

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Helen Bartelme
U. S. Army Nurse Corps, World War II
2004

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Bartelme, Helen, (1913-), Oral History Interview, 2004

User copy, 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master copy, 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

ABSTRACT

Bartelme, a Bowler, Wis. native, discusses her experiences as an Army nurse during World War II, including her work in New Guinea and the Philippines. She explains that she was trained as a nurse at Lutheran Hospital in Milwaukee, and enlisted in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps after the war started. She reports on the conditions of various U.S. bases including Walla Walla (Washington), San Francisco (California), and in the California desert. Bartelme describes the living and working conditions on New Guinea (Milne Bay, Fitchhaven, and Hollandia), particularly, her housing, the environment, and interacting with the natives. She also describes the conditions in a hospital in Santo Thomas (Philippines). Bartelme addresses the experience of returning home, and earning her nursing degree after the war. Several details in the interview are unclear and may be considered unreliable information.

Biographical Sketch

Bartelme (b. December 3, 1913), became a nurse, then entered the U.S. Army Nurse Corps where she eventually served in New Guinea and the Philippines. After the war, she earned her nursing degree and settled in Milwaukee, Wis.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2004.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2004.

Transcript edited by Rachel Reynard, 2004.

Interview Transcript

John: Well, this is John Driscoll, and I'm with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. And this is an oral history interview with Helen Bartelme, and we are at, well, we were supposed to be at her apartment in Glendale, Wisconsin. Today is March 5, 2004, and Helen, thanks a lot for agreeing to the interview. And why don't we start with you just telling where and when you were born?

Helen: December 3, 1913.

John: Okay. And, where?

Helen: In Bowler, Wisconsin.

John: Okay. And your early life? Your family?

Helen: Yes, I was born to two very wonderful parents. December 3, 1913. I attended the local grade school there, and the junior high school there in Bowler. And then I went to Shawano to finish the last two years of a four year course. And then, with the war coming on, things being what they were, my parents could not afford to send both my sister and I to college. And so my father suggested that I stop for a year or two, and let my sister finish college. And help her through, because she needed it, you know. And after she finished, she went to the normal school at the University of Wisconsin, in Milwaukee. She had her bachelor's degree there and her master's in Michigan, in the university there. And then when she finished, then my dad managed to afford it. We were farmers, you know. To let me go to the nursing operation.

John: Okay. Where?

Helen: Milwaukee Hospital. It used to be called, doesn't matter. Twenty-second and Kilbourn, in Milwaukee. The large Lutheran college. It was a three year course at that time. Anyhow, where was I?

John: You went to nursing school. And then you graduated, about when?

Helen: I had to work for three years, or two years, while my sister finished and then, of course, she helped me through. And of course I had saved a little bit, besides. So that I could finish the course, a three year course. Then I went into the profession itself. I graduated and I worked for about two years at the hospital where I graduated from, the large Lutheran Hospital. And the Army was calling, and of course I had the bug. And so my father and mother gave me their blessing. And my mother said, "Helen, you may go if you don't have to go overseas." And I

hadn't planned on that, you know. But, of course, I entered, I went into the profession as an RN after I graduated, and I worked for about two years, and I wanted to travel. So we started out in Milwaukee, or Chicago, Illinois. About a year or two years, or it was less than that, and I had a chance to, the Army encouraged us to open our minds and try to do what is the better thing in life would be. And of course I wanted to travel. We started out in Walla Walla, Washington. That is where they sent me. That is quite a ways from home.

John: Yea, that is as far as you can get.

Helen: And I stayed there for about perhaps, oh, it wasn't Walla Walla. I can't think of the dates, now.

John: That's okay. Was that an Army base?

Helen: Yes, they had an Army base there at Walla Walla. We did a lot of sports there. Of course, I was very fond of sports, so I took up horseback riding and other things that were available. I didn't join the church but I attended all the local Lutheran ties. My parents are Lutheran backgrounds. Lutheran church. And I was there probably not too many months and they wanted, they didn't want but your name was on the list to travel. And of course, that was my aim, too. We went to San Francisco area. They had the work, it was the Army hospital, but we weren't there too long before they had us on the list to be transferred out. And we were transferred to the San Francisco area. And then I went into the desert, the California desert.

John: Okay.

Helen: How long I was in the desert? I would say no more than six months. We lived on desert food. That was an experience.

John: I'll bet.

Helen: And one evening, one of the stories out of there.

John: Oh, absolutely.

Helen: One evening, or noon time, I was in the dining room having out desert. Ice cream. And I hadn't eaten very much because it was too hot to eat anything, you know. In July. And I ate a little of the main course, but the ice cream appealed most to me because it was so hot. And low and behold, I realized I wasn't able to keep the food down, so I ran from the dining hall trying not to vomit but I couldn't make it, and that was my first experience with desert food. We were used to it, but an

extreme kind of life. We got used to it in no time whatever. And we went from there, that was about the sixth or seventh of July, and we stayed in a rough, hot area. Desert rats and desert food. Desert everything. We stayed there until the beginning of the year. We were allowed to go home for Christmas. They permitted us to do that, to go home. And I don't remember just how long I was home, but it wasn't very long. I'd say a few days. And we came back and they were getting ready, they had papers for overseas. And so that was where we headed, at that time for New Guinea and the Philippines.

John: Okay.

Helen: But we didn't know. We thought it mostly to be New Guinea.

John: What type of nursing were you doing in New Guinea? Hospital, or surgical?

Helen: Yes. Did I mention Walla Walla, Washington?

John: Yes.

Helen: I thought I had. Yea. So we spent...

John: You said you shipped out and went to New Guinea.

Helen: We shipped out from San Francisco. We were on the desert. I have some books here, but they aren't about that area at all.

John: Do you remember New Guinea?

Helen: Oh, yes.

John: What was happening there?

Helen: Well, we shipped out from the San Francisco area, and ended up in New Guinea, at what they called the Milne Bay area. And Milne Bay, that is where MacArthur went also. We did not see him, but we saw of him. He was a very busy man. His headquarters was in New Zealand, and he would come in every so often, but we never saw him. The island of New Guinea, well, we landed on the shores there, a lot of small lakes there and, of course, the ocean. And we spent our orientation right along with these natives. The native men had already built a simple hut for us, and we lived in them. One room only. And I believe we had a small pot belly stove in there that we could use in the evening if we needed it.

John: Very primitive.

Helen: Oh, very primitive. Very. We saw a lot of fruit, like coconuts and bananas, mostly coconuts and bananas. And oranges, a lot of oranges. The food was all prepared by these workers, the locals. The short time, I would say, within perhaps less than six weeks. Of course, they had these little huts for us. But the 26th General Hospital came in, and I don't know where they were originally but I think they were in the surrounding area. And we had good food. The chefs were always experienced. In no time, the 26th General Hospital had brought along their own cooking crew, and of course, I used to love to cook and bake, and they had me do their deserts for them. The pies. We had pies and also cakes and cookies. The general meals were not that special, pretty routine. But they were tolerable.

John: What type of work were you doing?

Helen: General nursing.

John: Hospital work, or was there combat going on at the time?

Helen: They were fighting, and we had to be careful. We walked to work in the morning and we walked home in the evening, and there were pigs running around, old wild guys running around. And you had to walk through all this muck and dirt, and we had good shoes, good oxfords. And it was tolerable, but it was unpleasant.

John: I can imagine it wasn't pleasant.

Helen: And we walked to work in the morning and we would be sopping with pig dirt from the ground, and I had shoes, I had a pair of shoes that were of Japanese origin, and they were like a canvas shoe, they leaked the water. You kicked them off when you got to work and you'd wash your shoes out, inside and out. And you would mop up the dirt and you would let them dry for the day, and while you were doing your nursing.

John: Okay.

Helen: And we had a regular...

John: Like work shoes?

Helen: Like a low canvas, they came over the ankle. They were tolerable. We did stay behind. We did our work regardless whether your feet were wet, and there were available the pot belly stove where they would dry in the meantime and you would put them back on again for the way home. But it was messy.

John: Oh, I can imagine.

Helen: It was tolerable.

John: How long were you in New Guinea, do you recall?

Helen: We went to Milne Bay, to Fitchhaven, in the middle of the island, and on into Hollandia. And I was only in those three areas during my entire New Guinea stay. And I was New Guinea during the entire war. I was trying to think of the name of the, well, when we arrived in Hollandia, it was our final stop in the area. We tried to, I tried to recall the name of the little islet that we stopped on. It was at the very edge of Hollandia, and there was water there. Water for swimming, but you didn't swim. You could if you wanted to, but most of us didn't. And there was, when we arrived there, there was a series of little overnight places to stay in, like a great big made of wood lumber, and you didn't have your own bedroom, but we shared living and it was, because it was so comfortable in that kind of area. The very first night as we entered, the air was just full of little black things. You could see them flying thick as could be. And the men got out their guns, I call them guns, and just sprayed them, and they had outside toilets and they would go in there and spray through that area too. And once they sprayed, within five minutes the air was clear. They died. They were miniature little tiny like a gnat kind of thing.

John: Okay.

Helen: Then, after, I don't know how long we stayed there but after several nights they took us into Manila area, and you heard of Santo Thomas? That is where the prison was and that is where we stayed for a while until they found, let's say a while, a short time, until they found a place for us. But we did our nursing right in Santo Thomas, the main part that was converted into a hospital. And that was a very unsanitary kind of thing because these men, our soldiers, were prisoners of war and they had nothing to work with. They were all over the floor, full of debris, animal debris. We did our nursing, we did hypo injections, we gave, we did our surgery all in this one room. And of course they tried to wash the walls as much as possible but it was almost impossible. It was a mess.

John: That is remarkable.

Helen: I got away with the food too well, there, but it was mostly brought in. One day, we were supposed to, the locals shared whatever they could share with us in food, and they had the different kinds of fresh fruits and that, of course, was appreciated no end. Another thing they were concerned, it was not safe to mingle with them. The men were quite warm, they were as generous as they could be. They'd bring us the coconuts, and they'd break them for us. And we'd enjoy that. And they'd bring us

a handful of bananas, that gave us a sample of their generosity. We did actually see their families. We saw them but they were not available to socialize with. We could not go up into the mountains where their folks were. They did their own baking of whatever they were making, they did on their own. And shared with us, the GIs, whatever they had. I have often wished I could have run back or could have gone forward into their area, because they did have good things there, too, but they certainly were not allowed to mingle with us no more than we were with them. And they worried about the safety angle, you know. They now allow Americans to use a travel agent and I always had the dream to be able to go into their, and just get to know them better. That was not allowed in those days at all.

John: Do you remember when the war ended, Helen? Where you were when that was happening?

Helen: Oh, yea. We were, that happened in December, no, it happened before December, because we started coming back in November. And by the time we got back into the States, they GIs were already home, some of them were. It was in November that my parents took care of the necessities in order to get back home. I had a cousin who was in the Chicago area and she met me at the shore somewhere in the Los Angeles area. And then we flew from there back to Chicago, and that is where my cousin, we were in Chicago together, but I met her, apparently, en route. When we reached California, I don't know what stop it was, but she met me there.

John: Let me turn this.

[End of Side A of Tape 1.]

Okay, go ahead.

Helen: She met me, we both met at the airport in Chicago, and, of course, from there on, she was raised in the same town I was raised in, Bowler. And so of course we could rehearse our goings and our comings.

John: What did you do after the war? After you got home? Did you stay in nursing?

Helen: Oh, yes. Oh, I wouldn't leave nursing. Your question was, did I stay in nursing? I came back to Lutheran Hospital, in Milwaukee. It was called Milwaukee Hospital, at the time. And it had a large Lutheran history. We had, oh...

John: Let me ask another question, then.

Helen: While we were in New Guinea, in the Milne area, in the Hollandia area. We were shipped back in the end of November, the beginning of December, and when we

got back, my parents were anxious to get me home. My brother had already become, he was a prisoner of war of the Japanese, you know. During the entire three years. He was captured on Wake Island.

John: Oh!

Helen: And he was captured on Wake Island, and we did not see him at all. He was treated as a very bad prisoner. They were whipped and they were beaten, they were tortured. And they learned how to play cards in no time, because that is how they earned their food. My younger brother was not captured. He was not a prisoner at all, but he was injured, wounded. But he was not beaten.

John: Okay.

Helen: During our stay in Manila, I am going back a bit now.

John: That's okay.

Helen: We were not allowed to do anything at all that would harm us, or harm anybody around us. We realized we were watched very closely. One evening a young man came up to me. I was out taking a short walk from our domain, just to see the town, and this man came up and said, "You are not allowed to go into any of these areas. They are not safe for women. We didn't know that. So we said we'd go back home and stay in our own place, which we did for that short period of time. We did some shopping, though. I was allowed to go into one of the local stores and they had a lot of nice linens. And the Chinese, Japanese, were known for their hand work, and I bought a linen tablecloth that was all embroidered by hand, all by hand, beautiful. And it was like a luncheon cloth, with four or six napkins connected with it. And it was quite precious.

John: Oh, yes, sure.

Helen: But, of course, we were put on the plane as quickly as possible after they felt it was safe for us to travel. And it was a small ship compared with their standards, and we sailed the rough seas, and we had to catch our own fish.

John: Oh, yea?

Helen: Yea. There were a lot of these maui-maui fish?

John: Oh, yea.

Helen: They are delicious. And we had to, the men would go fishing and, of course, we

would clean the fish for them. And then either fry it or bake it, what have you. But they were delicious.

John: Yea.

Helen: I can't tell you how long we were on the water. Very probably it was close to a month, I suppose. It would have to be. But when we arrived at the Chicago, that was where I met my cousin and, oh, prior to my being ready to go home, one evening somebody walked up to me that I didn't see him, or I would have spoken to him, I am sure, and it was his sister, my cousin also.

John: Oh?

Helen: They came from a family of about five children, and they came from near Bowler, our farm, they lived about five and a half miles. They had a smaller farm. And we had a lot to talk about. That is about the thoughts on the Chicago part of it.

John: Did you ever get together with anyone afterwards, that you were in the service with? Reunions or that?

Helen: No.

John: How about VFW, or the American Legion, or any vets organizations? Did you ever join any of them?

Helen: I attempted to, but I didn't. I didn't do anything about it, really. We talked about it but it died a slow death. You asked what I did after I came back. I went into nursing again. Sister Emma, the director of nursing, insisted that I came to where I left off, and the Army furnished us money. We could do whatever we wanted to do with it. I was in nursing and I wanted to stay and get my degree in nursing. Which is what I did. Sister Emma offered me a job in charge of the out-patient department and the, it's like out-patient. I wanted my degree so badly that I decided to do it on a part time basis. We had...

John: You did get your degree, though?

Helen: Yea. I did that. And I went to Marquette to get that.

John: I see. Oh, okay.

Helen: It took about a little over two years, doing it on a part time basis. And I was doing evening supervisory work between three and eleven in the afternoon, and I think it took about two years to do that. And then what did I do after that?

- John: Well, this is a remarkable story. How do you feel about, you went through a very tough time, living in mud with pig dirt.
- Helen: I had malaria.
- John: Did you?
- Helen: Oh, yea. I had malaria. And I had relapses, and that three different times.
- John: Wow.
- Helen: I ran temperatures of a hundred and five degrees.
- John: Oh, man.
- Helen: Yea. We were very ill. They had us on a little cot staying out in the sunshine, or the shade, whatever happened to be. Watching the well people go by. It was really rough.
- John: Well, listen, I am running out of tape here. This is a remarkable story. It really is. You went through a really tough time and you were part of a major effort. You know, you people saved the world. You really did. The world was in really bad shape.
- Helen: I wish I could remember some of the things, speaking about that very thing. We were on a ship one time, while we were in the New Guinea area. And the ship was packed with people. And we were not allowed to know anything about them at all. It was all very confidential. It was during the heat of the war, and they wanted us to be killed. In other words, there was just no way out of it. You either were very, very quiet so they wouldn't know you were around. They were in these underground, what do they call it? Torpedoes.
- John: Submarines?
- Helen: Submarines. We were in one of those, and we just, you just hugged the shore line hoping you would make it back again.
- John: Yea.
- Helen: But apparently it was out in our favor. But we never found out what the ship that was chasing us, we never found out anything about it. But it was a Japanese ship. It had to be.

John: I see. Okay, I am going to wrap up here and head back to Madison. I need you and me both to sign a release that lets the Museum put these in their archives. What a remarkable story. This, you and I own this story, and this allows the Museum to have it.

Helen: Yea, I understand.

John: If you will give me a signature up here. I've signed it there.

Helen: My writing has gone down hill a lot.

John: What a remarkable story!

[End of Interview.]