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Interview with

DOROTHY STILL DANNER

March 19, 1995

Place of Interview: San Antonio, Texas  
Interviewer: Richard W. Byrd  
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Admiral Nimitz Foundation  
and  
University of North Texas Oral HIstory Collection  
Dorothy Still Danner

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Mr. Byrd: This Richard Byrd, interviewing Dorothy Still Danner for the Admiral Nimitz Museum and the University of North Texas Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place March 19, 1995, in San Antonio, Texas. I'm interviewing Ms. Danner in order to obtain her recollections as a prisoner-of-war of the Japanese in World War II.

Just for some background information, Ms. Danner, could you tell me where and when you were born.

Ms. Danner: I was born in Saginaw, Michigan, on November 29, 1914. My family moved from there to Long Beach, California, when I was about three years old. I spent most of my years in southern California.

Mr. Byrd: So you went to school in California.

Ms. Danner: I went to the Los Angeles County School of Nursing.

Mr. Byrd: And you went to high school there, too.

Ms. Danner: No, my family moved to Burbank, California, and I

finished high school there. Then I went into the nurses' training in Los Angeles County School of Nursing and graduated from there in 1935.

Byrd: In 1935.

Danner: I worked for a while in a local doctor's office and in the surgery section in the Hollywood Hospital. Then I happened to pick up an American Journal of Nursing magazine, and it had these applications for military nursing in both the Army and the Navy. As far as I knew, there were only about four hundred Navy nurses in the whole nation. I thought I was wasting a three-cent stamp, but I submitted an application to the Navy, and I was accepted.

Byrd: So you went into the Navy in 1935?

Danner: No, it was about 1938 or 1939. That was my first tour of duty.

Byrd: So you worked for the civilian doctor for three or four years after graduation.

Danner: No, I worked there briefly, and then I went to the Hollywood Hospital. I met another nurse, and we decided to apply for duty at a small hospital at Corona, California, out in the desert. I don't know how it happened, but both of us got fired. There were three younger ones and two older nurses, and we three got fired. They replaced us, and, of course, it brought a lot of consternation among some of our patients. In any

event, then I applied for the Navy.

Byrd: So that's what prompted you to go for the Navy position.

Danner: It was a good reason to apply (chuckle).

Byrd: Were you a registered nurse, an R.N., at that point?

Danner: Yes.

Byrd: Compared to the civilian sector, how was the pay for nurses in the military?

Danner: It was about the same.

Byrd: Plus benefits.

Danner: Yes, we had our nurses' quarters there in San Diego at the Navy hospital.

Byrd: So you were first stationed at San Diego?

Danner: Yes.

Byrd: How did you wind up going into the Pacific?

Danner: (Chuckle) At the end of my tour of duty, I was called into the chief nurse's office. This was a kind of a surprise to me, but I got orders for the Philippines.

Byrd: That was after your first tour. Was the a one-year or a two-year tour?

Danner: It was a two-year tour of duty.

Byrd: Were you an officer at this point?

Danner: No, just "Miss."

Byrd: What was your pay grade, or your rank, as a nurse?

Danner: I don't remember what it was there at that point, but when I was out in the Philippines, it was about \$70 a month, or 140 pesos.

Byrd: Where were you stationed in the Philippines?

Danner: At the Cañacao Navy Hospital.

Byrd: Where is that in relation to other things?

Danner: It's on the south end of Manila Bay, southeast of the bay. The hospital is on the Navy reservation. It's right in the target zone between the Navy Yard, which was right across Cañacao Bay from us, and Sangley Point, where the PBVs and the aviation group were located.

Byrd: This is exclusively Navy where you were stationed.

Danner: Yes.

Byrd: How long were you there? It says in your biography that you did a couple of tours.

Danner: This was another two-year tour, which was common. I would have been out of there in February of 1942, except I got a little delayed.

Byrd: But you didn't reenlist at this point.

Danner: No, you don't reenlist. If you want to quit, you just submit a resignation.

Byrd: What was your normal routine like at the Navy hospital?

Danner: It was a beautiful tour of duty. It was a relaxed station. One of the corpsmen was saying, "The only time anything get done is on Tuesday. On Wednesday everybody is getting ready for a fore-and-aft [full] inspection on Thursday, and on Friday everybody is getting ready for weekend liberty, and on Monday everybody is getting over the liberty. So the only time anything gets done is on

Tuesday." (laughter)

Byrd: Were there many dependents?

Danner: Yes, there were. They had a section of the hospital for families. They had Chinese amahs, and they take care of the children while the mothers were at liberty to do what they chose to do. It was choice duty.

Byrd: Did you live on base or off base?

Danner: On base. The hospital compound was a beautiful setup. The road went in and around the front of the hospital, which faced the Cañacao Bay, and then it circled around the back and came out the gate. Our nurses' quarters were the farthest one down, and the corpsmen quarters were next. There was about a city block between the front of our nurses' quarters and the hospital itself. On the other side of the hospital compound, there was a dry dock, and beyond that was Sangley Point. It kind of curved around like that. On a map, it rather looks like a lobster configuration.

Byrd: Like a claw then.

Danner: Yes. It was beautiful there, with the tropical flowers. Right next to our quarters, there was a banyan tree with the many-rooted structure. Along the front of the compound, there was a sea wall. On the sea wall, there were what looked like little, tiny lighthouses. They had amber lights in them, and it was quite a picturesque setup. You could go down and sit along there. In the

long twilights, it was just a very romantic situation. Then twilight ends, and here are the stars twinkling in the sky. It was beautiful. There was an arcade of mahogany trees.

Byrd: How many patients would that hospital accommodate?

Danner: Two hundred and forty.

Byrd: From an equipment point of view, how would that compare to a hospital in the civilian sector or stateside?

Danner: The hospital was located where the Spanish hospital had been formerly located. It was run by sisters [nuns]. [Admiral George] Dewey took it over from the Spanish in 1898 during the in the Spanish-American War. It was replaced by built this hospital in a very modern style, comparable to hospitals in the States.

Byrd: So it was pretty well-equipped in terms of the surgical facilities and the equipment, given the technology of the time.

Danner: Yes.

Byrd: On a given day, other than sick call, how many people would normally be in there, I mean, outside of a combat situation? Were there patients there on a regular basis?

Danner: We had a surgery ward, and we had a medical ward. They had laboratory equipment, the whole works. Then we had an isolation unit that was right off Ward C, which was basically my ward. Not that I didn't rotate, when I went on night duty, SOQ [Sick Officers' Quarters] and the



other units. But basically Ward C was where I was stationed most often. The isolation ward was just a little wooden structure with room for about four patients. Basically, it was for TB [tuberculosis] patients.

Byrd: Was malaria a problem there in pre-war days?

Danner: Not too much so. Of course, in that area, with the medical unit there, they kept the water sprayed so that mosquitoes didn't develop so fast. We did have one situation about October or November of 1941. There was a polio epidemic that started out on Sangley Point. It was basically among the enlisted personnel. It threatened to be a real epidemic, but it didn't turn out that way. They were acutely ill. By this time, the dependents had gone home.

Byrd: What did you all think when they started taking dependents home?

Danner: Admiral [Thomas] Hart was up in Shanghai. Much to my surprise, he was the head of the Asiatic Fleet. I thought it was the admiral at Cavite, in the Navy Yard, who was the head of the 16th Naval District. The Japanese were beginning to get very hostile toward the International Settlement there. About this time, the war in Europe had started. The only two settlements that were fully staffed were the Japanese and the American. The English had sent most of their personnel down south

to Singapore, and the French sent a good part of theirs down south. Admiral Hart was getting the feeling that the Japanese were getting a little hostile, so he decided to send the dependents home.

Byrd: Throughout the whole Naval District?

Danner: Yes. Later, I think the Army followed suit on that. Anyway, there was this epidemic, but with these dependents gone, we took these polio patients and put them in the isolation, in the little schoolhouse, because that little TB unit was not big enough. Most of them were quite ill, but only one had to be put into an iron lung.

Byrd: So you even had that kind of a facility?

Danner: I don't know where it came from.

Byrd: In other words, they weren't sent back home? They stayed there.

Danner: We couldn't take him out of the iron lung in time to send him home.

Byrd: That's what I mean--the iron lung was there.

Danner: Yes, and the other patients were well enough that they could go home on the next transport out, which was the last one.

Byrd: What did you military personnel think when all of the sudden the dependents were being evacuated? Was that an ominous sign?

Danner: No, not really. Whoever thought that "Uncle Sam" would

be beaten? Admiral Hart was a drive-drive-drive type. He was driving everybody crazy. He didn't think the attitude was good. He criticized the attitude. He criticized the ships. The crews would say, "What does he expect? They are twenty years old. They are old enough to vote." But he kept drilling everybody--drill, drill, drill. He was pushing so hard that the admiral on the base just couldn't keep up with it. He was an older man.

Byrd: The admiral on the what?

Danner: Cavite. He had a crisis. I think his son died, and this depressed him so much that he attempted suicide.

Byrd: The admiral?

Danner: Yes. I can't remember his name. In any event, he was replaced by another admiral. This was Admiral Bemis. He was an older man, too. I think it was kind of a joke with Admiral Hart, because he sent him to the hospital. Admiral Hart's diagnosis was "chronic indigestion" (laughter). That was funny, when I was on day duty in the SOQ. The old guy, he kind of took a liking to me. I guess it was because I must have reminded him of his granddaughter.

I didn't mention the Langley, which was sitting over there as a sort of tender for the PBVs. A friend of mine, the fellow that I was dating at the time, was stationed on the Langley. In talking to Admiral Bemis, he said that he was part of the group that converted what

had been a coal-burning ship from years ago and converting it into a carrier. In doing so, it was the most heavily-armed ship in the world. The point being, as they put the flight deck on the top of it, it began to tilt. To give it ballast, they loaded all these old armory things, cannons and all that sort of stuff, into the base of the ship to get it to float upright. Anyway, the admiral was a part of this conversion, so he was telling about that.

Byrd: Were these like vintage Spanish cannon?

Danner: No, from old Army cannons that had been scuttled--artillery that was out of date--when this was being done.

Byrd: Stuff that was antiquated or outmoded.

Danner: Yes. Admiral Bemis told me that he was a part of that. I mentioned my friend on the ship.

They finally got him transportation out on the China Clipper [passenger aircraft]. It was short notice. He wanted to give a cocktail party for the doctors and nurses, so he said, "What time can your friend get there?" Am I getting too social with this?

Byrd: No, you're doing a marvelous job.

Danner: He wanted me to arrange the party over at the commandancia. I said, "Well, Johnny has duty this day, Wednesday and Thursday." He said, "Well, make it on Friday." I learned that the only way you could not go to an admiral's party would be to drop dead. Our chief

nurse and our commanding officer had both made arrangements for Friday, and they were furious. It turned out to be a good party, and everybody had a good time, except those two and me. I was kind of getting the blame for this.

Byrd: How soon before the attack was this party that the admiral gave?

Danner: It was probably in September. The attack wasn't until December 8, 1941 [one day later than Hawaii because of the international dateline].

Byrd: Which admiral was leaving? Bemis?

Danner: Yes. He was replaced by Rear Admiral [Francis] Rockwell, a younger man who was very capable. With all of this, everybody being so busy, Admiral Hart drifted over to the hospital. They had a meeting about who should do what, when, and so on in the event of disaster. In the meantime, our commanding officer changed. He was replaced by Captain Davis.

Byrd: So in other words, you've had a complete shakeup here, within a matter of two or three months before the Japanese attack.

Danner: Yes. There was a Captain Roberts, who was the executive officer, and a Captain Loman, who was the fleet surgeon. Around November of 1941, Admiral Hart received orders from the Chiefs of Staff in Washington to send the Asiatic Fleet south.

Then when Pearl Harbor was hit, we had these three towers that the radio station used, the wireless towers. On December 7, with Pearl Harbor on December 8 on our side of the international line, a radio operator around 3:00 in the morning picked up these frantic calls from Pearl Harbor.

He called Admiral Hart, and Hart gave a message to the effect that the Japanese had taken the offensive, so act accordingly. Of course, the word got to our nurse on duty at night. The chief nurse immediately was notified, and they dashed over in the dark, with flashlights with blue cellophane masks, to the hospital. They sent the night nurse back to alert everybody. It was pretty hard to believe. We thought it was just a drill. In any event, that day, all of the ambulatory patients were transferred back to duty, except those that had possible diagnosis of diabetes or that sort of thing. They were sent over to Manila to go back to duty.

[Tape 1, Side 2]

Byrd: We were talking about the activities on December 8, on your side of the dateline, and the return to duty of ambulatory patients. Would you pick up there?

Danner: The boys went back to duty, those who could. From the Navy at Cavite, they sent over old helmets, World War I helmets, and gas masks and this sort of thing. They were distributed to the patients and everyone else.

Byrd: You're all getting gas masks, patients and staff alike.

Danner: I don't remember getting one, but I'm sure I probably did.

Byrd: But you're all getting helmets and wartime gear?

Danner: Yes. They looked like a plate. The next day, the ambulatory patients were transferred over to Manila. That was on the 9th. With all the evacuation patients, we had the whole hospital full of unmade beds. We finally got that all put together.

Byrd: So you're back up to snuff. You have enough to take care of 250 patients in your facility?

Danner: The capacity was 240. The next day, we were getting along pretty well. We hoped to move the hospital out before that fatal day, but we didn't. Each day, the air raid siren would ring. The Japanese were coming over the city, starting their bombardment.

Byrd: Japanese planes?

Danner: Yes.

Byrd: So this would have been noon on the 9th in the Philippines.

Danner: Yes. They were coming from Taiwan [then Formosa]. It took about four hours to get down there. The first day that they came down, like at Pearl Harbor, the Army had sent their planes out to watch for the enemy. At noon, they came back, and their planes were all lined up while they were having lunch. As I understand it, the Japanese

expected to run into a lot of flak from the Army Air Force, but there they were, and they just wiped the whole thing on the first day. The Japanese had the skies to themselves, basically.

Byrd: What about ground fire? Was there any antiaircraft fire put up against them?

Danner: It happened so fast. WHAM! There they are. It was quite a mess for the Army. The patients were coming into Sternberg Hospital, and they had this big front lawn. They brought these people in and just lined them up on the lawn. Each one was automatically given a quarter-grain of morphine, and they set up a triage. Those that were most critical were brought into surgery first.

The second day, the bed patients were taken out, and a team of doctors and two of our nurses and a group of corpsmen went with them. The Army let them use their empty dependents' ward temporarily. It was pretty eerie, with all these empty beds. The sounds would echo through the wards. At noon we went over to our quarters for lunch.

There was always that raid. The first night, our chief nurse told us that we should pack our personal effects. Somebody over in the Navy Yard brought over dungarees and work shirts and gave them to the nurses. The usual comment was, "I wouldn't be caught dead in one of those." You know, curvaceous female figures and so



on. In any event, our chief said, "Well, pack at least four of these dungarees and shirts in your luggage, and more if possible."

On the 9th, our chief nurse was telling us that we hoped to move out, but in the meantime, we want to be prepared for whatever eventualities might come up. We sterilized gallons and gallons of normal saline solution, and bandages and the usual things that you would need in a hospital. We had it boxed so that we could either use it there or take it with us when we went to Manila. We went to bed thinking, "Come what may, we are ready."

Byrd: Did the Japanese bomb only that one time at noon, or was this continuous?

Danner: No, they left us alone. They hadn't touched us at that point. On the 10th, the usual raid at noon came. So we went out of the hospital, and we sat there, and this time we took our lunch with us. While we were sitting under the nurses' quarters, we heard these planes coming over. The next thing you know, BANG, the bombs were coming down. This lasted forty-five minutes--this raid did.

Sitting there, your mind kind of wanders, and you think about different things. I was thinking, "Our patients will be Japs." After all that time, you can imagine how Admiral Hart must have felt, looking from his headquarters on Pier 7. He was watching his fleet's lifeline going down. They were flying too high for our

antiaircraft guns

In any event, there was no chance for any sort of a triage for us. The roadways and everything around the yard were impassable. Patients were coming in--military, civilian, and Filipino. They were just brought in and dumped. The beds were filled up so fast. They were dumped on the floor. Some of them were already dead. It was quite a situation, as you might imagine. We hardly knew where to begin. Many of the patients died at that point. They'd take them out to the morgue. We wouldn't have a chance to put clean linen on the bed. The next patient was put on top.

Byrd: These are all casualties from the air attacks.

Danner: Right. As the day wore on, things kind of settled down, and we got to the point where we could get our records straight.

This one patient--I was making rounds--said, "Nurse, I'm going to die." I said, "That's a very gloomy thing to say." He said, "I am going to die." He sounded very accepting of the fact. He said that when he was in surgery, the doctor told the surgery nurse that there was no use carrying on with this patient because he would be dead by morning. I said, "You must have misunderstood." He said, "Well, look for yourself." I put the covers back, and all of the surface flesh was gone. He didn't have a chance in hell. I was surprised that he was even

alive at that point. What can you say? The policy at this point was that one didn't tell a patient that he was dying. Even the doctors didn't like to tell the relatives that a patient was dying. Anyway, I told him, "Well, I'll be back." I didn't have the courage to go back until it was too late, and then the man was dead. It just broke my heart. Here I could have done so much for this man. I could have asked him who his mother was, or who his wife or sweetheart was. I might have been able to contact them, but I was too late. That was kind of a heartbreaking situation.

Byrd: When did the Japanese actually invade with land troops in your area?

Danner: You mean when they finally got to Bataan and Corregidor?

Byrd: Yes.

Danner: Of course, Bataan was hit right away. [General Douglas A.] MacArthur declared Manila an open city. Most of our Navy men, having no place else to go, joined the Army and went out to Bataan.

Byrd: Did you go then?

Danner: No, we had these Army/Navy surgical teams. I was sent to the Jai Alai Building, and some of them were sent to other places. One place was sort of a satellite surgery for Sternberg. It was in the confiscated Santa Scholastica Music Schol. When the city was declared an open city, the Army and Santa Scholastica moved out. One

of our nurses was on a Navy work team at Santa Scholastica. She was working with one of our doctors and a few of the corpsmen, so that team went out with the Army. While they were moving out, our Navy was moving in. It was just almost more than I could take.

Byrd: Were you a part of the group that was surrendering then?

Danner: Yes. Right at the first of the year, the Japanese army of occupation came in, and we were POWs.

Byrd: You were at the Santo Tomas?

Danner: Not right then, but we would be. As time wore on, the Japs would take out so many men and a few doctors and corpsmen and take them to Pasay Elementary School. It wasn't too far from the hospital. It was a little southeast of it. Bit by bit, they kept taking these people out, and they would take the medicines and whatnot. About March 3 or March 8, they transferred us nurses over to Santo Tomas.

Byrd: Were you segregated from the men?

Danner: Yes, at that point. Over there, the civilians had been picked up by the Japs. They were told to come in there for registration, so they brought just enough stuff to be there only about three days. But they never got out of there again.

Byrd: Did they treat you nurses any different than the male military?

Danner: Yes. They didn't have women nurses, so they didn't

really quite know what to do with us.

Byrd: Was their treatment harsh?

Danner: No, other than the fact that the food at Santo Tomas was not the best. We had three meals a day, but they were very light servings.

Byrd: How long were you held prisoner?

Danner: I was there a year-and-a-half. In 1943, they sent 1,400 able-bodied men and the eleven of us Navy nurses to Los Baños.

Byrd: Thank you very much for the time you have been able to share with me. I really appreciate it. Maybe we can continue this some other time. I don't know when I can get to Boise, though, but I sure have enjoyed our chat this afternoon.

Danner: It's been nice.

Byrd: Thank you very much.

Danner: You're welcome.

[Interview abruptly terminated by Admiral Nimitz Museum staff to accommodate another appointment]