

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Dorothy C. Tompkins
U. S. Army Nurse Corps
World War II

2005

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Tompkins, Dorothy C., (1923-), Oral History Interview, 2005

User copy, 2 sound cassettes (ca. 100min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master copy, 2 sound cassettes (ca. 100min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

ABSTRACT

Dorothy Tompkins, a Bloomer, Wis. native, discusses her World War II service as a second lieutenant with the U.S. Army Nurse Corps in Saipan. Tompkins tells of enlisting in the Army Nurse Corps while still in nursing school, and reporting to basic training at Camp McCoy (Wisconsin) on March 23, 1945. Tompkins served from June 1945 until August 1946. Tompkins was then sent to Camp Beale (California), a gathering place for people going overseas. Shortly after her arrival to Camp Beale, Tompkins traveled-cross country by train to Camp Kilmer (New Jersey). Tompkins tells of taking the St. Olaf Army Hospital Ship on a six-week journey from New York, through the Panama Canal to Saipan. Tompkins describes the accommodations aboard the ship and also tells of how she became a "shellback" after crossing the International Date Line. Upon her arrival in Saipan, Tompkins reveals the conditions of the 148th General Hospital as well as the conditions of the 369th Station Hospital where she was later transferred. Tompkins mentions the use of maggots on burns and infections before penicillin was available; she also describes the differences between evacuation and station hospitals. Tompkins talks of enduring a typhoon, food poisoning of almost all hospital staff, eating canned peas for days, trapping rats, and being in Saipan when the atomic bomb was dropped. Tompkins describes how at the end of war only six nurses remained on Saipan, where there had been two thousand when Tompkins arrived a year earlier. Tompkins talks of how she passed the time playing Gin Rummy, going to the beach, and being able to fly home instead of going by ship. Tompkins relates that she arrived at Fairfield Suisun Air Base (California), and then on to Fort Sheridan (Illinois) until finally returning to Bloomer (Wisconsin). Tompkins talks of using the GI Bill for college as well.

Biographical Sketch

Dorothy C. Tompkins (1923-), a nurse in the U.S. Army Nurses Corps during World War II, has lived in Elmhurst (Illinois), Fort Lauderdale (Florida), and more recently in Lake Mills (Wisconsin). Since her WWII service, Tompkins has become a member of the American Legion as well as the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

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

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

Transcript edited by Brooke E. Perry Hoesli, Wisconsin Veterans Museum 2007

Interview Transcript

John: This is John Driscoll, and I am a volunteer with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Archives, and today is October 25, 2004. And this is an oral history interview with Dorothy Tompkins who is a veteran of World War II, of the U. S. Army Nurse Corps. Dorothy, good morning, and this is at Dorothy's home in Lake Mills, Wisconsin. And thanks a lot for agreeing with the interview. Why don't we start at the beginning? Where and when were you born?

Dorothy: I was born in Bloomer, Wisconsin, in 1923.

John: Okay. And your family?

Dorothy: Yes. I had parents. And I had two sisters, one older and one younger than I. And I went to school there, all the way through high school. Graduated at seventeen and went away to nursing school the following September, in Springfield, Illinois. Because at that time I couldn't get into a nursing school in Wisconsin. You had to be eighteen. And I wasn't eighteen. In Illinois, you could get in. And I was, when the war began, I was still seventeen, and I was a probationary nurse. The first six months you spent as, what we called a "probie."

John: Okay. Probationary.

Dorothy: Yea. And if I talk, when I talk to a couple of groups about being in the Army Nurse Corps, I usually begin by saying that when I began, I was still seventeen. When it ended, I was on an island in the Pacific. A lot of years later. And so I went all the way through nursing school and when I finished, the war, of course, had been on all this time, and being in nursing school at that time, you really worked hard because the people that were eligible to be in the military were gone. The hospital was really totally staffed by students, like ourselves. So, anyway, I went home and I had got a job in the operating room in a little hospital in Eau Claire. And one of my classmates was also working there. She was from Eau Claire. And everybody we knew was in the military just about. And when I took the state board exam, that I could not take until I was twenty-one, there were recruiters there. And we talked to them. I did. Moira had already taken her boards. And then I went home, and I think I thought I was going to think it over, but I didn't really give it much thought because I was pretty busy. But this girl from Eau Claire that I was working with said to me one day, "I think I will go down and join the Army Nurse Corps." And to do it, you had to go to Chicago. I don't know why, but we did. And she said, "I don't want to go alone. Why don't you go with me?" So that is how I happened to join the Army Nurse Corps at that time. And we went back home. We passed the physical, and we went back home, and promptly got called up. We must have gone to Chicago some time in January or

February.

John: Of what year?

Dorothy: 1945, this was. And I was in the Army Nurse Corps in, I was in basic training in March. So things moved along. They needed nurses. And so I reported to Camp McCoy. I remember because we kid around about it here in this household. March 23, 1945, I was in basic training, and I was there for six weeks. I think that is all. And what it was was a lot of shots. I got shots for everything you could think of. Bubonic plague, cholera, typhus, and the usuals, you know. Vaccination and whatever else they give you. But it seemed to me they all fell on me at once. And then we must have known from the very beginning that all of us were going overseas. I can't remember how many people were in my basic training class but there were a lot of us. I happened to be one who knew how to tie a necktie, because my dad taught me. Anyway, I tied a lot of neckties in basic training. When we finished, we were sent directly to Camp Beale, California. It was a gathering place for people who were going overseas. Basically, it was replacements because there were a lot of people over there who had been there a long, long time. So anyway, I had been out of Wisconsin. I had been to Chicago several times with my parents, and Minneapolis, and that was about it. So, having a cross-country trip on the train was rather a treat. So we got to Camp Beale, and I don't know how long we were there but it wasn't terribly long. Maybe a couple weeks. Not any more than that. I managed to hook up with one of my boy cousins. Two of them, as a matter of fact. One was in the Navy and one was in the Coast Guard. And, as a matter of fact, in World War II, I counted them up the other day, and there were ten of us, all cousins. Quite unusual, I think. And I was the only girl. And they are mostly still around. Anyhow, we are a hearty people. In basic training, I met a young girl, an Indian girl from Nebraska.

John: American Indian?

Dorothy: Um huh. Her name was June Hatchett. And Junie and I went all the way through basic training, overseas, and home together. Anyway, we were at Camp Beale. I don't really remember how long but then they told us that we were going to be shipped out. And we got on a train in Camp Beale, California. Everybody always says, "What?" And went to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey.

John: All the way across?

Dorothy: Um huh.

John: Where was Camp Beale in California?

Dorothy: It's outside of Sacramento. It's at Marysville, California. I don't know if it's still there or not. First time I ever saw an olive tree. There were quite a lot of those. It was quite a great place. There was practically no place you could spend money. Everything was very, very inexpensive. The food was wonderful. We had a great time there. And we went to New Jersey on the cross-country train, the Southern Route.

John: Okay. All the way to Camp Kilmer.

Dorothy: This must have been some kind of trying to keep us from anybody who watched troop trains, what was going on here. So it took one week to cross the country, because we weren't a big priority train. You know, as war materials were, and so on. So we spent a lot of time on sidings, and there are not many places you can take a shower on a troop train.

John: No, there aren't.

Dorothy: And we were all pretty clean mid-Westerners. In fact, there were in my basic training class, I ran into four girls from my class at nursing school. And we all went overseas together. So it was absolutely wonderful for us that we had each other. So we were in, I don't remember exactly how many days we were in New York, but it was long enough for us to get leave, so that we weren't allowed to tell anybody where we were and, of course, we didn't know where we were going. But we did get leave to go into New York and we did everything. We went to the Empire State Building, and all sorts of stuff like that.

John: That's great.

Dorothy: And that is when I found out I didn't like tall buildings. And I still don't. And we got orders to embark, and we went, we were told, you know, how much we could take with us, and so on. One of my friends, who was also one of my classmates, was a flaming redhead, and she was part of a boy-girl twin. And had older siblings. And they were horrified that Virginia was going overseas, so they kept sending her stuff, you know. She had a foot locker that wouldn't quit. And on a fling in Chicago, she was from Illinois, they bought her fluffy negligees, and that sort of stuff. And her whole, they knew this. They were afraid that she wouldn't be able to get cosmetics. And the whole tray of her foot lockers was just full of cosmetics. And all of this stuff, so that she had to put her things that were issued to her inside her trench coat, and she carried this thing that looked like a mummy. And she will be continued because she was quite an interesting lady. Well, anyways, we finally got these orders that we were to ship out, and we piled into these, there were a lot of us. And we piled into the back what are still troop carriers. If you see them on television. And went to the port and, as I remember it,

we actually got on the ship. And then they decided there was something wrong with it. And we had to all get off and get back and go back to Camp Kilmer while they repaired the ship. Which certainly didn't make us feel very good about the safety of this transport. Although it was a hospital ship.

John: Do you know the name of it?

Dorothy: I have picture of it upstairs. It was the *St. Olaf*.

John: *St. Olaf*. Okay.

Dorothy: It was an Army hospital ship. The Navy hospital ships were floating hospitals. The Army hospital ships were to get people home.

John: Okay.

Dorothy: They did have facilities but they were not the deluxe ones, in quotes, "World War II style" that the Navy had.

John: Let me ask you a question. When you got out of basic, you were a commissioned officer, weren't you?

Dorothy: Yea. I was a second lieutenant. And, by the way, after about a week, I think it was, we got back on this ship and went, I think we made a couple more trips into New York, thinking good grief, we better have fun. And we started out, and I swear I was seasick in the harbor. And I was so seasick. I thought I was absolutely going to die. I had had car sickness but, of course, I had never been on a boat. Oh, that was absolutely terrible. And I really never got over it. We lived thirty years in Florida and every time somebody invited us out on their boat, it was the same thing all over again. Well, the food, now, on the hospital ship was wonderful but I couldn't eat any of it, of course. So we sailed away and we went to Panama. And I remember the day that we went through the Panama Canal vividly. It was a beautiful Sunday. It took all day at that time to get through the Canal. I don't know what it is like now, but I don't want to go. And everybody kept telling me "You will feel better when you get in the Pacific." And they were wrong. You know, because the swells go like this, instead of like that. But what is the difference? But we did have a beautiful little trip through the Canal and they let us off at the Pacific side for the evening. So the one thing we could do there was mail letters, but we couldn't say where we were. I have my letters. My mother saved them. And I wrote letter number one, or whatever it was, on it. But I couldn't tell them where I was. Then we set sail on the Pacific and, would you believe, six weeks after we left New York we landed on Saipan.

John: I can believe that.

Dorothy: Forty-two days.

John: That is an awful long time to be at sea. What was living on the ship like? What kind of accommodations did you have?

Dorothy: Well, it was a hospital ship so it was like a floating hospital, and they just, by a number, they gave you an assignment of a bunk. And I think there were about twenty-four people in the room, in the place I was in. One of my friends, Lee, the redhead, lucked out and got in one that only held four people. So everybody took turns hanging around with Lee a lot. Sitting on her bed one day, I was propped up like this against the end of the bed, sound asleep, and four girls were sitting, we were all nurses, four of us were sitting in the top bunk, and they all jumped out at once. And the bed jumped out of the slots and got me. And I had a gash in my head about three inches or more long. I still have a scar. And the world's most colossal headache.

John: I can believe it. Oh, wow.

Dorothy: Well, fortunately, it was a hospital ship and they patched me up. And I lay on the bed and had the headache for a few days, and that was sort of the end of that. We were zig-zagging, and we were in a southern route, going under Hawaii, to get over there. And what we did on the ship was play a lot of gin rummy, and eat a lot, if you could eat. Read. We had to divide up our reading material into pages, not chapters. We didn't have a lot. And the crew kind of resented us, because they had their own bunch of nurses and doctors, and so on. But they were used to going out empty. And coming back with wounded soldiers and so on. So they were used to having wherever they were going a nice voyage, sea trip, or cruise, or whatever you want to call it. Then they were stuck with all these nurses. When we crossed the International Dateline, we had the usual ceremony of becoming a - I still have the little certificate I got. Of becoming a Shellback. And I read in a letter this morning that, somehow or other, I had molasses and eggs put in my hair. Which seems incredible.

John: Yea. I was there.

Dorothy: And dunked in the swimming pool, and the whole thing. And missing a day of your life, supposedly. Which we got back when we came home. We owe you a day. And I don't remember exactly when they told us where we were going, but there was a big map when you were standing in line for meals, and they would show how much progress we had made. And, honestly, I couldn't believe that you

only went from about that much in a day, you had done that. Because ocean-going, at least in those days, was very slow. And it just seemed like an incredible amount of time, but eventually we arrived. And we didn't really know where we were.

John: At Saipan?

Dorothy: Even though they told us, because we hadn't been too aware of the battle for it. The island was secured, but in a war zone when I arrived there. Anyhow, we arrived on a beautiful sunny morning and it looked gorgeous. It looked like something out of Dorothy Lamour, Bing Crosby. And it is a pretty island. I can't believe now, when I go shopping, that I can buy something made there, because there was absolutely nothing except the military and I don't even know where the Japanese were being kept. But there were natives, the Camorra natives. And they had, they had priests. You know, it was a missionary place. And I really didn't know after I got there where I was, but there were an enormous number of Americans there. A figure like twenty thousand sticks in my mind. Because the invasion was being readied, and also it was the place the B-29s took off from. At that time. So every morning you would hear them take off. Well, I don't know how long I had been there. I was assigned to a general hospital that was up in the hills. It was on Mount Topacho (?), I think it was called. And the first I did general duty out there in the hospital. Because there were two staffs of nurses. Those that were there, and we now had come to replace them. And I can't remember when they went back to Hawaii, but I know they were mighty glad to go. They had been out there for quite a while. More than a year, I think. And I understood it, as time went by. And we were, of course, crowded into the nurses quarters because of the number of us. Well, I'll tell you about the nurses quarters, first. They were Quonset huts, and they didn't have, nothing had windows. There were screens on the quarters and that is where I ran into rats. And growing up, as I did, in a small town, I truly had never seen a rat in my life and I wouldn't have known it anyway, because these were big as cats. You know, when I think of being over there, rats are the first thing I think of, which is awful. But one of the people in the Quonset hut was a med tech, and she was from the South, and I guess she had seen a rat before, because she had traps, and a dog. I don't know where she ever got that little dog. And the dog would alert her, and you know, she would catch these rats, and everybody else would close their eyes and screech and holler. And Wilma would take them out and I don't know what she did with the rat bodies. Threw them over, there was a big chain link fence around the place, and she would throw them over the fence, I suppose. And then she would take the traps with her to the sterilizing department of the hospital, and run them through the autoclave. Which I am sure was not standard procedure. We missed her terribly when she went home. When I went to the next hospital, we didn't have Wilma. Well, anyhow, we were there a while and the other nurses went home.

And I think we were there two months or so, we must have been there three months, when the war ended.

John: Okay, that would have been in August.

Dorothy: In August. And then people began to get sent back home and we turned out to be absolute, Junie and I turned out to be dead last on the list because my four classmates were in the military about six or eight weeks ahead of me. So they got sent back first. But we had loads of patients. And, of course, they were trying to send people back, but there were people who were too sick to send, or too hurt to send. And so on. And for a long time, you know, in recent years, I've wondered if I'd ever seen any of the Japanese prisoners who were repatriated, promptly. And I used to tell myself, well, maybe I didn't really see them. Maybe I just heard about them. But I have a letter that says that I did. And it describes their pitiful condition. Colors you're thinking forever. But they were among the many people that came through the hospital. But after a long period of time, at that first hospital, two of my friends wanted to transfer to Guam because one of them had fallen in love with an officer who was being sent down there. And so they left. And they had been in charge of the nurses quarters. Sort of super-housekeepers. So one of my other classmates and I got that job and we no longer worked in the hospital. And that was a rather unusual job because we had the work was all done by Japanese who were colonists. They were on the island then, they had nothing to do with the Japanese army except they did hide them. And many of them had been born there. And they could apply for a job working either in the hospital or the quarters, officers quarters or nurses quarters. And they had a little piece of red cloth, I would say it was about that long, four inches long, had a number on it. Because we couldn't tell who was who. So when it came to payday, one of my jobs was to go with the pay officer and pay the number. So on that given day, somebody would show up with that number, and they would get paid. Well, I don't remember how long we were there but I probably have it in a letter upstairs. I haven't read them all yet. They were repatriated en masse to Japan, whether they had been born there, whatever. You were Japanese, you were sent back. I suppose, in a way, it was cruel because I remember some of these girls crying their eyes out about it. But that took care of what to do with all them. I also think it was unusual. It was a decision not made by anybody who was there at the time. And they all went back. So then we had, then the native villagers got those jobs. Before that, they had not had them. And the second hospital I was at, we had a native woman who always came with her two darling little girls. I have their picture upstairs. But I don't know how long I had been on the island but I got a note one day saying that Lieutenant Hovland had been to see me and would come again. And I thought, "I don't know him." Because I knew most of the people around the hospital. I wondered who that was. One of my classmates from my school. And, of course, there were only forty-five of us in the class. So everybody knew each

other. Everybody's family knew each other. We couldn't believe it. And he was on a crew on a B-29. He was an officer. So he did come back. And he took me to his, wherever he was stationed. There were pockets of people all over the island. You can imagine. Because there was nothing in the middle. It was a perimeter place. Entirely. All people were stationed along the edges, so to speak. Or on ships. Well, anyway, Ted said to me, "You're in the hospital. You know, the one thing I want more than anything is a pillow." I said something like, "Why, haven't you got a pillow?" They didn't have pillows. So I said, "I'll get you a pillow." I got him a pillow. He never got over it. The last reunion we had of my high school class when Ted was still alive, in his biography, he said, "Put in the pillow." He died soon after. Cancer of the lung, I am sorry to say. But, what an easy way to make a good friend. But we had known each other well in high school. I can remember, well, he was a football hero. And I still...

[End of Side A of Tape 1.]

Well, anyway, Ted got his pillow.

John: That is wonderful. What a beautiful story.

Dorothy: And, you know, it is rather amazing, one of my other cousins was in the Marines, which, I presume, you were.

John: Yes.

Dorothy: And he was on a ship in the harbor, and he couldn't get off to come and see me. But, anyway, he was there. And people from the hospital we trained at would send fellows who were out there to visit us. From time to time. I have to tell you a little story about my redheaded friend, Lee. Well, of course, this flaming red hair was like a magnet. And every time she walked out, when she was out in the hospital or anywhere else, it was "Hi, Red." And she had an absolutely marvelous attitude toward it. It was "Hi, fellows," you know. She didn't get upset. Nothing upset her about that. Or, "Can I take your picture?" And that was one. So, sure, she got her picture taken hundreds of times. Lots of times, without film.

John: Yea. Film didn't matter.

Dorothy: Film was precious. And I have a couple of albums, and I don't even know how I got that many, that much film. And I have been looking for the camera because Gail said it was worth saving. And I am sure it is laying around there in what we call the Black Hole of Calcutta, somewhere. Well, anyway, we had many, many pictures. And she had a terrible time trying to stay out of the sun. Very bad for her. And, of course, we had a whole ward full of people like her. Even the ones,

the Army had some regulation about redheaded people, I mean, people that got horrible skin disease over there. And at the time, all we had to treat them was the purple glop, Jensen violet. Did you ever see that? People dyed purple, all over?

John: That's - let me just stop this for a second.

Dorothy: All the way around but you don't see it any more because there are much more sophisticated ways of treating skin disease. But, anyway, they had their little purple blotches, and the poor things weren't allowed to go out of the ward.

John: Oh, wow.

Dorothy: You know, which was horrible for them. So I played a lot of gin rummy, and I had an empty bath salt jar. And it was a quarter a game. And I was really good at gin rummy. And I brought home this bath salt jar full to the brim with quarters, and when I was a GI student at the university, I used it for spending money.

John: That's great.

Dorothy: I loved that. I really enjoyed being a winner at cards because it truly is the only card game, except canasta, that I ever played well. Well, let's see, where were we? After a while, you know, enough people went home, we didn't need all the hospitals that were on the island.

John: You said, the people were all going home?

Dorothy: Yea. So, well, we didn't need all those hospitals, so one of the first ones they closed was the one I was at, because it was the biggest. And at the other end of the island, the hospital I was at was the 148th General Hospital. There were different kinds. There were station hospitals and evac hospitals. And I was transferred to the other end of the island, to the 369th, which was turned into a station hospital. Which made it smaller. And it was in an absolutely beautiful setting. It looked out on a beautiful bay. If you ever see a map of Saipan, you can kind of visualize this beautiful bay. And that was about the only difference except that the quarters we had at that hospital actually had a screened in porch, and then it was divided into two people to a room, and no windows, of course. And, again, a chain link fence all around the place. And we always had a walking, twenty-four hour guard. And I transferred down there as a person in charge of the quarters. The job I'd gotten at the other hospital with my friend Joslyn. Some people couldn't tell us apart. But anyhow, the, let's see, what happened when we first got there? People were assigned to the hospital and people were always going home, you know. None of the nurses who had been there originally were still there, and they were not replaced. So the people who were there had been with the other hospital. Well,

one of the things we had at that nurses quarters was, believe it or not, a beauty salon. So we had the privilege of, there was nobody there who could run it or anything, and I don't know how they ever got it. They even had hair dryers. But Joslyn, who was my partner in taking care of the quarters, got it into all this stuff. We were going through it one day, and Joslyn, who was extremely, forgive me, Joslyn, vain, and very spoiled, at home and everywhere else. Decided she would dye her eyebrows. Because she found some stuff you could use to dye your eyebrows. And she did. It was very dangerous. She could have blinded herself. And God paid her back, and they had great big black circles around her eyes that simply had to wear off. She couldn't do anything. I remember, she even used kitchen cleanser. Joslyn and I shared a room there, and my redheaded friend and Junie, the Indian girl, shared one. Well, June was afraid, horribly afraid of bugs. She just had this pathological fear. So every morning, someone had to look into Junie's shoes to make sure there wasn't a bug in them. But that hospital had more than its share of rats.

John: Oh, wow.

Dorothy: And the partitions between the little rooms we had did not go all the way to the ceiling, of course, so every once in a while a rat would be sitting up there. And God, we all would be screaming bloody murder. And the guards would come running. Thinking something terrible had happened. It was an adventure to go to bed in that hospital. I just been reading a book where this happened to nurses who happened to be in tents in places like Africa, and Italy, and so on. Except they had to take care of their own rats. I don't know what we would have done. Well, Joslyn was a rather interesting roommate. If I ironed something, she would say. "How about ironing this for me?" And I would say no. And my mother thought that was rather kind of mean of me not to help her out, but I knew that Joslyn's mother had come to nursing school to do her hair. So, she was not used to doing anything for herself. We arrived at the point where when I cleaned my part of the room, I counted the floor boards and cleaned half of them.

John: Well?

Dorothy: But that had one huge advantage, in that we had indoor bathrooms, which we had not had at the other hospital. And we would have walked to get there, believe me. Of course, we were there for a reason, and I am trying to remember what the patients had. And I don't remember a lot of wounds. I remember a lot of fractures. I was on an orthopedic ward. In fact, I was just reading a whiny letter I wrote to my parents about twelve hour night duty. And now my daughter-in-law does that as preference. Because it gives her more time with her family. But, anyway, we did twelve hour night duty, which I had only done on one service when I was in training, in the pediatric service, you had to do twelve hour nights. But we had a

lot of orphans, and you could pick up a baby and carry it around all night. I have often felt sorry for the people who adopted these babies. They were night owls. Believe me. And, well, anyway, I remember walking through, I had two wards. And there must have been at least thirty guys in the ward. You know. And it was impossible to take care of that many people. There were also GIs who worked on the wards. And they were good. And usually, if there were that many people, they had a sergeant in charge of them. And I happened to have a very good one. So I wasn't exactly overworked. But there was a tremendous amount of book work to do.

John: The, these hospitals were probably built up, expecting casualties from the invasion of the home islands.

Dorothy: Yea.

John: They expected a million casualties.

Dorothy: That is why there were so many of us there. And so many different branches of the service. The Marines had an air station there.

John: Did they? I didn't know that.

Dorothy: Yea. They did. Tyrone Power, was he a Marine?

John: Yea.

Dorothy: He was there.

John: Okay.

Dorothy: And I think Henry Fonda was stationed on a ship in the harbor. At one time. There were an awful lot of people out there. And getting them all home, in retrospect, I can see it was a chore. But you are very selfish about it, when you think about it.

John: Well, it's over. You know. I am going home.

Dorothy: I've got to mention the beach, because our main recreation was to go to the beach, and we had an absolutely beautiful beach. Recently I ran into a retired Air Force officer who had actually been where I had been stationed, and I told him, and he said, "Oh, they had wonderful scuba diving." And I thought, scuba diving? I was trying to get out of there. Well, eventually, eventually time passed, and time passed, and time passed. And I haven't read all my letters about what happened to me. But I noticed that I carefully left out of them the fact that I had an

appendectomy. And I think it was, you know, Gale mentioned this to me. That people would write everything was okay when it wasn't.

John: Yea.

Dorothy: Because they didn't want their parents to worry about it. Whenever I talk to a group about being out there, and they say, "What was it like?" I always reply by saying I couldn't call home.

John: That's true.

Dorothy: You couldn't. You know. No matter what. And I must have told them at one point or another, but apparently I didn't write it in a letter, because I don't know if my mother saved all my letters, but she saved the ones that had anything interesting in them.

John: I don't think I would have written home to the folks. That would have worried them.

Dorothy: It would have.

John: And they would have got it weeks and weeks later.

Dorothy: Of course. I took, well, I don't know how long it took to get. The mail was very erratic. You got whole bunch of stuff, and then you didn't get anything. And it was sort of the invention of the paperback, because I remember these books would arrive. They were Little Big Books, I think they were called. Little Big Books. And we would take them apart. And you got Chapter 1, hurry up and read it so I can have it. It was that sort of thing. And it is unbelievable how many times they showed certain movies. [Break to answer phone.]

John: Okay, there we are.

Dorothy: I must tell you about the food.

John: Yes. Definitely.

Dorothy: I lost twenty pounds in the year. The food was wretched. And the nicest thing that could happen to you would be to get invited on a Navy ship.

John: Yes.

Dorothy: They had good food. We were tremendously nice to people in the Nave, believe

me. With malice aforethought. Well, anyway, and I remember going days and days and days and eating peas. Canned peas. Part of the things that happened in this interim period after the war was over and while gradually the patient load reduced, was that we had a big picnic, and the guys were playing softball, I presume it was. They played a lot of softball. And they invited a team from another group. Not another hospital. And play. And they gave them all food poisoning.

John: Oh, wow.

Dorothy: Because the picnic they had, they served ham, and it must have been left in the oven overnight. And you know, everything went bad right before your very eyes. Now, being a finicky eater, at that point, I didn't eat any. And Junie, being as big as a minute, and on duty all the time, because she was the one operating room nurse left at that point, didn't eat at the picnic either. Everybody got sick and I had one corpsman, one dentist, the doctors were sick, and Junie and I and one other person. I don't even know who he was. And the whole, everybody who could go to that picnic just got really, terribly ill. We ran out of IV fluid because they got so dehydrated. It was really a bad, bad time for us. And I think that we only lost one patient. We evacuated him to Guam and he went into renal failure and died. But it started out with food poisoning.

John: That's so tragic.

Dorothy: The colonel who was the head of the hospital, the chief nurse, everybody was sick. Now, that was one of the happenings that filled up part of the interim. And then we had a typhoon.

John: Okay.

Dorothy: Of course, we didn't know what a typhoon was. The worst I had ever been through was a mid-Western storm. Having now lived in Florida, I now know about hurricanes. But the typhoon, the rain comes horizontally. And, of course, we had the Quonset huts with the screens. So the rain would come right across the ward. There was absolutely nothing you could do about that. And so we tried to put all the beds in the middle. So that the patients would stay relatively dry. And let the rain shoot across as it would anyway. We had a terrible time keeping the records from getting wet. Everything flew around like crazy. That was, we only experienced that once. One big one. It rained all the time. Hardly a day went by without it raining. You just got used to it raining on you. You got dry. Well, I have to say something about the Army Nurse uniform for overseas.

John: Okay.

Dorothy: I don't know if you are familiar with it or not. But some idiot designed a dress for the Army nurses. And it was a wrap-around. It didn't have any buttons or anything you could close it with. It just had a belt and it wrapped around you, and you tied it with a belt. Well, there weren't too many occasions when you had to wear it, and we did have slacks and shirts which we wore routinely, believe me. You simply couldn't on a breezy island hang on to that stupid dress. And every single Army nurse I have ever run into hated that dress with a purple passion. I know of a woman who you must interview, because she went through the whole thing in Europe. We all laugh about the dress now. And another one of my friends has this wonderful story about guys in the South Carolina hospital with a big fan in the middle of the ward, like a ceiling fan. Big ceiling fan. She's a little, cute person. Now in her eighties. And I imagine as a young girl, she was adorable. She said that when she would walk down this ward of sixty or more patients, they would wait until she got in the middle, and turn the fan on high and let her struggle. Well, one thing I always try to tell people is, one of the things we had out there was each other. Everybody was young. And it certainly helped. You know, we were a homogeneous group of young people.

John: Yep. All in the same boat together.

Dorothy: And we were all in the same bundle because we couldn't get out of there. And I also should mention the fact, it is historical, I was there during the atomic bombing, of course. And the bomb was on Tinian.

John: Yes, that is where they took off from.

Dorothy: And we were on Saipan. And people will say to me, "Well, didn't you know? Didn't you know?" All we knew was that something was going to happen.

John: That, by the way, is my birthday. August 6.

Dorothy: Is it?

John: What was the reaction when you found out?

Dorothy: I thought I had the local, they had a little newspaper that came out and the one I have upstairs, I can see it, is on the surrender. And it was called *The Saipan Target*. I'll get it for you after a while. The reaction was absolute joy.

John: Sure. Because now you wouldn't have the invasion.

Dorothy: The invasion was off. And nobody was happier than the pilots. And, you know, I

just never have felt it was a bad decision. It saved how many lives?

John: They figured a million.

Dorothy: Many, many, many lives. And I would say that was about a one hundred percent reaction among the people I knew and the people who were stationed out there. And many of them had been out there a long time. Well, now, let's see. What other happening did we have beside a typhoon, and an atomic bomb, and food poisoning? And rats. There is a military song that goes, :”Rats, rats, big as alley cats,” you know that one?

John: No.

Dorothy: And the quartermaster corps.

John: Did you have any interface with the islanders?

Dorothy: Oh, yea. After the war was over.

John: They had them working there.

Dorothy: Yes, and one of the things they had on Saipan was a leper colony.

John: Oh?

Dorothy: Yes. And one of the doctors asked me if I wanted to go and see the leper colony. And I said, “What? What for?” And he was going out of professional interest. And I was not going because I didn't want to go. So I did not see the leper colony. And we were not allowed to go without a reason to the native village. But they came and worked in the hospital. And that is the contact we had with them.

John: Okay.

Dorothy: It was just as well because it wasn't a very big place, and it would have been overrun, I suppose, if all us had toddled out to see what it looked like. And they were entitled to their privacy.

John: Yes. Sure.

Dorothy: And it had been a Spanish missionary for many, many years, until the Japanese came along and took over all those islands out there. Now, does that about finish my story?

- John: What happened when you started hearing that going home was imminent? Other than being ecstatic?
- Dorothy: Well, the old point system came in, and I had none. You know, I had gone from basic training overseas, and so I didn't have any points accumulated, which put me dead last on the list. Before we went home, dependants came, because if you agreed to a certain amount more military service, and you were a married person, an officer, your dependants could come over.
- John: I never heard that. That is interesting.
- Dorothy: And the dependant wives did not like the nurses, because we had been over there. And I don't know if there were stories to jibe. I really don't know about that. But, anyway, they came. And I can't even remember where they were quartered. They weren't quartered at the hospital. We wouldn't have had a place for them. That was one of the things that happened. And the other thing was, just marking time to come home. And, you know, it sticks in my mind, and I can't document it, that when I arrived on the island, there were two thousand nurses. And when I came home, there were six.
- John: Wow.
- Dorothy: And Junie and I were two of them.
- John: So there were a lot of nurses that got to go home ahead of you.
- Dorothy: I mean, of the original bunch. And the four that were left had re-upped. So they were going to stay. I think if you agreed to stay a year, you then got a trip around the world, or something. There was some incentive. But I was for home. My father thought I should stay and have the trip. And I thought he didn't want me. But, anyway, eventually it trickled down till it got to Junie and me, and then we were ordered down to Guam. And another thing that I did, I almost forgot about, I ferried patients from Saipan. If we had somebody too sick to send down to Guam on the plane, I mean, the plane people didn't want to take them, then one of us got to go and I made a trip down there. My two friends who had transferred down there, then I got to see my two other friends who were out there. That is what broke up the monotony of it all. Well, Junie and I went down to Guam together because that is where you had to go to wait for a plane. And we were total last priority because by the time we got there, the atomic tests on Bikini Island were going on, and the place was overrun with reporters and people like that. And they all had priorities ahead of us. I read a letter this morning where I said plenty of the nurses had gone home and Junie and I were twenty and twenty-one on the list, the next list. However, when my other friends went home, they went by ship. When I

went home, I went by plane.

John: Okay.

Dorothy: And it was a war weary plane, and do you know what they look like in time of war?

John: What were they? Four engine, or two engine?

Dorothy: I really don't remember how many engines there were.

John: I remember what they were like. Yea.

Dorothy: You know, what they call bucket seats. Which were along the side, and in the middle was cargo. And luggage, and stuff like that. Well, when, eventually we got to come home, it was on that kind of plane. And we were told that we had one hour to get ready. And I can't tell you, I am amazed I had the stuff I had, because I left a trail of things across the Pacific. We got on the plane, and the stuff in the middle was so high we really couldn't see the people on the other side. And I honestly don't remember eating on that trip. And we went to, first, to Kwajalein, what a gruesome place. You know, it was a runway. And that was about it. From there to Johnson Island. Got our day back that we had lost on the way over. From there to Honolulu, where we were told we might have to wait because of our priority, and I think we were there three hours and the decided to get rid of us. And we came back to a base outside of San Francisco.

John: Travis Air Force Base?

Dorothy: I don't know what it was. No, not Travis, because that is a modern name. It was Fairfield Suisun Air Base. Something like that. It was in sort of a wasteland. And I don't remember why we were there. But Junie, somehow, she was still with me. She somehow got notified that she had go to the income tax people. I still haven't figured out why but just the other day, thinking about it, I thought, I think now I figured it out. She had fallen love with a young officer who came home ahead of her. And I think, between them they bought a Jeep. You could buy a Jeep for a hundred dollars. Dad never forgave me.

John: I guess. Yea.

Dorothy: Instead of the Jeep, I bought a fur coat. But, anyhow, Junie had to, but they told her at that air base that they would let her go to Chicago, but she couldn't go home until she went to the income tax people. So I think must have had something to do with buying the Jeep. I can't imagine why, any other reason,

unless she had to prove she was an American citizen, or something like that. But I don't think they did that. She was in the Army. So we went to Fort Sheridan.

John: Okay.

Dorothy: Everybody went there. And we went through the usual routine of the physical and all that stuff. But Junie still couldn't go home, because she hadn't been to the income tax people yet. And I was dying to get home by that time. But I didn't feel that I could abandon her at this stage of the game, so I stayed with her in Chicago a couple of days, and we went shopping. I mean, we were loaded. We hadn't spent a nickle overseas.

John: How long had you been gone overseas?

Dorothy: A year. It was over a year. I had shipped out in June and I came back in August. I remember exactly how long I was in the service because my follow-up story is the GI Bill. And I was given seventeen months and one day at the university. But, anyway, we went into Chicago, and we went shopping. Neither one of us knew what size clothes we wore. And I remember a lady at Marshal Fields getting rather impatient with us because we couldn't make up our mind. And when we finally, I was promoted. And I don't remember exactly when, but it must have been before that because it is in one of my letters, and I wouldn't have been writing to my parents at that point. I could have phoned them. You know. And anyway, I left Junie. She went back to Nebraska and I went home to Bloomer. And I remember thinking to myself, "I'll treat myself. I'll go in a chair." And I went in a special car where you could have a swivel type chair, and I sat there and looked out the windows. All the way. I probably left out some things. But it was an event. It changes your life.

John: Oh, yea. Well, let me ask you a question. And I ask this of everybody. You lost, in a way, you lost a year of your life. This was taken from you.

Dorothy: Yea.

John: What do you feel about that? How do you feel?

Dorothy: It really was a life-changing experience, and, in my case, much for the better.

[End of Side B of Tape 1.]

Dorothy: I went back and I got a job with Junie in Chicago. After I had been home maybe, at the most, it couldn't have been more than a month. I was restless, you know?

John: Yea.

Dorothy: I was used to being out, I just had, I don't know.

John: Did you get active in any veterans organizations?

Dorothy: I've been more active since I've lived here. You know, in Florida, it wasn't the same. And my dad put me in the American Legion, I think even before I got home from overseas.

John: Now, was he a vet?

Dorothy: Yea. World War I. He was a World War I vet. So was my father-in-law. And they both served in France.

John: Okay.

Dorothy: That is not the usual thing. The war didn't last that long. Anyway, I have been more active since I belong to the one in Milwaukee than I ever was before, but I also am a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. I always tell people that is my exclusive club. It is. You know, there is only one way to get in.

John: Yea.

Dorothy: And I am very proud of that. And I do not belong to a post, because there isn't one here. But they have members at large, sort of thing. And that is what I am.

John: I see. How about any reunions, or getting together with folks?

Dorothy: Well, you know, of the five girls that I went overseas with, I still am in touch with one of them. Who married a neurosurgeon, and through her, she tells me about the other ones. My red-headed friend died very young. She came back and was married to a sergeant she met overseas. Also redheaded. Probably from one of the picture taking sessions.

John: Oh, okay.

Dorothy: Had four redheaded kiddies. And I last saw her when we lived in Elmhurst, Illinois. My husband was a resident at Cook County Hospital. And she came out to see me. And died soon after that of cancer of the breast. And June married, after she finished college and lived in California, but her husband was president of a company, and they would come to Fort Lauderdale for conventions, and we saw them twice in Fort Lauderdale. And our young son was a junior tennis player on

the national circuit, so we took him to California for tournaments. Big tournaments. And Junie brought her family there.

John: Oh, great.

Dorothy: And then she just disappeared. And I write to her every Christmas, and I haven't heard from her for several Christmases, and I was going to try to find her on the Internet. We don't have a computer. I always tell people we have a dog. All people should all have a dog. One of our neighbors has been very kind about using, you know, looking things up. I think he enjoys it. But those are the only people I have had any contact with. One of the doctors from the hospital overseas did all of his practice in Chicago. You know, there are various people who turn up and say, you know, I was on, I remember Saipan. I was there, and so and so. So there you are.

John: Sure. You mentioned Marysville, California.

Dorothy: Um-huh.

John: I am doing a biography. When I don't do this, I write. And I am doing the biography of an Army officer who was stationed there in 1849. And it was the most unhealthy post in the Army. The Surgeon General. The soil, drainage, and an Army camp back then was a bunch of tents and a latrine.

Dorothy: Yea, right.

John: And it was right on the slopes. They were guarding the trails to the gold fields. This man was a monumental crook. He was a crook in the Mexican War. He was awful. But Camp Far West was what he was stationed at. At Marysville. I don't know what it is called now.

Dorothy: Beale.

John: Oh, okay. Just one thing I happened to think. You know, ding!

Dorothy: You know, I can't remember what town Camp Kilmer is in. But it flashed on the screen not long ago, and I thought, "Oh, yea. That's where it is." Well, where is Rutgers? Because that is where it is. Okay, I don't know. But it has got to be on the coast of New Jersey. Somewhere in the wilds of New Jersey.

John: It's an embarkation post. Yea.

Dorothy: I remember it especially because the buildings were all camouflaged. And that

was the first time I had seen that, because being in the mid-West for part of the war, and then. And you asked me what I was doing on the day of Pearl Harbor. I remember it very well.

John: What?

Dorothy: It was, of course a Sunday. And in this nurses school I went to, it sounds like slave labor now, and it was. Because my parents actually paid for the privilege of my doing all this work. But we got one half day off a week. And if you did six months of continuous twelve-hour night duty, you got one whole day off. That was it. For three years. You know, so, as far as giving up part of your life, that was giving up the outside world, more or less. And somehow I had managed. I saw half of a loud movie because if you had the afternoon off, you could go to half a movie, but you had to be back by seven o'clock. So there were sacrifices to be made. And I remember. In fact, I'm not sure I don't have a newspaper. I do have a newspaper downstairs about declaring war. I have the *Illinois State Journal*. And, of course, the war just immediately changed everything in hospitals.

John: Yea, that's right.

Dorothy: The nuns and the students ran the hospitals, and I don't know what hospitals did that didn't have...they must have had older nurses.

John: I remember I had my tonsils out in 1943. I was eight. But the surgeon was a woman. And that was unheard of.

Dorothy: Unheard of.

John: She did a good job.

Dorothy: Everybody had their tonsils out because, first of all, there wasn't anything to stop tonsillitis. And one of the other interesting things about Saipan was one of the things I didn't remember really was penicillin. And penicillin came in during the war. I think it must have been toward the end of the war because in one of the letters I said "It's time for me to stop. I have to give the penicillin." Of course, it was in shots. And you had to give it, and give it, and give it. Until the patient just about rebelled against getting any more penicillin. They had so many holes in them. And the other thing they hated were vitamins. And they'd pass out vitamins every day and you could hear them hit the floor. As you went down the ward. Well, nobody said you had to take them. And there was no point in making a big thing of it. The other thing I've got to tell you one more rat story. It doesn't take a bunch of guys long to figure out those silly nurses were afraid of rats. So, I got rats.

John: More than your share.

Dorothy: I got, "Hey, lieutenant, we brought you a coke from the P X." And there would be this rat tail hanging out of the thing. One time I came on the ward and they were all there with, they had done a whole bunch, and the tails were hanging over the edge of the waste basket. Of course, the sergeant, he really ran the mechanics school. He got rid of those. One part I will never forget, ever. I saw him after we got back to Chicago. I got to thank him for taking all the rats away. That is a terrible way to end the story.

John: No.

Dorothy: As far as, I've never thought of it as giving up a year of my life. But when I say it changed my life, I really mean for the better. In many ways. Including the education. That was a wonderful gift. It really was. I have a friend in Madison. She was in the Navy intelligence. Mort. She had graduated from college and was able to, you know, she had to put in codes and that sort of thing. She didn't know any big secrets that were going on. But, anyway, she thinks it changed her life, and I don't think she means for the better. Because she is a Southern woman and has lived all her life in Madison. And still misses the South, you know.

John: I did an interview with a woman who was an Army nurse in New Guinea. Now, she went in early. She went in on a program where registered nurses could go into the Army for so many months.

Dorothy: Yes, that was caught a lot of them in Corregidor.

John: And her months were still running when the war started. Yes. She tells just heartbreaking stories about New Guinea where they had just nothing. They laundered bandages and, again this was several years ago we talked. Something about using maggots on burns.

Dorothy: Oh, that was common.

John: Was it? Okay. Just a wonderful person and some great stories.

Dorothy: Maggots were used on infections, too.

John: Were they?

Dorothy: Yea, before penicillin. That was an absolute miracle when that stuff came along. And I remember getting what I've always thought were the first flu shots, since

they are so much in the news right now. And we just were told, you know, you are going to come and get this shot you've never had before. So everybody lines up, and marching through the line. And, you know, young guys were not crazy about getting that kind of shots. There were a couple of them dropped over. But we did it. And I am sure it was for influenza. Must have been some Army experiment they were doing.

John: My one son is an EMT. And he can give anything. But you walk up to him with a needle and he'll faint. He can stand there all day long. We have a hard time with him getting to the dentist.

Dorothy: I don't blame him.

John: But, if he can do it, he should be.

Dorothy: I think the dentists hurt you more than anyone else.

John: Don't say that. I am going to have a tooth out next Monday.

Dorothy: Welcome to the club.

John: Is this your son?

Dorothy: Yes, that's Bill.

John: Good looking guy.

Dorothy: And he has three sons.

John: Oh, super.

Dorothy: Their picture is in front of the nurses memorial in Washington. Our daughter-in-law lined them up and said, "Stand there! And get a picture for Granny." They did pretty well.

John: Okay. What a remarkable story.

Dorothy: I think there were many stories out there with nurses that I wish we could get them to tell. In my group in Milwaukee, we had this very, very interesting nurse who did the whole European theater. She was stationed in England, Wales, and France. She got in the past year, she got a citation from the French government. She said, "Fifty how many years late?" She spent the winter in Arizona or I would send you to see her in a minute. Because a couple of years ago, I've only belonged to this

group for about six years, mostly because I didn't know about them before. Mostly, we need publicity. She showed me, at one of the meetings. We meet at a restaurant in Milwaukee every other month. At one of the meetings, she had a transcript she had written out for a grandson who wanted to use her as a project. And it was a fascinating story. And I said, "Louise, you should tell this story to other people besides me." And she came out when Gayle was here and talked about what went on in Europe. So I could give you her address.

John: Does Gayle have it?

Dorothy: I have it. I have it in Arizona. I don't know if Gayle has it.

John: Okay. Before we wrap up, though, I had a friend who passed away, Stephen Ambrose, who wrote so much about World War II. And he was talking to a bunch of veterans in Madison, and most of them were saying, "Yea, but I really didn't do much. I didn't do much." And he said, "Stop!" He said, "You were giants! You were. You went out and saved the world." And that's true. You did. That is a great story.

Dorothy: Well, I am very proud of it.

John: You should be. Yea.

Dorothy: And I don't know if we were the Greatest Generation, but we weren't bad.

John: You were the best at the time. I was born in 1935, so I was six when the war started. And I grew up in eastern Ohio. But I remember rationing and shortages and I remember the Blue Stars becoming Gold Stars. I remember when we got the telegram when my uncle had been killed. Okay.

Dorothy: Rationing was terrible.

John: Oh, yes.

Dorothy: The first time I went. I could do another one of these about nursing school. Oh, God. I am going to tell you, I always call it "Three Years Behind The Veil," because it was a Catholic hospital. And I tell people that, after nursing school, the Army was a snap. At least, there were guys there. But nursing school at that time was one thousand ninety-five days, and you ask any nurse my age group, and they know about the one thousand ninety-five days, because universally you had to do that to even get to take the state board. And it was a tremendous amount of work. But I had a classmate in nursing school And it was a big hospital. It was a five hundred bed hospital. At that time, at St. John's, in Springfield, Illinois. And we

had something very unusual. We had a conveyor belt for serving the patients trays, and it carried them up hot to the floor and were served, and they had wonderful food for the patients. And, honestly, I hate to say it, but we stole food from the nuns. Because they got better food than we did and they had this great big thing that would take it to the convent, and when we went off duty, we'd go by and have a little snack. God forgive us. But the conveyor belt was entirely staffed by probationary nurses. So the whole first year, even after you got your caps, and Genna Swartz stood next to me, and she did the oatmeal, no, she did the toast. She got transferred from the toast because she made so much, we had bread pudding ninety days in a row. And they transferred her to the oatmeal, and she had a nosebleed. And we were just amazed. We didn't dare tell the nun and so we sugared it up. Isn't that awful. People gag when I say that. They'll never eat oatmeal again. We had a lot of giggles, John.

John: This is just a fantastic story.

Dorothy: You won't believe that I usually walk with a cane, but I do. Nothing to do with the service.

[End of Interview.]