

***INTERVIEW OF
MARY MEDCALF
ARMY NURSE***

Mr. Cox: This is Floyd Cox. Today is December 27, 2000. We are here in San Antonio, Texas, interviewing Mary Medcalf. She was an Army Nurse during World War II. We are conducting this interview as part of the Oral History Program of the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas. We are going to talk with Mary concerning her experiences as an Army Nurse during those trying times.

First of all, Mary, I would like for you to tell us a little bit about your background, when you were born, where you were born and a little bit about your schooling.

Mrs. Medcalf: I was born in Cusseta, Georgia, which is just a tiny neighborhood down below Columbus, Georgia. I graduated from High School there. Then I went up to the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond, Virginia and spent three years there and became a registered nurse. I got a certificate and I wanted a college degree. When I finished, I went to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan. There I worked part-time and went to school part-time until I got my degree.

Mr. Cox: So you got your full degree ...

Mrs. Medcalf: We got some credit from the Nursing School, but I wanted a BS, so I had a BS in Nursing. I was in my last quarter of studies at the University of Michigan, and Pearl Harbor happened. I was working part-time in the student health center at that time. Everybody in there said they were going to join up. Sure enough, a week later the campus had lost so many men to the service.

When I graduated, I signed up to become an Army Nurse. I had a nurse friend that I had been working with and she said "let's go ahead and join up and stay together through the war." I said "we can't do that because I'm from Georgia and you are from Michigan." She said I could use her address, which I did. So my address was 442 Marine City Michigan. And I had never been there. When I was

discharged, my discharge was sent there.

Mr. Cox: How old were you when you graduated from college?

Mrs. Medcalf: It took me about three years so I was about 22 or 23. When we joined the Army, we were transferred to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin. That was more or less a jumping off place. You would go overseas or you would go to another camp. But you don't stay in Camp McCoy, Wisconsin. Since I was in limited service, I couldn't go overseas. So we lost track of each other and I don't know to this day where she is.

When I was at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, they were distributing groups of nurses out into the areas where they were needed. The largest number went overseas. The other went to various medical facilities in the camps in the United States. I ended up in Camp Ellis, Illinois. You didn't stay there very long either.

Mr. Cox: You were a 2nd Lieutenant at this time.

Mrs. Medcalf: Yes. Since I could not go overseas, I wanted to work in a big hospital to care for the wounded. I got sent up to Chicago. This was a big hotel, right on the lake, called Chicago Beach Hotel. The Army took it and transformed it into a hospital. It made a wonderful hospital. It was such a nice location.

We got the wounded from all the surrounding states, Illinois, Iowa. There was a big train station so they had easy access to visit the wounded soldiers when they came back from overseas.

They had converted the hotel into the hospital. We had the dedication ceremonies. We got all the soldiers when they were wounded and came back to the States, they were allowed to choose the hospital where they would be, since they had a long convalescence. So we got them from everywhere. With such a big train station, the families could visit them. It was a well-run place and we had a

wonderful commander there. I just loved the place.

Mr. Cox: What was your specialty?

Mrs. Medcalf: Well, actually, when the soldiers came back from overseas, so many of them needed orthopedics because they had wounds to the arms and legs. Most of them developed all kinds of infections. Sometimes we would get an entire troop coming in. They would notify us and we would stay on duty until all of the patients were cleared. The doctors would be there to remove the cast. Since there was so much infection, it was just horrible for a few days after they arrived.

A lot of them had severe bed sores for not having as adequate care as they should have while they were overseas. A lot of them had spinal injuries. We learned we needed all kinds of beds. We needed the circelectric bed and the Bradford frames that you have seen in the hospital where they are able to turn and move people regardless of how ill they are. You can turn them by moving the equipment around.

As war was winding down, the hospital no longer accepted patients. They transferred us nurses to where we wanted to go from there. I chose to go to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. That was a real nice base there and I liked it there.

Mr. Cox: These wounded that you would treat, were these fellows that had lost limbs.

Mrs. Medcalf: Yes. It was interesting. Some of them were addicted. I know we had one patient one night that cried every night. I would tell him that he would not get the narcotic anymore.

Mr. Cox: He was used to the morphine to ease his pain.

Mrs. Medcalf: That is what they were using, the morphine. It was highly addictive over a long period

of time.

Mr. Cox: Were the nurses who worked together a pretty close group. Did you really cooperate with each other.

Mrs. Medcalf: Yes. I was fortunate enough to be in a place where we had good cooperation among the nurses.

Mr. Cox: What medical group was this that you belonged to in Chicago? I don't know how the medical worked, were they battalions, what did they call them?

Mrs. Medcalf: This was just called the Gardiner General Army Hospital. When they converted from the hotel to the hospital, they had a big dedication ceremony. They named the hospital, Gardiner Hospital. The reason for that was Ruth Gardiner was the first nurse confirmed dying while in service. She was evacuating troops on a plane from Alaska back to the States and the plane went down. She lost her life, and the hospital was named for her.

When they first decided to put the big hospital there in Chicago, they bought the Stevens Hotel which was a larger and most expensive hotel. I understand they lost a lot of money trying to convert it and found out they couldn't. They had to resell it. Then they bought this one and it was ideal.

Mr. Cox: How long were you there in Chicago?

Mrs. Medcalf: I was there a couple of years. We had a lot of interesting experiences, we really did. Some of them were addicts because of their long extended illnesses. Some of them had malaria.

Mr. Cox: What did you think of the doctors that you worked with?

Mrs. Medcalf: They were wonderful people.

Mr. Cox: They really had their patients interest at heart?

Mrs. Medcalf: Oh yes. I worked rotating shifts, which was only fair. I remember one night I was working night duty and these soldiers would come in late at night, 12 or 1 a.m. They had been given passes. They would sit down and tell you all the things that happened to them while they were out. They said that you cannot buy a meal while you are in Chicago, you cannot buy a drink. They would be told to enjoy it, somebody had already paid for it.

Mr. Cox: Civilians were buying food and drinks for them because they were military.

Mrs. Medcalf: They said that if you want to put Chicago on the map, be good to the soldiers. And they were because every single one of them that went out on a pass would come back with these stories.

Mr. Cox: After you went to Fort Bragg, did you get the same type of duty?

Mrs. Medcalf: Yes.

Mr. Cox: Can you describe the worse case that you ever had? Can you recall?

Mrs. Medcalf: I guess it was the ones that had been addicted. Sometime they would cry all night. Back then we didn't know how to help, we just cut it off.

Mr. Cox: Cold-turkey.

Mrs. Medcalf: We had one real nice young man except he had become addicted and he had some severe injuries. As he got better, he was transferred down to other floors. There was a rotating system so that the seriously ill ones on one floor, and so on.

So he was transferred out. I didn't see him for months and months. One day I was on duty and somebody tapped me on the shoulder and I looked around and didn't recognize him. He had a beautiful young lady on his arm. He was dressed in civilian clothes and just looked like a million dollars. He would cry all night, asking for narcotics, when a patient on my floor.

Mr. Cox: Can you recall one of the most humorous times that happened when you were a nurse? Anything that was really funny.

Mrs. Medcalf: It will probably come to me later.

Mr. Cox: When did you meet your husband, George?

Mrs. Medcalf: He doesn't like for me to tell this. We would double date because it was usually safer. I was going out one night on a double date. I decided that I didn't want to go out. I told my friend I didn't want to go and she got mad at me. She said "you just sit here and rot, I don't care." So I stretched out on my bed, we had cots, and I was reading and the phone rang. Somebody down the hall answered it. We lived in barracks. They had just received a call from the Officers' Quarters and they wanted everybody to go up and go to the dance. Usually it was 10 - 1, males over females. They would take us in one of the big motor vehicles and we would go in a group and come back in a group. We were dancing with strangers. They were very protective of us, which I appreciate now.

Mr. Cox: This is when you met George, at the dance that night?

Mrs. Medcalf: Yes. I had already broken a date. I said that I really didn't want to go. They said, "come on and go they need you over there." So I went. I was sitting there talking to one of the guys and he asked me where I was from because of my accent - real southern. I told him I was from Georgia and he said that they had a Lieutenant over here from Georgia. So George came over and met me. That was the beginning. Over-all my time in the service was very enjoyable.

Mr. Cox: How many years did you spend in the Army as a nurse?

Mrs. Medcalf: I was in for three years.

Mr. Cox: Three years total?

Mrs. Medcalf: Yes.

Mr. Cox: Do you remember when you were discharged, what the date was?

Mrs. Medcalf: We were discharged within one day of each other. I can't remember exactly the date.

I told you I gave my address as Marine City, Michigan. I got a notice in the paper that if you applied, Michigan was giving all of the veterans a bonus. Well, I wrote to them and told them that my address was Georgia, but I had signed up in Michigan. I got the bonus anyway.

Mr. Cox: I guess that paid off in one way.

Mrs. Medcalf: It was \$370, a lot of money then. We found a little house when we got out of the service. It was right on the street car route, because you couldn't buy a car. We were very fortunate. The street car stopped right in front of our house.

Mr. Cox: After you got discharged, did you continue in nursing?

Mrs. Medcalf: No. We wanted to start out family. We were both getting on in age. I did work for Kraft Foods as a nurse. They needed someone to start a health center because they were having so many absentees. My main duty was to be sure we didn't have too many people goofing. And that is what was happening. They found out that if they laid off sick, they had better be sick because the nurse would come for a visit. And if you weren't sick, you might lose your job. So that improved absenteeism quite a bit.

Mr. Cox: Overnight improvement, practically.

Mrs. Medcalf: Then we had a baby six months on the way and I didn't go back into nursing. Three years later we had a second one. So I stayed home for a while. We were transferred to Augusta and I worked night duty for Emory University Hospital for a while.

When I went to work, I told them I had been out of nursing a good while and I needed to be refreshed on a lot of things. The war was over and a lot of things were changing as well as the medical field. The lady who interviewed me said that if I had any problems and didn't know how to do something, just call on us and we will send someone to assist you. I think I only had to do that once.

Anyway, they offered me the job of night supervisor. It would be a wonderful step up financially but I just couldn't take it. By the time I got all the reports done in the morning and got home, the children would already be gone to school and it was more important to me to be home. So I would get home in time to prepare their breakfast and get them off to school. They never knew I was gone because I would work from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. It worked out pretty good.

The Director of Nursing at University Hospital School of Nursing, heard about me through a mutual friend. She called me and asked me if I would come to work. This was a three year nursing school and I only needed a Bachelor's Degree to teach. I just loved it. We accompanied the students to

the floor and supervised everything that went on. The doctors were so nice to us. Anytime I would ask them to come and lecture, they would. They would let us sit in on autopsies.

If I were going to be off the floor for some reason, I would tell the head nurse that I would be gone and if anything came up she would know where to find me or get in touch with me.

I taught medical surgical nursing. My main specialty was orthopedics and neurosurgery. We had all kinds of clinics. We had doctors to come and lecture to them. And I would take them to autopsies. They weren't allowed to go to autopsies without me.

The school closed about a year later. They had a four-year - the Medical College of Georgia in Augusta. So the three-year program closed.

Mr. Cox: So did you retire then?

Mrs. Medcalf: Yes. I haven't worked since then. I did have a rather varied nursing career and enjoyed it.

Mr. Cox: Thank you very much, Mary, I certainly appreciate your contributing to our archives. You contributed to the war effort. And you and George have been married how long?

Mrs. Medcalf: 55 years.

Mr. Cox: Well congratulations.

Mrs. Medcalf: When I was stationed at the hospital in Chicago. There were three corpsmen and their only job was to go all over the hospital and give the penicillin injections. They didn't have enough to take a chance on losing it, it stayed under lock and key with three people in charge.

Mr. Cox: Up to the penicillin, primarily you used sulfa drugs.

Mrs. Medcalf: They were still using the sulfa drugs. I remember one time at the regular hospital, not the army hospital, we had a patient who had a severe leg wound. So they were using the sulfa drugs and they were putting it down into the wound. And it was just healing up so pretty.

They didn't know at the time that the side effects were so bad and the patient actually died later on because of the sulfa drugs. There was sulfanilamide and sulfa diazine and sulfathizol and all of that and they had to know which ones were best for which illnesses.

Mr. Medcalf: We carried sulfa drugs in our little paks. I know when the aide man came in and slapped it all in the wound. It was a gashing wound.

Mr. Cox: Sulfa drugs fought infection immediately.

Mrs. Medcalf: That is right.

At this point the tape ended.

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By Becky Lindig

Nimitz Volunteer

