

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH CAPT (ret) WINNIE GIBSON DEWITT, NC, USN

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**Interview with CAPT Winnie Gibson Palmer DeWitt, NC, USN (Ret.),
Director of the Navy Nurse Corps 1950-1954.**

**CAPT DeWitt, you were born in Texas. How did you end up here
in Arkansas?**

Well, I'm not sure when I came here (one year ago) but I'm here
with my twin brother Wayne. He's down the hall. Did you meet him yet?
He's a love.

**Yes, I did meet him. Perhaps before I leave I can get a picture
of the two of you. Let me ask you this, when did you decide that you
wanted to be a nurse?**

I always wanted to be a nurse for as long as I can remember,
but my father was really against my going into training.

Why was that?

He thought nurses had a terrible reputation. He thought that
I'd go straight to hell if I became a nurse! He was very strict but
he was a good man, a good father. Boy, he just didn't want any daughter
of his becoming a nurse.

Did you defy him in going into nurses training?

No, I worked for a while after high school as a stenographer,
a typist, and gradually I got him to change his mind. I think in the
end he was very proud of me. He died a few years before the war (WWII).
My mother died when I was very young. She died when my sister Mary
was born. I was raised by a step-mother. Wayne and I were the youngest
children living at home. My youngest sister Mary lived with an aunt.
I didn't get along too well with my step-mother but I probably gave
her a lot of trouble. Even as a child I had a mind of my own. I don't
remember much more.

**I have some notes here on where you went to nurses training
(referring to her service record).**

I went to nursing school at Sisters of Charity in Austin Texas.
I started out at Fleckinger's Sanitarium but thought I would get a
better education with the nuns. (Records indicate that she graduated
from Seaton Infirmary in Austin, run by the Sisters of Charity).

What was the training like at Sisters?

Oh, they were wonderful. I'm not Catholic, you know, but they
were wonderful to us. I think I got a good education there. You worked
hard and the days were long but you learned a lot. There was one
particular person there, Sister Matilda, who though I didn't have
a "lick of sense" and she was bound to give me some. She had me

transferred to her ward every time she moved somewhere different in the hospital and she kept a sharp eye on me all the time. She probably did more to help me to become a good nurse than anyone else. I wrote to her for many years after I joined the Navy.

I see here that you worked as a nurse for seven years before you went into the Navy. What kind of nursing were you doing?

Oh, general duty nursing, some private duty and office nursing. My favorite was surgical nursing. I moved to Montgomery, Alabama after nursing school and worked for a surgeon there, Dr. John Blue, at St. Margaret's Hospital. He was a wonderful man, a wonderful surgeon and I thought the world of him.

You moved to New York City after a while. Why?

Yes, just to travel a bit and see the world. It's good to see what's on the other side of the fence. I didn't stay there long but I was a night supervisor for a while at Polyslinic Hospital. I went back to Alabama after that and just did some private duty. I was even a camp nurse one summer. That was fun. Then I applied to the Navy.

Do you recall why you decided to go in the Navy?

Of course! I wanted some adventure! I wanted to see the world! Also for the education. The Navy was always sending you off to schools. That's how I got my anesthetist training. I went to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. That was six months of good hard training. I was an operating room supervisor as well. Did you know that?

Yes, I did.

I was darned good too. When I was at Mare Island (WA) I was the operating room supervisor and the nurse anesthetist.

Weren't there other O.R. nurses?

No, it was a small place. Only one or two operating rooms. Besides, what would I need nurses for? The corpsmen were wonderful. I trained them myself.

There was not tech school back then?

No, the nurses did all the corpsmen training. I'll never forget how wonderful the corpsmen were. The doctors were wonderful too. But sometimes I had to boss them around to keep them in line. But then again, they depend on the operating room supervisor to keep a good eye on things.

So in your duties as the O.R. supervisor and the anesthetist,

you had to watch out for the room, the patient, the corpsmen and the surgeons?

I guess so. It didn't seem like so much back then. Everybody treated me so well. They were a wonderful staff.

Do you recall anyone in particular?

No. It was so long ago. I just remember they were all so wonderful.

Since you had both civilian and military nursing experience, what do you think was the biggest difference between the two?

Education, of course. The Navy was always encouraging you to advance yourself. And the corpsmen. There's just nobody like the navy corpsmen. We trained them and supervised them. Teaching was always a big part of Navy Nursing. (Sigh). I just love all those corpsmen.

Now before Mare Island, you were on the USS Relief. What did you do there?

I was the operating room supervisor and the anesthetist. It was a good group of people. Our C.O. was the most wonderful gentleman. I can't recall his name. (Records indicate command at that time was held by CDR O.L. Wolford, MC followed by CAPT L.A. Davidson, MC).

Prior to the Relief, you were stationed at Quantico. What was that duty station like?

Quantico was a wonderful place. Then again, I loved every assignment I ever got. But Quantico was special. That's where I met my first husband, Horace Palmer. He was a Marine Corps officer and he was the love of my life.

You met him in the late 1930's but you didn't marry him until you retired in 1954. Were you dating all that time or did you just late getting back together again?

We were late getting back together again. I met him in Quantico and then he looked me up again when I returned to Washington. He had already retired at that point. Neither of us had ever gotten married. I waited for him and he waited for me.

Were you dating him when you were Director of the Nurse Corps?

Sure, whenever I was in Washington. But that wasn't very often.

I see by your records that you were always on the go during those four years. What was the purpose of the travel?

There were always lots of professional meetings to attend, representing the Nurse Corps usually. Very often I had to speak at

those meetings. I didn't like getting up in front of people to speak. It was just part of the job. The majority of my travel was done with the I.G. I was part of the team and had to go out on all the inspections. The Surgeon General, Admiral Pugh, was the head of the team. He was a nice man to work for.

It must have been difficult work for you?

Oh, Lord not! I loved it. I got to go to nearly all the Navy Hospitals in the world and many of the clinics and got to personally meet so many of the Navy Nurses. They were all so wonderful and I loved meeting them. I can't remember their names but I remember their faces and the feelings. I'm not saying everybody liked or agreed with me. You can't keep everybody happy in a job like that one.

What were the people like that you worked with at BUMED during those years?

It was a great staff. We all made a good team. I had a wonderful four years. In fact, I had a wonderful career. Tell people that. There's not a thing in my life I regret.

Did you get to meet President Truman or President Eisenhower?

I met them both. I remember a couple of trips to the White House. I remember Admiral Nimitz also.

What were they like?

You can't decide what someone is like from one of those social meetings. Everyone was always friendly and courteous. I remember them with very nice feelings. I think I met Eleanor Roosevelt too. Now there was a remarkable person.

I agree. I wish I could have met her. CAPT DeWitt, I noticed in your record that in January of 1952 you went to Chelsea, MA, to attend a Reserve Nurse Corps meeting. I was intrigued that at that early date we had a Director who was showing an interest in Naval Reserve nurses.

There weren't really that many back in those days. The only time you ever really saw a reservist was if she had been recalled to active duty. It wasn't the way you tell me it is today with reservists working right along side active duty people. That's the way it should be. Anyway, I had a good friend up in Boston, Toni Antonelli, and she wanted me to come up for a visit. She married an Army officer after she got out and we stayed such good friends. I met with the Naval Reserve nurses and I got to visit my friend.

In your twenty-four years as a Navy Nurse, what do you feel were

the greatest changes during that time?

Nurses becoming naval officers was the biggest change. In early 1943 I was a Chief Nurse and the next thing I know I as a LT(jg). Some line officers weren't very happy about that change but I guess that was to be expected.

Do you know how that tremendous accomplishment came about?

No, I was too junior to be involved in politics. We pretty much just did what we were told.

You had thirteen years in, yet you were made a LT(jg). That seems awfully junior for that many years?

They didn't allow for hardly any senior officers in the Nurse Corps when we first got officer status. Then later that was changed (In 1947, line running mates were assigned). A short time later I was made a LCDR (1947, but date of rank was back dated to 1944). (In 1949) I put on CDR and then found out just a little later (six months) that I was picked to be Director. That's when I got promoted again.

That's a pretty impressive career progression?

Maybe by today's standards, but we didn't think too much of it back then.

Tell me about Pearl Harbor?

(Becomes tearful) I don't like thinking about it. It still hurts so much. The most wonderful group of people on the face of the earth was at Pearl Harbor.

Take your time. Start from the beginning. Did you hear the planes?

No. We had just come on duty. I was in the operating room and we were busy getting ready for the day.

You were operating on a Sunday morning?

We worked every day back then. You got a day off now and then but that morning even the ones who had a day off came in to work after the attack.

What do you remember?

I try not to. Instead I think about the people I worked with. They were all so wonderful. We had an especially good C.O. (J.J.A. McMullin, MC). We had a good C.O. and good officers. The corpsmen were wonderful that day. You should have seen them. That staff did the work they had to do. We were a team. (Pause) I hate the Japanese. Sometimes I get this dream that I'm in the nurses quarters and someone

is knocking at the door. When I open it a Japanese officer is standing there. I know it's not possible and it's just a dream but it seems so real.

I know that was difficult for you. Thank you. CAPT DeWitt., if you could give the Navy Nurses of today a piece of advice, what would you say?

If you see something that needs to be changed, don't be afraid to change it. Don't rely so much on the senior officers to do everything. Consult with your seniors and work with them to make the place better ... and be fair to everyone.