

Bernadine B. Bircher oral history interview

ED METZLER: This is Ed Metzler. Today is the sixth of February, 2014. I'm in Fredericksburg, Texas at the Admiral Nimitz Museum and I am interviewing Bea Bircher. This interview is in support of the Nimitz Education and Research Center Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission for the Preservation of Historical Information related to this site. So, I would like to start, Bea, by thanking you for spending the time this morning to share your World War Two experiences with us and let's get started by having you introduce yourself. I need full name, date, and place of birth and then we'll go from there.

BERNADINE BIRCHER: My full name is Bernadine Bircher. My maiden name was Beabout, so when I was in the war that was my name. I was born in Robinson, Illinois on October the sixth, 1920. And --

EM: OK, and where is that in Illinois?

BB: That is 200, approximately 200 miles south of Chicago.

EM: OK so you're downstate.

BB: Yes, I am downstate.

EM: And what did your parents do for a living?

BB: My father worked in the oil field. So when I was growing up we moved about Southern Illinois frequently because it depended on where his assignment was.

EM: Where they were punching holes in the ground.

BB: Yes, that's right.

EM: You know that most people don't think of Southern Illinois as the oil patch.

BB: No.

EM: But back then it must have been.

BB: It must have been, yes.

EM: And did you have brothers and sisters? Was it a big family?

BB: I have four brothers.

EM: My golly you were the only --

BB: I was the only girl. I had one older brother and the rest of my brothers were quite a bit younger.

EM: So I guess they saw some experience in World War Two as well, probably.

BB: I had one -- my older brother actually went into the service with that program that was known as Goodbye Dear, I'll Be Back In A Year? If you remember that. But of course that didn't happen.

EM: (laughs) Well the one year assignment were few and far between unless you went in within a year of the end of the year.

BB: No, this was prior to the European war. And then my youngest -- I have three younger brothers as I say. And the oldest younger brother was six years, so he was in the Korean occupation but not during the Korean War. And then my brother who lives here in Texas, he was assigned after World War Two because he was in Alaska during the...

EM: OK so where did you end up going to school? You were moving around a lot I take it.

BB: You mean in primary?

EM: Primary, secondary both.

BB: We moved around and I went to multiple, different little country schools.

EM: All around in Illinois?

BB: Yes, all around in Illinois.

EM: OK. When you ended up making it to high school where did you go?

BB: I went to a little town of Oblong, Illinois.

EM: Oblong?

BB: Yes. And that's where I graduated.

EM: And that's downstate as well?

BB: Yes it is.

EM: So let's see, if you were born in 1920 you're probably coming out of high school in 1938.

BB: That's exactly right. That's exactly right.

EM: And what did you do?

BB: Immediately after I went to live with my uncle because I had made the decision -- I didn't want to stay in that area and at that time there were about two choices that women could make. You could be a nurse or else you could be a teacher. And my disposition was not inclined to be a teacher, so.

EM: You didn't have a teacher in you?

BB: (laughter) No. So I went to -- my uncle decided to take me under his wing and make sure that I went to a school that would help me get a better education than I might. So I lived with my uncle and aunt in Decatur, Illinois until March of 1939 and then I went to St. Luke's in Chicago for my nursing education.

EM: How did you like being a nurse? Did this really sit well with you?

BB: Yeah.

EM: It was a challenge or what?

BB: It was a challenge. And it was a great experience for me because being away from -- it was pretty much a rural area that I had grown up in and then to be in Chicago, why that

was a big adjustment but this was a -- at the time it was a unique situation because there were women that were my age from all over the country because it had attracted that kind of student body.

EM: And that was the tail end of the Depression and so I guess there were more jobs in the big cities than there were out --

BB: Yes, I'm sure that's true.

EM: So how long did your training last before --

BB: I went in in March of '42 -- '39, and then it was through three years and that was -- we had no summers off at that time.

EM: That's a long haul.

BB: That was a long time.

EM: That's like a basic college degree as far as hours.

BB: (laughter) Oh yeah, we had a lot of hours and during our training why if we -- our hours, we worked all kinds of hours. But then we went to classes when our hours were off. So there was not a lot of free time experience.

EM: So I guess you got a lot of on the ground training in the hospital, real hands on.

BB: That's what it was. We got a lot of hands on training, that's exactly right. And then all of our -- St. Luke's

did offer all the experience we needed to pass our requirements of a nursing school.

EM: So to become an RN, you mean?

BB: Except for communicable disease, so then we went to Cook County for an affiliation, for three months. Because St. Luke's did not offer any communicable disease so we went to Cook County and the least amount of time you could go there was for three months, so we were in Cook County. As a matter of fact, I was there at Cook County on Pearl Harbor. I remember well, I was working nights when that experience -- I did have a radio which was an alarm. So that news woke me up that Pearl Harbor had been declared in December of --

EM: That's definitely one of those dates that everybody who was around at the time remembers. And that's one of my stock questions, by the way, that I ask but you beat me to it. I was going to ask what you remember about Pearl Harbor day. How did things change for you and the people around you when that happened?

BB: I think the atmosphere became very geared to what was going -- I mean it was the uncertainty of what everybody was going to find their place in that era. You know, before the war it was more what you were going to do and where you were going to seek a job.

EM: How could you find a job and kind of make a living and what have you, yeah.

BB: Immediately after that, there was a unit in from St. Luke's and the doctors at Northwestern, they did form a hospital unit to go and support the Army movement, even soon after that. But I elected --

EM: So it wasn't a military thing?

BB: No, it was voluntary.

EM: A voluntary organization to be of help.

BB: Yeah, it was people and the doctors and they selected nurses. A lot of the people I graduated with and those that had graduated before, they formed the 55th General Hospital and they were generally -- not generally, they were assigned to the 55th General Hospital and they were in England.

EM: Is that where you were assigned?

BB: I was not. I elected not to -- I did not want to go into the Army at that time. I was working in -- after I graduated I had an opportunity to go work at the Illinois Psychiatric Institute, which I had become interested in that field so I went there and I liked what I was doing. I made that decision not to go into the Army at that time, which was in 1942.

EM: Now in '42 they didn't draft females, did they?

BB: I don't think they ever did.

EM: I didn't think they did. But obviously if you had a skill that was needed and you volunteered they put you through the normal thing and then utilized you.

BB: Yeah, right.

EM: So let's see. For the Navy, it was the Waves.

BB: Well I think for the Waves -- but I think the nurses were just, maybe they were part of the Waves.

EM: I don't know.

BB: I'm not sure either.

EM: So you were involved in psychiatric hospital operations. How long were you there?

BB: I was there until I worked in that facility and then I went back to St. Luke's because there was an opening. And my friend who was older than I and who had graduated, she became kind of like my mentor. She was working in -- St. Luke's had their own psychiatric department. So I worked there and it was in October of -- we were deciding maybe we should -- we were getting a little guilt trip and we thought maybe we should join the service because there was a plea for more nurses the services, to support the troops that were -- they needed nurses.

EM: They needed nurses. So you began to think that maybe you should be doing that, being a patriotic citizen?

BB: That's exactly right. As I think everybody at that time, they did feel the real -- they wanted to be there to support the people who were fighting in the war.

EM: Now before you went into -- I'll use the term nursing corps.

BB: That's what it was. Army nurse corps.

EM: OK, and you were still there in the Chicago area. Did you get any exposure to or involvement in soldiers that had been --

BB: Oh not really that much. They had been -- at that time there was a USO that was a social, functional arrangement for -- there were a lot of sailors who were Navy peer. A lot training facilities at Fort Sheridan. They had dances and of course they came to the hospitals and anybody that wanted to go dance with the soldiers --

EM: They loved to have nurses there dancing with the soldiers.

BB: (laughter) So that was the only encounter I had with them.

EM: But nobody that was under treatment?

BB: We had absolutely none of that.

EM: I guess most of that pretty much came later as the war ground on.

BB: Yes. We were not exposed to anything like that.

EM: So when did your guilt overwhelm you and you --

BB: So then it was in October of 1943. But we had a difficult decision to make just which brand of the service -- you know, we were young and not very attuned. We were thinking where did we really want to go into the service, if we had a choice. So we went down and we got information regarding the Navy nurse, because we knew nurses that had joined there. And the Army, so we decided we would pursue --

EM: And who is we?

BB: My friend, I told you --

EM: And she was your mentor, that friend?

BB: Yes. So we went down on Michigan Avenue, we went down and I know we had an interview with this lieutenant colonel and we said we would like, we had made the decision that we'd like to join the Army nurse corps if we could stay together. And if we could --

EM: So you had some conditions!

BB: She listened, she listened to us very patiently.

EM: Oh, it was a she?

BB: Yes, the lieutenant colonel. She was not really a nurse corps, but I think she was in the administrative, probably, in Army. So she assured us that it would be noted that that was our request. (laughter)

EM: (laughter) No commitment. That would be right.

BB: So that's we decided that we would go into the Army nurse corps and we actually were -- it was interesting because even at that time -- now the Red Cross was the -- at that time they were processing our paperwork. It had not been, it had not been assigned to the Army because I guess maybe it was the first time that before the nurses had been under the jurisdiction of the Red Cross for other wars.

EM: OK, they were never true military. Kind of administered by the Red Cross.

BB: Right and at this time, all nurses that went into the service, we were commissioned as second lieutenants.

EM: OK so you were a commissioned officer when you went in?

BB: Yes.

EM: That is really interesting. I didn't realize that.

BB: Yeah, all nurse were.

EM: So you're getting paid big bucks. (laughter)

BB: (laughter) That's right.

EM: Now do you know if you were paid as a female, the same as a second louie --

BB: No I don't think we had the same stipend as the --

EM: There was a glass ceiling. (laughter)

BB: I don't think we talked about that.

EM: It was not open for discussion (laughter)

BB: (laughter) No it was not. No you had those lieutenant things on your collar. And I think a lot of that was to make it understood that you were not to fraternize with the enlisted men.

EM: It kind of put up a --

BB: A barrier.

EM: A social barrier.

BB: I believe so.

EM: Except for the other men officers. But that was different.

BB: I guess so.

EM: So what kind of military training did you receive, or did they say "Hey you're trained, now hop on a boat, let's go."

BB: Oh not at all. No, we went, my troop trained in Camp McCoy, Wisconsin. That was a big training center for all branches of the Army. And there we were introduced into, you know, closed rank marching and bivouac and all this stuff. Because we had no idea what our assignments were going to be. And we were issued our clothing and got all the shots.

EM: So this is boot camp?

BB: That's exactly what it was. That's exactly what it was.

EM: How long did that last?

BB: I think we were only there about a month.

EM: And you were still with your friend.

BB: I was. And it was a big adjustment because we had no idea what to expect. As I say, she was probably 15 years older than I was and had a lot of different kinds of experiences before she had become a nurse. So she was much more worldly. (laughter) Knew what life was about better than I.

EM: The real world, more than the nursing world.

BB: So she decided this was not really what I expected, but anyway. Then we were told that we were going to get on a troop train. Our uniforms at that time, we were issued wool uniforms and there was a navy blue blazer and then a teal blue skirt and that was how we got on this troop train. And then we had a backpack and a bedding roll and all the other things.

EM: And what time of year was this?

BB: This was in -- let's see, we went in October. So this was in November then.

EM: So at least wool clothing felt reasonably good.

BB: Yeah.

EM: It wasn't like August or something like that.

BB: That's true.

EM: Now just connect back to your family. Your parents, what are they thinking about all this?

BB: My mother was not happy at all.

EM: She was not a happy camper.

BB: (laughter) No. But like she said, when anyone asked her. "Well actually," she said, "She never asked me what I thought." Which is probably true, so. (laughter)

EM: Well, but I mean, come on. You're 23 years old.

BB: Right.

EM: So you're grown up.

BB: So she wasn't -- I don't think she was not -- she wasn't in favor of it but she didn't --

EM: Stand in the way.

BB: Oh no no no no. I already -- as I tell you, my one brother was already in the service.

EM: And what about your father?

BB: Oh, my father -- I think as many fathers at that time he was concerned. But he was so busy providing a living, my mother was really in our family, she was the one who set the rules.

EM: She ran the household. And the social side of things, the family structure.

BB: Yep.

EM: OK so you're on a train in your teal blue skirt and your navy blue blazer and your backpack and your roll and then what happened?

BB: Yeah yeah yeah. So we were on that troop train for, I don't know, four or five days.

EM: All girls?

BB: Oh no. Lots of soldiers. No no, we were in probably one car as I remember. And we sat up -- of course, everybody, you didn't have a place to lie down.

EM: You mean you didn't have a Pullman car and a private --
(laughter)

BB: (laughter) I think we had two meals a day and then we would stop periodically, this troop train, and we were allowed to get off and walk up and down.

EM: Walk a little bit.

BB: Yeah. And then I remembered that I was the disaster of the trip. We had -- I caught my foot and I fell and my nylons were (laughter) shattered. At that time they probably didn't have nylons. I think it was silks. That was a real disaster.

EM: What a downer that must have been.

BB: But anyway, we made it and then we -- well I don't know, I think we were on that troop train for four days, I think.

EM: Where did you go?

BB: We went out in the middle of nowhere near Yuma, Arizona. So then we decided "Oh, this is what life is going to be." Up until then we didn't know where we were going because

they didn't tell you. So then we got off the train and became familiar with what a lot of time we would spend -- I think they were six by six trucks and they had bench seats and that's what we traveled around so we --

EM: So all of a sudden you're in the back of a truck.

BB: That's right.

EM: So we're not talking ambulance either. We're talking big old Dually truck.

BB: That's right. So then we --

EM: It bounces a lot.

BB: It did, it did. We were sure that our dental work was going to get --

EM: Loosened. Now the nurse corps back then was all female.

BB: That's exactly right. But we did have -- there were a lot of technical. We had sergeants who were operating room helpers and technicians. So they were --

EM: They were male.

BB: They were male. Yeah.

EM: What extent are you exposed to doctors, MDs, at this Yuma site?

BB: Well, we were there for training because it did become apparent that we were probably going to the Pacific. What they did -- they had a tent, we were in tents out in the middle of the desert. That's what we lived in and they had

-- it was a model of what a tent hospital would be. But we were not -- a lot of troops were also in that surrounding area in the Mohave Desert. They were getting ready to go to the Pacific. As far as patients, we were not functioning as a hospital.

EM: You were still training.

BB: That's exactly right. So we went to -- they were teaching us, we went to these classes, we had a headquarters tent. So we went there for exposure to and supposedly learning about tropical diseases and what we would be expected to treat. And what kind of --

EM: That's one way you knew you were going to the Pacific, because they were doing tropical diseases.

BB: That's right.

EM: So how long were you there in Yuma?

BB: We were in that area from -- let's see, that was in November. Our unit was every time that we would go on maneuvers periodically for a week or 10 days, out into the desert and set up a mock hospital. But we never had any casualties. We did that but every time then the unit was assigned to go to Pacific then the nurses were dropped from their corps because they decided nurses -- that was during the Bataan March, so they had decided nurses shouldn't be going to the Pacific. So then we would go back and they

would assign us to another evacuation hospital. So that happened a few times and then at one time we went from Yuma, we went up into Camp Cook, I think it was. But that was in buildings. But then we had the first Filipino regiment, they taught us judo. Because they thought if we were going into the Pacific then nurses, if they might be able to defend themselves.

EM: So who taught you judo?

BB: They were Filipinos. It was the first Filipino regiment.

EM: How did that go for you?

BB: Pretty rough. (laughter)

EM: (laughter) Did you get a black belt or not?

BB: No no no no. I think that only lasted six or seven days, maybe. I don't know who made the decision. Then I guess they thought that was enough of that.

EM: This wasn't working too well.

BB: Yeah. And then they decided, after that then I think it was in -- let's see, that was early part of 1944. Then we went to -- I think that was May of '44. I wrote some of these dates down. They sent us -- we were told we were not going to the Pacific. They were going to change our assignment so we went on troop training. We found out we were going to go to Camp Swift, Texas, in fact.

EM: Where's that? It's in Texas.

BB: You know, wherever we were we didn't know where we were.
Because we were out in the boonies some place.

EM: At this point were you assigned to a specific organization
like the 446th nursing corps?

BB: No, we were not.

EM: You were still kind of --

BB: In limbo. We didn't know what we were going --

EM: You were not actually assigned.

BB: No, we were not actually assigned to any group except our
immediate hospital until we crossed the channel and got
into England.

EM: So you went to Swift, Texas for what? More training?

BB: Yeah we did that. We went on maneuvers there. Just to
kill time I think. At that time. They were trying to
teach us how we would function, and gave us an idea of how
we would function in the European theater. But that --
those kind of casualties as opposed to --

EM: Jungle warfare, tropical diseases, that kind of stuff.

BB: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

EM: Roughly how long were you at Camp Swift?

BB: Oh we were only there probably about five weeks, not very
long at all.

EM: So this was early '44.

BB: Yeah, right, May.

EM: So then what happened?

BB: And then we -- then we were told we were going to New York Harbor and then we were going to go overseas.

EM: That's when you knew you were going to the European theater.

BB: That's right.

EM: Northern Europe. Now during this period of time are you getting frequent letters from home? Are you writing home?

BB: Oh yeah. And then every time that we were dropped from a hospital we were given a final leave because we had to mark our luggage and send out the APO numbers and all this materials so that everybody would know where we were. So most of us had used -- I did not go home when we were out in the Arizona desert because I didn't have time to get there. You had a week time and in those days, of course, you went by train. So --

EM: Two days home, two days back. There's no time at home.

BB: But then when we were at Camp Swift in Texas then we did have enough time. And that's when I did go back home in Illinois and then I knew that we were going into the European theater.

EM: So how are you feeling about that? Are you excited or scared or anxious --

BB: No, I think we were ready to get a final. It was the uncertainty of not knowing what we were going to do or where we were going to do it. And we didn't feel -- we had been in the Army for six months or seven and hadn't done anything. Hadn't had patient care or anything like that. We were hoping to get some definite assignment.

EM: They were moving you all over the place too.

BB: Yeah, we did move.

EM: So you're on a train to New York City?

BB: That's right. So then we arrive in Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. That's where we went in June of '44. And then we were not there very long, just in order to get our paperwork process. And then when we were going, sailed out of New York we were on a Dutch ship called the *SS Mauritania*, which was a big ship. I just remember, you know it was zig zagging around because there were a lot of submarines in that area at that time.

EM: Well yeah, in fact that was just about when the Normandy invasion occurred in early June. So there wasn't even a foothold on Europe yet until --

BB: No, that's right.

EM: But then there was. So where did you go?

BB: We landed in Liverpool. And then from there we did go to Cheddar, England. And that's when we knew that we were

going to be a part of the Ninth Army. We were billeted in private homes while we were in England. Still with my friend.

EM: That's amazing, you stuck together through all the thick and thin of training.

BB: That's right. And so then we were assigned to live with this real nice lady in Cheddar. And her husband was in the RAF, if I remember. Then we walked to our headquarters which was about a mile and a half. Because we were going through more of what we were to be expected [sic] to do. I didn't mention, when we were out in the Arizona desert there was some captain doctor decided that if we ever went overseas we did not have any anesthetists. We only had two anesthetists assigned to our unit. So we would need more anesthetists. So I signed up for the class. We had no patients but he gave us what at that time was series and we had machines we became familiar with. So that was on my record. When we were in England then they were reviewing what our status was and where we would be going.

EM: How many of you are we talking?

BB: There were 40 nurses. And 40 doctors and approximately I think 150 or so enlisted men that functioned --

EM: Orderlies.

BB: You know, KP. They were the ones who did the foreign echelon of going ahead and setting up our --

EM: So what was this organization called? Medical corps Ninth Army?

BB: We were assigned to the Ninth Army and we were assigned to the 111th evacuation hospital, which was a semi mobile unit. And that's when we realized that was going to be our status. You know, as long as at the time that we knew.

EM: How was the trip across the North Atlantic?

BB: It was terrible. As a matter of fact we went down to Weymouth Harbor and we were trying to get across the channel. Is that what you mean?

EM: I'm talking about when you went from America to the UK. We'll come to that trip in a moment.

BB: Well that was pretty smooth because we were on this Dutch ship, the Mauretania.

EM: Was that trip solo or did you have other ships involved?

BB: No I don't think there were other ships.

EM: All right. So that was a passenger ship.

BB: Oh yeah, it was a big ship.

EM: They tended to be fast.

BB: Well yeah, zig zagging.

EM: And they zigged and zagged.

BB: But I think it only took us -- which I don't know -- I think seven days.

EM: That's pretty good.

BB: Yeah.

EM: So that's when you went to Liverpool. And then you were assigned in the area around Cheddar. That's where Cheddar cheese comes from.

BB: Yeah, probably. It was a resort.

EM: What was the UK like when you were there? What were your impressions?

BB: Well like I say we were billeted in private homes. We really did not see any other part of the UK.

EM: How did the British people react to the Yanks?

BB: They were very kind in that area. They welcomed us. This woman that we lived with tried to make us -- of course, we didn't spend much time because we were at our headquarters all -- we were just --

EM: And where were your headquarters?

BB: Oh, about a mile and a half. We walked back and forth. And that's where our meals were. We only slept -- so we had very little -- we didn't have a lot of contact with the UK people.

EM: And how long were you there before you were transported onto the compound?

BB: I think that was May of '44. No, June. From there then we went down to cross the Channel.

EM: Went down to Weymouth.

BB: Yeah. The seas were so rough at that time. We got on the LSTs open air, I don't know --

EM: Open flat bottomed --

BB: Yeah. It was terrible. We stayed out on the channel on this boat for three days before we could cross the channel. It was that time -- they said it was the weather, who knows what it was. I mean, there were a lot of people.

EM: Well the English Channel is not known to be a smooth ride anyhow. Now did you get seasick when you were aboard?

BB: Well now the friend that I told you, we were down on a lower level. If you ever went down there, you stayed there believe me. It was so rough, everybody got seasick. But we stayed on top, my other friend and I. And they did allow us to, so we didn't get sick.

EM: At least you got some fresh air.

BB: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And you know, we were eating -- what we had was K rations or something. Nobody was eating much. It was rough. Anyway, but we made it so.

EM: So you went across the Channel finally.

BB: Finally we got across the Channel. And I think that was (inaudible; sound of pages turning) --

EM: What you got there, a script?

BB: Yeah I had somebody -- well I have, my friend some enterprising young sergeant did take an aerial view of our set up of what a tent hospital looked like and then made a map of our itinerary, which really helped. Because at the time when you moved around you really didn't know where you were. So then it was September the fourth, 1944.

EM: This when you landed?

BB: At Omaha Beach.

EM: You landed at Omaha Beach. Wow.

BB: And that was after this rough trip overseas. Now we, we were provided with a truck to go up that hill because I remember --

EM: That's excellent.

BB: Yeah.

EM: You didn't have to --

BB: Nobody else did. The male members of that crew did not. There were troops that were near that beach because they had gotten the word that there were nurses that were landing there and nobody wanted any women around there. Anyway --

EM: Well I'm trying to think back. Of course, June sixth was when they invaded Normandy. And Paris was liberated in August, as I remember. So there was a fair amount of land

that was held by the Allies. But I mean that was all pretty fresh.

BB: Well as a matter of fact, when we were on this train we didn't know where we were. I mean you know, they didn't tell us. But the rumor was we were in Paris, but this train was in blackout conditions and was supposedly -- but it was Paris, supposedly. But it was in blackout conditions and we weren't off the train, we were just going.

EM: So once you landed on Omaha Beach and they trucked you up over the heights, what did they do with you then?

BB: Then we were out in the middle of a peach orchard and it was -- that's what they said it was. It was near Carentan, France which I think had just been liberated and there, that was the first time that our supplies were there. We had a lot of Southern nurses assigned to our unit. As a matter of fact our head nurse was from Winston-Salem, North Carolina. And the nurse who was going to be in charge of surgery decided that if we would take sheets and make a liner for our tent it would make a lighter situation.

EM: Brighten things up? (laughter)

BB: Yeah, and provide better light for the operating room. Which made sense. But I couldn't sew, I couldn't do anything. So I was assigned to another detail. We

unpacked the instruments that we were going to use. They were packed in this thick axel grease.

EM: Cosmoline. It's like Vaseline.

BB: Yeah it was. Anyway.

EM: (laughter) Keep it from rusting.

BB: I knew that whenever we got to be assigned to a unit I would be giving anesthetics. Which I had had practically - - I had not had any experience in giving anesthetics. So I was not qualified and I made that known. Y

EM: You were trained but not hands on.

BB: So then when we --

EM: So, so -- I'm interrupting you.

BB: That's all right.

EM: So they put you on a train. And it was blacked out conditions, you kind of didn't know where you were. You think you were in Paris. They told you you did but you didn't get out and walk down the Champs-Élysées.

BB: No, we definitely didn't. No no no.

EM: So what happened then? Where did you go?

BB: Well that's when we went to Carentan.

EM: Spell that.

BB: C-a-r-e-n-t-a-n.

EM: OK. Where is that?

BB: I don't know.

EM: But it's in France. So, north and east of Paris, then.

BB: Yeah.

EM: I'm going to have to look that up when I get home.

BB: As I say, I don't know.

EM: So you went there and what happened?

BB: Then we were there for a brief time while we got our supplies ready to go into an operation. We didn't know when we were going to be assigned or where we were going to be. Then we were eventually travel by truck to Maastricht, Holland. And that had been just liberated and then we were just on a bivouac situation. We got out of the trucks and I think we spent a couple of nights in some building, but who knows where it was.

EM: Since you're a mobile unit, all your stuff is packed so you kind of just pull up, hop off, and find a place to sleep and wait for orders?

BB: Yeah, that's what it was. Then we stayed in Maastricht. I remember we were allowed to walk around. The buildings -- that was our first experience of seeing the rubble.

EM: So it was pretty beat up, huh?

BB: Yeah, it was.

EM: What about the people? Did you see Dutch people? Were they beat up, or?

BB: We did not have a lot of contact but my friend and I did -- we went for a walk and see, by this time it must have been in November. And the snow -- maybe it wasn't November. And it was cold and these little kids were out. And they could speak English, the children they could speak English. And they asked us where we were from. And when I told them I was from Chicago, then that -- all they knew about was John Dillinger in Chicago.

EM: They wanted to know where your six shooter was! (laughter)

BB: Right, right. That's where they thought that --

EM: The image that America had. And still has.

BB: Oh yeah. So then we were just waiting and someone fortunately decided that I would be giving anesthetics. But I was put on detached service then, to a station hospital for the Army for six weeks.

EM: And where was that located?

BB: In Maastricht.

EM: In Maastricht.

BB: So I gave anesthetics for 12 hour shifts.

EM: So you got some hands on.

BB: That's right, which was fortunate.

EM: Now where were you living at this point? What kind of housing did they have for you?

BB: You know I don't -- we lived, it was in a barracks kind of. Because a station hospital is not mobile. I don't remember what kind of building it was.

EM: But they set up a personal hospital there, fairly close to the lines. So at this point were you starting to get exposed to wounded.

BB: That's what it was. That's where my experience --

EM: That's the first time for you.

BB: Yes it was.

EM: What were you seeing and how were you reacting?

BB: I was overwhelmed. At the station hospital -- I don't even know, maybe there were field hospitals but I don't think so. I think these casualties had received first aid at an aid station and given something for pain and then they were all transported by ambulance per se, and then they were set up. That's where the idea of triage was introduced during World War Two.

EM: So they'd gotten basic help, but nothing beyond that.

BB: No.

EM: So you're seeing fresh wounded coming in. What did you see?

BB: I was assigned to work with an orthopedic surgeon. So a lot of amputees and a lot of shrapnel debridement, that

kind of thing. But every -- it was all orthopedics.
Casualties, that's what I was assigned to.

EM: How'd you hold up under that?

BB: I don't -- you know, I think it's like anybody who has
those conditions, you just do it.

EM: You sort of don't have a choice.

BB: Wherever we are, you sort of detach your emotions. You
become just performing and learning because wherever I was
assigned I could not have functioned as an anesthetist.
But if you were in a building or in a tent there were
usually six operating tables -- not six operating rooms,
six operating tables assigned to each building. Each team
had their anesthetist.

EM: You were covering six tables?

BB: No, no. There were six tables functioning but no, I only
had one. Every anesthetist --

EM: So there were five other anesthetists?

BB: I had a great deal of support that had a lot more
experience. That saved a lot of patients, I'm sure.

EM: So you could learn from them and they could help you when
you didn't know enough?

BB: Yeah. And I made it known that I --

EM: I need help here. And these were all female nurses?

BB: No, the persons that helped me most, they were doctors. In Arizona, like I say, there had been two other persons that had signed up as I had, just for something to do. And then we had one nurse anesthetist, who had been an anesthetist before she joined the service.

EM: So you were really the junior member of the anesthetist crew? I love trying to pronounce that, that's a challenge.

BB: But most of our anesthetists at that time, we used a lot of intravenous sodium pentothal to induce them. And then we did have a machine. But I, as I say, I was giving anesthetics for a orthopedic doctor so you didn't need a lot of muscle relaxation.

EM: So what about ether, is that being --

BB: Well that was a part of the machine.

EM: That's the machine. So they put the mask on.

BB: It was a mixture of nitrous oxides and oxygen and ether.

EM: Man, that's a mix isn't it. Laughing gas, ether. So it's pretty hectic here. You're working long hours?

BB: Oh yes, 12 hour shifts.

EM: Able to get enough sleep and food?

BB: Yeah, I think so.

EM: Did it feel like you were almost in combat?

BB: Yeah, yeah, that's right. So then I stayed in Maastricht for six weeks approximately. And then our unit had gone

ahead in Heerlen. At that time we were in a building.

Heerlen, Holland. It was --

EM: Would you spell that for me?

BB: H-e-e-r-l. Let's see, H-e-e-r-l-e-e-n. [sic]

EM: Somebody's going to have to type this up someday so we're trying to --

BB: I think that's right.

EM: Close enough.

BB: So this was the period of the Battle of the Bulge.

EM: So tell me again. Are you separated from the mobile unit at this point?

BB: You mean in Heerlen?

EM: Yes.

BB: No, we are in a building. We are classified as a semi mobile unit at that time.

EM: So how far from the Bulge are you?

BB: Well that was during Aachen. We were in Germany, so I think we were only eight or 10 kilometer from -- the buzz bombs at that time were going over us.

EM: Headed to England.

BB: Well no, they were going to Aachen. Our buzz bombs.

EM: Oh your -- our buzz bombs. So can you hear --

BB: We did hear the buzz bombs?

EM: Could you hear artillery and ground fire?

BB: Yeah. Because some of those bigger artillery guns -- I really don't know anything about the Army but some of these military units were behind us and they were shooting over us at that time.

EM: So they lobbing shells over your heads? (laughter)

BB: At times, yeah.

EM: That must have been -- I guess you kind of ducked a lot didn't you?

BB: Well yeah. We had some very heated discussions. Of course it was stupid, it was a diversion I think.

EM: Heated discussions about what?

BB: About whether that was a buzz bomb.

EM: Oh I see, you debated what was going on over head. With some emotion too.

BB: Oh yeah, I'm sure it was a vent.

EM: Just to take your mind off of reality.

BB: To introduce a little levity. If there's such a thing.

EM: If you can call it that. Levity, yeah. So what's the job like now in your semi mobile location?

BB: I was giving anesthetics all the time. I mean, our unit at that time was the first hospital behind the front lines. We had a doctor and a supervisor of the operating room who went into this triage situation to decide which of the casualties would be treated.

EM: Who were treatable and who weren't.

BB: Yeah.

EM: Who could be saved immediately, who couldn't be saved, and who was going to get better but you could put them on hold.

BB: Right. So then that was -- and was as I say, my assignment as an anesthetist. But then we did have a tent set up where these patients were kept for a maximum of 21 days. If they were able to go back into the front line then they were screened and that determination was made. If they needed further treatment, as soon as there was transportation available there were sent back to a station hospital where there was more detailed treatment available.

EM: So Maastricht would be a station hospital, where you were.

BB: Maastricht was a station hospital.

EM: Which direction did most of them go? Go back or go to another hospital?

BB: There were a lot of them who went back. Probably, I would say more -- it's hard for me to judge. Most of the ones I gave anesthetics for definitely went farther back. They were not going back to the front lines.

EM: What's the worst case you saw?

BB: I think the worst case -- I think the thing that really was most overwhelming, there was a time when the -- we were still in the part of the Battle of the Bulge. But there

was some artillery or buzz bomb or something that went over a unit were the troops were at a mess hall eating and there was a lot of glass in that building. It crashed into that, so we got all of these soldiers with eye injuries.

EM: Glass embedded in them.

BB: I think it just was the mass that was the most traumatic thing. Fortunately we did have an ophthalmologist, which is an eye specialist that had been assigned to us. So he was able -- there were some that had to have enucleation, which is removal of the eyes. But others could be given some immediate treatment. That was what always -- you know, it was just overwhelming to have that much facial --

EM: Trauma. But like you said, you're operating like a machine. If you get emotionally involved, you're toast.

BB: And then we worked, every two weeks we'd change shifts. We were working 12 hour shifts always. We were either work seven in the morning until seven at night, but then every two weeks we'd change shifts which was -- I don't know why. But on the days that we'd change shifts, then we'd work like seven 'til noon in the daytime and if we were going to work nights then we'd go to work that night at seven.

EM: They gave you like a swing thing when you're changing shifts.

BB: But when we were -- our senses and how many casualties we received depended on the location. But during the Battle of the Bulge we were pretty much -- we got a lot of casualties.

EM: I bet you did. Did you have any sense of what was going on out there on the lines, how much --

BB: Not much.

EM: How it was going?

BB: Just because the soldiers that we got, there was not any opportunity for any kind of conversation. I know they just wanted, they just said "Can you get a little closer? I just want to smell a woman." (laughter)

EM: Is that right? Poor guys.

BB: Just to hold their hand.

EM: So you did some of that?

BB: Oh yeah, before putting them to sleep. Just getting them ready.

EM: So you saw some young kids.

BB: Oh, very young. And I was only 23 or 24.

EM: But you were middle aged! (laughter)

BB: That's right. These young kids, at that time we were giving quite a few, they called SIWs, self-inflicted wounds. And they were shooting themselves in the foot to get out of that front line. Which I guess I didn't -- I

know there was an era in which some people thought that was terrible. I just thought, I don't know, you know, if I were in that situation, whether it took more courage to pull that trigger and shoot yourself in the foot or whether it would just take more courage to meet the situation.

EM: Did you see to any extent what we call now the Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome?

BB: Not in our --

EM: What they called battle fatigue back then?

BB: I'm sure there were. But in our hospital we did not have that. I think they were automatically, people who needed immediate attention so they were not probably --

EM: You're talking physical trauma that you're dealing with and whether there's mental trauma it's hard to detect, probably.

BB: We didn't, no.

EM: So what did you think about the doctors there on the ground?

BB: I would say we had very good. The doctor that I gave anesthetics for an orthopedic doctor. They were all very professional, they were good.

EM: Younger guys? Older guys?

BB: The doctor -- let's see he was probably in his mid -- probably in his early forties. Most of the doctors that I

know -- the first anesthetic I gave, I couldn't believe. We came back from detached service and we were functioning in Heerlen. The first casualty I had, we did not treat civilian casualties but somehow this kid, young Dutch kid was there and he had just been hit by a piece of shrapnel. So the surgeon said, well we'll just give him some drop ether. Well I didn't even know (laughter) I knew there was this young captain doctor who was in the next table and I said, "I don't even know how to give it." So he showed me how, you know, because in my hospital where we went to school you weren't even allowed to touch a glass of ether, so. Anyway, that was my --

EM: That was part of your on the job training.

BB: But we did not -- the only other casualty was someplace, wherever we were I don't even remember. But there was this SS trooper and as you know they were bulky and big and strong.

EM: And mean.

BB: Yeah. So I always restrained the patients before we gave them the anesthetics in case they responded in an excitement stage.

EM: Flopped around.

BB: Yeah, so I put a restraint over his legs. When you have this many casualties the anesthetist is the first to see

them and the last to see them because -- and the surgeon is there. So anyway I was getting this fella and he was an SS trooper. Well, all of a sudden, he was not completely knocked and he started -- oh my God, excuse me. He didn't get off the table but I made it known that I needed some help, so.

EM: He was trying to leave.

BB: Yes he was, he was trying to get out of there.

EM: So you treated German casualties?

BB: I don't know why we did.

EM: That was an exception.

BB: We did not. No that's the only one --

EM: So you restrained him.

BB: It was a minor -- he did not have any big injury. I think it was just a piece of shrapnel. Why we were treating him I don't know.

EM: Well they may have wanted to treat him and then have a chat with him about what was going on.

BB: That's probably very true.

EM: How interesting. So he was in his uniform.

BB: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

EM: Wow. That is something. So you mentioned early that for folks to give themselves a little bit of mental relief, you

were debating what kind of shell it was that went over and all that. What else did you do?

BB: Now when we were not -- there were so many evacuation hospitals that were assigned to the Ninth Army and they actually functioned on a rotating basis, so might have been, when we were near the front line and as the front line moved, it worked kind of in an echelon. So then there were times when those of us who were assigned to surgery, we did not have that much need for our services. So then sometimes we went and relieved -- as our head nurse chose -- we'd go and relieve the nurses that were working in the hospital tents where the casualties were. Other times we were given the opportunities to go on leaves. I did get to go to the Riviera. When we had a five day leave, I think it was. Another time I did get to go to Paris. Depending on what was going on with our census.

EM: So there were some breaks in the action?

BB: Oh yeah, yeah. Definitely.

EM: You probably couldn't sustain that kind of frantic operation for long periods of time.

BB: No, that's right.

EM: Unless it was an extraordinary emergency. So tell me about your leaves.

BB: Well the most interesting leave I had, as I say we took a troop train to Paris, with a friend of mine. I think we had a five day leave and I was walking down the street, she and I were.

EM: Now the war is still going on, correct?

BB: Oh yeah, yeah. I think the Battle of the Bulge, this was after that.

EM: That died down in the middle of January of '45.

BB: Yeah and we stayed in Heerlen on that assignment. I think it was March of '45. Just waiting for our next -- so that was when we went on leave. Anyway, I was walking down the street, she and I. Because when you got a leave, you were assigned a hotel and you had to have orders in order to travel. I recognized this fella, it was a kid I had gone to high school with. (laughter)

EM: In Paris?

BB: Yeah, in Paris. So I ran after him --

EM: Small world isn't it?

BB: It was! So we chatted and he asked me where we were staying and I told him. So then he said, well, he was a promoter and he was in the transportation corps in Paris. He said, "Well I can get you an extended leave and I'll put you on a plane and you won't have to go to troop training." And I said, "Oh no no no." And he said, "Yeah." So it was

a very fast (laughter) as I said, he was a wheeler dealer. I'm sure there was a lot of that that went on. We didn't get involved in that. But anyway, we talked it over and we decided -- we never saw him again, but he said -- we were staying at the Normandy Hotel -- and he said, "There will be a taxi there, and they'll pick you up on such and such date and you know, then you'll go out to the Champs and say 'airport.'" So then we did and there we were, of course we didn't have any official order. Anyway we got back to where we thought we were going to our unit and -- now this was just before, it was when Franklin Roosevelt died.

EM: Early April.

BB: When we got back to this location off the plane, then we thought we, you know we didn't know all the details. So we had no way of getting back to our unit. Because the bridge over the Rhone River had been bombed and so there we were in the middle with no orders, no nothing. So of course, somebody had to call our headquarters and tell them.

EM: Try and explain.

BB: Yeah, explain that.

EM: So I'm a little confused. You actually got on a plane somewhere. And where did you go?

BB: We were getting back to our unit, which at that time was in Germany.

EM: So this was getting from Paris back to.

BB: Our extended leave had terminated and now we had to get back to our unit.

EM: You must not have been AWOL or they'd have put you in the brig.

BB: We were fortunate. Our chief nurse said, "You've had your fling. Now you're just not to sign up for any more leave." I didn't, I just -- right away. My traveling partner, she thought well, "Gracie doesn't care." She went down immediately and signed up. I didn't, I thought that was enough.

EM: That's enough adventure.

BB: It really was amazing because when I was at the Riviera, I was out on the dance floor and there was the nurse. She had joined the unit that was formed after we graduated, joined the 55th General Hospital. There she was. And she was from my hometown, we had go to St. Luke's and it was just amazing, so.

EM: You're running into more familiar people over in Europe!

BB: I was surprised, it's amazing.

EM: So this was in the Riviera. That's French Riviera.

BB: Yes, down in --

EM: Nice or Cannes, or somewhere around there. I mean, not Cannes but --

BB: Yeah. It was Cannes.

EM: So when did that happen? Did that happen before the war was over or after?

BB: Oh yeah, before the war ended.

EM: So that was soon after your escapade to Paris. I thought you weren't signing up for any more of those? (laughter)

BB: Well not immediately.

EM: So what did they do, take you by train?

BB: No, there was a corduroy bridge, that's what they called them. We had to get over Elbe, or which river was it? Because you know, the bridge had been bombed.

EM: Oh yeah. So they had one of those temporary floating bridges.

BB: It was a truck that came over.

EM: You swayed and bounced across the river on those pontoons.

BB: Yeah. So that's how we got back to our unit.

EM: So what happened down in the Riviera?

BB: Oh well we went. It was the first time, it was similar to what we call the paddle boats because we went out onto the Mediterranean you know, in that little ship but they had guides, you paid them so much. It was really a wonderful experience.

EM: The weather's a little better. How long were you down there?

BB: I think we were there just three or four days, very briefly. Our leaves were never --

EM: Long. So then it was back up to work. And by this time the Allies are well into Germany, so where did you go to?

BB: We moved around frequently. Probably in our locations we would only stay like six weeks, maybe not that long. Most of it was repairs of people that had had surgery or didn't need a lot of surgery. It was not extensive. We were not getting the front line casualties that we did during the Battle of the Bulge.

EM: Where were you physically located at this point?

BB: You mean in Germany?

EM: Several spots then? And long names that were hard to pronounce, probably.

BB: We were in Bad Salzuflen, Bad Nauheim, [Mannheim?], you know. But we were never in a town because by this time -- the only time we were ever in buildings was when we were in Heerlen, Holland. Otherwise we were in a tent.

EM: Did you get any exposure to the German civilian population at all?

BB: No, not during that time. No. We didn't get any exposure to -- but we were encouraged, we didn't go out --

EM: Well it wasn't a social trip.

BB: No, but when we did it was always in a truck. You just saw rubble and you just saw -- anybody in those little villages, they were just combing the rubble to see what they could find. But as far as contact, we did not have any contact with the civilian population. Nurses did not have, we just stayed within our confines pretty much.

EM: Do you remember when they told you the war was over?

BB: I do. But we weren't sure if it was true. Because you know, there had been all kinds of rumors that were floating around. And VE was what, May the sixth?

EM: May the fifth.

BB: And we -- where were we then? We were in Germany someplace. Then all of a sudden we were in tents on the road, it was out in the country. But they were just lots and lots of people, displaced people. They were not prisoners of war.

EM: Displaced citizens leaving the war zone. Where were they going?

BB: I don't know. They were trying to get back to where they came from probably.

EM: They had probably gotten pushed back when the Allies came through. I bet they didn't look very happy.

BB: No. But we were not allowed to treat them or to have any contact with them, we were supposed to -- because I think they were desperate for anything.

EM: Well once you open that door then you've got thousands of people that you have to kind of treat and then you can't do your primary work.

BB: No. So then after VE Day, then that was the time when our unit was being reorganized because for the people who -- the doctors who had been in the service for a certain length of time and they were older. And my friend that, then they were deciding who was going to be separated because those of us who were younger and hadn't -- it depended on the classification -- some of us were getting ready to go back to the States and the rest of us were told we'd probably be going to the Pacific. Our unit was divided then.

EM: Did you ever treat any other Allied soldiers other than Americans?

BB: No.

EM: So no Brits, French, Poles.

BB: We didn't, no we did not.

EM: I guess they had their own hospitals, I guess.

BB: I really don't know.

EM: So did they tell you that you were likely to go to the Pacific?

BB: Yes. So then that's what we were in the staging area --

EM: How did you feel about that?

BB: I was hoping it didn't happen. You know because at that time everybody was trying to figure out how many points they had and how soon they were going to be able to go home.

EM: How many points did you have?

BB: I don't know. (laughter)

EM: It wasn't enough.

BB: No, that's all.

EM: Now were you still in contact with family at home? Were you getting letters? Sending letters?

BB: Our letters were not very regular, no. Because we never didn't really know where we were going to be after that Heerlen assignment. We moved around as I say, we moved around a lot.

EM: What kind of food did you get?

BB: We didn't get good food. We had terrible food. A lot of it, then we found out our supply officer was confiscating our food and selling it on the black market, so. Our food was absolutely terrible, we had a lot of green beans.

EM: (laughter) A little military underhandedness. They still had that going on apparently.

BB: Yep, yep, yep. So our food was bad.

EM: Did you get any sort of change in rank or promotion while you were in?

BB: I did, I was promoted to first lieutenant in May. That was right after -- I don't remember if it was after VE Day but I think it was after -- our, as I mentioned briefly, I remember that experience that we had in Paris. When we came back from that leave and it was when Roosevelt had died and our colonel who had been our commanding officer, he had some kind of a breakdown. And he had not welcomed -- nurses by him, he told us when we arrived. We hadn't had a meeting with the colonel prior to our first assignment in Heerlen and then he said he would -- if he had a choice there would not be any women in his unit because he did not do well with that assignment. However he had no choice so we were there. If there was a movie shown we were never -- nurses were not included and --

EM: You didn't get to go to the movies?

BB: No. And then we never had -- if there was a chaplain service we were not encouraged to go to that.

EM: He was the original sexist. (laughter)

BB: Well actually it was not a good fit for him to be in the military.

EM: You said he had a breakdown?

BB: Yeah, so after him we got a West Point colonel as our commanding officer and he treated us with respect and made us feel comfortable.

EM: When did that transition occur?

BB: That was in -- well whenever Roosevelt died, when was that?

EM: That was early April of '45. So that was within a month or six weeks of VE Day. So this was late in the game when you got a little relief as far as leadership was concerned.

Well then after VE Day they disbanded your troops?

BB: Well now we did go a couple times they put us on detached service to other units that were still functioning. And then we worked in the hospital wards for maybe a week or so just to give the nurses there relief and to keep us occupied.

EM: But still in the field if you will in Germany.

BB: We were never in any place but Germany until -- I think it was in November of '45, then well VE Day was September, wasn't it?

EM: Early September.

BB: I don't even remember being aware of the Hiroshima tragedy.

EM: The atomic bomb.

BB: Yeah. We knew the war was over but --

EM: But that was a relief though, because you didn't have to go to the tropics or what you thought was the Pacific.

BB: That's exactly right.

EM: So you stayed in Europe until November.

BB: We stayed in Europe until December.

EM: Until December. Still in Germany.

BB: Yeah, in Germany. And then finally when it got closer, as our points, as we were being evaluated -- there was a lot more people waiting to get home than there was ships available. So then we went to Marseilles. That's where we --

EM: Got aboard ship.

BB: Yeah, and that was on a Swedish ship. And I got back into the States in December of '45.

EM: How'd it feel to be back in the US?

BB: Great, great, great, great. (laughter) But you know by this time, by the time I got back the excitement of the war being over was over. I mean there wasn't any big parade.

EM: They weren't dancing in the streets still?

BB: No, everybody was concerned about what was going on, how they were going to get back into civilian life.

EM: What am I going to do with the rest of my life?

BB: That's right.

EM: Is that what you were thinking too?

BB: You know immediately no, I was just glad to be home. When I got back to New York my older brother, who had been in the service, was living in Manhattan. He was in Greenland during his military assignment. And this Filipino lady who was in the USO, she had been an opera singer, went there as part of the USO. So he had met her. He was discharged from the Army. Anyway, they had got married so he was living in Manhattan. So I got a leave from Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, and got to see them before I was really discharged.

EM: So you had not been discharged yet?

BB: No, I was waiting orders to get back to Illinois where I would be separated. So that was fun.

EM: So like a little fling?

BB: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. So when I came back to Fort Sheridan in Illinois, out of Chicago, that's where I was processed.

EM: Separated they say. And the rest is history. So it was good to be home?

BB: Oh yeah, it was good.

EM: And did you remain a nurse after the war?

BB: Oh sure. Yep, I did but it was a different kind of -- it did not meet our expectation because during the war there had been a cadet nurses program and so those, that program

was still in effect because part of the agreement was you would stay and work in those hospitals for a year because they had provided nurses in the cadet program an education. So there were no vacancies for nurses.

EM: So there were no jobs for nurses, or they were few and far between.

BB: So my friend who I told you went to high school together, we went to St. Luke's together, we met on the Riviera. So she had gotten discharged similarly. So we hooked up again in Oblong and we said, "Well, what are we going to do?" So then I went to -- in this little town where we lived there was nothing. My friend who I'd been overseas with, she was already back in Chicago. There wasn't any place to live, there were no jobs. Anyway so then we decided we would go -- I had an uncle, this uncle who had helped me decide where to go to school, we went there to try to find a job in Decatur, Illinois. There were no jobs there. And then she had a brother who lived in St. Louis. There were no jobs there, so. I finally went back to Chicago because that's where I wanted to live and my friend who I had been in service with, she said, "Well" -- she had been a legal stenographer before she was a nurse. So she sent a letter to the psychiatrist that I had worked with and so I did

psychiatric private duty then and I was kept busy. And it was a wonderful experience, clinically.

EM: Thinking about your war experience, how did it change you as a person? You went in as a young nurse and you came back having repaired battle casualties and seen the world. How did it change you? How would you describe your new self after you came back?

BB: Well I think it made me more aware of what -- I think the biggest revelation to me was we did go to protect our country. Regardless of what your status was in World War Two, everybody felt that they were there for a purpose and to fight for -- I mean soldiers fought for our freedom. That really did make me believe that that is what made this country what it is. If we had not -- and it made me feel good to be a part of that.

EM: So you felt fulfilled that you had been part of a noble --

BB: That's exactly right. And what I think as I came back and realized that the civilian population had forgotten a lot about what war was about then I was somewhat disillusioned. Because I think everybody was so busy finding their lot that freedom was here to stay and I probably would have been busy thinking that same thing except that I could not find a position or anything that -- I felt disenchanted with our system.

EM: Well they had a head start on you because you didn't get back until December.

BB: That's true. And the glory of the day had gone.

EM: Had pretty much evaporated.

BB: And then I think I also didn't realize what the atom bomb was until I got back too.

EM: Further understood that situation. Do you think much in the next 70 years after the war was over, did you think much about your experience overseas?

BB: No.

EM: Was it the kind of thing where you just kind of put behind you or did it come back to you?

BB: No, I moved on. I didn't -- I had wonderful experience, I think I just always was blessed to be with the kind of support I had. When I had been given this assignment as giving anesthetics I just really had -- which was a good thing.

EM: OK. What secrets have you not shared with me today about World War Two? What have I failed to ask you, to get you onto?

BB: Not that I know of.

EM: There must be something.

BB: I don't know. During World War Two I -- overall, I think it was a very -- I mean I had experiences that I would have never have had otherwise.

EM: Experiences and you gained experience.

BB: Oh yeah, clinically and --

EM: I don't think you'd have been on the Riviera dancing --

BB: I think not! (laughter)

EM: From Oblong, Illinois. (laughter)

BB: No, that's exactly right. Can you imagine walking down the street and seeing a fella you went to high school with?

EM: I'll tell you, I hear those stories all the time.

BB: Do you?

EM: It happens and I don't know why, but people run into people they know halfway around the world.

BB: Of course we did not have a lot of contact with the civilians in other countries but I think we -- the contacts that we went when we went on leaves were with other military people that were on the same --

EM: No, I understand. Well OK, I'm going to end the interview. I'd like to end it by thanking you for what you did for our country during World War Two.

END OF AUDIO FILE