

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH LCDR (ret.) DOROTHY VENVERLOH, NC, USN

CONDUCTED BY
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Interview with Dorothy J. Venverloh, Korean War Navy nurse and survivor of the 25 August 1950 USS *Benevolence* (AH-13) collision with SS *Mary Luckenbach*.

Are you originally from St. Louis?

Yes. I was born and reared here. I'm living in the family home at present.

When did you decide to become a nurse?

When I was about 5 or 6 years old. The teachers were always asking us what we were going to be when we grew up. And I said I was going to be a nurse. I went to Catholic school. My teacher said, "Why don't you be a nun and then be a nurse?" I said, "No. I don't want to be a nun. I want to be a nurse." So it was always there in the back of my mind.

Where did you go to nursing school?

At St. Johns-Mercy. Now it's St. Johns-Mercy Medical Center but the school as I knew it is no longer in existence. I graduated from nursing school in '41. I then did general duty at the hospital, and then signed up with the city of St. Louis Public Health Department. We did maternal Health, new babies. The Health Department also had a tuberculosis clinic where they did follow-up work on TB patients. There was also an active program of immunizing infants and a "well babies" progress and development and a school health program. Of course, the war was in progress, but at that time since I was with the public health department, the American Red Cross could not process my application. Nurses were needed on the civilian front. Nurses (RNs) were classified. I was essential for the home front.

When did you join the Navy?

In November of 1947. At that time, the organization I worked for had to release me when a nurse released from military service replaced me. It was no longer necessary to apply to the Red Cross. You see, previously, if you wanted military service you applied to the Red Cross and they assigned you where they needed nurses, whether it was Army or Navy. By the time I applied, the Red Cross was no longer doing that. I was told to write to the service of my choice and request an application.

So you picked the Navy?

Yes.

Why?

Many of my friends were in the Navy and they all reported good

working relationships. Some of my friends who were Army nurses didn't feel they were always treated as professionals.

Where did you enter the Navy?

I had to go to Olathe, Kansas for my physical and interview. I don't think I was sworn in out there, though. I think I was sworn in St. Louis.

Where was your first assignment?

US Naval Hospital Houston, TX..

Did you have any kind of orientation into the Navy or did you just report to your new assignment?

An orientation nurse was assigned that we reported to. She introduced us to the physical layout of the place and the Navy's way of doing things from folding blankets to . . . It wasn't that bad. I had been doing field work with the St. Louis Health Department so I had been away from hospital work for 4 years.

This was still '47.

Yes. When we reported into Houston, there was a Miss Dell, as I recall. She was our orientation nurse. A Marine who had been a prisoner of war in the Philippines was the one who gave us our drill instructions and abandon ship training. But what we always laughed about was what he told us. He told us that if we had to abandon ship to take our dungarees off and put them over our head to gather air and use it as a life support system. But they forgot that we didn't wear dungarees. Our group of indoctrinees got a lot of laughs out of that.

How long was the indoctrination?

It lasted 6 weeks and we were restricted to the base.

Where were you when the Korean War broke out?

I was at Oak Knoll. I was on a surgical ward when we heard they were having troubles in Korea.

How did you get involved with the hospital ships?

Through the Bureau [of Medicine and Surgery]. My orders were dated the 25th of July 1950 for another nurse and myself. We had to report to Mare Island Naval Shipyard because that's where the ship was in mothballs. We reported in and lived in Quonset huts on the base, as the hospital was officially closed at Mare Island 2 weeks before. When we reported in we reported into the Reserve Fleet for temporary duty.

So you lived at the Navy yard and could see the ship while it was being renovated.

Yes.

Were you going aboard the ship?

Yes.

What kind of duties did you have?

We were making an inventory of what was there.

What was your first impression of the *Benevolence*?

I had nothing to compare it with. One of the hospital chiefs from the Naval Hospital in Houston was on duty there on the hospital ship so he showed us all around--above deck, below deck, the elevators, and then when we got down below where the hospital units were, he said, "This ship is not as seaworthy as some of the other ships." It was originally laid down as a tanker so it has only one hull. The regular Navy ships have two hulls." I always kept what he said in the back of my mind. Another comment of his was, "All the wool blankets were secured with moth balls and stored in the cells of the brig."

Did the ship look like it was in pretty bad shape and needed a lot of work?

No. It looked like it had been taken care of pretty well. Just as the wool blankets were preserved with camphor (moth balls), the remainder of the ship had been protected by spraying it with layers to protect the entire ship and to "cocoon" it when it was placed in the "Moth Ball" fleet.

Were you excited about being assigned to a hospital ship?

Oh, absolutely. That was one of the things one always thought about. This was choice duty for a nurse. I had come into the Navy in '47 and, of course, many of the experienced personnel had been released to inactive duty. After reporting in for this duty we stayed in Quonset huts at Mare Island. There were a few incidents that didn't bode well, but we didn't realize it.

What were those?

Personality differences.

Who did you report to while you were there helping get the ship ready? Was there a chief nurse?

Yes. Her name was Eleanor Harrington. I understood she had

experience as chief nurse on an earlier hospital ship.

Besides personality differences, did you see other problems?

No. Not at that particular time. There was so much preparatory activity of many things.

It was a busy place then, getting the ship ready.

We were to go aboard earlier but couldn't because this was going to be the first ship that sailed with a Navy crew and a merchant marine crew. And the merchant mariners had gotten there first and staked out their territory.

So, they took the best quarters?

Yes. They took over the staterooms. So they had to find a different place for them and get them moved out. So we weren't too sure just how this was all going to work out. It was said they were very resentful because when they had moved aboard no one had told them anything.

So, already people were lining up, the Navy people on one side, and the merchant mariners on the other.

Yes. Anyway, we finally got moved aboard. The first day we went out--the first shakedown cruise . . .

This was in August?

Yes. We were headed out, but before we got to the Golden Gate Bridge, while still in Oakland Bay, the crew practiced using the distress flags and signaling that the ship was at anchor.

Prior to this, had you ever had abandon ship or lifeboat drills?

We didn't have them until after we moved aboard. On that shakedown cruise down the bay, we had to go to the officers' mess. There the captain read the orders taking the ship from the reserve fleet and putting it back on active duty. The Chief Nurse told us she had our life boat assignments and would give them to us the next day.

This was now the captain in command of the ship, not CAPT [Cecil] Riggs.

No. This was Dr. Riggs. The other captain was the merchant marine officer. He told us to call him "Pineapple Bill." I don't know what his real name was.

Anyway, we were getting ready to go to dinner at 1700 hours. Our mess was on the next deck down. And suddenly, there was this awful jolt. My roommate and I looked out our porthole and we could see

another ship right next to us--the merchant ship that hit us.

This was about 4 in the afternoon. Who was your roommate?

Her name was Rosemary Neville, a graduate of Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. I haven't heard from her in years. She was a little girl and just barely made the regulations as to height and weight.

You said you felt a jolt. Was it a really big jolt? Did it knock you off your feet?

No. It didn't knock us off our feet. Just minutes after that we heard over the loudspeaker system, "Prepare to Abandon Ship." They told us to take our life jackets and go to the side of the ship that was out of the water.

Was it listing by this time?

Yes. It began listing very fast.

I understand it went down in about 20 minutes.

It may have been faster than that. By the time I went to go forward I had to walk with one foot on the deck and one foot on the bulkhead. My roommate ran out ahead of me. When we got to the door between our quarters and the cross passageway, there were men who had been up on deck and they came into the cross passageway to give us a steadying hand getting up the bulkhead that separated the nurse quarters from the cross passageway.

Was everybody pretty calm or were they panicky?

We did not know very much about what was going on. We knew the ship was listing and not stabilized. We were all so busy getting out of our quarters. There was someone who didn't take her life jacket and she wanted somebody to bring her one. Prior to this, most of the life jackets had been gathered and placed on another deck. They were to be sent out to be cleaned that very day so some people didn't have them in their rooms. But we had ours. We had thrown them on top of the metal cabinet in our stateroom.

So, you and your roommate both had your life jackets when you left. You got to a cross passage and noticed all these men holding on.

Yes. And they reached down, grabbed our hands, and pulled us up the bulkhead, helped us through the doorway, and up the passageway. Then once we were on deck we sat on the railing to see what would happen next.

What did you see once you got topside?

The weather was very foggy. The 25th of August was very foggy and the fog horns were going off. You really couldn't see very far over the water because the fog was hanging very low. Some of the men were just jumping in the water.

Could you use the lifeboats?

They were still secured. What did get over were the rafts but they were bouncing around. They couldn't launch any of the lifeboats because the ship was listing so badly. Then they told us to be sure to put our life jackets on. When we had our indoctrination course nothing much was said about putting on life jackets. You know, you put this thing on and then you wrap this long tape around you and tie the knot in it. Well, we had never been told that you were supposed to secure some of the straps between the legs. And, of course, we were wearing full skirts--uniforms. So most of us just tied the strap around our waist. Well, that resulted in difficulty later on when we were in the water because the life jackets had a tendency to ride upward and float over your head.

So, you were never taught how to put the life jackets on properly.

No. Maybe they assumed we should know by common sense. The men knew what to do with them but we didn't.

How many nurses were there on the ship?

There were about 16 of us.

Were you all together at this point?

Most of us were together but there were a few who had gone in a different direction and on the side of the ship and were separated from us.

By now, you must have been hanging on for dear life because the ship was leaning over.

Yes. They finally told us to get off the ship and we had to navigate our way down the side. We finally stepped off the bilge keel into the water.

Wow! This thing was really leaning over if the bottom of the ship was already exposed. What were you thinking about at this point?

We knew it wasn't a drill. You were really looking out for the other person, making sure everyone was together. In the meantime, CAPT Riggs, the medical C.O., who was still aboard, had some of the men go around and get some wooden planks to put into the water. Planks and coils of rope and round life preservers were available for "man

overboard" drills.

This was Dr. Riggs.

Yes. The idea was that we needed something to hang on to.

I read somewhere that Dr. Riggs had gotten some rope and tied you nurses together. What was that all about?

While we were on deck, he ran the rope through the belt loops on the back of our coats.

You were still wearing your coats?

We were wearing everything--full skirted uniforms, hats, sweaters, coats, and purses. After all, we were going somewhere.

So, he put a loop through each of your coats, keeping a distance so you'd be separated, and he secured the rope to each of you.

Yes.

So, when you stepped off the bilge keel you were all hooked together with the rope.

Yes.

What about the boards that were floating in the water?

They were pretty wide--about 18 inches or so--and quite thick. I had a death grip on the board I was holding on to. When the men on the ocean going tug finally pulled me out I couldn't bend my left hand for a good day.

You had really been gripping this board for dear life.

Yes. And then with my other hand, I was holding on to my roommate, Rosemary because her arms weren't long enough to reach the board. She was holding on to me and I was holding onto the board.

When you stepped off the bilge keel into the water did they tell you to get clear of the ship?

As we stepped off, we used the leg closest to the hull to push off. And then they told us to get away and get clear of the ship because when it finally went down we didn't want to get sucked under.

San Francisco Bay is noted for its cold water. What did that water feel like?

It was cold. I think we later learned that it was around 50 degrees. We also heard that had we been in that water just 10 minutes more, they would have pulled our bodies out.

You and your fellow nurses were there floating about. Could you see anyone else in the water?

Some of the merchant seamen were holding on to the opposite side of our board.

Where was Dr. Riggs?

I think he had been up on the bridge with the pilot who had been taken aboard to guide us out through the Golden Gate. We later learned that the pilot had been thrown back against the wheel on the bridge and was seriously injured.

We could hear airplanes flying overhead, probably sent out from Alameda [Naval Air Station] to try to find us.

It was still foggy?

Yes.

Do you remember talking to your colleagues while you were in the water to try to keep your spirits up?

Yes. Nell Harrington was singing all kinds of songs. Then one of the girls finally said, "If I open my mouth again to sing, I'm swallowing too much water." Then she said to Nell, "And besides, I can't say my prayers while you are singing." So then Nell finally stopped singing.

Was the water rough?

Yes. It was rough. First we'd be down in a trough, and then we'd be way up, and then down.

Did you see the ship go under?

No. It was so foggy and we were so intent on holding on that we didn't see it. After a while we saw the captain's gig come up and one of the sailors aboard said, "I can't take you aboard but I'll tell them where you are." Apparently, he had a tough time keeping the engine running.

About that time an Army Engineer tug appeared and were going to pick us up. They first took off the men clinging to the plank on the other side of us. When it came time for us, they wanted us to grab a hand so they could pull us aboard. We said we couldn't because we were all tied together. One of the men from the tug came into the water and cut the rope between us. Then they were able to pull us individually up over the side of the tug. I would have been the last person pulled aboard except that Wilma Ledbetter didn't want them to come near her. The tug crew had fired a Very pistol over us and told us to catch the line. We were trying to do that but Wilma kept pushing them away saying they were going to drown her. She was very

panicky. Several men then jumped in and tried to hold her up, but she wouldn't cooperate. So they turned their attention to me instead. When the waves washed me up high, the men were hanging over the railing. Two of them each grabbed one of my arms and pulled me up over the side.

Wilma, then, ended up being the last one. She continued to fight them as they tried to pull her aboard and, by the time they finally got her aboard, her color was terrible, kind of a pinkish-blue, and she wasn't responding.

Then we went below deck where it was very crowded. Soon thereafter, they brought the pilot down on some boards. Apparently he had been injured--had hurt his back--when the collision occurred. I don't think he survived.

Were you given dry clothes?

No. They took as many people as they could aboard the tug and took us right back to the pier in San Francisco.

All of you nurses were then accounted for except for Wilma Ledbetter, who didn't make it?

No. Helen Wallis was with a merchant seaman who had survived several ship wrecks. The ship that hit us pulled out survivors who were floating into that ship's path. Helen was brought to our ward some time after we were.

Wilma Ledbetter died aboard the tug boat. When they performed the autopsy, we all wanted to know what had happened to her. She probably died from hypothermia.

Where did you go after they delivered you to the pier in San Francisco?

We were taken to Oak Knoll on buses and admitted to the hospital and hospitalized for several days.

We were all put to work on the wards until all our paperwork was reconstructed. We lost all of that except for our pay records, which weren't aboard.

I thought this was just supposed to be a shakedown cruise.

The plan was to go back to Mare Island and get loaded up with supplies and then we were going to go to Korea and to relieve the *Consolation* as soon as the ship was loaded. We would have stayed on the ship that night

So you were ready to sail for Korea the very next day?

Yes.

Were there any repercussions from this accident? Did anyone ask you to testify at a board of inquiry?

We had to go up to Mare Island to a meeting. It was a closed meeting of the people who had been aboard the ship. We weren't supposed to talk to anybody about what was discussed. They told each of us if there was someone we wanted to praise or condemn for their actions, that was the time to do it. The next day they took us to Treasure Island to get some uniforms.

You had lost everything except for what you were wearing.

Yes. I have the purse I had with me right here and it's stiff and still has the salt on it.

I guess that's a historic relic.

That's right. What's peculiar about all this is that no one ever talked to me about the sinking. The first time anybody really mentioned the event was at my separation interview. And that was about 1970.

Were you ever reassigned to another hospital ship?

No. I would like to have gone. One of the other nurses created a fuss about wanting to go so they gave her orders to another hospital ship. The Chief Nurse, Nell Harrington, may also have had orders to another ship.

What ever happened to the hulk of the *Benevolence*?

I heard it was blown up because it was obstructing the shipping channel. The chief nurse at Oak Knoll sent me a newspaper clipping about it.

It's been 50 years since that tragedy. Do you ever think about that day?

For a long time it kept bugging me. Why couldn't have we done more to keep Wilma with us? Was there something we didn't do that we should have done to save her? Some of the girls were talking to her. Some of them were praying with her. I don't really know what more we could have done.

Well, those were pretty extenuating circumstances. You didn't expect to end up bobbing about in San Francisco Bay with your ship sunk underneath you.

That's right.

Since that day, do you ever think about what happened?

I kept having these flashbacks. When I was sinking through my

life jacket and Rosemary reached over and pulled the tie down farther, it was about that time that I had an out of body experience.

What did you see?

I was looking upward. I heard harp-like music and saw a translucent stairway going up to the heavens. I didn't see anybody up there. I had ascended almost to the top of the stairs and a voice asked me if I was all right. And that brought me back, back to being in the water. I've often wondered what I would have found at the top of those stairs.

When I looked downward I could see the side of the ship with a few ant-sized bodies moving and many ant-sized bodies in the water moving away from the ship.

Nurses aboard *Benevolence*

LT Eleanor Harrington, NC, USN (Senior Nurse)

LT Mary E. Dyer, NC, USNR

LT Jean C. Fralic, NC, USN

LT Catherine Harkins, NC, USN

LT Marie Lipuscek, NC, USN

LT Josephine E. McCarthy, NC, USNR

LT Gail C. Matthews, NC, USN

LTJG Marie R. Brennan, NC, USNR

LTJG Rosemary C. Neville, NC, USNR

ENS Mary Deignan, NC, USN

ENS Patricia A. Karn, NC, USN

ENS Ruth W. Martin, NC, USN

ENS Dorothy Jane Venverloh, NC, USN

END Helen F. Wallis, NC, USN

LT Wilma Ledbetter, NC, USN