

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

ANN FRITSCH

Army Medical Specialist Corps, U.S. Army, 1951-1983

2015

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1968

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1968

Fritsch, Ann., (b.1927). Oral History Interview, 2015.

Approximate length: 2 hours 11 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

Ann Fritsch discusses her career as a member of the Army Medical Specialist Corps from 1951-1983, including service overseas during the Vietnam War. She explains why she entered the Army and talks about her basic training in San Antonio. Fritsch describes working at many Army hospitals including Percy Jones Army Hospital in Battle Creek, Michigan, Valley Forge Army Hospital, the 452nd General Hospital [Wisconsin], and Brooke Army Medical Center, as well as Letterman Army Hospital where she received training in physical therapy. She reminisces on being stationed in Alaska in 1960. Fritsch details attending career school, including a United Nations logistical exercise known as LOGEX at Fort Lee [Virginia], and comments on her time working at the Institute for Surgical Research, Armed Forces Burn Center. Fritsch describes her first deployment to Okinawa and then Vietnam, and outlines how she set up a leprosy program in Japan before working at the 8th Field Hospital in Nha Trang, Vietnam. She discusses working at Walter Reed Army Medical Center [Washington D.C.] after returning and gives an anecdote about her “masterpiece” patient. She details her second deployment to Vietnam in 1970, working at Military Assistance Command Vietnam [MACV] and receiving the Vietnamese Technical Medal. Fritsch compares her homecomings from Vietnam with the way servicemen and women are treated today. Fritsch mentions working at Fort Meade [Maryland], in San Francisco, and lastly in San Antonio as the Physical Therapy Consultant for the Army until she retired. She describes her discharge in 1983 and receiving the Legion of Merit. She gives an anecdote about her opening the Panama Canal. Fritsch also mentions working and volunteering after retirement from the Army.

Biographical Sketch:

Ann Fritsch (b.1927) enlisted in the Army in 1951, and worked in U.S. Army hospitals across the country. She was deployed twice during the Vietnam War, first to Okinawa and the 8th Field Hospital in Nha Trang, Vietnam and then in 1970 to the Military Assistance Command Vietnam [MACV] in Saigon. Fritsch was discharged in 1983 with the rank of a colonel and as a recipient of the Legion of Merit.

Interviewed by Ellen Brooks, 2015.

Transcribed by the Audio Transcription Center, 2015.

Reviewed by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Abstract written by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Interview Transcript:

[File 1]

Brooks: Today is Tuesday, March 31, 2015. This is an interview with Ann Fritsch, who served with the Army, in the Medical Specialist Corps, from 1951 to 1983. The interview is being conducted at Mrs. Fritsch's home in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. The interviewer is Ellen Brooks, and the interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Oral History Program.

Okay, so if we can just start at the beginning, and you can tell me where and when you were born.

Fritsch: I was born in 1927, in Milwaukee, on the west side of Milwaukee, and stayed there until I graduated from college. I graduated from Mount Mary College, which is down Mount Mary University, and I graduated in occupational therapy. My first job was in Cleveland, at a school for handicapped children.

Six of my classmates went into the Army after graduation, all occupational therapists, and they were writing letters and telling me what wonderful times they were having, and I wasn't having wonderful times. I loved my work but that's all I was doing, was working, and I was young, you know. So I decided that I would join them and have good times too. It was obviously the thing to do, because I spent all those years in the military.

Brooks: Can you tell me just a little bit about your early childhood and growing up in Milwaukee?

Fritsch: Well, I grew up a Depression child. My father, fortunately, had a job through the whole Depression, so we were never--we owned our own home and we always had food and clothes, which a lot of people didn't have during the Depression. My parents were very generous with the people who didn't have, so early on, I realized the importance of service. It was a happy childhood, you know, and went to good schools. I lived across the street from the best park in the whole city and we had everything you could imagine; ice skating in winter, roller skating in summer. It was a nice childhood.

I loved being a student. School was wonderful for me, and I've never stopped. I'm still, at eighty-eight, still taking classes. In fact this morning, I went to my writing class. I wish I could tell you something dramatic about my childhood.

Brooks: Did you have any siblings?

Fritsch: I had three older sisters.

Brooks: And what did your dad do, that he worked through the Depression?

Fritsch: He was an accountant for one of the foundries here in Milwaukee.

Brooks: So when you got to college, why did you decide on occupational therapy?

Fritsch: Oh, when I was in high school, I belonged to what was called a senior--a service. I forget what they called it, but it was Girl Scouts, who did service projects. One of our projects was to work at; it's called the Harbor Park Daycare Center for Disabled Children. I went and worked at that park one summer, I think that was in my either freshman or sophomore year, and worked with the therapists and knew that's what I would do, that early. So I started planning what courses to take in high school, so that I could get into college and be a therapist. Then, I received a scholarship to Mount Mary, who had probably one of the best schools in the country at the time. It was one of the early, early occupational. In fact, they're celebrating their seventy-fifth anniversary this year, and there weren't many schools, there were only a couple at the time. I took a Latin exam and got first place, and they gave me a four-year scholarship, which was wonderful at that time.

Brooks: Yeah.

Fritsch: And I worked. I worked as a telephone operator from the time I was sixteen on, until I finished college. Then, I went into the Army of course. I went in when the Korean War started, in '51. Well, it started in December of '50. I'll show you my basic class.

Brooks: All right, so this is a photo of basic training.

Fritsch: Basic training at Fort Sam Houston.

Brooks: All right. Medical servicewoman, officer, basic course number nineteen. So how many women do you think?

Fritsch: Oh, gosh, some are nurses.

Brooks: Some are nurses, okay.

Fritsch: Yeah, nurses and therapists, and some of them are in the school, the PT school.

Brooks: So March nineteenth, through April 13, 1951.

Fritsch: Ah-huh.

Brooks: All right. Where are you, do you know?

Fritsch: Yeah. Where am I? Well, I'll show you a different picture.

Brooks: Or you could show me later as well.

Fritsch: Yeah, I will, I'll show you later.

Brooks: To back up just a little bit, do you remember--what are your memories about World War II?

Fritsch: Oh, the guys were all gone. I graduated on D-Day, which was a terrible day to graduate from high school. Nobody cared that we were graduating. All they cared about was their son going off, on to the beaches. And the next day, all the boys who were left had to go to the draft board. The very next day, they had to report to their draft board. During our senior year, anyone who reached their eighteenth birthday during the year, were drafted right away, right out of our senior year in high school, but after a certain date, if they reached eighteen, they could stay to graduate, so then they went the next day. So by the time, all the guys were gone, every one of them, and there were very few left in our graduating class. It was kind of sad, because the fellows knew that's what they'd be doing.

During the war, we had--you probably can't believe this, but do you know what a two-by-two bandage is? It's those little gauze pads that nurses use when they give you a shot.

Brooks: Oh, yeah, sure.

Fritsch: Or three-by-threes, bandages. They didn't have any machines to make those and those were all made by hand. It's difficult to believe that. So during our lunch hours in high school, we all folded bandages. We'd stay in our classroom and we'd fold those bandages. And then after school, my sister and I would go to the Red Cross building and we'd fold more bandages. So that was my contribution to the war effort, but it was a lot. When you think that all those dressings had to be hand-folded, of course then they came up with machines, thankfully. Yeah, those war years were difficult. Well, the first few years in college, the war was still on.

Brooks: Did you have any notion of joining the service then?

Fritsch: Kind of, because my sister was a WAVE, and she loved it.

Brooks: Did she ever go overseas?

Fritsch: No, no, she was in the States. In fact, she was at Great Lakes almost the whole time, so she could come home on weekends once in a while.

Brooks: So, you decided to enlist?

Fritsch: Yeah, to go in.

Brooks: Tell me a little bit about that, the induction process.

Fritsch: Well, I signed up and then I had to have my physical. I came home for the physical, because I was going to leave from Milwaukee, so I had to have it here and it was gee, a big room full of guys and there I was. (laughs) They weren't dressed all that great and you know, finally they decided I didn't have to sit with the half-nude men any more, you know I could go into another room. It was a shocker to begin with. I got used to that thought. I passed my physical. I don't think, well I had all my credentials, because I was a registered therapist by then, and they were looking for them.

So I went to basic and basic was great fun. Where's my basic? Well, I'll find it. It's how we lived in basic. We lived in one big room, about forty of us to a room. Every day, they had a list of what we could put in our dressers and what we could put in our lockers, we each had a locker. Every day, we had to open all three doors, our lockers, and the inspectors would come through every morning, to see that the bras were in a certain place, the pants were in a certain place, the girdles were in, slippers were there. You followed your diagram and you set up your--and I'm not exactly a neatnik, and this was surprising to me. Then I got the most awful haircut, the one and only Army haircut I ever had, because after that, I found a place in town and went and got a haircut. That was a shocker. Then I didn't know how to tie a tie, so I had to learn that, but it was interesting.

We learned to march, we marched and marched and marched, and we fired weapons and we learned a lot about the Army, Army history. We had to go out for field training and you know, we were knew we were in the Army, there was no question about that. Then we did spend some time in the Army hospital and get used to how they handled their records and protocols, things like that, and then we went off to our assignments.

Brooks: Was this your first time in the South, out of the Midwest?

Fritsch: Yes, because my first job was in Ohio. Yes, it was, and that was a surprise too. The South is different from the North, but San Antonio, all the medical--well, it's the home of the army medic, and there were three or four Air Force bases there, and the Air Force had their basic training in there too. San Antonio was used to military people, so it wasn't that we were--actually, I was downtown, we all went in our uniforms one day, and there was a cowboy there and I said, "Are you a real cowboy?" He said yes, and I said, "Oh, I don't have my camera," and he says, "Are you a real lieutenant? I don't have my camera either." There were hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of lieutenants in that town, you know. (laughs) That's one of the things I remember from basic.

Brooks: What do you think the most challenging part of basic was for you?

Fritsch: I guess the living conditions, yeah. I wasn't used to a room with forty women, and the showers, I wasn't used to that. I got used to it. It wasn't exactly challenging. It was kind of exciting because everything was new. I remember the very first class we had was with a New York lawyer, and he wanted us--well, the first thing they tell you is you're not dispensable, which you learn very quickly that you're not dispensable. But then he said, you know at the time, the movie *Boys Town*, you probably have never seen *Boys Town*.

Brooks: I haven't seen it but I think I've heard of it.

Fritsch: One of the lines in it is, "There's no such thing as a bad boy." He said, "I want you women to remember, there is such a thing as a bad boy." (laughs) I always remember that. It's the first thing I learned in the Army.

Brooks: He was trying to warn you against unsavory characters?

Fritsch: Yes. But I enjoyed basic very much. I made some very good friends.

Brooks: Did you have a sense of where you would be assigned?

Fritsch: Yeah, I knew where I was going to be assigned. I was kind of disappointed, because when you went in, you could ask for different assignments, and I wanted to be assigned with some of my college friends. Then I got a little note from the boss in Washington, and it said, "I am sending you where I think you can do the most good." Oh, it's not me they're thinking about. But I did get a wonderful assignment; it was in Battle Creek, Michigan. I worked with the best chief. She was such a good therapist and such a compassionate woman, and I couldn't have had a better start in the Army.

I worked with wonderful people and we were one of the largest hospitals in the Army, just a huge hospital, lots and lots of amputees. The Korean War had many amputees, probably more so than any other war, and so that's what we did mostly, was amputees. And then polio, you know, this was still polio days. There was a lot of polio in Korea, and some of the military people developed polio. This is before the vaccine. So, we did a lot of polio too. It was a great hospital and I just really--well then they decided they would like a few people in OT and PT, to work in small hospitals, and so they asked me if I'd like to go to PT school and I said why not, and so I did.

Brooks: Tell me first, a little bit, tell me what an occupational therapist does.

Fritsch: Occupational therapy primarily trains people in activities that provide exercise, but not just plain old everyday exercise but activities. They work on activities of daily living. Preparing people to go back to their homes or back to their jobs. Of course in the Army, we prepared them to go back to their jobs. With the amputees, we trained them to use their prostheses. We had a lot of arm people,

amputees, and so we taught them how to use their prostheses in some kind of purposeful activity.

Brooks: So at Battle Creek, what was a typical day like for you usually?

Fritsch: Early morning breakfast. The hospital, Percy Jones Army Hospital, was the former Kellogg Institute, and it was plush. Army hospitals don't look as plush as that. We had a huge dining room with eight crystal chandeliers; not in your average mess hall. Beautiful--it was like almost three-story ceilings, just these huge ceilings with floor-to-ceiling windows, with drapes, oh beautiful velvet drapes. Well anyhow, it was not like any other Army hospital and meals were wonderful. We had a great dietician. People used to say she did creative accounting, because the food was a little better than most people were eating in the Army, so mealtime was wonderful. We would all gather three times a day, of course.

Then we'd just go to work, and sometimes we'd work on the wards and sometimes in the clinic, wherever we were assigned. There were about eight therapists in the OT department, and I think maybe about ten or twelve in the physical therapy department. It was a large service. We had, I think three or four physiatrists, that's physical medicine doctors, who were our supervisors.

Brooks: Did you ever get any time off?

Fritsch: Yeah, weekends.

Brooks: And where did you live while you were there?

Fritsch: I lived in a barracks, but we had our own room. We shared the bath and shared a little kitchen and living room. (knocking) Come in.

Brooks: I'll just pause it really quick.

[break in recording][00:21:35]

Brooks: All right, go ahead.

Fritsch: Besides our hospital, there was a convalescent center, and it was the old Kellogg Estate, and they had oh, just this gorgeous house there. The fellows who were able to be away from the hospital, they had wonderful facilities. It was on a lake, they had boats and fishing. They had a golf course, their own golf course, tennis courts, everything, and so we could use that facility on weekends. That was pretty much our weekends, was out there at the Kellogg Estate.

Brooks: And how many beds or how many patients did you typically have?

Fritsch: I forget. I think it was around a thousand. It was the largest Army hospital at the time.

Brooks: So then you went to school for physical training?

Fritsch: Yeah, physical therapy.

Brooks: Tell me a little bit about that.

Fritsch: At Fort Sam Houston.

Brooks: So you had to go back down to Texas?

Fritsch: Down to Texas, yeah, and I was the only one who had any Army experience. The rest were all just, they came in with a bachelor's degree. Oh, that's my terrible Army haircut.

Brooks: It's not that bad.

Fritsch: Oh yeah, (chuckles) it was. Oh, I wish I could find that picture that I had out, of my class. We were kind of an interim class. They had one a year, but they needed therapists so badly that they started an extra class and we were the extra class, so we were smaller than the other classes. Oh, heck, I can't find it.

Brooks: That's okay, we can find it later.

Fritsch: Oh, here it is, here it is right here. The lady on the end, the black woman there, is Dr. Elders. She was Surgeon General under Clinton.

Brooks: Oh, wow, that's exciting. So this is your whole class? There was about eleven of you?

Fritsch: Yeah, our PT class, yeah.

Brooks: Wow. Oh, that's neat, that's really neat. So what was that like, what was that school like?

Fritsch: Well, it was intense, because they had to get us in and out. We covered all the didactic in six months, and then we had six months practical, and I went to San Francisco for that and that was great. Hard work, because we did all the scut work. We'd get up early in the morning and get to work and roll the bandages, and then after everybody went home we'd wash bandages and get them ready for the next day. There, we had a lot of polio, a lot of amputees too, because that was still a problem.

School was very well done. Part of the faculty were from Baylor University, our anatomy professor was. We, unlike most PT schools, we had cadavers that we studied with. That was something that PTs don't normally have. It was a very, very good program.

Brooks: And in San Francisco, were you working at an Army hospital?

Fritsch: Yeah, Letterman Army Hospital, and that was a smaller hospital but that was a fun place too because you know, you were in San Francisco. And then from there I was assigned at Valley Forge Army Hospital, and that was primarily TB. That was another problem at the time, was we had TBs, and we had a lot of polio there too, but the war was winding down.

Then, there were several communities that had polio epidemics. So as we were seeing fewer military patients, the therapists were going out into the communities. If you went to a city that had an epidemic, you could still get credit for your Army, but you had to join a Reserve Unit, so I came home. I was going with a guy in Milwaukee at the time so I thought eh, I'll come home. I got a job here in Milwaukee during the big epidemic of '55, and joined the Reserve Unit in Milwaukee, the 452nd General Hospital. It was a really good Reserve Unit. We did a lot of good medical training. There was one thing they did. The chief of orthopedics from the VA was part of the unit and he also taught at Marquette. So he, instead of going to the meetings, we would go down to Marquette, and we all had--some of the doctors and the therapists had a review, orthopedic review, a neurosurgery review, which was really good for me, to have that opportunity. We studied with those doctors. So I got a lot out of that couple of years that I spent, and then I decided to go and get my master's, so I went to Columbia and joined the unit in New York.

Brooks: When you had originally signed up, did you have a term?

Fritsch: One year.

Brooks: One year, okay. So then did you just keep re-upping?

Fritsch: Well, you don't re-up; I mean you just stay in.

Brooks: You just stay in, okay. No one was complaining.

Fritsch: No.

Brooks: You had done your duty and you needed to get out.

Fritsch: When you take a course though, you have to pay one for one. So I had to--no, I only had another year, yeah, of obligation. The first time, they weren't discharging anyone. I mean, you signed up for a year, but then you had what they

called the Truman year. Truman made the decision that if you were in; you were in until you weren't needed any more. So, I did my Truman year and then as I said, I got out and joined a Reserve Unit, and stayed in the Reserves until I finished at Columbia.

Then, they called me, and told me they had a job they wanted me to do. They knew I was finished at Columbia, and so if I would come back on active duty, they have an assignment for me, and that was again, down at Fort Sam Houston.

Brooks: And what did you get your master's in?

Fritsch: Rehabilitation.

Brooks: Can you tell me really quickly what the--well, it doesn't have to be quickly, but what the difference is between physical therapy and occupational therapy?

Fritsch: Physical therapy takes care of more the acute and they do oh, primarily ambulation and transfers, moving patients from bed to wheelchair to crutches to-- They do exercise per se, real exercises, rather than converting the exercise to an activity, and there's the difference.

Brooks: So you decided to study rehabilitation. While you were at Columbia, were you still training? Were you attached to a unit there then?

Fritsch: Yes, ah-huh.

Brooks: So how often did you have to train and what was that like?

Fritsch: Once a week, and then later on it was one weekend a month, for the whole weekend, and then two weeks of actual duty at a hospital. I went to Fort Dix, Fort Drum, New York, for my training. That was an interesting unit too. It was totally different, it was New Yorkers versus Wisconsin, you know?

Brooks: Yeah.

Fritsch: I actually had to say that I got more out of the unit in Wisconsin. They were kind of laid back in New York. There was no nonsense in the 452nd, we got things done. But I enjoyed the unit and made some very good friends. I didn't mind that one evening a month or one evening a week I'd go.

Brooks: Was it mostly physical training then, just to keep you in shape?

Fritsch: No, it was mostly classroom.

Brooks: So not a lot of drilling.

Fritsch: No, just classroom.

Brooks: And why did you choose Columbia?

Fritsch: Because they had the best course and I always wanted to go to Columbia. I had a teacher in grade school who was a Columbia grad, and oh that's all she used to talk about. I said, some day I'm going to Columbia too, so I did.

Brooks: Can you just talk a little bit about kind of the political climate and the social climate around the time of the Korean War. A lot of people consider it kind of the forgotten war; people weren't interested in what was going on. So I want to know, from your perspective, how people kind of were reacting to the war.

Fritsch: There didn't seem to be a lot of interest one way or the other, you know people weren't out there protesting. We came home and nobody made a fuss and it was just like a lot of them didn't even know it was going on. They were tired of war, because we had just gone through World War II, but no, people just kind of ignored the whole thing, which was kind of sad, because we lost a lot of people and a lot of injuries, an awful lot of injuries, lots of amputees, a lot of frostbite.

I think people, they weren't prepared for Korea. They didn't know that it snowed in wintertime and that it was basically hot in the summer. They didn't know anything about the country, and that was the reason we had so many casualties, or not deaths but injuries.

Brooks: Did you have a chance to talk to your patients often?

Fritsch: Oh, sure, yeah, you sat down with them and chatted while you were working with them.

Brooks: Were most of them willing to talk about their experiences?

Fritsch: No. They didn't talk much about it. They talked about their high school teams and their girlfriends and that was about it. No, they didn't, and they didn't in Vietnam either. You just didn't, and you really had no reason to talk about them, yeah. I don't think they wanted to relive those days, it was too soon. They just wanted to get well and go home or go back to duty.

Brooks: Did you get the impression that most of the people you treated wanted to go back to duty?

Fritsch: Well, most of them couldn't because they were too badly injured, but the ones that did weren't--no, they didn't seem to really want it but you know, they did what they were told. They still had duty time that they had to fill, and some of them wanted to stay in the Army. It's different now. Now they can stay. Well, that's a whole other story, is the intrepid... what's it called, the hospital for the

intrepid or something like that, it's in San Antonio, where if they want to stay in the military, regardless of their injury, they can go down there and train, and they can stay for, I think a year and a half, and train, and then they can go back on active duty. And so they're going back, a lot of amputees are going back on active duty. They even sent one blind Marine back. He was an instructor in the Marines and apparently he was a very, very good instructor, so they trained him up. He got a lot of help with, well electronics are now, you know, big with blind people, and he's back teaching in the Marine Corps. So, it's a totally different world. We didn't have electronics, we didn't have anything. We worked with our hands. PT is totally different than NOT, they're two different professions now.

Brooks: I can imagine, yeah. So, you graduate from Columbia. Do you remember what year that was?

Fritsch: Sixty.

Brooks: Okay, so it's 1960 and you get a call from the Army. Do you remember who called you?

Fritsch: The chief recruiter.

Brooks: Did that call come as a surprise?

Fritsch: Yeah, kind of, yeah.

Brooks: What did he or she say?

Fritsch: Well, that they would like me to go back and do this particular job at San Antonio. When I got there, there was a higher ranking person than I, who wanted it, and pulled strings and she got the job, so I just went into a clinic and stayed there for a while. That was a very good learning experience.

One day I was at the Officers Club and I heard two guys talking about the fact that the Army was going to change the--they were taking over an Air Force base in Alaska, and they were going to take over the hospital, and they were going to need hospital personnel, Army personnel were going to be sent up there. Alaska was another place I always wanted to visit, and so I wrote to--we had what was called a wish list, and if you wanted a particular assignment, you could ask for it. Whether you got it or not was another story, but you could at least put it on record. So I wrote and I said, I know we don't have any assignments in Alaska, but if they should get one, I would like it. My letter, and the request for a therapist in Alaska landed on the chief's desk the same day, and she thought it was an omen, and so she gave me that assignment and that was a delight, a total, total delight.

We just took care of training accidents, mostly ski accidents, because the 10th Mountain Division was training there at the time, and they were really good soldiers, so there was no problem, you know you told them to do something, they did it. It was great, it was between wars. There wasn't this emotion that you have when you're taking care of wounded soldiers. They were all there because they wanted to be there, they wanted to be in the Mountain Division. It was great. We had wonderful facilities, lots of good times, I mean they partied. (laughs) That was kind of interesting too, because we had survival training. We had to go out at forty below zero, stayed two nights and three days with whatever we could carry, and live out there, at forty below. We had wonderful gear. The gear was designed for seventy below zero, just wonderful, wonderful gear, and so we didn't have to worry about it. That was our lean-to that we built, and everybody had to build their own. We were in groups of seven, because there were forty-nine of us I remember, and we had seven women, and we had to do our own. They didn't let the guys help us. We built this lean-to, and then collected wood all day long, that's what we did, so we had piles and piles of wood to keep us warm, and then we were on one hour. There were two of us at the time, keeping the fires going all damn night, and we stayed comfortable, it was amazing. It was such a good experience, because everybody had a different idea of what kind of shelter they needed. There was just everything imaginable, very creative, and we all survived, and we didn't have one frostbite. But as I said, our gear was designed for living outdoors.

Brooks: What kind of food did you take? Did they give you rations to bring up?

Fritsch: Most of us took powdered soup and tea, and anything we could mix with water. We didn't have a lot of food, but you know, what we could carry. We planned ahead of time, so everybody took a different tool. One of us took an axe, another a shovel, so that we had it with our group. Learned a lot, learned an awful lot about living outdoors. Everybody came back quite confident that we could survive. Then we had to go out a second time, during a snowstorm, and we had to set up essentially what we would do to set up a hospital if we had to, and so we had tentage, and that was a whole different--because we had to set up a mess kitchen and things like that. That was a good experience, yeah.

Brooks: Well, what do you do up there when you're not training or going to survival?

Fritsch: Ski, skate, dance, dance and dance, party.

Brooks: Fun.

Fritsch: Yeah. Oh, I had the best assistants working, PT assistants working with me, and really good doctors, so there just weren't a lot of problems. That was the nice part about being there, was the personnel that we had. It was great fun.

Brooks: How long were you there?

Fritsch: Two years.

Brooks: So what was next?

Fritsch: Oh, I went back to San Antonio. I had five assignments in San Antonio.

Brooks: Oh, wow, gees.

Fritsch: I went to the career school, which is, well they call it advanced basic, but everybody, if they're going to stay in the military, has to go to career school, and that was very, very interesting. There were two groups and our group was primarily physicians and dentists, and then I was the only one from my corps, there were two or three nurses. We did lots of interesting training, and one of the things we did was we went to Fort Lee, Virginia, for what's called LOGEX. It was a United Nations logistical exercise. They called it the paper war. It was planning the logistics of a war. We each had an assignment there and I was assigned to the action place, and I would set up all the problems for the medical service. That was kind of interesting. I didn't make many friends, because I was giving 'em some pretty tough assignments.

Brooks: Like what? What's an example of a problem you'd set up?

Fritsch: Well, transportation was one. If you had X number of casualties, how were you going to get the ones who needed--well, you know, in the military, you have an evacuation system where you take care of immediate needs, and then move them on to--over in Korea it was MASH, evac hospital, and then back, back, back, and how do you get them moving, you know, and how do you get your supplies forward. Those would be the kinds of...

I remember once, I had to set up an exercise for the graves registration people, and we had to figure out how many--they had to figure out approximately, because of the way the war was going, how many casualties you're going to have, and what they would need to do their job. That was the kind of thing I set up. It was an interesting assignment. It was a six-month course and it was a lot of good training.

Brooks: That's the advanced basic?

Fritsch: Yeah. I think they called it the career course, yeah.

Brooks: And when you were going through that training, was it still all women?

Fritsch: No.

Brooks: So, co-ed.

Fritsch: There were only about six women in the group.

Brooks: And how was that?

Fritsch: What, being a woman in--

Brooks: Yeah.

Fritsch: Well, I was used to it by then.

Brooks: Did it take you a while, because we started off talking about your experience in the recruitment with being around these half-clothed men. How long do you think it took you to kind of get used to being a woman in...?

Fritsch: Not long.

Brooks: Not long?

Fritsch: No. There were a few men who still, they were mostly instructors, who didn't particularly like having women in their classes, because they had to kind of watch their mouths. But no, that wasn't much of a problem, not in that class. Later on in other class, I did have problems.

Brooks: What happened then?

Fritsch: A couple of the instructors were pretty raunchy and they didn't like the idea of having a woman in their class, and I was the only woman. This was in Command General Staff College, and that was later on in my life.

Brooks: We'll get there.

Fritsch: Then, I went to the Institute for Surgical Research.

Brooks: You did like school.

Fritsch: Yes. Oh, no I worked there. What happened to that one? I wanted you to see it. Huh. Well, anyhow, that was the Armed Forces Burn Center, and they were doing a lot of research. In fact, it was the real basic research for the care of burns, where they develop what's now used worldwide. It's a topical medication to stop the kinds of infections that burn patients had, and that was developed there. I was on the team that tested it. We had lots and lots. At one time we had about seventy-five burn patients, and they only took them if they were 40 percent burned or had burned hands and faces. We got a lot of kids. They took dependent children, the children of servicemen, and if they were burned they just brought them down there. That was tough duty, emotionally that was tough because oh, the smell and

the screams; all day long, screaming, screaming, screaming. But there again, I learned a lot.

Brooks: And how did you end up there?

Fritsch: Well, they offered it to me and at the time it was one of the prestigious assignments. When I left Alaska, I was going to get out. I had a job and everything in Alaska. One of the doctors, or the orthopedist was going to stay, and he asked me if I'd stay and oh, I loved Alaska, so I thought yeah, I'll stay. And then the Army offered me this and so I took it and learned a lot.

Brooks: Why do you think you made that decision, instead of staying in Alaska?

Fritsch: I don't know, that's a good something to think about. I think it was because it was such a good opportunity, a learning opportunity, and I didn't want to pass it up.

Brooks: And where was that?

Fritsch: In San Antonio.

Brooks: So you had to go do your advanced basic, or your career training, before you could accept that position?

Fritsch: No, no, they just offered me that too, as long as I was going to be in San Antonio.

Brooks: Okay, so you did them at the same time.

Fritsch: Yeah, and then I worked there for, I think about two and a half years, and then I just, one day I thought I can't do this anymore, so I went to my boss and said I need out, and he said yeah, he thought maybe I did, and I went to Okinawa.

Brooks: So before we get you out of the country, during all of your time moving around, were you able to stay in touch with folks in Wisconsin?

Fritsch: Yeah. I did leave and go home, yeah.

Brooks: Did you still consider Wisconsin kind of home base?

Fritsch: Oh, yeah, I kept Wisconsin as my residence, because I was moving around so much that I wanted to vote, and a lot of places you couldn't vote unless you were there a year, two years, things like that. I also just kept my license on my car. I didn't want to keep registering every place I went, so if I used Wisconsin as my residence, but then I had to pay taxes, I had to pay Wisconsin taxes. I did that, rather than fool with all these other things.

Brooks: And how did your parents feel? What was their reaction to you being gone and in the Army?

Fritsch: Well, my father had died, so it just was my mother. She wanted us to do things that, you know, live our lives the way we wanted to, without being told what to do and how to do it. I think she might have wanted me to be at home but she never said, she never told me. She'd come and visit me in the different places too, so she had a place to go.

Brooks: So, Okinawa is next.

Fritsch: Yeah, and Okinawa was again, an interesting experience, because it was a totally different culture. We were getting casualties from Vietnam by then.

Brooks: What year?

Fritsch: Sixty-six, I think, '67, in there. Yeah, so we had a lot of casualties. We were the big general hospital for the whole island, and we had Marines training there, an Air Force base, big Air Force base, big supply. All the supplies for Vietnam were going through Okinawa, so the big depots. We had Special Forces training there, the SEALs trained, you know lots of training, so we were busy, busy, busy.

Brooks: What were your first impressions of Okinawa?

Fritsch: First impressions. Well, the difference in the culture. The hospital was the same, you know, I went in and went to work immediately, because I knew all the paperwork, that didn't change, everything was the same. One clinic is pretty much like the others and there, I had good techs too, and good therapists. We had a staff of about fifteen maybe.

Brooks: What was the culture like?

Fritsch: Well, it was Japanese and it was still Army occupied, you know, they were still an occupied island. They wanted, a lot of them wanted to be not in occupation, wanted the occupation forces to leave. So there was some feelings against us, but it was funny because they all like working on military bases, but they didn't want the military there. So it was kind of strange. They wanted us there but they didn't want us to go, because we were supporting the economy of Okinawa. I don't know what it's like now, but they were typically Japanese people. Nice people, you know I have nothing against them, but it was interesting, they had a leprosarium on the next island over, a hospital for leprosy patients, and they asked me if I would go and set up a rehab program on that island, which I did, and there too, what an experience.

Brooks: So were those typically Japanese patients then?

Fritsch: They were all Japanese, and the doctors were Japanese.

Brooks: So what was that like?

Fritsch: Well, the people back in my clinic weren't happy that I was exposing myself to it, but by then they were all on the medication that they use for leprosy patients now. The people who were there probably could have gone home had their families accepted them, and a lot of them were the older people who had lots of different-- they were disfigured. I learned a lot, I learned a lot about leprosy, and I learned how to work with indigenous people, which I did when I went to Vietnam.

Brooks: When you were in Okinawa, where did you stay, what were your quarters like?

Fritsch: Oh, we had little houses and by then I was a Major, and I was chief of the department, so I shared a house with the chief nurse. The little houses had two bedrooms and a bath between each, and a little kitchen and a living area. Most of the others had four people, but because I was chief, I got one half and she got the other half. They were nice little houses.

Brooks: What do you do on your downtime there?

Fritsch: Oh, swim, we were a block from the ocean, and we had lots of nice facilities, nice clubs. It was nice.

Brooks: Before you left for Okinawa, what was your experience in the States about people's thoughts about Vietnam? It hadn't really started up to its full extent at that point.

Fritsch: Yeah, it was going. I wasn't paying much attention. I was working too hard.

Brooks: I don't think you mentioned, how did you end up in Okinawa?

Fritsch: They sent me. They called me one day and said, you're going to Okinawa, I said, "Yes, ma'am."

Brooks: No arguments from you?

Fritsch: No. Well, that's how we got all our assignments.

Brooks: So you were there for a couple years?

Fritsch: Yeah. And then, because I had everything I owned in storage, and I was on the list to go eventually, to Vietnam, and I was used to the culture, the Asian culture, I said well, you know, if I have to go, I'll go right away. So I went right there from there, but they did send me back for an anatomy review, just to get me back to the States, so I could have a leave at home before I went on my tour in Vietnam.

Brooks: How long was that leave for?

Fritsch: Two weeks.

Brooks: And you were able to come back to Wisconsin?

Fritsch: Yeah. I went to the class that was two weeks.

Brooks: Was there anything that you did to kind of prepare you to go over to Vietnam?

Fritsch: No. I just got my fatigues out and polished my boots and got ready to go.

Brooks: What were your expectations?

Fritsch: I didn't have any. I knew I'd be--well, I was going to a field hospital. I already had an assignment, and I talked to some of the people who had been there. Life was not easy in Vietnam, but we had it better than most because we lived in little cinder houses. We were crowded in there. We called them villas. They were really, most places lived in hooches, that was what they called their quarters, but because we were special, we called ours villas, and everybody said oh, you're going to be living in a villa. Well, when I got there and saw what the villas were, that was kind of a shock. Again, I did essentially the same thing that I was doing in every other PT clinic, except that we were seeing lots of the casualties, and they were coming right from the--some of them were still muddy when they arrived, so it was different. It was—it was again, a very good learning experience. I think we really, the PTs really made a contribution, because the doctors used to say, when I got back, they'd say well, we could tell which patients were in hospitals that had therapists, particularly the amputees, because we saw them a couple hours after they had their amputees, we got them started on exercise. So they didn't have time to think of themselves as handicapped. We'd get them up on crutches. It was a different way of handling amputations.

Brooks: And not every hospital had PTs then?

Fritsch: No. I think twenty-three hospitals in Vietnam, and I think about ten of them had therapists.

Brooks: Was that just a lack of staffing issue?

Fritsch: I don't know why they did it that way, I really don't. The people back in the States were really working hard, because we had a lot of casualties. Do you want to take a break?

Brooks: Sure, yeah, we can do that. I'll stop this.

[end of audio file]

[File 2]

Brooks: We're recording and this is the second file of the interview with Ann Fritsch, on March 31, 2015. Where are we going to pick up, Ann?

Fritsch: Coming home from Vietnam, and I'm sure every Vietnam veteran has told you the same story about coming home. It was not a nice homecoming. I usually don't talk about it, I usually don't dwell on it, because it's so far in the past, but I think people should know, when I got to the airport in Seattle, I came back through Seattle, the customs man said, "I want to talk to you in my office." So he took my suitcase and he went through and he found a dress that I had worn, and it had all holes on it, because they hung our laundry on the barbed wire, and so we had little holes in all of our underwear and everything. He said, "You put this on." And then he took all my brass off and he crushed my hat, and I had to go buy a new hat when I got back, everything. He said, "Now, you go directly home, you don't tell anybody where you've been." He said, "Just do not tell anybody on the plane. Don't talk to anyone, just go home." That was my welcome home. He said, "It's dangerous for you to be out there telling people you've been to Vietnam." So I didn't. When I got home, I didn't tell anybody where I had been. I was still in the Army and that was it.

And then I got to my next station, which was Walter Reed, and I lived in an apartment, and I did my laundry about eleven o'clock at night, so nobody would see my uniforms. I put my--we had to have a pass in order to park on the grounds, on our bumpers, and I put that on with wires, and I'd wire it on when I got to work, and take it off before I left, and I'd go in civilian clothes and change, so nobody in my apartment knew that I was in the military.

Brooks: When you were in Vietnam, did you know to expect that when you came home?

Fritsch: No. No, we didn't hear almost nothing about what was going on in the States. We worked twelve-hour days, seven days a week; it seemed like it, you know that's all we did. We had television for about an hour and all they played was old movies, really old, like "King Kong." And we didn't see newspapers, so we didn't know. That was a shock to me, when he said, "Do not tell anyone where you've been."

Brooks: I don't think we talked a lot about while you were actually stationed in Vietnam. Did you move around a few times?

Fritsch: No, I stayed in a field hospital.

Brooks: And where was that?

Fritsch: Nha Trang, it was right on the coast. Originally, it was a resort town, so they had oh, beautiful beaches, just beautiful beaches. But you know, we didn't have time, because when you're working twelve hours, you've got to grab a meal once in a while and get some sleep. So we really didn't have time for recreation.

Brooks: Tell me about a typical day while you were there.

Fritsch: Oh, I got up early in the morning and we had one--the X-ray doctor, the radiologist would get up about three o'clock, and he'd go in and read all the X-rays that came in during the night, and then the orthopedist would go and see what came in. He would get there about six, and I would make rounds with him at six o'clock in the morning, before breakfast, and then I'd go and grab a bite to eat and then go to work.

Nha Trang was a support section. A lot of the supplies came in on ships, supplies for the whole country. That and Cam Ranh Bay were the two suppliers, and ships, Navy ships, would come in and we'd get patients from the Navy ships. We were kind of the general hospital for all the supply people, and then we were also seeing casualties, lots of casualties, I mean it was all day, every day. We'd get them out as soon as possible. There was an air base there and they would fly them out. Then I'd work until noon, and then I'd go back and work until about five or six. Then at night--I lived in a building with operating room nurses. They would go back at night and set up the packs for the next day's surgeries, and they needed help, more hands were the best, and so I'd go up and set up packs at night, and then I'd go to bed and start the next day doing the same thing.

Brooks: What would a pack consist of?

Fritsch: The instruments that they were going to use and the towels and dressings and everything would go into a pack, and then it would go in the autoclave, and they'd have techs who worked all night, just autoclaving, getting everything ready for the next day.

Brooks: So, where your hospital was, was that also just a base for men who weren't out in the field?

Fritsch: Yeah. We had Special Forces was stationed there, and SEALs, we had SEALs too.

Brooks: Did you have an impression of how things were going in terms of combat and making ground and things like that?

Fritsch: Not really, not really. All we were doing was working. We were totally away from the world. It was a strange way to live, because we didn't have any idea what was going on in the States. We didn't know about the college kids protesting. I didn't get that until I got to Walter Reed, and then I was really aware

of it because we had students from universities all up and down the East Coast, and I was in charge of the student program. I'd ask them a question. Oh, no, we were going to study that week, and that was the week they closed the school because of protests. No matter what you asked them, it was like you were going to have your whole course the last week of school or something? They use that as an excuse for everything, everything that they didn't know was going to be taught that week, and I got a little tired of it.

Brooks: I imagine.

Fritsch: Yeah. Yeah, I didn't have much sympathy for these kids, I'm sorry but I didn't.

Brooks: When you were over in Vietnam, did you get any R&R?

Fritsch: Yes I did.

Brooks: What was that like?

Fritsch: I went to Australia. No, that was the second time. First, oh, I was going to Kuala Lumpur. There was a plan, an embassy plane, going, and I was going to get that. I was waiting for the plane and my suitcase was next to me, and this kid came up to me and I looked down and he said, "Oh, don't worry about your suitcase, I put it on the plane." I said, "What plane?" He said, "Well, you're going home aren't you?" I said, "No, I'm going to Kuala Lumpur," and he said, "Well, your suitcase is going to San Francisco." So there I was, with no civilian clothes, and my camera and my travel checks were in the suitcase. I had some checks in my purse. So I went to Okinawa, back to Okinawa, where I still had friends, and I spent the week there. That was probably smarter than going to Kuala Lumpur, because all I did was rest, which is what R&R is supposed to do. I bought some clothes and I bought necessities and things like that.

About six months later, I went back to my quarters and there in my bedroom was my suitcase with everything in it; the camera, the checks, everything. Where it had been for six months, I have no idea, and how it got back to me, I don't know, but the Air Force took care of it and sent it back.

Brooks: That's great. It's good that you got it back.

Fritsch: I got it back, but I didn't get to Kuala Lumpur.

Brooks: Sorry. I had been interrupting you when you were talking about Walter Reed. So what was--just tell me, what was your assignment there initially?

Fritsch: Well, I was in charge of the orthopedic section, the PT, and also, the student program.

Brooks: And does that mean training new?

Fritsch: Training, yeah, new therapists, both from our program, the Army program, which was a master's program for Baylor University. They got their degree from Baylor, from the universities that had programs.

Brooks: Okay, so some civilians.

Fritsch: Civilians, yeah, yeah.

Brooks: Was that your first experience teaching?

Fritsch: Yeah. Oh, I taught in Vietnam, I taught English, in the high school.

Brooks: So this is a photo of you.

Fritsch: At the high school, and look at the way they went to school, on those benches.

Brooks: It doesn't look very comfortable.

Fritsch: No.

Brooks: So you were teaching?

Fritsch: English. I taught pronunciation. They had an English teacher, he was a Vietnamese English teacher, but then I just taught pronunciation.

Brooks: How was that?

Fritsch: Very interesting, oh I loved these kids, they were such good kids. The Vietnamese, I think were quite different from the Japanese. Education to a Vietnamese person was everything, everything. It was absolutely amazing. There was a school right near our hospital, and the Viet Cong would blow it up just regularly. The engineers, the Army engineers, would go out and build it, and the Viet Cong would blow it up again. But they never missed a day of school. You'd go past and there would be tarps down on the ground and the kids would be sitting there having classes. Rain or shine, they'd have their classes, wherever they were, and these kids, poor, poor, poor kids, they all wore uniforms. They wore dark pants and white shirts. Their shirts were as white as could be. They'd put them out in the sun and let them bleach and bleach and bleach, and these kids would go to school like they were going out to dinner, because that's what you did, you respected your teachers and you looked the part. Just the nicest kids.

Brooks: So how did you end up teaching them then?

Fritsch: They asked for someone and I did it. (laughs)

Brooks: Just volunteered?

Fritsch: I volunteered, sure. I did that after work, I'd go over to the school, about five o'clock. But the kids would stay. They'd stay until the American teacher came and we finished the class.

Brooks: And when you left did someone else replace you then?

Fritsch: I don't know.

Brooks: Tell me a little bit more about Walter Reed.

Fritsch: It was wonderful, yeah. Walter Reed had the patients who were transferred from the station hospitals, because they needed such highly specialized care, and we had lots and lots of doctors training there. We had interesting patients. We had the people from the embassies could get medical care at Walter Reed, the congressmen, lots and lots of VIPs, president's wives, presidents, everybody came through, and we had so many patients from Vietnam. But the ones whose conditions were such that they really couldn't be taken care of at a small station hospital, so we had very, very severe patients and we worked long hours, long, long hours. It was again, a real good learning experience for me.

Brooks: Did you have any type of specialty?

Fritsch: Yeah, I did, wherever I was assigned, I was the specialist. (laughs)

Brooks: I just don't know how it works sometimes, different wards.

Fritsch: Now everybody is specialized, yeah, yeah, and they're licensed in their specialty and all this other stuff.

Brooks: Sure.

Fritsch: No, we did it all.

Brooks: Wherever you were needed.

Fritsch: Wherever we were assigned. You hit the books if you had to. It was a teaching hospital, so we had lots of interns, lots of residents.

Brooks: Were there any particularly memorable patients?

Fritsch: Oh, yeah, yeah, one I'll never forget. Do you want to hear about it?

Brooks: Yes, please.

Fritsch: The doctor called and he said this young man had to get up, he had to start moving, or he was going to die, and we were to get him up walking. He wouldn't talk to anyone, he wouldn't eat, he wouldn't move. He just, well, he wanted to die really, I think. So I went to his room to see what it was we were going to get and he had eight tubes running in him, and bottles, about eight of them. I thought, how in the world am I going to--oh, one leg in a cast and one arm in a cast. How was I going to get this kid on his feet?

The next morning, I went to breakfast, which I normally didn't do, but I stood outside the dining room and I found the four biggest guys I could find, really big, big guys. I told them what the problem was and I said, I'll talk to your nurses, but I want you to come during your lunch hour, when everybody is away from the clinic, and we'll bring this kid, in his bed, down to the clinic. But I wanted corpsmen and not PT assistants, to do it, because they would know how to handle the oxygen and all the IVs that were running in this kid, and the blood and everything else. So, they all agreed and their nurses agreed, and so we went up and they brought the kid down on the bed and each guy had two bottles with him and was handling two. We stood him up, they put a walker on his cast, so that he could stand on that casted leg, and we stood him up, and I got down on my knees and I pushed one leg, one leg, one leg. He started to scream and he screamed and screamed and screamed. He called me every obscene name you could think of. There was one, I said to him, you know, "I don't even know what this means," and one of the corpsmen, a big, oh a nice kid, and he said to me, and ma'am--he was about nineteen years old, "Ma'am, you don't need to know." (laughs) But oh, how he screamed. Well, the more he screamed, the more fluids he pushed out of his chest tube and the deeper he was breathing. He was breathing so deep from all this screaming, that they had to turn the oxygen down. I pushed those legs forward and got in front of him and pushed him back. They put him back in the bed, the next day they did the same thing, and we did this for about a week. Finally, he decided well, you know, we're not going to let him die so he'll do something about it, and he asked for food. He had been on a feeding tube up until then. So one by one, they kept pulling the tubes out. Then he got the casts off and he started walking with crutches, and then he got down to a cane.

One Saturday, I was working and his uncle and aunt came from--he was a southern kid. They were going to take him out to dinner, so he got himself a real nice haircut and shoes, a nice pair of shoes, civilian travel shoes, and a shirt. So he came down to show us how nice he looked in his new shoes and his new clothes, and he turned around, he was going out the door, and he did a little soft shoe dance as he went out the door and I started to cry. I looked around and the corpsmen were crying and the patients were crying, everybody who had gone through this with this kid was standing there crying. It was that soft shoe that did it. And the old sergeant came up to me and he said, "You know, he's going to be all right, you don't worry about him." He said, "You know, it was just like the day I sent my little boy off on the school bus for the first time," and I thought you

know, all these people were involved emotionally with this kid. He left, he was on a cane, and he was going to go to a VA hospital. I imagine they would get him off, eventually off the cane. But he came in and he put his arms around me and he kissed me goodbye and he whispered “Am I your masterpiece?” And I thought, “Yeah, you were my masterpiece.” I’ll never forget that kid, ever, and the fact that he knew that we were practicing the art of medicine. That’s what got to me, yeah.

Brooks: Wow.

Fritsch: He was a highlight.

Brooks: Do you know what happened to him?

Fritsch: No, and that’s right, you know. They should put the hospital behind and we should let them.

Brooks: That’s amazing.

Fritsch: Yes it was, it was amazing, amazing. I can’t describe the condition that body was in, and that he could have healed that much.

Brooks: And he had been over in Vietnam?

Fritsch: Yeah. It was amazing. And then I went back to Vietnam. They asked me if I would go back, because they wanted--I went back to MACV, the advisory, as the rehab advisor, and all I did was teach. Every eight weeks, I’d get a new group of the orthopedic techs from the Vietnamese hospitals. They were all Vietnamese corpsmen, and then we’d have them for eight weeks and then they would go back. Then, I’d take a month off and travel to all their hospitals, to see how they were doing, and then I’d have another eight weeks. I think I showed you pictures of the class. Oh, here’s one of my classes.

Brooks: What year did you go back?

Fritsch: Seventy.

Brooks: And can you explain what MACV is?

Fritsch: The Military Advisory, something, Vietnam. MACV.

Brooks: I think I wrote it down actually. I know I wrote it down somewhere. Military Assistance Command Vietnam?

Fritsch: Yeah.

Brooks: So I got it. So I know that much, but can you tell me a little bit about what its job was kind of?

Fritsch: Its job was advisory to the Vietnamese Army, Army Medical Service.

Brooks: So people in MACV would be advisors too.

Fritsch: They were all advisors, yeah, and it was a tri-service team. We had Air Force dentists and Army doctors and Navy doctors, and that was again, you know working at a totally different level. And then we did know what was going on, because we had briefings every Saturday morning. We would have briefings with the command.

Brooks: You mean you knew what was going on in country?

Fritsch: And in Vietnam, yeah, yeah.

Brooks: Where were you stationed, where was the main?

Fritsch: Saigon.

Brooks: So Saigon eight weeks and then you'd travel around?

Fritsch: Yeah, yeah.

Brooks: What did you think of Saigon?

Fritsch: It was a big city. It was interesting. We used to go down to the Continental Hotel once in a while. We didn't work as many hours as I had been working for all those years. We'd go down to the hotel and that's where the press used to hang out, so we'd listen to the lies they were telling the American people, and we'd suggest to them that they would say something positive, and they used to say no, we'd never get it printed if it was positive. They only wanted to hear negative things. Yeah, I didn't have much respect for the press. They told lies and half-truths. You weren't getting the full story.

Brooks: What were those briefings like then?

Fritsch: Casualty briefings mostly. It was interesting. We worked with USAID too, the United States AID [Agency for International Development]. They were all civilians. I remember one time, I went to a meeting they were having and they were trying to decide how they would handle all the civilian amputees. The civilians had a very good prosthetic service, a few really good prosthetists, but for the numbers of people that was a problem, because they didn't have enough personnel to make enough prostheses. But they wanted to know how many amputees there were among the military, the Vietnam military, in the Vietnamese

hospitals. They had all these formula, you know, we have so many casualties and so many, on and on and on, and how should they apply the formula. I said to them, I've got a better idea, why don't we count them? Well, that was so simple and they said well we can't, how are we going to count them, and I said every one of our Vietnamese hospital has an American hospital in the area. We could have one of our people, on any given day, go to the Vietnamese hospital, and count the number of amputees in that hospital, and we'd come up with the number. Well, they looked at each other, could we do that? And of course they could and that's what we did. We got the number we were looking for, but they were making it so complicated. They didn't realize that, you know, we're in Vietnam now, everything is simple, so do the simple thing and get it done. Well, men.

Brooks: Good thing you were there.

Fritsch: I think they never would have gotten a count, never. We did a lot of different jobs. I worked at one of their--oh, they had a lot of polio, loads of polio, and the Americans went through every village and they vaccinated all these children against polio, practically wiped polio out of Vietnam. They did the same with the plague. They taught them how to take care of it, they got rid of all the rats that were carrying plague, but they did have a lot of residual polio, and so I worked part-time, on my off time, with those polio kids. That was kind of getting back to my original skill.

Brooks: Who did you report to then?

Fritsch: The commanding general of the medical section. We had, well General Bernstein was with us first, then he went on to be commander at Walter Reed. Then we had an Air Force doctor who came in, and then a Navy doctor.

Brooks: I'm just asking, because it seems like you had a fair amount of autonomy while you were there.

Fritsch: Oh, did I, yeah, yeah.

Brooks: What rank were you at this point?

Fritsch: I was a major. No, I was a *thieu da [??]*, they called me *ba thieu da [??]*, that meant lady major. This was the medal I got. When I was left, I was the only woman to ever get this medal.

Brooks: Wow! May I?

Fritsch: Mm-hmm.

Brooks: And what is it?

Fritsch: It's the Technical Medal, the Vietnamese Technical Medal, and they never gave it to women but they gave it to me.

Brooks: Oh, wow, that's exciting.

Fritsch: Do you want it?

Brooks: Well, I'll put it here for now. So this was from the Vietnamese then?

Fritsch: Yes.

Brooks: Did they present it to you in any type of ceremony?

Fritsch: Oh yeah, they have a ceremony.

Brooks: What was that like?

Fritsch: That was kind of nice, yeah. The Vietnamese doctors all came and gave it to me.

Brooks: Did they throw you a little party or anything?

Fritsch: Yeah, there was one time we had a little party, and I've never been so sick in my life, but that's another story. That was a good year. I think I got a lot done that year. I put together a little textbook in Vietnamese. When I would go to different places, they'd have fliers that they gave patients, and so I'd collect them and get them translated. I did most of my teaching from films, so we set up a film library for them, so they could use them when I was gone and there was no one teaching.

Brooks: Did they tell you why they gave you the medal? Did they give you a little speech or anything?

Fritsch: Oh, yeah, they wrote it out and I can't find it. It was very strange when it was translated. (laughs) Yeah.

Brooks: That's nice. That's quite an honor.

Fritsch: Yes, it was. Yeah, I was touched.

Brooks: Did they give that to you right before you headed back?

Fritsch: Yeah, just before I left.

Brooks: Which was in, was that '70 still?

Fritsch: Seventy, yeah. And then I spent about three weeks, I think, in Da Nang, at their spinal cord injury hospital. When I left there, then the nurses gave me a vase, and

I think it's in the corner there, because no one had ever taught them how to take care of spinal cord patients. They just assigned them and let them kind of go on their own, and so you know, there I was, paying attention. I guess they thought that they were just kind of, I don't know, they didn't get much cooperation from their front office. They were just kind of stuck out there with these patients that they didn't know what to do with, and so I spent a lot of time with them, teaching them how to get patients in and out of bed and how to treat them and how to get them standing and things like that. Well, it never occurred to them, that they could stand a patient with a spinal cord injury. Those things healed and the patients were so--you know, the Vietnamese are such little people, that they were easy to handle. So when I left, they gave me this lovely vase and said I was the only one who ever cared that they learned anything, and I thought, oh those poor girls. I just felt so bad for them. That was a nice experience too.

Brooks: Hopefully they could then teach others.

Fritsch: I stayed at the American hospital, I was there. Wherever I went, I found a place to stay. A lot of times I didn't know in the morning, where I was going to stay that night, but you found a place.

Brooks: Yeah, it's adventurous.

Fritsch: Hmm?

Brooks: Adventurous. And you did your R&R in Australia?

Fritsch: Yeah, I did my R&R in Australia.

Brooks: How was that?

Fritsch: Oh, wonderful, just wonderful.

Brooks: How long were you there?

Fritsch: A week. We went to Tasmania. I had been to Australia before, so I went down to Tasmania.

Brooks: That's great. Any good stories from down there, or were you actually resting that time too?

Fritsch: I climbed a mountain. I'd never climbed a mountain before.

Brooks: That's something.

Fritsch: And on the way home--no, that was from our first trip. I went down with a nurse friend of mine from one of the other hospitals. We went twice. We were in

Okinawa together too, and so while we were in Okinawa, we went to Australia. You know, you could get hops, you could go out to an airbase and go wherever they were going, which was kind of fun. So you really didn't know where you were going. You went where they went.

Brooks: And you used to stand on the helicopter pads?

Fritsch: Yeah. My second tour, I had to go around the whole country.

Brooks: How did you usually get around, helicopter?

Fritsch: Helicopter. Well, in the small Air Force planes.

Brooks: No driving?

Fritsch: I had a license to drive a jeep and we did have a jeep, to take them around Saigon, because we'd pick them up at the Vietnamese hospital, where they lived, the students, and take them to the American hospital for training. They had lectures in the morning and then they trained on the wards in the afternoon.

Brooks: Did they train on American patients then?

Fritsch: Sometimes, yeah. In Saigon they did, yeah, because we had a deal with the American hospital, that they would take them. The kids liked that. They got a good meal and saw different doctors and different patients, and the doctors were real good about teaching.

Brooks: That's good.

Fritsch: That was a good year.

Brooks: Yeah, it sounds like it.

Fritsch: I took some time off before I went home and kind of unwound, so it wasn't so traumatic going back the second time. I knew what to expect and things had kind of calmed down by then.

Brooks: Yeah, that's what I was wondering, if the climate had changed at all. This is kind of when people are starting to--the troops were being brought home, back in waves.

Fritsch: Yeah, sure, so it wasn't as bad.

Brooks: Where did you take your time off?

Fritsch: Europe.

Brooks: Oh, wow.

Fritsch: I went skiing.

Brooks: Oh, nice.

Fritsch: It was winter, and so I went skiing for a week, went to Garmisch, the American R&R center in Europe. I had a friend over in Munich. Skied for a week and came home, got a hope on a C5-A1, in the big cargo ship, cargo planes, out of Germany, into Delaware, and then went home and was relaxed by then, not so uptight as I was the first time. My mother thanked me. She said, I couldn't go through that a second time. I didn't realize I had affected her that way.

Brooks: That first time that you had come back, because you were so stressed?

Fritsch: Yeah.

Brooks: So you had spent some time at home before Walter Reed? When you came back after you got a little break.

Fritsch: Oh yeah, the first time, yeah. I then went to Fort Meade and that too was interesting because we took care of the people from the National Security Agency, NSA. That was interesting, because we couldn't ask them questions about their job or anything, so we didn't know if they worked standing up or sitting down or what. We just kind of... There was nothing in their records. You played every one of them by ear, because you didn't know anything about them. It was different.

Brooks: And where is Fort Meade?

Fritsch: Between Washington and Baltimore. It's in the paper today, a lot of it, in fact pictures. That's where they had the shooting a couple days ago. The guard was shot. And then I went to San Francisco. I got orders to go to NATO Headquarters in Belgium. I was all ready to go, I was just so excited, and my boss called up and she said well, the person who was in charge of the student program at San Francisco, doesn't get along with the boss, so I'm going to send her to Europe and you can go in her place. I thought, she can't get along so they give her the top job, the choice job? I said, well if I can't get along can I go to Europe too, and she said you'll get along. Yes, ma'am. So, I had the student program there. We had students from Stanford, University of the Pacific, and all the California schools.

Then I went back to Walter Reed and I was chief of the department. I ran that whole department at Walter Reed. It went into a new building and I was the project officer for the building. Then I went to health services command and I was corps chief.

Brooks: Wow. So how long did you stay at all those places?

Fritsch: Oh, about a year, year and a half.

Brooks: So never usually not two years or more.

Fritsch: A couple places were two years.

Brooks: How did you feel about all that traveling?

Fritsch: I didn't mind. The last four years I traveled, I was the PT consultant for the Army, so I visited all the hospitals in the Army.

Brooks: Where were you stationed that time?

Fritsch: San Antonio.

Brooks: Back where you started.

Fritsch: Yeah, back where I started. I got promoted to colonel.

Brooks: What was that job like?

Fritsch: It was all administration. I missed patient care. I was ready to get out. I went to work one day and I said to my boss, "I think I'd better leave," and he said, "Why?" I said, "I woke up this morning and I was going to call in sick." He said, "That's the first time that's happened?" I said, yeah. I said, "I just didn't want to come to work this morning," and I said, "I think I'd better retire." So he said, "Well, take a month to think about it and then let me know." So I did, I retired. I was going to go back to a clinic, they were going to reassign me to one of the clinics, one of the general hospitals, but by then, you know it was time, and you know when it's time.

Brooks: And this was 1983?

Fritsch: It was the end of '82, but I had so much accumulated, vacation time, the actual discharge was in '83.

Brooks: What was the discharge process like?

Fritsch: Oh, they had a parade and they played the theme from *M*A*S*H* and the troops marched by and they gave me the Legion America. Do you know any of the medals? Well, you know the Legion of Honor. Not the--

Brooks: The Medal of Honor.

Fritsch: The Medal of Honor. Well, there's three congressional medals; the Medal of Honor, the Legion of Merit and the Legion of... something else, I forget. Anyhow, those are the three congressional, and I got one of them, and you wear it on a pink ribbon around it.

Brooks: Yeah. So they had a party for you.

Fritsch: They had a party, yeah.

Brooks: Was that down in San Antonio?

Fritsch: Yeah, yeah. That was a nice experience. See how thin I was at one time?

Brooks: And your nurses outfit, if we can call it that.

Fritsch: Where is that picture? Oh, that's where they're giving me the Legion of Merit, and this was what they handed out to all the guests at the parade.

Brooks: Wow. Twenty-six years of honorable service.

Fritsch: The twenty-six was--I was paid for twenty-eight, but I had thirty-two. You get points when you're a Reservist, and so they gave me three years for pay purposes. So, I think that's about it.

Brooks: All right, let me clip you back in here.

Fritsch: I think you didn't expect so much did you?

Brooks: Oh, no I did, and I've got more questions.

Fritsch: Okay.

Brooks: Let me just make sure we've got everything on here. This says that you returned to active duty during the Berlin crisis, and you were assigned to Brooke Army Medical Center. Which assignment was that? Did we talk about that one?

Fritsch: That was after I left Columbia.

Brooks: I think we covered all of this. Fort Meade, Letterman Army Medical Center. Great. So this says that your retirement plans are to winter in San Antonio and summer in Wisconsin. Is that how it worked out? No?

Fritsch: No, it didn't. My mother was still alive. She was 101 when she died, and I came back to help care for her. I kept my apartment and then I moved in here, because this was going to be my sister's apartment and I was going to stay in San Antonio.

She was going to winter down there and I would come up with her. She was in the hospital and they said she had to move in or she'd lose the apartment. So I moved in instead and helped take care of my mother until she died.

Brooks: And you've been here ever since then?

Fritsch: Yeah.

Brooks: Did you have a career after the Army?

Fritsch: I worked next door, at the hospital next door. It was Lakeview Hospital at the time. Well, after I retired in San Antonio, I worked for the Arthritis Foundation as a volunteer, and I taught living with arthritis. And then they sent me to their course in Salt Lake City, to do the instructor training. So then after that, I did instructor training around Texas, and then I realized that I was doing a great deal of what the people who were being paid to do should have been doing and so I stopped, and then I came back here and I worked. And then I volunteered at the VA Hospital for lots of years.

Brooks: So if you were forced to choose, what do you think your favorite assignment was?

Fritsch: Oh, Alaska. (laughs)

Brooks: That was easy, huh? Yeah, I got that sense when you were talking about it. The most fun?

Fritsch: Most fun, right.

Brooks: What do you think the most challenging assignment was?

Fritsch: I really don't know. I think the most emotionally challenging was the burn center. I think the toughest really, was Walter Reed. Yeah, I think that would be it.

Brooks: So, we talked a little bit about your experience at Walter Reed, and especially after that first homecoming from Vietnam. How do you think people respond to you these days, when they find out you're a veteran?

Fritsch: Oh, people thank me. Nobody had ever thanked me, ever, and one day I was at a dinner and I was sitting next to a man and he said--and this was years later. He said, "I want to thank you." I said, "Thank me?" I was so startled. And he said, "You mean nobody's ever thanked you?" I said, "No, nobody's ever thanked me." Now they do, they say thank you for your service, and that's kind of nice to hear once in a while. I'm pleased that the whole atmosphere has changed for veterans. Some Vietnam veterans, I'm sorry to say, are a little bitter about the homecoming, but I think they should be happy that it's changed. You know, I told you what I put up with, and the rest did too, but that doesn't make me want these

veterans to have that experience. I'm happy that they're being received the way they are.

Brooks: Did you ever join any veteran's organizations?

Fritsch: Yeah. I belong to the Catholic War Veterans and I'm the VAVS for them, you know, at the VA Hospital.

Brooks: What is that?

Fritsch: The volunteer services. Each organization has someone who works in the volunteer office, and I'd been doing that while I worked at the chaplain's service for, oh maybe ten years, and then I've been doing this other for a long time. And then I'm on the board of the War Memorial.

Brooks: In Milwaukee?

Fritsch: Yeah, ah-huh. War Memorial Center, do you know where that is?

Brooks: Mm-mm.

Fritsch: Its downtown.

Brooks: Oh, yeah, sorry, I thought you meant there was a different.

Fritsch: No, no, the center.

Brooks: I was there last year in the fall, for an event. Yeah, that's great. Did you keep in touch with anybody from service?

Fritsch: Yeah, the people from Alaska are my very dearest service friends.

Brooks: Oh yeah?

Fritsch: Yeah.

Brooks: That's great. Where are most of them from, or are they all over?

Fritsch: All over. Some are living in Texas and Kansas and Cincinnati. We have an organization, the AMSCs, retired AMSCs, they meet every two years. I've gone to every one up until this year; I decided not to go, because the last time, I was the oldest one there and all my friends have... You know at my age, your friends go.

Brooks: You said AMSC?

Fritsch: Army Medical Specialist Corps.

Brooks: Okay, that makes sense. Well, sometimes we ask--I think we went through all of the pretty general questions. Sometimes I like to ask some wrap-up questions, but I think you covered most of them. Was there anything about your career in the military that surprised you?

Fritsch: I think of how well we were received when civilian women seemed to be crabbing about, you know? For one thing, we were paid the same as the men and that made a difference. Yeah. I never quite understood what the feminists were hollering about, because we were very well received.

Brooks: Yeah, so no gender based struggles?

Fritsch: The only trouble, I mentioned it before, when I went to Grand General Staff College. I went to the Reserve program for the staff college, and I went one weekend a month, when I was in San Francisco and Washington. So, you know, it took a long time to get through the college. Most of the instructors were Reservists, and they were a little reluctant to accept a woman in their class. But as I told you before, it's because you know, they hampered their dirty jokes and you know, I didn't put up with it. So, yeah, I think I expected more discrimination because of being a woman.

Brooks: When you did that one time, encounter that, how did you handle it? You said you didn't put up with it, what does that mean?

Fritsch: I asserted myself. You want to hear what the situation was?

Brooks: Sure.

Fritsch: The instructor gave a group of us, a few of us, an assignment to give an oral report on a subject, and then he called on the men and when they were finished I said, "Well, I didn't give my report," and he said, "Oh, I don't think you have anything that we'd want to hear about." And I said, "Then why did you give me the assignment?" He said, "Because I'm an instructor, I can do what I want." So I went to the door, it was lunchtime. I went to the door and I stood in front of the door and I said, "Nobody leaves this room until I give my report," and I didn't look at the instructor. I don't know what his face looked like. They all moaned and said, "Its lunchtime," and I said, "I don't care if you starve. We're going to sit here and you're going to listen to my report." And they all-- Because up until that time, I hadn't hardly said a word in that class, but I was miffed, because I spent a lot of time working on the paper and I wanted them to hear what I had to say. The topic was night operations, and so I wrote it about how we took care of patients during night operations, when there was mortar attack on our hospital and how we handled them in the dark. It was a darn good paper and I wanted them to hear it. I said, "You either hear it now or you hear it tomorrow when we come," and they said "Well, we'll hear it tomorrow," so I said okay. I went to lunch, nobody came

to lunch, and then about twenty minutes later the guys started to come in and one of them came over to the table. I said, "Where was everybody?" He said, "We had a few things to settle with that instructor," and he said, "We let him know that nothing like this was ever going to happen again." One of them was Adjutant General Corps Officer and he said, "I told him that he would lose his commission if it ever happened again." Ooh, so that ended that.

Brooks: Wow. It's nice that they stood up for you, with you.

Fritsch: Yeah, right, yeah.

Brooks: That's great.

Fritsch: And one of them said to me, "Did you have to put up with that for all these years?" I said, "No." Because I didn't. They respected our education, they respected our skills.

Brooks: That's great.

Fritsch: Yeah, it was, and we had so much more freedom then, civilian therapists, to make decisions, we really did. I liked military work much better than next door. We were never treated like handmaids.

Brooks: While you were in Vietnam, did you have any close calls?

Fritsch: Oh, yeah.

Brooks: I don't think we really touched on--

Fritsch: No. And I guess I don't think of that all that much. It's funny that I wouldn't have mentioned it, isn't it? We had mortar attacks regularly. We had one that they hit the autoclave, of all dumb things, and of course if you don't have an autoclave what are you going to do? Well, they had to boil all the instruments and it was horrible. They got one almost immediately from the depot, got a new one. In Okinawa, your transportation was so good, you know the Air Force was there flying things back and forth. So they did get an autoclave.

One exploded right in front of my clinic and it put holes in the roof of the clinic. They had to repair that. I wasn't there, it was at night. One fellow was killed outside our--he was coming out of the office and he got killed. But yeah, they would harass us with a few mortars every night. You'd get up; you'd go to the ward and put all the patients under the bed. We had mattresses, and we'd slide them under and put the patient on, wrap them in flak jackets and helmets. A few mortars would come in and you'd wait, wait, wait, and then another one would come. So, a lot of times we were pretty tired, because by the time you got them all

back to bed again, and I would help with the orthopedic patients, it was time to go to work.

Brooks: Did you have warnings then?

Fritsch: Yeah, the sirens would go off and you'd run like heck. We kept our uniforms like firemen, the pants inside the boots, so you could just jump in them. Most of us slept in our underwear, so that we could be up and out. There was one period when we were walking around like zombies, I mean we hadn't had sleep for days on end. That was pretty terrible.

Brooks: What kind of kept you going during those difficult times?

Fritsch: Patients. You had a job to do so you did it. You know, we had such good doctors and they were there. You didn't have to, you know? In civilian hospital and even in military hospital, the doctors would go home at night. But if you needed a doctor, you got a doctor fast, because they had nothing else to do. They were sequestered as we were. There was a period when we weren't allowed to leave the compound, so we had nothing to do but work.

I remember, when I got to Walter Reed, there was a doctor there who had been with us in Nha Trang, and one day I met him in the hall and he said, "I want you to promise me something. If I get sick, you'll have me airvac'd back to 8th Field Hospital." (laughs) I said, "Okay, I'll take care of that."

Brooks: Okay, sure. Wow, that says a lot.

Fritsch: Yeah. It was a good hospital, a really good hospital, good nursing. Oh, my, I can't say enough about the Army nurses. They were wonderful, wonderful nurses, so capable.

Brooks: I'm sorry, it's 8th Field Hospital?

Fritsch: Mm-hmm.

Brooks: Was that your first tour? And then MACV was your second, okay.

Fritsch: Yeah, ah-huh.

Brooks: I just wanted to make sure I had that. All right, well then unless you have something else that you think we should touch on.

Fritsch: I've said more than enough.

Brooks: My last question would be why did you think that you wanted to do an oral history interview with us, for the museum?

Fritsch: Oh, because I think people ought to know that there were women in the service, working hard. I think that was my reason, that they kind of forget there were women. During World War II there were fifty-five thousand nurses, women nurses, in the Army Nurse Corps; fifty-five thousand. That's a lot of women, and the chief of the Nurse Corps at the time was a major and you know, taking care of fifty-five thousand people, the rank of major. She was a colonel by the time the war ended. Of course now they have a general.

Brooks: It's an important part of the story.

Fritsch: Yeah, I think it is. I hope there are other women, because women did interesting things in the service, and I think they kind of underestimated us. People around here can't believe that I was a colonel. I'll tell you a funny story about that if you've got time.

Brooks: Yeah.

Fritsch: While I was down at Health Services Command, the Panama Canal Treaty was being--do you know about the Panama Canal Treaty?

Brooks: Mm-hmm.

Fritsch: Yeah. Well, there was a lot of medical questions that had to be taken care of, and so they sent a taskforce down and I was in the taskforce. Because I had worked in the leprosarium, the fate of the leprosarium down there was in question. So I went to meet with the doctors there and discuss what we could do with the leprosarium, because it was going to be--it was part of the Pan Canal Company, but there wasn't going to be any company, so who was going to take care of the Hansen's Disease patients? So then the next day, a couple of doctors had never been to a leprosarium, so they wanted to go with me, and then the next day another one.

Well, I had so many things I had to do, that I didn't have time to even go and look at the canal. So, the last day they made arrangements for me to go on a catwalk, across the canal, into where the engineers were who managed the opening and closing of the gates. So, they told me that I could open the gate, there was an oiler coming through. So, I pulled the lever and this big huge gate, and the water rushed in and this big ship came. They said oh, you know, "The last person we let do this was President Carter, and before that was Queen Elizabeth," and I said, "Well, why did you let me?" He said, "Well, we'd heard there was a woman colonel in this group and none of us had ever met a woman colonel." And then there was silence and I said, "And?" And he said, "We thought you'd be taller." (laughter) Isn't that wonderful?

Brooks: Oh, man, how do you respond to that?

Fritsch: We thought you'd be taller. (laughs)

Brooks: Only so much you can do about that.

Fritsch: Yeah, right.

Brooks: Oh, wow, that's good.

Fritsch: That was a good experience too.

Brooks: That's great, that they let you do that?

Fritsch: Yeah!

Brooks: That's really neat. Great. Well, okay. Well, we can end it there, if that's okay with you?

Fritsch: Yeah, that's fine.

Brooks: All right, great. Well, I want to say thank you.

Fritsch: Oh, I've enjoyed this. You know, I haven't thought about these things in a long, long time, because I'm too--you know, retired people are so busy.

Brooks: That's what I've heard.

Fritsch: Oh, gosh.

Brooks: Got to stay busy.

Fritsch: We have classes here every day, there's some kind of a class going on. Yesterday, I had chorus, today I had writing group, tomorrow I have book club.

Brooks: Wow. All right, well I'll go ahead and turn this off.

Fritsch: Okay.

[end of audio file]