

Virginians at War

WWII: Nurses

Transcript

NARRATOR: Virginians have always stood at the crossroads of the fight for freedom. It is a battle in which we all reap the benefits.

WORLD WAR II: 1939-1945

NARRATOR: World War II was the defining event of the 20th Century. It involved 60 countries. Over 57 million people were killed. The nuclear age was launched, and the United States emerged as the world's most powerful nation.

World War II was fought in two major theaters of operation: the North African, Mid-Eastern, and European Theater, and to the Far East, the Asiatic-Pacific theater. During World War II, the United States committed millions of troops worldwide. Supporting our soldiers around the globe were 75,000 nurses. Their tireless efforts and selfless commitment earned them a place in history, and the gratitude of the nation. These World War II nurses became known as angels of mercy.

World War II Nurses: Angels of Mercy

ANSWERING THE CALL

HAYS: Pearl Harbor was in December of that year, and after Pearl Harbor, everybody became chauvinistic. Very patriotic. They wanted to serve their country. And of course we, as nurses, wanted to serve the country.

DAVIS: On December 7th, it was a Sunday, on our way back from the dining room. And everyone was gathered around this radio, and we were wondering what was going on. And that's how we learned about the bombing of Pearl Harbor. In 1943, early spring, the Red Cross came around recruiting students to go into the military when they finished training. And I think I was probably first in line when the Red Cross came, and signed up to be called as soon as I finished my boards. And so, when I received that letter saying, "Second Lieutenant Dorothy Steinbis" it was the most exciting day in my life.

WELLS: And I think we had 15 nurses there before a chief nurse, and everybody had come from civilian life. None of us knew anything about the Army, but we knew, we knew nursing, so we were taking care of the patients. Yeah.

VOGEL: We went through the same basic training that the G.I.'s and everybody else. It was a class of nurses. We went through the same basic, though. Ten mile hike with a pack of tin cans on your head, and a little canteen on your belt, and Little Abner boots that you marched in. Fatigues. We did a typical... the Navy would say "Boot Camp" but it was basic training for the Army in those days.

GOING TO WAR

PURYEAR: She said, "You're 31 and married. You will never go overseas." And in six weeks, I was on a troop ship going to Europe.

DAVIS: There were 18 of us nurses – I think there were about three or four Red Cross women – on this ship with 5,000 troops.

VOGEL: So, this lone little Texan with all those Yankees – it was, but I made lots of friends! My Army buddies that I remember are the seven of us young ones that were on that boat going to Hawaii. And it took us 12 days to get to Hawaii.

HAYS: It took us 42 days to cross the ocean, because we were chased by submarines. And we finally got around to the west coast of India. Then we crossed over India in a narrow-gauge railroad. 10 days, it took us. Then we went on the Brahmaputra River, and from there with trains, and then trucks. And finally, we got 1,000 miles above Calcutta.

AT THE FRONT

FISKE: Well, like everybody else, I think I expected to go through the war seeing other people wounded or killed around me, but I would never get scratched.

PURYEAR: And just then, the commanding officer came in with a radio, and we heard Eisenhower's speech to the troops. The invasion of France had begun. So we were all sent back to our units, and then we went to Bournemouth and we went across the Channel – 15 days – and we went into Omaha Beach. And we're wading

into the water, and I suppose you live on excitement, because... people say, "Were you scared?" Well, if you weren't, you had to be crazy not to be scared.

KOWALCHUK: It was scary, because when you had fighter escort, you knew that they had to be pretty close. And when they started to shoot at the Germans that were coming after us, we were very relaxed that we weren't gonna be hit, that we were gonna get to England alright. When we had to sleep in the plane overnight, on the beach, it was a very tiring night because when you slept on that metal strip, you were always sliding down to the one end, and all night long you kept pushing yourself up. So we didn't get very much rest at all.

DAVIS: The first day was very long, and our time was not in days and nights, really. We would work. Since there were only five of us, if we were really busy then we would try to just shift off and get sleep so that there was no end to the day, or beginning of the night. There really was no day or night if you were in the battle, you just didn't see daylight. We were close enough to hear the bombing and, of course, start getting the wounded. And after the first few days, we suddenly realized that this was going to be hard work. Certainly, we were concerned, and everybody was hoping that they could live up and do the things that were expected of them. As our sergeant had written in his notes, this was our baptism of fire.

PURYEAR: And we got there on Christmas Eve. And we were cold, we were hungry, we were miserable. But the next morning, there was a flag pole on that ground. And when that American flag went up that pole, it was the best Christmas gift we could have ever asked for. They had five of us in one tent. Five nurses to a tent. But in the tents, got very, very hot, particularly in the summer. And in the winter it wasn't much better, but at least you didn't have... you could keep the tents closed up pretty well. But we didn't have any heat, no electricity. And you washed your hair in your helmet, and you washed your socks. And then, the next morning you got up, and if you wanted coffee before the mess hall was open, you made coffee in your helmet!

DAVIS: I don't think we ever felt really hungry, but the thing that we were – we were sleep-deprived. And I talked to a lot of soldiers who say the same thing, that many times they were marching, sleeping.

PURYEAR: The Germans didn't take any notice of the red crosses that we put up on top of the buildings. New Year's Eve, our hospital was strafed, and several people

were hurt and two of our medics were badly wounded. They both survived, but they were very badly wounded.

DAVIS: Our hospital was bombed several times, even though we were marked with red crosses on the roof or on the tents.

KOWALCHUK: When we came home, to England, for the night, very little was said. Some of us didn't even wanna eat anything because of what we saw and what we did was not very pleasant. And most of us were not too much older than some of the patients that we brought over, the boys, you know, 18, 19 years old. I was 21. And we just lay on our cots, our beds, put those big blackout screens on the window, and we just laid there and cried. And something that most of us did, you know, we didn't talk to our roommate because we didn't have to. We all came back with about the same type of patient. And then, we got up, and just... once I was loading the patient on a plane and he said, "Don't let me die here." He didn't wanna die any place, but if he wanted to, he wanted to be at home. And he was very grateful that we put him on the litter and were sending him back to England to go home. But we never expected to take care of the injuries that we took care of, and we were so proud of ourselves, you know, when we were able to do that without breaking down or without going to a doctor and saying, "Now what'll I do with this patient?" You just knew what to do. You just knew what to do.

SCHINTZEL: Well the nursing care that I got was marvelous. Without exaggeration, that was, in every respect possible, it was. And they were probably the people that brought me along better than anyone else.

KOWALCHUK: We had parties, weddings. We had 10 nurses marry. And then we used to go and we had sticker rations from the government, you know, of course we paid for it. And we would have a party and dance with the officers and... a good time. You know, we danced and did what's now, they call, the jitterbug. And we did a good jitterbug.

MAROCCHI: Between surgeries, I didn't have anything to do, so I took up golf again, and at night I'd go to the officer's club and, as somebody put it, chase nurses, which was nice. That way, I found my wife-to-be, on the first tee of the golf course at Mare Island. I went up there one morning to play and there were three girls getting ready to tee off, and they looked at me and felt sorry and said, "Do you wanna join us?" And I said, "Yes." One of them was Mary, my wife. She became my wife later. So that hospitalized period was not all bad.

PURYEAR: In those months in combat area, 159 days in combat area, we admitted 21,000 patients and did surgery on 9,490.

HAYS: We took care of the soldiers who were fighting the Japanese, and also those pilots who were flying what we knew then as “the Hump” over the Himalayas. So we were quite busy giving care to those patients. I loved them all.

KOWALCHUK: The first nurse that died that was killed, we were gonna have services in Scotland. And this was different, this was... if she were your roommate, you had to go and pack her things and send them home to the family. And that was hard. We would stand at attention for three services: Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish. And you could not move, you couldn't wipe a tear, and especially with taps... I don't know how you feel about taps, but it makes me, no matter where I am, when taps sound and you couldn't even wipe the tear from your eye. You had to stand at attention. And that was discipline.

WHY WE WENT

LANE: Our whole generation thought, “We are gonna save the next generation from ever going through a thing like this. We heard the terrible things that Hitler had done. It's important to understand how hurt they were. And they were so hurt. Being with a patient that was so ill, and holding his hands, and I would think, “Oh my goodness.” This man was probably as valuable to some woman as my husband was to me. I was shocked at how sick some of them were, and how well we were meeting their needs. I don't know how well... we were doing the best, everybody was doing the best they could.

PAROUBEK: A nurse came over and asked me certain questions: my name, rank, serial number. She looked like an angel to me. It turns out that I got to know her quite well. Eventually I married her. The rest is history.

KOWALCHUK: I think most of us felt that if these boys volunteered, enlisted – a lot of them enlisted – and if they went into the service to help keep us free and help with the democracy, why shouldn't we go in to help them? To take care of them? After the war broke out, 43% of all of the registered nurses in the United States – 43% had volunteered for military service, and that's quite a percentage.

DAVIS: Since the beginning of nursing, the nurses have always been on the battlefield to take care of the wounded.

WALLS: I considered it an honor that I could have been qualified to do what I was able to do there, with the patients that we had. Wish I could find some of them right now that were patients of mine.

CRATCH: While I was there in the hospital, there was one nurse. Either she was feeling blue because her boyfriend was gone, or she just felt sorry for me, and she would come and sit down and we would talk. And I think that kind of calmed me down in size, much as anything else in this world, that somebody had time for me.

Interested in learning more? Join us at vawarmemorial.org/learn for more films and resources! Contact education@vawarmemorial.org with any questions or if you have a correction for this film's transcript.