WINIFRED GANSEL

Santa Clara, California Chapter

Transcript of an Oral History Reminiscence

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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

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WINIFRED GANSEL

E 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: 0. K. Well, I was born November 7, 1807, 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 IE 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

IB 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 1834, I went to work at the

E0 Santa Clara County Hospital, where I worked until I was joined up with the service. I did surgical nursing and

EE general duty nursing. CLaughter) My happiest time there at the hospital was working in the isolation ward, where

E4 we had all kinds of contagious diseases; diphtheria,

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scarlet Fever, meningitis, TB, measles and mumps, or

26 uihat-have-you. We had many seriously ill children, and it uias the time before Salk and penicillin, which made us

2B have to do more intensive nursing care.

After Pearl Harbor, which happened December 7, 1341, 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

3B 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?

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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. CLaughter) It always got cooled off at

night, though. We had to wear a coat at night when we

58 went out; and we had to take salt tablets because it was so hot we were perspiring all the time. My ward at the

1. **time, also was isolation. They seemed to put me in that**

bracket. We had measles, mumps, meningitis, valley

1. **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?

68 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 D: What kind of houses did you live in? What was your housing like?

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72 WG: Oh, ue had real nice rooms— private rooms.

Q: In barracks?

74 WG: They were in barracks, yes. They didn’t have air condi­ tioning at that time, of course, but we did have our own

76 private rooms. We had to walk quite a ways to the mess hall. We had a very nice dining room.

7B 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

B4 Hospital.

man and join the 80th General

We took a train to San Francisco and spent our last

86 evening at the Top of the Nark, having a drink and reminiscing and watching the scenery go by, because the

**88** roof daughter3 revolved around it.

We were very busy at Camp St man. It was the staging

80 area to go overseas, and it was such a terrible stress. Everybody was under stress because we had to get all our

32 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.

84 I was first lieutenant at that time, so I helped the head nurse, who was a captain, with details on registration—

36 and in details. There were about a hundred nurses in our

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

After several days, we were to walk to the ferry Cone- and-one-half miles! with all our equipment. We thought 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 the L . That was our troopship to go overseas.

We sailed quietly out of San Francisco Bay— no escorts. We zig-zagged across the Pacific Ocean to Milne Bay, the southern tip of New Guinea. Most of us were seasick at some time or other. We heard stories q F the Japanese being close, but we made it safely. We had only nine bunks in our small cabin, so we were a little on the crowded side.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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lines, wanting somebody to talk to and drink with. fly Favorite - safest drink was rum and coke or beer.

Q: Where were these parties held?

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

Q: Were these in tents, also?

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

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

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

WG: CLaughter) Yes, those Field shoes were big and they rubbed all of us in the wrong places.

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In mid ’44, our general hospital mas Finally ready for us. It was built on the hill. It had been built before; 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 beautiful view.

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

In 1845, we were sent to Clark Field, outside of Manilla. We Joined a field hospital for a short time; took care of the boys directly from foxholes. Most of them had been in the foxholes For 40 to 60 days. They came in with terrible diarrhea and vomiting and mal-nourished, and the First thing we had to do was to start I-U’s. Thank goodness for the corpsmen, with the I-U’s, etc. We had to give the morphine and watch the condition of the patients. At that time, we didn’t have enough beds; nor sheets; nor blankets. Finally they came, but we were under distress until we got our supplies.

Then the general hospital moved to Manilla. Our

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

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

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

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

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Q: You mentioned ”R and R.” What do those letters stand

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| **240** |  | **brother and his friends. (They were all non-commissioned officers.) (Laughter)** |
| **242** | **Q:** | **Oh, that did take a bit of finagling to get to go with them, didn’t it? (Laughter)** |
|  | **WG:** | **Well, they had been in foxholes for a whole month— over a** |
| **244** |  | **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? |

For?

WG: Rest and recreation. I had been in New Guinea, I guess, nine months then. I had quite a bit of leave time built 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

together. We had a good time, though, and we were all Catholic people; So we went into this cathedral, thinking we were going to a Catholic Church. We ’d find out after we got in there that it was a Presbeterian Church. (Laughter) But we were treated royally there.

Also, in my stay overseas, I was lucky to meet my brother in New Guinea and also in the Philipines. He treated me and my friends to picnics and dinners and dances— after I got permission from my commissioned officer to go with my

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WG: Yes, they did show that up quite a bit, so I was very 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.

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

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

WG: When we got to Manilla and our unit— our hospital ward was intact, we were allowed to wear a seersucker, with

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| **260** |  | **hose. Were the boys glad to see our legs then! CLaughter3** |
|  | **Q:** | **I imagine so!** |
| **262** | **WG:** | **It was so warm there, anyway— Manilla. We were glad to have dresses.** |
| **264** | **Q:** | **When you’re talking about the— when you say the seer­** |
|  |  | **sucker— were those the little brown and white striped** |
| **266** |  | **seersuckers?** |
|  | **WG:** | **Yes. They had kind of a little wrap-around.** |
| **26B** | **D:** | **With the little overseas cap?** |

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

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

WG: Well, it was after the bombing, and we knew the Japs were taken care of— pretty much. In November, 1845, I was sent home. I had several months of leave coming. I was discharged as a captain, March 3, 1846.

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

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

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

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

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

WG: Yes. Part of them were.

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

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| **300** | **WG:** | **No, three of my pals were sent home. One had her back****injured in a jeep accident, and one had bursitis that she** |
| **302** |  | **had gotten from a yellow fever shot that she had taken.****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** |
| **306** |  | **men. I wondered, were any of our women ill very much?****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?

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WG: Yes, and I think they mere sent home if there was

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| **333** |  | **college and take advantage of the education, but I did****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** |
| **334** |  | **that time.** |
| **335** | **Q:** | **This was on the Cal-loan, wasn’t it; because you were a Cal-vet?** |
| **338** | **WG:** | **No, I couldn’t get the Cal-Uet. That was lower than the****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** |

anything seriously wrong with them. They were sent home quickly.

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 was going to stay in my nursing field. I didn’t go on to

said that I wasn’t a worthy benefit because I just had my

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dad: If I was a married person and that had children, I would have been able to get the state loan.

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 any conflict between the fact that you were a woman and your military status— other than the incident you’ve

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| 338 | WINIFRED GANSEL, Santa Clara Chapter**already mentioned when your brother came,** | 15**and he was a** |
| **340** | **PFC? Were there other times that you had with this?** | **any conflict** |
|  | **WG: No, I don’t remember any, but I think the** | **opportunities** |
| **348** | **were pretty fair to both sexes, from what** | **I saw of the** |
|  | **service.** |  |

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

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

D : That was hot.

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

Q: They were either too large or too small. WG: And the sleeves on the shoulders..

Transcribed by Patricia Siggers

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