

Interview with Marilyn Ewing Affleck, Navy nurse stationed in Yokosuka during the Korean War. Interview conducted by Jan K. Herman, Navy Medical Department Historian, 30 July, 2001, Woodbridge, VA.

When did you join the Nurse Corps?

I came into the Navy October 1, 1948 from New Cumberland, WV.

Why did you decide to become a Navy nurse?

My mother was a nurse, and when I was a child I decided I was going to become a nurse. As I got older, like 13, I went to DC to visit a sister of my mother's and we drove past Bethesda [National Naval Medical Center]. I said I was going to be a Navy nurse and be stationed there one day. And I was right.

Where did you go to nursing school?

East Liverpool, Ohio City Hospital, the same hospital where my mother trained. She graduated in 1919 and I graduated in 1943. And I had patients that she had. One day I was working in the men's ward and a man said, "You know, I had a nurse who looked just like you in 1919. Her name was Miss Bloomgren." And I told him that was my mother. I looked like her even when I was a child.

When you joined the Navy in 1948, what kind of orientation did they give you at the time?

Well, we went to Great Lakes and orientation consisted of a lot of paperwork to make sure that we could write the evening report and the day report and do the charts like the Navy did them. The only other thing they taught us was marching. We had one nurse, her name was Sterling as in silver. That's what she told us. The chief actually got down and took hold of her ankles and moved them. But that's all they taught us, marching and how to wear a uniform.

There wasn't any time for learning the traditions of the military; it was just the basics.

Yes.

Where did you go from Great Lakes?

We got orders to Camp Pendleton. I was stationed out there for a year and a half. We went out there in the spring or summer of '49 and left there in December '50.

Where you when you heard about the war in Korea?

I worked in the dependents' clinic out there and we had a civilian nurse whose husband was a Marine. He was an admiral's son. Bob Carson was his name. Shortly after it started in June, he was sent over there and was killed in a tank. That was our first real thought of what was going on over there. Then we would see boys on the buses going and they would be throwing their letters out and ask us to mail them for them. They were on their way and they knew that. They left Pendleton by the busloads.

Did you have any idea at that time that you would be going?

No. I did apply for flight nursing but they were filled up so I didn't think any more of it until I got my orders.

Did you have a specialty at this point?

Obstetrics. I had just come out of the delivery room. when the phone rang and it was the chief nurse telling me that I had orders to Japan.

Did they tell you Yokosuka?

Yes.

What thoughts went through your head?

I was excited. We were going to do something, but that was on a Friday and we left on Monday. Saturday we started getting all of the shots we needed, we packed up all our gear. We were allowed . . . Well I went overseas with something like 28 pounds.

And then we left Monday morning early, went down to San Diego, and then flew to San Francisco. We stayed there for two or three days and then we went up to Seattle and then to Alaska. Then we went to Shemya and then to Tokyo. They were going to send us down in an open truck but they finally decided that they better get a bus. There were 10 or 12 nurses and 4 or 5 doctors crossing the same route.

How long did that flight take?

Eons. It probably took us 5 days to get there. We spent 2 nights in San Francisco and crossed the International Date Line. Then they made a big deal of it but now there are so many crossings that it doesn't matter. They wanted to know how much money we had. I didn't have any and had to borrow 5 dollars from Betty Joe Alexander and we went into Japan that way. It was something.

We got in late at night or early in the morning. They put us in dependents' housing and we had to get up and go to work the next morning. We went over to the chief nurse's office by 8. We had to go to work at 2 or 3. We were tired. I remember leaning up against the wall falling asleep.

They had a lot of young men there in the hospital, three high in some bunks on our wards. The ones that could move were on the top bunk and the one ones who couldn't were on the bottom bunk where we could handle them.

What did the hospital look like? When you got there it looked a lot different from what you left at Camp Pendleton.

I worked on the very last ward on the right, Ward Victor. Believe that was a walk when you came from the front. And you had to go to the officer's club to eat, which was another half-mile walk. It was a Japanese hospital that had been converted with long rows of wards on either side. There must have been 10 on each side. It had brick and cement type corridors. It was a little rustic but they did everything they could to make it good for us. We hadn't had any

complaints about that.

So the wards were specialized. In other words, you had certain patients in some wards and certain patients in other wards. How did that work?

Right. I was on orthopedics. We didn't have any arm amputees on that ward but we did have legs and fractures, and then some of the other wards had VD, and some of the other wards had patients without arms. They also had an OB/dependent ward. I worked on that for a while. They had an officer's ward. They were all spread out and they were full.

How many patients would you have had at any given time at the hospital? This was late 1950.

Right. We got our orders just about the time of the Chosin, and they went from a few patients up to three or four thousand I think it was. The nurses and the corpsmen were overburdened but nobody was complaining about anything.

Was there a sudden onslaught of Chosin patients?

I think most of them got there before we got there. Our little group got there in December, maybe a week before Christmas. They came in and I remember we would soak their feet in a basin of warm water and would use our bandage scissors to scrape the black crud, calluses, and stuff off their feet. It was hard. Those kids really had a hard time.

These were the frostbite cases?

No, they were the regular cases. We didn't have frostbite on our ward; they were on a different ward. I could only tell you about surgery, SOQ (Sick Officers' Quarters), dependents and ward B.

So these patients were just dirty.

These kids weren't able to wash their feet but they were able to change their socks to make sure they had dry socks on their feet so they wouldn't get frostbitten. Some of them hadn't had a bath in weeks.

Did they talk to you about their experiences?

Not really. They were just glad to get out of there.

Psychologically, were they cheerful or....?

Yes. Most of them were. We had corpsmen who were more depressed than they were. We had one who tried to hang himself in the men's bathroom. If anybody acted depressed or anything they asked if they were going to pull a ____ and they would laugh name his name.

Was he a staff corpsmen or was he one of those who had been evacuated?

No, he was a staff corpsmen.

He couldn't deal with it all.

He couldn't deal with it and he wanted to go home. So he didn't kill himself but they did send him home, of course.

Well, he wasn't of use to anybody else.

No. But there weren't many like that.

You had a good relationship with the corpsmen.

Yes, very good. You saw all of the pictures of all of the kids and they were just kids.

What would a typical day have been like for you?

Well, the first thing you would do is get your report from the night nurse and then make your rounds and check all the patients. Then the corpsmen with the medicines would go around and you would wait for the doctors and have doctors' rounds. You did dressing changes. The chow cart would come along and anybody who could walk would go and get their chow. We took the food to the others. It was just a day of nursing care. They don't do nursing care now in the Navy or anyplace else as far as I can see. Anyway, you took care of the patients. You rubbed their backs and made sure they turned every 2 hours, and if they couldn't you turned them. And you just worked like that.

What was the team relationship between the nurses and the corpsmen? How did you divide the duties? What did you do versus what they did at the hospital?

In Japan, it just seemed like we all worked together. We knew that we had to take care of the keys for the narcotics and make sure the medications were given. But if a patient wanted a back rub or the urinal or something, you didn't say corpsman go it. You'd go get it. You didn't wait for them to do everything. You couldn't. They were probably just as busy as we were.

What would they have done? You did the so-called "nursing care."

They did pass medications except for narcotics.

Did they give shots?

They probably did, and changed dressings. We had a dressing corpsman. We had a medicine corpsman. It's been 50 years you know. (*laughter*)

I wouldn't expect you to remember all the details.

I think we worked pretty well together. We just dished up the chow for them and there was always a nurse on chow carts when they came to the wards.

Those were the ambulatory patients who would go to the chow cart and then the chow cart would come into the wards.

There was a little alcove that we took it into. And the doctors were good too. Dr. Ronny Strong was an orthopedic man. He told us that if ever there was a patient who had a cast on or were in traction and we could not make them comfortable we were to call him no matter. There were nurses that lost their arms and legs because they didn't believe it when they had a cast on.

One Navy nurse had taught the patients how to walk. She was an amputee at Oakland when they came back. They called her back so that she could teach them how to walk. Someone told me about that the other day and asked me if I had known the nurse and I said no I didn't. When I was stationed out in Pendleton in the 60's there was a Navy nurse who lost her left arm because they didn't believe her when she said her cast wasn't comfortable.

She claimed it was uncomfortable and they just left it on.

And she had her arm amputated because of gangrene or something. But anyway, Dr. Strong said that if we ever couldn't make a patient who was in a cast comfortable with a cast we were to call him. And he was always there if we needed him.

This would have taken you through lunchtime in the routine of your day.

Well, probably until 3. It was pretty much the same all the time. We would get new patients in too. And you'd get patients ready for surgery.

So these were all orthopedic surgeons. You must have seen every kind of injury.

Pretty much. We had two Marines, young guys. One was hit by a land mine and his buddy went out to get him. The first one lost a leg. And the other one went out to get him and he lost the opposite leg. The two of them were on our ward. You should have seen the two of them carry on. They would get together and hop and walk arm in arm. They really adjusted well at our place.

One of the biggest complaints many of Korean War nurses and doctors made was that they never knew what happened to their patients once they left their care. Did you ever learn what became of your patients?

We had one amputee who lost one of his legs. I was working in Bethesda when he came up on the ward. He had been playing touch football or something and his stump opened up.

What kind of treatment did you provide to the men who had amputations? And did most of the amputations take place there at Yokosuka?

No, they were done before we got them.

They were probably treated on the scene and then evacuated to the hospital ships or something.

Probably, and then on to us.

You were, in a sense, the third stage.

Pretty much. Well they made sure there was plenty of skin to pull down over the end of the stump and that was the healing process. They would put the prosthesis on when they got back to the mainland.

What condition were they in in the healing process when you passed them on to the next stage of treatment back in the States? Were they fairly well healed?

Well, their stump probably was not draining by the time they left us. They probably had

healed a little bit better. And then they got back to Oak Knoll where they would get their prostheses.

Are there any patients that stand out in your mind?

There was one kid the North Koreans had left out in the middle of a field for the helicopters to pick up.

What do you mean he was left in a field?

He was injured.

Was he a Marine?

Yes. The story was the North Koreans had put him out in an open field and let the Americans come and pick him up. They didn't kill him.

North Korean? That's unusual.

Yes it was.

It just sounds out of character from the rest of the stuff they did.

It's a wonder they didn't just kill him.

Sure, at the beginning of the War. When things were going badly they would tie up their prisoners with wire and shoot them.

Or let them freeze. Anyway, he came to our ward with a bad wound on the back of his leg. One day I was turning him over to do back care, to make sure all was well and no bed sores, and I heard this bubble. I called Dr. Bronstein and he checked him right away. We kept turning him to see if we could hear it again but couldn't. They took him to surgery and it turned out to be gas gangrene, and they got him in time. They didn't have intensive care or anything like that. The patients came from surgery right back to the ward. They isolated that patient and he survived that. I guess we gave him penicillin.

So the gas gangrene was in his leg and it hadn't been picked up before?

No. It probably had just developed in a short time so we were lucky. He was 18 or 19 years old.

You heard a bubble and the gas was given off? Was it somewhere in his wound?

Yes. We took him down and debrided it.

What was it like at the hospital when you were off duty? What did you do to keep from going nuts?

(laughter) I guess, like everybody else, we just played. We had a good time. I climbed Mount Fuji, all ten levels. When we got to the top it was so cloudy we couldn't see a thing after all that.

How long did it take you to get up there?

Well, you climb at night so that you will be up there by sunrise. It probably would take 6 to 8 hours. And then we slid down a little bit on the snow and came down to the bottom.

I want to go back to the hospital for a bit. You had mentioned before the tape was on that you had gotten some Army people in there but did not keep them very long.

Right. We weren't supposed to treat the Army and the Army wasn't supposed to treat the Marines or the Navy at that time. And the Army guys did say that they liked us better.

How long were there at the hospital?

Seventeen months. I left in May of '52 then came back and went to Bethesda.

Did the patient population at Yokosuka change much from the time you had gotten there until the time you left?

Well, the three bed bunks were out by then so we probably had the beds on either side of the wards by then instead of bunks up the middle of the ward with two or three high.

How many patients could you accommodate in that orthopedic ward at one time?

Maybe a hundred with bunks up the middle.

The bunks would be against the walls double decked?

The beds would be against the wall. Just single beds. And the bunks were up the middle.

And they had how many levels? Three?

We had some that were three levels and some with two.

How would you treat the patients at the top?

He was the one who could get down on his own. We could treat the other two.

The other two you could reach but the third one was ambulatory?

More or less.

You said earlier that you sometimes substituted in other wards?

Yes, on nights, like the time I substituted on the ward with a Marine who lost both of his hands. It was near Christmas. The Salvation Army had sent packages and we were going around putting them on their bedside tables. We didn't wake them up to say Merry Christmas, unless you saw that they were awake. I felt really bad and didn't want to tell the young man missing his hands "Merry Christmas." But he was going back home and told me that he was not going to tell his family. It seems his brother had lost both hands like that in World War II and they didn't know it until he got off the train at home. I don't even know what his name was but, hopefully, he's alive someplace.

I worked in surgery for awhile. The corpsmen scrubbed and we worked as circulating nurses and sponge counters. And then I worked in SOQ , day duty or night duty, and in OB for a

month or so. I took care of labor patients, pediatrics.

Like in most naval hospitals, the enlisted patients were segregated from the officers? The officers were in the SOQ regardless of what situation they were in—orthopedically or whatever?

Right.

On the SOQ you might have orthopedic cases and post surgery cases and everything else?

Yes. I don't remember it be so crowded. A lot of those kids had a good time. They read their books.

A lot of wheel chair races.

Yes.

As I understand, you even had patients in the passageways.

Yes, we did. But these were holding areas. As soon as possible, they were moved into a ward.

What were they on? Litters? Gurneys?

Probably gurneys and litters.

So it was a temporary situation. They wouldn't have lived here?

No.

You weren't that far from Tokyo?

No. We would go out to the train station. Their trains were fast. When they said they were leaving at 10:01 they left at 10:01. No question about that. I don't know how I would have treated them if they were occupying my country. You were sort of hesitant. They all spoke to us and treated us very nice. Yes, it was good. We would get on the train and go to Tokyo or Komakura or any of those places. It was good.

Overall, it was very good duty even though you had to deal with so many patients and were so busy?

Right.

During your whole Navy career you probably weren't as intensively busy as you were during that period.

And that was good. We didn't have time to worry about your family back home or anything. You were too tired. You would go home and maybe go to the club and maybe go back to work and start over again.

So how many hours a day did it turn out to be?

Well as long as you were needed. I don't think anybody griped about the hours.

It certainly wasn't an 8-hour day by any means. It could have been a 12 or 15-hour day.

It could have been. I'm sure it was for the nurses who were there before we got there.

Because that hospital went from nothing to a huge hospital overnight.
Huge.

Everyone calls the Korean War the "Forgotten War," I know the World War II veterans have gotten their share of attention for the 50th Anniversary of World War II but most people don't know about Korea today. It doesn't mean much to the younger generation. If they know anything about World War II it is because of some movie like "Saving Private Ryan" that has given them some connection, but Korea seems to be overlooked. Do you ever feel left out?

I didn't before. I really don't now either. I have never had my picture taken so much in all of my life. I don't feel left out.

I have gotten the feeling from some of the veterans, from some of the Marines, that they feel they came home and nobody knew they had ever gone.

That's true. When I came home I flew into Pittsburgh, PA. I had 30 days leave. This one guy came up to me. We had grown up in the same area. And he said, "I thought you were dead. You hadn't been around in a long time." And I said, "No I am alive and well." But you are right. People didn't even think about it.

It's interesting because if you look at any of the wars that we've been in over the past how many years, World War II is called the "Good War" because it was so clear-cut and the whole country was so wrapped up in seeing that it was won. Korea was an unpopular war, it wasn't even a war; it was called a "conflict."

It was called a "police action."

That's right. Until very recently it was called a "conflict" because it was not declared by Congress it wasn't a real war. Even though people were killing each other in large numbers it was not a war. Gunny Gigg, who is also a Korean War veteran, said something interesting. He said he never thought the whole thing in Korea was worthwhile. Yet when he went back there relatively recently the images of what it was like back then went through his mind. He remembered all the starving orphans in a country virtually destroyed by war. Yet what he now witnessed was how prosperous it had become--the buildings, the economy, and the well-fed kids with cell phones. And, he thought, maybe all the sacrifice in saving Korea from communism was worth it after all.