

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH CDR (ret.) LURA JANE EMERY, NC, USN

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**Interview with Lura Jane Emery, Navy nurse aboard the USS *Repose* (AH-16) during the Korean War.**

**Where did you grow up?**

In Cambridge, PA. It's just a village. My father owned a big farm there. I lived on the farm for 16 years. There were 10 of us in the family plus I had two stepbrothers. I was the youngest.

After my mother died, I went to live with my sister. My father died 19 months later. After I finished high school, I really wanted to teach math but the estate was tied up and there was no money available for me to go to college. So my brother Jerry talked me into going to nursing school at the Pennsylvania Hospital on 8th and Spruce Street in Philadelphia, which I did in 1943.

When I finished the 3-year diploma program I felt bonafide as a professional nurse and skilled in nursing care. The director of nursing at the Pennsylvania Hospital asked me to be in charge of the operating rooms at night so I worked for 1 year in charge of the operating rooms.

My roommate had joined the Navy; she was stationed at Portsmouth Naval Hospital. She invited me to spend a weekend to observe patient care activities. Upon return, I didn't say anything to anybody. I just went into Philadelphia and joined the Navy.

We were sent to Newport, RI, on November 3, 1947 for indoctrination in the Navy. I was up there until August 1949 at which time I received orders to go to Naval Hospital San Diego. I was there from September 1949 until July 1950 at which time I got orders to proceed to Hunters Point south of San Francisco to help prepare the USS *Repose* for duty in Korea.

We were at Hunters Point about 1 month before the ship was ready to go to Korea. We sailed out of there shortly after the *Benevolence* went down in August.

**What do you remember about the ship? I heard that when nurses got orders to a hospital ship that was the ultimate assignment. How did you feel about your new assignment?**

I was absolutely thrilled. The nurses in San Diego were a little upset because I and Pinky Connors--both ensigns--had orders to go to this ship at Hunters Point. That really made us appreciate those orders. I never expected orders to a ship being such a young nurse.

When we got there, we had to get ready to take care of patients. We had to make up 4 x 4s--gauze sponges--and we had to get out all the linens that were in storage. And we had to clean the ship. The springs on the racks were all rusty. So

they all had to be cleaned. We worked hard for about a month until we were ready to leave.

**So the ship was in the yard, just called out of mothballs.**

That's right. It had all sorts of lines--water lines, electric lines, everything running through the passageways. Then we also had civil servants who were working on the ship so we had to be real careful about the things we left out at night because they'd be gone the next morning. That was a little problem for us but we worked around it.

**Was the ship in drydock or was it floating at a pier?**

It was at a pier. During our time at Hunters Point we had an opportunity to see San Francisco late in the afternoon and that was a treat.

Finally the day came to leave and they had a reception the night before we left so the officers' wives could come and see them off and meet the crew. We had merchant marine officers, not naval officers.

We left Hunters Point and, 1 day out, we had a burial at sea. A couple of fellas who died when the *Benevolence* went down had requested to be buried at sea. That was a new experience; I had never seen that before. We got into our dress blues and the chaplain had the service and then they dropped the bodies into the sea.

After that, we kept ourselves busy getting ready for casualties. One thing I'll always remember. The supply officer, CDR Sam Griswald, didn't have any sailors to take care of the laundry. So he went down to Chinatown with a bus and asked some of the Chinese down there if anyone would like to go aboard ship to do laundry. Well, he came back with quite a few Chinese. They went down into the hold and ran the laundry for us. The OR supervisor had a bit of a problem because none of them spoke English and she was trying to get them to do the laundry as soon as possible because she had to take care of any emergencies that might happen on the ship like appendectomies and what have you. Every morning she came up from the laundry quite frustrated. Finally, she sent the supply officer and a couple of his petty officers down there to teach the Chinese how to run the laundry. Once they knew how to run the machines, they did beautiful work. They stayed with us down in that hold for some time. Our uniforms and the linens for the patients' beds were all very well done.

On the way over, we stopped in Honolulu for a very short time, then we went on. The night before we got into Pusan, we were in a very bad storm and the ship just rolled and pitched all night long. You couldn't sleep because you just rolled from

one side of the bed to the other. The next morning when we pulled into Pusan, it was clear.

**When was that?**

It was September 20th.

**What were your impressions of this place? A lot of people have told me about the way it looked but also the way it smelled.**

Yes. It was very grim, dark, and bleak looking. And the smell was horrendous because of the refugees. Finally, the refugees just filled the pier. They had no food. They had no clothes. There were no sanitary facilities. There was just a ditch where they relieved themselves. It was just deplorable! You just felt so sorry for those people. We soon found out that they were eating our garbage. Then the food service officer started to keep the food separate that was left over from the officer and enlisted mess. We fed them for quite a while until they suddenly disappeared. They must have moved them out of Pusan or else some of the people in Pusan took them in. It's a scene I'll never forget.

**The war was going very badly at that time. The South Koreans and the Americans had been pushed into the Pusan Perimeter. Were you aware of the situation?**

Absolutely not. We were not aware of what was going on out there. We were so busy taking care of patients that they just didn't have time to brief us as to what was going on. It was a long time before they began briefing us about what was happening war-wise. We had no idea that enemy troops were so close to us.

**You began to mention your first day in port.**

Some of the Army personnel--colonels and what have you-- came aboard and informed us that we were going to get patients at noon. Well, at noon the patients started to come and it just went on and on and on 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

**What condition were they in?**

They were dirty and very sick. The first thing we did was clean them up. The corpsmen bathed them. Of course, if they were able to go to a shower, they went to a shower. But not many were able to go to a shower. They were in pain but they were happy to be aboard ship because they knew they were in a safe area. We immediately saw that each patient was bathed, fed, medicated, and prepared for surgery. And as soon as they were physically able to go to surgery, they went.

**Were these mostly Americans or were there South Koreans mixed in? Were there other UN troops like Turks?**

We had American Marines, Army, Turks, British, some Australians but not many South Koreans. We had a couple of North Korean POWs that they had to guard. They got them off the ship as soon as possible. But basically it was UN troops.

Now the Turks were an interesting group. They were very tough. They didn't want any anesthesia when we were putting sutures in or taking them out or changing dressings or casts. They never flinched. They just told the doctor to do what he had to do.

The only problem we had with them was that they got shaving cream and toothpaste mixed up. They'd use toothpaste to shave and shaving cream to clean their teeth. The other problem we had was they would get in the shower and stay there for an hour. Of course, aboard ship, you have a limited amount of water. You'd have to keep an ear open for what was going on in the shower. When you knew that shower was running too long you'd immediately send a corpsman in there to get the patient out of the shower. But they were a tough bunch of troops.

**Was there any reaction when they were brushing their teeth with shaving cream? Did it faze them at all?**

No. They figured that was the way it was to be. The shaving cream and toothpaste were in tubes and they got the tubes mixed up. The corpsmen tried to get them straightened out but never could. But they were a great bunch of fellas to take care of. They were so appreciative. Nothing fazed them. They'd eat whatever you gave them and you didn't have to worry about pain. When you were taking dressings off, it could be very painful but that didn't bother them. They just told the doctor to go ahead. The doctors would say "Well he's a Turk. We don't have to give him any anesthesia; he can take this." So that's the way we operated.

We had long hours. Sometimes we worked 22 hours a day. You had your wards assigned to you. I was on the neurosurgery ward. You were lucky if you could get back to your stateroom at 1 or 2 or 2:30 in the morning. And then you didn't go to bed. You just took your shoes off and lay across the bed until the chief nurse woke you up in the morning and said that another train had just come in. This was usually around 6:30. Then you'd get up and start the day over again.

**You say they came in by train?**

Yes.

**Did the trains come right out on the pier?**

Yes.

**This was a massive pier. I've seen pictures of it. It was a concrete pier and the tracks then came right to the pier?**

Yes.

**So they took the patients right off the train and carried them over?**

No. They put them in an ambulance to get them from the train over to the hospital ship.

**So the train was some distance away.**

It was close by but not right where the ship was.

**Could you see the train?**

Yes. The trains usually came down at night because of the danger of them being bombed during the day. It started around 6:30 in the morning and then it wouldn't stop. We did have a lull in the procedures at night around dinner time. That's when we had an opportunity to eat our dinner. I then usually showered and put on a fresh uniform and got ready for another day's work.

**What were your duties on the neurosurgery ward?**

We saw a lot of head injuries and anything that had to do with the spine, the nerves, or the head. A lot of patients had shrapnel in their brain which had to be removed. We also had eye cases if they had shrapnel in the eye.

**Did you assist in the OR or just on the ward?**

Not at that time. I was on the ward. I didn't go to the OR until probably the last 5 months aboard ship. [Eveline] Kittelson had left the ship and gone to Honolulu. She had been working in the OR. Since I had OR experience, I was asked to work there.

**She had gone to Korea with you?**

Yes. We had a great group of nurses that went out with us. They were all very professional and knowledgeable nurses. They were good nurses. No one had to tell us what to do. We knew what our responsibilities were and we stayed with our patients.

**It must have been a very difficult thing to see young kids so horribly mutilated and knowing that some of these injuries were going to affect them the rest of their lives.**

Yes it was, but they responded rapidly, and they healed rapidly. That was the gratifying thing. There was one thing on

that ship that we were concerned about. We knew that if that ship went down, we'd never get some of those orthopedic patients out.

**Did you ever have abandon ship drills?**

We did going over to Korea but I don't remember having drills when we moved around the Korean coast. CAPT P. J. Williams was very aware and concerned of the dangers so I am sure we had drills.

**So, it was in the back of your minds the possibility you might be attacked.**

Oh yes. The other thing we nurses really battled . . . The ambulatory patients were put in three-tiered bunks in the hold and we tried to get them to understand that they couldn't smoke. But you'd make rounds down there and catch one of them smoking. If that ship had ever caught fire we couldn't have gotten those orthopedic patients out.

I would also like to say that I don't know what we would have done without our Marine patients. The sergeant would be in charge of them and he'd see that there was someone to feed the patient who could not feed himself at every meal. There weren't enough corpsmen to do it so we needed the Marines because we had too many patients who couldn't feed themselves. Some of these patients not only had brain problems but orthopedic problems as well. They might have a cast on an arm, so it wasn't just one injury.

**When you were on the neurosurgery ward, do you remember any specific patients?**

There was one in particular that I'll never forget. He was a young fella with light hair. He had been a prisoner of war. He had been tied up to a tree and the enemy shot at his eyes so he was blind.

**He had somehow been freed?**

Yes. I don't know the details of how he was freed, but he did come in with a group who had been behind the lines as POWs. He wasn't with us very long. CAPT [Russell] Blood, our neurosurgeon, was very good with him. He sat and talked to him a long time. They got him out fast and back to the states because there wasn't really much we could do for him there on the ship.

That was about the time I got body lice from another POW. I thought he had a terrible urticaria. I didn't know it was moving urticaria. When I cut the clothes off I just threw them

under the bunk until later on when a corpsman went through the ward and gathered up all the dirty clothes.

**So you ended up with body lice?**

Yes. Oh, what a time I had trying to get rid of them. The problem was that the body lice got into the mattress. Finally, one of the petty officers and the chief nurse decided that the only thing to do was to put the mattress in the autoclave and sterilize it with steam. So one night I'd sleep on the lower bunk whose mattress had been steamed, and that night I'd sleep in the upper bunk. So I'd switch bunks night to night. Every time I slept in a bunk they would autoclave the mattress to get rid of the body lice. Oh, those lice were miserable. You were so busy you didn't have time to think about it during the day but if you sat down to do charting during quiet hour from 1 to 2, you'd feel these things moving all over you. It was miserable. The EENT doctor made rounds in the morning since the neurosurgeon was in the operating room and he'd say to the new patients, "Don't get near that nurse. She's got body lice." Then they'd all hoop and howl, and the word got around that the nurse down on neurosurgery had their lice. Anyone who could walk or even get down there on crutches used to come see who the nurse was who had their lice. It really got to be a stress-reliever.

**That famous photograph of you treating the Marine in his bunk . . . Do you remember the circumstances of that photo?**

They wanted a picture, and they sent in a photographer who came in and took this picture. This fellow, I'm pretty sure, had been behind the lines. He was in a lower bunk and I had started to take off his clothes.

**Was he one of your regular patients?**

Yes. But he had just come in from the field.

**You said earlier that the patients you encountered were tickled to be out of the war and on the ship. Did they ever talk to you about that. Did they ever talk to you about their experiences?**

No, not to us very much. You'd hear them talking to one another about what was going on in the field as you went about your work. Particularly, they were talking about who had been killed and how difficult it was. During quiet hour you'd try to keep them quiet so they didn't talk to you much then. But we were so busy, we didn't have the time to sit down and talk to them individually. And we had such a turnover. The patients

came in, we got them ready for surgery, they had surgery, and out they went.

**Where did they go?**

They airevaced them. Some went to Yokosuka but a lot of them went straight back to the states.

**One thing I have heard both from the physicians and the nurses who served on the hospital ships . . . and this is universal . . . They never knew the outcome. They never knew what happened to these patients once they left the ship. That was it. That was the end. Did they survive? Did you ever feel that way, frustrated that you didn't know what became of your patients?**

Yes, particularly that young fellow who was blind. I felt bad I didn't know what became of him. He was simply sent off the ship. I assumed he was sent back to Oakland. There were times I had two wards. There were times I had the neurosurgery ward and the general surgery ward next to me. That was Ruthie Jones' ward but on occasion, when she couldn't be on the ward for some reason. I would have that ward also.

On that general surgery ward, we had patients that were hit with napalm. That was just unbelievable the damage that was done to those patients. Napalm is a sticky, jelly-like substance which is just filled with gasoline and it burned right down into the tissue. There was no medical protocol for taking care of those patients so the doctors had to use their best judgment. You just felt so sorry for those patients because they had such burning pain. We gave them narcotics to relieve the pain, and they stayed with us until they were physically able to be sent back to the states.

I often wondered about some of them, if they made it once they got back to the states. I assumed that they sent them to the burn center at Brook (Army Medical Center).

**I assume the patients with the napalm injuries were victims of friendly fire. They probably got in the way of one of our own planes.**

Right. I think this incident happened on the 30th of December [1950]. I'm a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. In their monthly magazine, I recall reading about the incident at that time.

**This was after the Chosin Reservoir and the Chinese were coming south in hordes.**

Right.

**Were you still down in Pusan when these burn patients came aboard?**

Yes. We were in Pusan. We spent most of our time down there as a base hospital. We didn't have the helo pad at that time. That wasn't put on the *Repose* until we came back in February 1952. When we were a base hospital, the patients had to come to us by train or, when we were up at Inchon, they came by boat.

**So at some point, probably in January of '51 when the Chinese were moving into Inchon, the ship moved from Pusan to Inchon. What do you remember about that operation?**

I remember the *Missouri* firing on the port area, and there were terrible fires because they were hitting the oil tanks in Inchon. That night the Korean people were trying to escape the fires and they were coming down the river on these little junks. Entire families were in these boats trying to get away. You just felt so sorry for them; I'll never forget that.

**The *Repose* was given a special mission evacuating patients from Chinnampo. What do you remember about that?**

We left from Inchon and went to Chinnampo on 20 November. That's when we went up that river. We had a minesweeper on each side of us; they were worried about mines in the Chinnampo River. We got up there and had to swing around the anchor for 4 or 5 days until they got the troops to us. We took on 780 patients.

**Then you had to go up that river?**

Yes. The Chinese were coming; it didn't worry me but one nurse became quite upset and they had to remove her from the ship later on.

There was an Australian chopper pilot who later told us that the Chinese were lined up on both banks of the Chinnampo River with their guns ready to fire. But the miracle is they watched us go up the river but never fired on the ship.

**Did any of the crew see them?**

No, we didn't see them. At night, when we were swinging on the anchor, the captain put a guard on the rail. The whole time we were in Korea and moving around, the ship was blacked out because the Chinese and North Koreans did not honor the Geneva accords.

What I remember most was that it was so cold up there. We took on all these patients with their personal gear, which wasn't much, plus their ammunition and guns which they put down in the hold. Then we had so many patients and so much gear that

we couldn't leave until we got a high tide. With our draft, there wasn't enough water to get us down the river.

**Did you get up on deck at all? Did you see what was going on?**

When they started loading those patients, we had to be down in our ward taking care of them. We didn't get the real serious patients there; we got patients who weren't that ill. Most were ambulatory; some were litter patients. The real serious patients were airevaced out. Then we took our patients back to Inchon where we unloaded the Army patients. Then we went back to Pusan.

**How did the patients get aboard when you were up the river?**  
Small boats.

**Inchon had a terrible reputation for its extreme tides. So you couldn't come in; you had to lay offshore at anchor in deep water. How did you get your patients ashore?**

Small boats.

**And you lowered them into the boats the same way from winches.**

The litter patients. A lot of them walked off. One thing I remember were the patients who had frozen feet, hands, and ears. I can see it to this day. I can see those patients coming aboard. They had grain sacks wrapped around their feet.

**This was at Inchon?**

Yes. I don't remember the date we took those patients aboard.

**Was this around the Chosin Reservoir time, about December?**

It was November 1950 when we had these patients with the frozen feet. The funny thing was, they came up a gangplank. I can see them now walking up that gangplank.

We also went to Pohang. We went ashore there with some of the officers. It was so grim. That was up near the 38th Parallel. The people there had never seen white nurses before. They had never seen white women before. They just kept staring at us.

**When you were down at Inchon at the very beginning, did you see the *Consolation*?**

It was there first but we relieved one another so when one ship arrived the other one left. We rarely saw the *Haven*.

It is said that each of the three hospital ships--the *Haven*, *Repose*, and *Consolation*--had a distinctive personality. One was reputed to be a party ship, another took itself very seriously, and I don't remember what was said about the other one.

Oh, definitely. You could probably call the *Repose* the party ship. We had a lot of people who enjoyed partying. We worked hard but we also partied hard too.

**How did you do that? Did you do it on the ship or did you go ashore for your partying?**

We waited until we got to Japan. When the jellyfish clogged up the sewers, we had to go back.

**Tell me about that.**

The jellyfish clogged up all the water intakes and sewer lines. It was a mess. The only way you could flush the head was with a bucket of water. It was a mess and the odor was awful. The captain got permission to go back to Yokosuka and for 3 days they flushed fresh water through all the lines to clean them out. At that time they gave us liberty. So a group of us went up to the Mt. Fuji hotel which was an R&R hotel. Oh, it was beautiful. What a nice rest.

**That first liberty must have been months after you got to Korea.**

Yes. A long time. One time we went back to Kobe. That was in May, right around my birthday. We just celebrated my birthday for about a week. Our OR supervisor was a party girl. In the OR she could work 72 hours straight, but she enjoyed liberty in Japan.

**Did you ever mingle with the crews of the *Haven* or *Consolation*?**

No. We never saw very much of each other.

**When you finally took the ship back to the states to have the helopad installed, you knew you were leaving Korea for the last time. You were going home. What do you remember about the leave taking? Did you feel you had accomplished something there?**

I felt very good about what we had accomplished, and I loved the duty aboard ship even though it was very difficult. But we were happy to come home. When that flag went up indicating that we were going home that was great. I went out and took pictures of the ship's flag--the going home flag. It was pure delight. We stopped in Honolulu and the Royal Hawaiian

Hotel took the nurses in for at least a night or two. We had rooms and all the food we wanted.

Then we went back to Long Beach. One of my nursing school classmates met me there. Then I flew back to Philadelphia where my family met me.

**Where did you go from there?**

I had duty in Bethesda. I had asked to go into the blood bank. I went to blood bank school there, then stayed on at Bethesda for 4 years. I worked with a senior nurse and we collected blood and taught laboratory technicians the whole process of taking care of blood. We also arranged for donors to come in. We supplied most of the blood for Washington, DC, at that time.

**How long did you stay in the Navy?**

Twenty-six years and 10 months. And I retired as a commander in '74.

**It's been 50 years since Korea. Do you ever think about it anymore? Do you ever look back at that time?**

The big anniversary party given here in Washington was very good. Since then, a lot of the nurses in this area have gotten together. In 2000 CDR [Frances] Omori wrote Quiet Heroes about the nurses on the hospital ships and in Japan and that has brought a lot of us together.