

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
VALEDDA WILSON
Nurse, Air Force, Korean War

2007

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Wilson, Valeda, (1928-). Oral History Interview, 2007.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 25 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 25 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Valeda Wilson, a Chamberlain, South Dakota native, discusses her experience overseas in the Air Force Nursing Corps during the Korean War. Wilson talks about entering the Air Force in 1951 after a year of postgraduate work at Baylor University Hospital. Wilson states she chose the Air Force because they were sending nurses overseas without requiring them to serve stateside for two years. Wilson describes her job as a supervisor on the GoldBricking Ward at McChord Air Force Base in Tacoma (Washington). She speaks of being sent to a fifty-two bed hospital in Japan, where she became a triage nurse for wounded soldiers arriving on planes from Korea. She states, "After we finished triaging, we opened the operating room and sometimes operated for three days straight." In 1952, Wilson discusses being sent to the hospital at Kunsan Air Force Base (South Korea) as an operating room supervisor. She mentions she served with nurses from Australia and Sweden, and she describes living conditions. According to Wilson, the hospital at Kunsan took care of routine medical matters so that soldiers could get back to the battlefield while more serious matters were sent to Japan. As the only operating room nurse at the base, Wilson talks about being on call 24/7. Wilson speaks of being exposed to some danger from broken glass and rusty nail bombs dropped from the cockpits of small Chinese planes that flew under the radar. In addition, Wilson recalls a faulty bomb exploding on the flight line causing significant injury to base soldiers. While in Korea, Wilson indicates that she saw General Dwight Eisenhower after he had been elected President but before he took office. She also met MacArthur and his successor. In her free time, Wilson mentions traveling around Japan and volunteering on weekends at a ski lodge set up to provide rest and relaxation (R&R) for soldiers. Wilson states that she received double time for her service in Korea. After return to the States, she talks about receiving training to be a nurse anesthetist. She stayed in the Air Force for eight years after her return, serving at Tinker Field (Oklahoma), Lackland Air Force Base (Texas) and March Air Force Base (California). She discusses leaving the service with the rank of captain when she became pregnant. Wilson states, "When you got married and pregnant back then, they told you goodbye." After her discharge, Wilson speaks of living in a home she and her husband, an Air Force pilot, bought near March Air Force Base (California). She touches on moving to Green Bay (Wisconsin) after he was discharged and working as a nurse at Bellin Hospital in Green Bay. Wilson states she uses the Veterans' Administration for health care and medication and has been active in veterans' organizations, including being the National Director of the Honor Society of Women Legionnaires (National Twenty and Four).

Biographical Sketch:

Wilson (b.1928) served in Japan and Korea with the Air Force Nursing Corps from 1951 to 1958. After discharge at the rank of captain, Wilson worked for eighteen years at Bellin Hospital in Green Bay (Wisconsin) and has served as both national treasurer and director for the Honor Society of Women Legionnaires.

Interviewed by Terry McDonald, 2007.

Draft Transcription by Cathy Cox, Aug 2007.

Abstract written by Anne Smith, 2009.

Interview Transcript:

Terry: This is an interview with Valedda Wilson, who served with the Air Force Nursing Corps during the Korean War. The interview is being conducted at about 9:00 a.m. [REDACTED] on the following date of March 24, 2007, and the interviewer is Terry MacDonald.

Val, can you tell us a little bit about your background, the year you were born, and where you were born?

Wilson: I was born on October 9, 1928 in Chamberlain, South Dakota. We really lived on a farm/ranch combination 25 miles south of there.

Terry: And did you have any brothers and sisters?

Wilson: I have one brother and one sister, both older than I am.

Terry: And had they served in the military?

Wilson: No.

Terry: How about your parents?

Wilson: My dad was supposed to go on active duty the day the Armistice was signed, so he didn't have to go.

Terry: I'll be darned. Did you graduate from high school in town?

Wilson: I graduated from Chamberlain High School in 1946.

Terry: Can you tell us what you were doing prior to going into the Air Force?

Wilson: Well I had spent three years getting my RN license. I worked at the hospital, I trained for a year and then I went to Baylor University Hospital for postgraduate work. And while there I met, or I had a classmate who had served in the Navy and was going back into the Navy. And since I had no specific job at the time she said, "So why don't you join the military?"

Terry: What year was that?

Wilson: 1951.

Terry: And so what made you join the Air Force?

- Wilson: Because they were building a nurse corps that left [let] you go overseas before you had been stateside for two years.
- Terry: And when you went into the Air Force, did you have to go through a basic training or being a nurse did they put you in--
- Wilson: They put us directly in the hospital. We were supposed to go to basic training later, but I was scheduled to go in December and by that time I was already in Japan.
- Terry: Now as a nurse, did they give you an officer ranking at the time?
- Wilson: Yes, I went into the Air Force as a Second Lieutenant.
- Terry: What was your first job? You were assigned to a hospital?
- Wilson: I was at a hospital at McChord Air Force Base at Tacoma, Washington.
- Terry: Were you a specialty nurse of some sort?
- Wilson: Well, there I worked on the ward. I worked on the medical ward, and I was supervisor of what they called the Goldbricking Ward, where men were assigned waiting for testing to see if they actually had what they said they had, like a sore back or something. (both chuckle) And then I supervised the orthopedic ward.
- Terry: How long was it before they sent you to Japan?
- Wilson: I went on active duty in May of 1951, and by October of 1951 I was in Japan.
- Terry: Now in Japan, was the hospital where you were working at, was it basically handling the servicemen from Korea?
- Wilson: Yes. The planes came in from Korea, and we triaged them. Our hospital was capable of keeping 52 patients. And the rest of the patients were sent to Tokyo Army.
- Terry: At that hospital, as a triage nurse you must have seen quite a few battlefield injuries, then.
- Wilson: We saw a lot of them. Fact is, after we finished triaging, we opened the operating room and sometimes operated for three days straight.
- Terry: In Japan, what kind of living conditions did they have for you, set up at the--

- Wilson: Oh, there was a two-story dormitory right connected to the hospital.
- Terry: And was there a lot of women working at the hospital?
- Wilson: Yes. A lot of nurses were stationed there.
- Terry: So, how did you eventually get sent to Korea, then?
- Wilson: Well, friends of mine had gone to Korea, and the chief nurse knew me and they had problems with the first operating room supervisor they had, so she requested me by name, rank and serial number.
- Terry: So you had a little pull to get overseas, whether you wanted to or not!
- Wilson: Fact is when she requested me, I had not yet signed up to be one of the nurses to go to Korea. But the friend of mine that was over in Korea says, "Come on, sign up and come be our operating room supervisor."
- Terry: So what area in Korea were you assigned to?
- Wilson: I was assigned to K-8, which is Kunsan, which is south of Seoul but right on the Yellow Sea, nine miles from Red China.
- Terry: Was that a very big facility, or base, or--
- Wilson: Well, we took care of two Marine units, two Air Force units, and an Army unit. There was about 1500 men that were eligible to use that hospital.
- Terry: And you being a triage nurse in the operating room, that was a pretty important job.
- Wilson: Well, I was the only operating room nurse on the base. There were only eight nurses, and I was the only operating room trained nurse.
- Terry: Now, were there very many nurses assigned to Korea? And to go in country itself, or were you one of the few?
- Wilson: Just the eight that were at this base. Ones that were actually assigned to go to Korea and stay there.
- Terry: Wow.
- Wilson: The flight nurses were based in Japan and flew in and out. But we were—well there were other nurses. Fact is Sweden not only had female nurses, they had female doctors there. So there was a, practically a UN unit that

was in Korea. We had Australians, and Swedes, and, I don't remember all the others.

Terry: While you were there, then, what kind of living conditions did you have there?

Wilson: Well, this base had been built by the Japanese when they occupied Korea. So we actually had a small house, with a living room, a bathroom and three bedrooms. Two of the houses were—nurses were assigned to live in.

Terry: And how about the hospital itself? Was it a--

Wilson: It was a Quonset hut type. And it had no lining in the inside so you use the 2x4's to set things on.

Terry: So, basically you're saying then there was no insulation or anything? (chuckles)

Wilson: No, there wasn't.

Terry: So, what was it like in the wintertime? I mean—

Wilson: It was cold. We had oil burners, the pot-bellied oil burners all through. We did have a steel jennig(??) for the operating room, because of the explosiveness of the gasses that they used in anesthesia.

Terry: Where you were at, well then you were catching people coming right off the line, then, and doing the triage work with them.

Wilson: Well, we didn't get the—I saw more wounded in Japan than I did in Korea.

Terry: Really!

Wilson: 'Cause, uh, our hospital, being a permanent hospital, we air evac'd people to Japan. We took care of the things that needed to be taken care of by the other units that would stay here.

Terry: So they could be going back to duty then. More or less like, people that need to be--

Wilson: People we did, uh, tonsillectomies. We, uh, other injuries that people might get.

Terry: How long did you spend in Korea then?

- Wilson: I went there in July of 1952 and I left there in March of 1953.
- Terry: Now when you were over there, did you run into any uh--did you see any USO shows or anything? Did they bring any--
- Wilson: Oh, yes. We saw some. Once General Eisenhower after he had been elected President but before he took office, he came and visited. And we had several other USO shows that came in.
- Terry: Did you meet any important people when you were over there? (both chuckle) That you can think of?
- Wilson: Well, I met, uh--oh, I can't think of his name, he was the commander of the Far East of military. And uh, I also met McArthur. I met the man that replaced McArthur and I can't think of his name off hand.
- Terry: When you were over there, is there any interesting stories that happened that you can--stick vividly in your mind?
- Wilson: Well, the day(??) that sticks in my mind was, uh, we had a faulty bomb explode on the flight line. And uh, we end up with one person that eventually passed away. He had lost both of his legs, and one arm, and a big hole in his liver. And he'd also been burnt. And then we had another young man that, uh, he had just gotten word that he had a son, and the only thing he talked about was getting home and teaching his kid how to play football. And he lost one of his legs in that bomb.
- Terry: So you were in a dangerous situation, even though you weren't on the front lines it was still dangerous where you were at.
- Wilson: Oh, yes, we had what we called the, oh um--I can't think of the name that we called the bombs from red—the small planes from Red China would come in under the radar and open the cockpit and drop bombs filled with broken glass and rusty nails. But um, none of them ever did any damage of great concern.
- Terry: So, how was your life in the military then? Can you basically describe what it was like during a war period?
- Wilson: As a nurse you did the same thing as you would do in the civilian life. That was one of the reasons they let nurses skip basic training at the beginning because we did the same thing we would have been doing in civilian life.
- Terry: Now, being in the hospital setting where you um--did you work shifts or were you basically on call all the time? How did that work for you?

Wilson: Oh, in Korea I was the only one, so I was on call 24/7. But in Japan, since there were several operating room nurses, we took turns doing triage, but uh, if the operating room was working, you worked every day.

Terry: Were you able to get any time off when you were over there?

Wilson: Oh yes. I did a lot of going around Japan. And I also volunteered to be a nurse on the weekends up at a ski lodge that the United States had for rest and relaxation. For people coming back for R & R from Korea. And I worked the weekend up there.

Terry: Now, what was it like when it was getting time to be sent home, then? Did they tell you you had like a certain amount of time you were going to spend there, or didn't you know when you first went over?

Wilson: Oh, I didn't know when I first went over. But uh, you got double time while you were in Korea, so uh, the length of stay for nurses in the Far East then was three years. But because I got double time for Korea I came home before three years were up.

Terry: Did you stay in for awhile or did you get discharged?

Wilson: No, I stayed in. I first went to Tinker Field, Oklahoma. From there I went to Lackland Air Force Base to do school of anesthesiology. I trained to be a nurse anesthetist. And, uh, I was there from first of January 1954 till sometime in 1953 [likely means 1955]. Then I went to Southern California to March Air Force Base. I stayed in—I was in a little over eight years. The reason I ended up getting out was I got married, and got pregnant, and when you got married and pregnant back then, they told you goodbye.

Terry: They didn't let you stay in at all.

Wilson: No.

Terry: Was your husband military?

Wilson: Yes, he was a pilot.

Terry: How did you get to the Green Bay area, then?

Wilson: Because he was from Abrams, Wisconsin.

Terry: So, when you got your discharge then in, uh--was your husband at the base, and you just stayed at the base there then? When you got married?

- Wilson: Yes.
- Terry: Ok
- Wilson: Well, I was working at one base and he was at another when we got married. But then, after I got discharged we were at March Air Force Base.
- Terry: Did they have adequate housing for you?
- Wilson: We lived off base. We had bought our own home five miles from the base.
- Terry: When you got out, did you join any veterans' organizations?
- Wilson: Not until after I divorced. Because my husband was very much a loner, he didn't like joining things, and he didn't want me to join things.
- Terry: So how did you find out about the All Women's--
- Wilson: I saw an ad in the newspaper that they were having a lunch for women veterans and I went to that.
- Terry: And you signed up?
- Wilson: I signed up, and I've been a member ever since. I've been—this is my third time to be Commander of the Post. And I'm also a member of the Honor Society of Women Legionnaires, which is called the Twenty and Four. And I've been its director for the state several times, and I've been the National Director of the Honor Society of Women Legionnaires.
- Terry: Wow. That's quite an accomplishment to get a national title.
- Wilson: Right now I'm the National Disbursing Director, in other words the National Treasurer.
- Terry: Good for you. Good for you. After you got out, did you use any of the benefits from the service?
- Wilson: Yes, I did. The house we bought in Abilene, Texas, I used my military-- and then in Wisconsin I got money from Wisconsin veterans group to put new siding on my house. Of course I use the VA for my health care and get my medications through it.

- Terry: Good, good. Serving in Korea, did you receive any citations or medals for your service over there?
- Wilson: No, South Dakota gave me a bonus. (both laugh)
- Terry: Ok. Just thought I'd ask as you were in a combat area. Have you kept in touch with any people you served with over the years?
- Wilson: I did call one of the women that I worked with at March Air Force Base. She's out of the service now and lives in Nebraska. But, uh—and for a long time I kept in touch with one of the nurses that had been in Korea when I was there.
- Terry: You know, it was different at that time, not a whole lot of women served in the military. What was it like looking back and being one of the, really, few women that served, and being one of the few women that served in Korea at that time?
- Wilson: As we said at the meeting we had last Saturday, we'd all do it over again.
- Terry: Just something you did at that time, right?
- Wilson: Correct.
- Terry: So what did you think about your military experiences? Was it good, or bad, or—how would you judge it?
- Wilson: Well, as a nurse, the military, being an officer, it was good duty. And, plus the Air Force sent me to school for a year, which in civilian life I would have had to go to school to be an anesthetist without being paid. Where the military paid me my wages the whole time I was in school.
- Terry: After you got out, did you continue to be a nurse?
- Wilson: Yes. Fact is I retired from Bellin Hospital after working there 18 years.
- Terry: Can you think of anything else you'd like to say about your military service?
- Wilson: Well, I enjoyed it 'cause I love to travel, and I ended up getting to see a lot of the United States and also the Far East.
- Terry: What did your children think of it after, when they found out their mother's served in the Air Force?

Wilson: Didn't bother them one way or the other. Fact is my youngest son went to medical school on an Air Force scholarship. And then served in the first Gulf War over in Saudi Arabia.

Terry: So what was your final ranking when you got out of the military?

Wilson: My final ranking was a Captain. I'd received my captain's bars in April of 1958 and I got out of the Air Force in March of 1959.

Terry: That's a pretty high rank.

Wilson: It was by the luck of the draw. They had some leftover captain's bars, I think, (both laugh) and one of the nurses that had been a chief nurse at March Air Force Base when I was first stationed there was on the board choosing who should get these extra ranks, and she suggested that I should get one. So I got my captain's bars in April of 1958.

Terry: Good enough.

[End of Interview]