to enjoy as we saw fit. I loved to play bridge and never had difficulty joining a foursome until lights out at 2200.

The next morning the routines began all over again as long as we had patients aboard. Once we had returned our patients to their respective locations the remaining trip home was one of rest and enjoyment. We sailed around Panama experiencing sailing through the Panama Canal.

Somewhat early in the trip it was learned that some were not citizens of France and would not be allowed on French soil for seven years. I think this applied to members of the French Foreign Legion. Consequently the route had to be altered to debark 125 patients in Oran, Africa;. Then we sailed to Marseille, France to return the remaining patients to their homeland. While in port the crew was permitted their first liberty since leaving Japan. Martha and I flew to Paris for 24 hours.

The most vivid memories of that fantastic experience were:

1. Lack of gratitude on the part of those patients to the United States for providing a way home and giving them excellent medical care while in route.

2. They reminded me of the Israelites who complained and murmured against God and Moses about their food after being led out of bondage in Egypt.

3. They complained about the early hour at which we served the evening meal.

4. Loss of life while in our care. I don't know how many, but some were critically ill when admitted to the ship. This was here say.

5. A fight between patients resulting with man overboard during the night. I cannot prove this, but I remember hearing about it.

6. All in all it was a very worthwhile experience. It was difficult not to become fond of the patient who was the most critical on my ward. He received the most attention because his condition required it. He was patient and responsive to our efforts to make him comfortable. He gave me some kind of souvenir (I don't recall what) as they were departing. I gave him one of my seersucker nursing caps as a memento.