

WINIFRED GANSEL

Santa Clara, California Chapter

Transcript of an Oral History Reminiscence

All rights, title, and interest in the material recorded are assigned and conveyed to the Women's Overseas Service League for the purpose of publication, use in teaching, or other such uses that may further the aims and objectives of the League, such use and participation to be acknowledged in appropriate fashion and with due credit to:

Winifred Gansel

## PREFACE

This transcript is the product of a tape-recorded reminiscence conducted for the Women's Overseas Service League.

Signed, dated agreements of release and biographical information accompany the original cassette.

Transcribed by Patricia Siggers  
Lansing, Michigan

1987

WINIFRED GANSEL

2 Santa Clara Chapter

Q: You served overseas in World War II, in the South Pacific  
4 theatre. Could you tell us a little bit about yourself?  
Maybe you could give us a little idea about your  
6 childhood before you went into the service.

WG: O. K. Well, I was born November 7, 1907, the second  
8 child of seven children. We were in a low-income bracket,  
but we were very happy because there was much love  
10 between us. My dad was born in Denmark and came to the  
USA when he was about 14 years old. My mother was born  
12 of Irish descent, and was born in San Jose, California.  
I attended Willow Glen Grammar School, and San Jose High  
14 School. I earned my money working in the cannery to pay  
my way through O'Connor Hospital of Nursing. My family  
16 was against nursing at first because they felt like I was  
a glorified maid, but they soon got over that.  
18 In 1931, I graduated, and did private duty nursing and  
general duty nursing. In 1934, I went to work at the  
20 Santa Clara County Hospital, where I worked until I was  
joined up with the service. I did surgical nursing and  
22 general duty nursing. (Laughter) My happiest time there  
at the hospital was working in the isolation ward, where  
24 we had all kinds of contagious diseases; diphtheria,

scarlet fever, meningitis, TB, measles and mumps, or  
26 what-have-you. We had many seriously ill children, and  
it was the time before Salk and penicillin, which made us  
28 have to do more intensive nursing care.

After Pearl Harbor, which happened December 7, 1941, I  
30 applied for service in the Army. The radio kept pleading  
for nurses--the desperate need of nurses. I believe I  
32 was the first one to sign up in the county. Big stuff!  
In February, '42, I received my orders to report to Camp  
34 Roberts in March.

Q: Where is Camp Roberts?

36 WG: That's about 120 miles from my home at San Jose. I went  
in as a Red Cross nurse and the status was changed to  
38 Army Nurse Corps, Second Lieutenant. The men used to  
tease us about our rank; calling us 90-day wonders, or  
40 "shave-tails." We wore the navy blue blouse and the gray  
skirt and the little overseas cap. We wore that about  
42 two years.

Q: Do you recall what your pay was at that time, when you  
44 entered the service?

WG: Yes, it was only \$65, and I think the range finally ended  
46 up about \$300 or \$350.

Q: Were you supplied your uniforms then?

48       WG: Oh, yes. We had our complete supplies. At Camp Roberts,  
we nurses had charge of large wards. Camp Roberts was a  
50       real hot place. (Laughter) It always got cooled off at  
night, though. We had to wear a coat at night when we  
52       went out; and we had to take salt tablets because it was  
so hot we were perspiring all the time. My ward at the  
54       time, also was isolation. They seemed to put me in that  
bracket. We had measles, mumps, meningitis, valley  
56       fever, and pneumonia. We all felt like pioneers because  
we were using sulfa drugs and penicillin drugs, which  
58       were quite new at that time. I remained at Camp Roberts  
for about two years.

60       Q: While you were at Camp Roberts, did you have corpsmen to  
help you, or were the WACs then helping in the hospitals?

62       WG: Oh, yes. We had corpsmen entirely, and they were pretty  
good, too. They did all the hard work. I always missed  
64       the nursing care, myself, but we had to be in charge of  
them. We had a half-day off a week and one-and-a-half  
66       days for a weekend every month, so I was able to drive  
home; to my home here in San Jose. I had my car, and I  
68       was lucky enough to have plenty of ration tickets to buy  
gas, thanks to my friends.

70       Q: What kind of houses did you live in? What was your  
housing like?

72 WG: Oh, we had real nice rooms--private rooms.

Q: In barracks?

74 WG: They were in barracks, yes. They didn't have air condi-  
76 tioning at that time, of course, but we did have our own  
private rooms. We had to walk quite a ways to the mess  
hall. We had a very nice dining room.

78 During my stay at Camp Roberts, I volunteered for over-  
seas service. After one-and-one-half years and many  
80 shots; yellow fever shots and smallpox vaccinations--  
which I had had for every six months because I was on the  
82 alert to go overseas--I was called to join nine other  
nurses to go to Camp St\_\_\_\_\_man and join the 80th General  
84 Hospital.

We took a train to San Francisco and spent our last  
86 evening at the Top of the Mark, having a drink and  
reminiscing and watching the scenery go by, because the  
88 roof (laughter) revolved around it.

We were very busy at Camp St\_\_\_\_\_man. It was the staging  
90 area to go overseas, and it was such a terrible stress.  
Everybody was under stress because we had to get all our  
92 equipment, and we had to stand in line an hour at a time  
to get just our mess kit or our duffle bag or something.  
94 I was first lieutenant at that time, so I helped the head  
nurse, who was a captain, with details on registration--  
96 and in details. There were about a hundred nurses in our

unit with several of each of Red Cross nurses,  
98 dieticians, and physical therapists.

100 After several days, we were to walk to the ferry (one-  
and-one-half miles) with all our equipment. We thought  
102 that was a lot, but anyway, we made it. The boys had  
always felt like we were going to faint or something  
along the way, but we didn't. The ferry boat took us to  
104 the L..... That was our troopship to go overseas.  
We sailed quietly out of San Francisco Bay--no escorts.  
106 We zig-zagged across the Pacific Ocean to Milne Bay, the  
southern tip of New Guinea. Most of us were seasick at  
108 some time or other. We heard stories of the Japanese  
being close, but we made it safely. We had only nine  
110 bunks in our small cabin, so we were a little on the  
crowded side.

112 After about ten days (it seems like it was) we disem-  
barked at New Guinea. This was at night, and it was  
114 raining cats and dogs. About four hundred of the nurses  
were taken off the ship with us. We were transfered from  
116 the ship by amphibious tanks and driving through the rain  
and mud through the jungle. We could see many eyes  
118 glaring at us from the trees which made us feel a little  
eerie. We landed at the nurses' staging area. It was  
120 all enclosed in canvas pens.

Our first clothes in New Guinea were men's suntans, pants  
122 and shirts, with leggings to protect us from mosquito

bites. We had orders to be sure and take our Atebrin  
124 every day to prevent malaria, and never to go out of the  
compound without an armed guard. There were stories of  
126 rape attacks, etc. Not from the natives; they always  
stayed in their own area, but they were out during the  
128 day to help the Australians build our sheds and different  
buildings.

130 Anyway, on that dark, cold night our first cots were in  
small tents with mosquito net, and we could see spiders  
132 were all around. (Laughter)

Later our cots were moved into a long, thatched-roof shed  
134 with a floor. The latrines were double holers in little  
sheds, which we shared with the spiders and the lizards.  
136 We used our helmets for taking baths and washing our  
clothes. We were glad to see the per-pads come in, after  
138 managing with diapers.

Finally, the shower room was completed, and it was long  
140 rows of showerheads--no privacy. The water supply was  
very unreliable, so many times we were caught short;  
142 being soaped--well-soaped and not able to rinse.

With all the inconveniences, we shared a good comradeship  
144 between us; we had lots of good times. Some of the girls  
were attached to field hospitals, but the rest of us had  
146 to wait until our hospital was ready. We were able to go  
to parties in the evening with our groups. There were  
148 many young men at that time on their way to the front



150 lines, wanting somebody to talk to and drink with. My  
favorite - safest drink was rum and coke or beer.

Q: Where were these parties held?

152 WG: They were held in recreation centers and then were  
sponsored by the Red Cross.

154 Q: Were these in tents, also?

WG: No, they were in pretty good buildings. I guess they had  
156 had Milne Base set up for a staging area for a long time  
before we ever moved there. Our water supply was in a  
158 canvas bag with chlorine to flavor it, and the water was  
always warm. So we got to like beer as our favorite  
160 drink of the day.

To go back to the parties: One moonlit night, I remember  
162 I wore my white blouse and suntan pants, feeling real  
dressed up. My friend and I were going with our dates to  
164 a swim party. My friend and I proceeded to get ready to  
get in the pool. Then I realized I still had my corn  
166 plasters on my toes, and did they show up like neon  
lights! It didn't take me long to get rid of them, so  
168 all went well.

Q: Must be the PX's were well supplied with corn plasters?

170 WG: (Laughter) Yes, those field shoes were big and they  
rubbed all of us in the wrong places.

172 In mid '44, our general hospital was finally ready for  
us. It was built on the hill. It had been built before;  
174 I mean, it wasn't brand new to us. Other units had used  
it. It was on the hill overlooking the harbor. It was a  
176 beautiful view.

Most of our patients were boys being sent back home;  
178 mental cases, and skin disorders, jungle rot, and things  
like that. We also had the electric shock ward, which I  
180 hated. Most of my work was administrative, making rounds  
and reporting to the head nurse. I was offered a  
182 promotion to a captain, but I'd refused it because I  
didn't feel qualified. The colonel said at the time that  
184 he had never heard of that before, but I felt happier as  
a first lieutenant.

186 In 1945, we were sent to Clark Field, outside of Manilla.  
We joined a field hospital for a short time; took care of  
188 the boys directly from foxholes. Most of them had been  
in the foxholes for 40 to 60 days. They came in with  
190 terrible diarrhea and vomiting and mal-nourished, and the  
first thing we had to do was to start I-V's. Thank  
192 goodness for the corpsmen, with the I-V's, etc. We had  
to give the morphine and watch the condition of the  
194 patients. At that time, we didn't have enough beds; nor  
sheets; nor blankets. Finally they came, but we were  
196 under distress until we got our supplies.

Then the general hospital moved to Manilla. Our

198 buildings had been badly bombed. Roofs--and plumbing was  
ruined, but the latrines were set up in tents outside of  
200 our courtyard until the plumbing was complete.

Finally, we were whole again. My ward was a polio ward  
202 with respirators and hot packs. Boy, was it a tough one,  
wringing out those hot packs with no instruments, burning  
204 your hands all the time. Thank goodness, we had good  
electricity for the respirators.

206 In the interval in New Guinea, I was given a one month R  
and R at Sidney, Australia. We went by seaplane. I had  
208 never ridden in a plane before, and was I scared! We  
went over the deepest harbor in the world. (I understand  
210 Milne Bay was.) We had a lovely time; met so many  
friendly people. I sure had my share of ice cream and  
212 chocolate pie. The mess food back at camp had very  
little fresh fruits and vegetables and ice cream. The  
214 Australians were friendly to the Americans. They felt  
closer to us than they did to their mother country.

216 One Australian family invited us into their home, and  
invited us to tea. Well, the tea turned out to be a  
218 whole dinner. We had so many lovely, different kinds of  
foods. I think they had saved all their rations in order  
220 to accommodate us. They even saved their petrol ration  
to take us to the mountains: To the--what they called  
222 "the bush,"--we would call the mountains.

224 Q: You mentioned "R and R." What do those letters stand  
for?

226 WG: Rest and recreation. I had been in New Guinea, I guess,  
nine months then. I had quite a bit of leave time built  
228 up. We really had a good time. We even saw the  
cemeteries (Laughter) in Sidney, and we'd always go see  
the cemeteries. There were three of us that went  
230 together. We had a good time, though, and we were all  
Catholic people; So we went into this cathedral, thinking  
232 we were going to a Catholic Church. We'd find out after  
we got in there that it was a Presbeterian Church.  
234 (Laughter) But we were treated royally there.  
Also, in my stay overseas, I was lucky to meet my brother  
236 in New Guinea and also in the Philipines. He treated me  
and my friends to picnics and dinners and dances--after I  
238 got permission from my commissioned officer to go with my  
brother and his friends. (They were all non-commissioned  
240 officers.) (Laughter)

242 Q: Oh, that did take a bit of finagling to get to go with  
them, didn't it? (Laughter)

244 WG: Well, they had been in foxholes for a whole month--over a  
month, so they were glad to get away from their unit.

246 Q: Were they pretty strict about the relationships between  
enlisted men and officers in that area?

WG: Yes, they did show that up quite a bit, so I was very  
248 sure I didn't want to be embarrassed with my brother--  
being a PFC. He was in the Paratroopers, the Medical  
250 Corps, P\_\_\_\_\_ Company.

Q: Wasn't that fortunate, though, that you were able to meet  
252 him? - twice!

You had mentioned several times about your uniform being  
254 suntan pants and boots, with your leggings and all. Was  
that the only uniform you wore all the time over there,  
256 or did you at sometime change?

WG: When we got to Manilla and our unit--our hospital ward  
258 was intact, we were allowed to wear a seersucker, with  
hose. Were the boys glad to see our legs then!  
260 (Laughter)

Q: I imagine so!

WG: It was so warm there, anyway--Manilla. We were glad to  
262 have dresses.

Q: When you're talking about the--when you say the seer-  
264 sucker--were those the little brown and white striped  
seersuckers?  
266

WG: Yes. They had kind of a little wrap-around.

Q: With the little overseas cap?  
268

WG: Yes. Of course, mine was always off because I was  
270 reaching into the respirator, or something, (Laughter)  
and getting it knocked off my head.

272 Q: When did you return home then? Did you return home  
before the end of the war?

274 WG: Well, it was after the bombing, and we knew the Japs were  
taken care of--pretty much. In November, 1945, I was  
276 sent home. I had several months of leave coming. I was  
discharged as a captain, March 3, 1946.

278 On our way home, we were on a cargo ship. We landed in  
Los Angeles area, and we were met by the band, which  
280 played many patriotic songs. Then we took the train to  
San Francisco, and I took a bus from San Francisco to San  
282 Jose, carrying my fatigue bag and my purse. I had the  
khaki uniform at that time, so that my yellow skin (from  
284 too much Atebrin) really showed up. (Laughter)

After a month or two, I went back to work; in March,  
286 right after my Army time was up. I went back to my old  
job at the isolation ward at Santa Clara County Hospital,  
288 and my job was waiting for me. I was supervisor then.

If I didn't return in 60 days, I would have lost my  
290 seniority, but I was ready to go back to work.

In retrospect, I really did miss my friends in the Army.  
292 I kept up correspondence for several years, but I'm a bad  
correspondence person so I gave up writing.

294 Q: In mentioning your friends, were these the same friends  
that you had gone over there with?

296 WG: Yes. Part of them were.

Q: Did you come back with these same four people that you  
298 went over there with?

WG: No, three of my pals were sent home. One had her back  
300 injured in a jeep accident, and one had bursitis that she  
had gotten from a yellow fever shot that she had taken.  
302 The other one went home with a lung condition, so I was a  
loner coming home.

304 Q: All along you have mentioned about taking care of the  
men. I wondered, were any of our women ill very much?  
306 Were they able to withstand the illnesses and pressures  
from over there?--other than these three that you have  
308 mentioned? What was the general health condition of the  
nurses over there?

310 WG: Some went home pregnant, (Laughter) but it seemed to be -  
I think everybody was happy enough; and they were in  
312 fairly good health. But they were usually on another  
ward that I didn't have much contact with.

314 Q: There was a special ward for women?

WG: Yes, and I think they were sent home if there was  
316 anything seriously wrong with them. They were sent home  
quickly.

318 Q: After you got home; have you made any use of the GI Bill?

WG: I didn't go in for the education at all. I felt like I  
320 was going to stay in my nursing field. I didn't go on to  
college and take advantage of the education, but I did  
322 get the GI loan on a lovely new home; which I sold later,  
but I was able to get a very reasonable interest rate at  
324 that time.

Q: This was on the Cal-loan, wasn't it; because you were a  
326 Cal-vet?

WG: No, I couldn't get the Cal-Vet. That was lower than the  
328 federal. I got the GI loan, rather than the state loan.  
I was put out of shape because I couldn't get the state  
330 loan. The interest would have been cheaper, but they  
said that I wasn't a worthy benefit because I just had my  
332 dad: If I was a married person and that had children, I  
would have been able to get the state loan.

334 Q: I didn't know that! That is news to me, but that was the  
way it often worked. Did you find that there ever was  
336 any conflict between the fact that you were a woman and  
your military status--other than the incident you've



338 already mentioned when your brother came, and he was a  
PFC? Were there other times that you had any conflict  
340 with this?

WG: No, I don't remember any, but I think the opportunities  
342 were pretty fair to both sexes, from what I saw of the  
service.

344 Q: What was the hardest thing for you to adjust to? Do you  
recall?

346 WG: Well, I guess maybe it was the uniform, especially in  
New Guinea.

348 Q: That was hot.

WG: Yes, that was hot. We had those men's pants that  
350 buttoned in the front and they didn't fit the woman's  
behind. (Laughter)

352 Q: They were either too large or too small.

WG: And the sleeves on the shoulders..

354

Transcribed by Patricia Siggers

356

Lansing, Michigan