Interview with Dorothy Maroon
July 15, 1995

Beginning Tape One, Side A

Question: Okay. It's Saturday, July 15th. This is **Nina Ellis** in **West Park, New York** with **Dorothy Maroon.**

Answer: Mm-hm.

Q: Tell me when -- where were you born and what year?

A: **Kingston, New York**.

Q: Say again.

A: **Kingston**.

Q: Am I getting it -- need a little -- tell me once more, please, where were you born and what year?

A: **Kingston, New York,** 1921.

Q: And how old were you when you decided to become a nurse, or when did you do that?

A: Probably about 17. But my family did not want me to become a nurse, so I took a year off before I went into training.

Q: Why? Why do you think?

A: Well, they didn't think their daughter should be taking care of sick people and doing all this dirty work. But I finally convinced them after a year, that's what I want to be.

Q: So you finished high school and took a year off?

A: Mm-hm, took a year off, took a secretarial course. And then I went into training the following year.

Q: Uh-huh. Where did you do your training?

A: Metropolitan Hospital**, New York City.** A city hospital.

Q: And that was a two or three years?

A: Three years.

Q: Three year course. And when did you decide you wanted to go into the service?

A: Well, since the war broke out. I was still in training and I always wanted to go in the service. I had two brothers that were overseas and I felt as if I wanted to go in to the service and I still had to fight with my parents, they didn't want me to go in the service now, but I finally convinced them.

Q: Why didn't they want you to go in?

A: The same reason, safety reasons. They didn't want their little daughter, their youngest child overseas and working in the war fields, etcetera.

Q: Did you have any idea, really, of what you were -- would be getting into?

A: Yes, I had a good idea. They were begging for nurses at the time and I just -- Uncle **Sam** needs you, nurses posters all over the place, so soon as I took my state boards, I a-applied to go.

Q: Uh-huh and then -- and when did you go in?

A: August of '44.

Q: Uh-huh. So there was --

A: Maybe it was August of '43. No, '44.

Q: There was fighting going on **[indecipherable]** the invasion had happened?

A: Oh yeah, sure. Yeah, on our way -- on our way over, the Battle of the Bulge was going on. Oh yes, they s -- were fighting for a long time before that.

Q: Mm-hm. So you went across in December?

A: Yeah, December of ‘44.

Q: Mm-hm, and can you tell me the full name of your unit?

A: The 131st evacuation hospital.

Q: Mm-hm. And you were attached to what army?

A: Well, we were with the ei-eight army for awhile. I think we were with the 15th army for awhile and I think we were with the third army for awhile.

Q: Uh-huh. So it was a unit of how many doctors and nurses?

A: Well, there were 40 nurses, about 40 doctors and quite a few enlisted men.

Q: Uh-huh and as -- at -- what was the responsibility of the enlisted men with the hospital unit? What did they do?

A: Well, they were corpsmen. They were corpsmen and they -- maintenance, setting up tents and taking care of odds and ends **[inaudible]** and stuff.

Q: So they didn’t fight, they just stayed with you?

A: No, they didn’t fight, no, was not a fighting unit.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: It was like a **MASH** unit.

Q: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And where was -- you were in **England**?

A: We landed in **England** just before Christmas. We stayed in **England**, in fact, they didn't send our unit over to **France** until, oh, two or three months later. But in the meantime they assigned us in certain groups to go work in some of the general hospitals in **England**.

Q: Mm-hm, caring for **US** servicemen?

A: Our -- our men, yes. Our men that came back through that way.

Q: Mm-hm. So these were men who had been fighting?

A: Who had been fighting and they were on their way home, probably and they were -- we took care of them.

Q: Mm-hm. What was -- what was your response to that, the first time caring for soldiers, what --

A: Was the same as taking care of any patient. I trained in the city hospital, **New York City**, so -- we did a lot of work like that.

Q: Did you talk with them very much?

A: Oh yes. Oh, very, very friendly.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: They gave me little souvenirs. One man gave me a -- colored man, I'll never forget him, he gave me little dime and he put a hole in it, to put in my dogtags. And they gave me a party with -- this one hospital there, when I -- they knew we were moving out with our own unit and it was -- it was heartbreaking. They were singing, "She's a Jolly Good

Fellow," and we had a regular party. It was nice. They appreciate anything you did for them.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Course they had been through hell, over on the continent.

Q: Yeah. Did they tell you about what -- what it was like?

A: They told us stories, but they weren't that talkative about it. I mean, everybody had a general idea of what was going on.

Q: And when did you go across then -- across the channel and --

A: It must have been the early part of '45.

Q: Mm-hm. And you --

A: Across the **[indecipherable]** channel. A small ship we crossed with. They'd drop in depth charges, scared the living daylights out of us. Nobody told us they were depth charges, we thought we were being torpedoed.

Q: All night long, too?

A: Yeah, quite a bit, yeah.

Q: Yeah. And then you went -- where did you get sent to?

A: We were -- we stayed as a unit and we traveled in trucks, back of trucks. We spent more time in the back of trucks than I care to remember. And we set up our hospital in three or four places on the way up and we were in **Germany** on **VE** Day, in tents, loads of mud. And we stayed there until our unit got orders to go up to Camp **Gusen** -- **Mauthausen** -- at that time. But they wouldn't let the nurses go up at the time The

colonel said that we had to stay behind because it was so gruesome. But they would send for us. So, they did send for us about a week later and then they told us if we didn't want to go in -- the nurses, we didn't have to. But we all went.

Q: Do you remember what you were -- can you tell me about **VE** Day, how you heard the news that the war was over?

A: I don't know, somebody came through the camp, probably enlisted men or somebody saying **VE** Day was over -- was there, and -- oh, there was a lot of celebration, everybody was very happy, so --

Q: Do you remember what you all did?

A: I think we had a party somewhere. And the usual -- everybody was real happy this was it.

Q: Mm-hm. And shortly thereafter then, you moved in early May to **Austria**?

A: To **Austria**, mm-hm.

Q: And tell me what you did there.

A: We worked in the concentration camps. We put on our fatigues, we put on masks, we put on something what cover our hair. And we went in and most of the bodies had been buried and the ones that were there were so sick and they were dying on us all over the place. And we couldn't do too much for them. Our -- most -- our corpsmen did a lot. And we'd go down and give them pills. I forgot what the German word was for diarrhea and all that business and we'd pass them out and they'd kind of hoard them under their -- their mattresses, they didn't take them right away. And they -- we fed them and we had

plasma, we had **IVs** and as soon as they sent them back to their own countries, as soon as they were able to, they burned down the she -- the barracks that they were in.

Q: Do you have any sense of -- when you -- you first arrived and you were at **Gusen**, right? Which is --

A: Yeah, that's just the name of the camp, yeah, it was part of **Mauthausen**, yeah**.**

Q: Uh-huh. A subcamp of **Mauthausen**?

A: I think so, yes.

Q: Uh-huh. And who were the people who were there? Mostly men or women or -- do you remember?

A: I worked mostly with the men, but there were women there, they tell me.

Q: And -- and did you have direct contact with them --

A: Oh, yes.

Q: -- did you talk to them, did you -- or were they able to --

A: Well, none of them were Americans, very few of them spoke English, so we didn't have that much contact with them. We just looked at them and saw what we could do to help them and what the officers told us to do and that was it.

Q: Mm-hm. And you would -- they would be cared for in a ward?

A: They were in their own barracks, yeah, they were three t-tiers high and they were just -- they were skin and bones, I mean, they really didn't even seem like patients, I mean they just -- people -- they were -- it was pathetic, really. It was a sight you didn't want to

know -- in fact I tore up the pictures the chaplain gave us a few years later. I just didn't want to look at it any more.

Q: What were those pictures?

A: They're the ones that you see on **TV** etcetera, with a -- just the skeletons being buried, etcetera. And I -- that one you -- on -- just got from Discovery Channel brought back a lot of memories.

Q: The film of the men --

A: The films, yeah -- the men that were raiding **Mauthausen.**

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Brought back a lot of memories.

Q: Yeah. Wh-What was your response at the time, do you remember?

A: Well, you were young at the time. You were a nurse and you knew that they needed help, you were in the army to help and you did what they told you to do. It was gruesome, that -- that time, it bothered you, but I think it would bother me a lot more if I saw that today. But that time, I mean, you were young, you -- this was part of your job. This wa -- was what you were in the army for. We didn't expect it to be taking care of these -- this type of patients. But they needed help and we were willing to give it.

Q: Mm. And how long did you do that for?

A: I think we were in **Gusen** for four or five weeks, I can't remember. You know, things are blank, it's 50 years ago.

Q: Yeah.

A: About four or five weeks.

Q: And a typical routine would be what for you? What would your typical day be like?

A: Well, I don't remember. I know you got up and had breakfast and then they put us on the trucks. As I said, we wore fatigues and masks and covered our hair because of the lice. And we'd go in the camp and we'd help, whatever we could do. They didn't want us to have too much contact with the patients directly because of the diseases

Q: Physical contact?

A: Physical contact.

Q: So they asked you --

A: And there wasn't much to do, I mean, otherwise, pass out pills and things like -- we didn't bathe them or do anything like that because they were so emaciated, you couldn't do anything for them, particularly. And as soon as they were able, they shipped them back to their own countries.

Q: Mm-hm. Did -- di -- were there people from the l -- city, the local community coming in to help any?

A: They brought -- well, the soldiers made them come in and help.

Q: Oh, really?

A: In fact, I remember distinctly they brought Nazi soldiers in, but boy it must have been the bottom of the heap because they looked -- looked more like kids, 13 - 14 - 15 years old, a Nazi soldier and they made them help clean up and take care of the bodies and stuff like that. And some of the local people came in, yeah. In fact, they said that they used to

go into the town and drag everybody in off the street that was able-bodied and bring them in and make them help clean up this camp. They did that.

Q: Do you remember seeing those people come in?

A: Yes, I saw some of them come in, yeah.

Q: Oh.

A: Be surprised. Well dressed and they were helping. They made them help.

Q: Huh. D-Do you know if they -- those people were expressing anything?

A: No. They were just kind of blank. They'd give them something to do and they would do it.

Q: After you would give these people pills and what kind of food were you able to give them?

A: The corpsmen handed out as much food as they could wrangle together, but these people couldn't eat too much. You have to remember, they were starved for years, you know. You give them too much to eat and that would be the end of them. They would upchuck and stuff. You can't give a starving patient food, but what -- what we had and what we -- they were sending up to us, they got.

Q: Which would be what, for example, do you remember?

A: I don't remember too much about it. I -- I think there was soup and I think there was bread and things like that. But some of them couldn't tolerate even that. This goes back a long time, you know, there was these little things you don't remember too well.

Q: Yeah. Do -- what did you do after your assignment at **Gusen**?

A: They told us that we were a new unit and they were sending us back to the **United States** for a short leave and then we were going to go over to **Japan.** So we traveled down from **Gusen** on trains and we were in **France** for awhile and then we were on the **General Bliss**, we came back to the **United States**. And I happened to be home in **Kingston** on **VJ** Day.

Q: Oh, really?

A: I was in **Kingston**, **VJ** Day**.** And then we had to go back to our unit, then we were reassigned down to -- I was reassigned to **Texas**. And they wanted some of us to stay in, but I was anxious to get home. I wasn't in that long. I was only in about a year and a half. But they gave us a -- a double time for being overseas. And my brothers were both home and they were doctors and I was a nurse and I knew they were going to start an office shortly and I was supposed to be their nurse. And I did that, but when I did get home, they encouraged me to go back to college on the **GI** bill, and I got my **BS** with my **RN** in education. So I worked with them for awhile and unfortunately the one doctor, the one that bought this place here, he died. Had a coronary down -- big lake down there, the age of 43 and that kind of took the starch out of us. And my other brother got out of practice a few years later to do research for **Squibb's** drug company, radioactive isotopes. And then I had to find, they gave up the office and I had to find a job, so I decided to use my degree. So I started teaching practical nursing. And I did that up until 1979, when I retired.

Q: You mentioned that you had some photographs that were taken by your -- was it the chaplain of your unit?

A: Yes, I tore those **[indecipherable]** up.

Q: And that you tore them up?

A: I tore them -- I don't know why. It was only a couple of years ago, you know?

Q: You saved them all those years?

A: And I -- I -- I had them in a box here, with all the rest of my things and I -- I just looked at those things and they were so gruesome, I decided I just didn't want to look at them any more. I mean, there are so many of those around. I don't know, I was just in that kind of a mood that night and I started tearing up things and I tore those up. The girls will have them, they all -- a lot of them saved -- most of them saved them, but I just didn't want to see them.

Q: Yeah.

A: It was hard **[indecipherable]** to see them -- see these people, human beings, what they did to them.

Q: Yeah. How do you think having that experience had an impact on you as a young person at that time, or --

A: It wasn't nice, but it didn't hurt us too much. I mean, we could see what was going on. You have to remember, I was in the -- didn't get in the army til the end and we had heard all these stories, seen all these stories on **TV** about the Nazis and all this and you'd see people -- them lining people up and shooting them and things like that and that bothered

you, but -- and that was it. It didn't have that much permanent effect on me. At the time, felt sick when we saw some of this. But I don't think it had a permanent effect on us, except for the fact that I hope it never happens again.

Q: Before you arrived at **Gusen**, did you have any idea, what -- what was going on?

A: Well, the -- the colonel on our unit told us it was horrible, they were burying bodies as fast as they could get them. They didn't think it was a very good sight for the nurses to go up and see it -- I don't know how many other nurse units went in there. I don't know of any at the time. And they said that it was gruesome, they were burying the bodies and they were being helped by some of the other outfits. And as soon as they thought it wasn't as bad, they would send for us, which they did about a week later. And I'll never forget the colonel getting up and telling us that he would not hold it against any nurse if she did not want to go up there. He said, but they could use the help and if we wanted to go up, if not, we could stay right where we were, until they all came back down. But every one of us, 40 of us went right up there. Nobody even thought twice.

Q: Do you have any idea of how many people you cared for or how many --

A: Up there? You didn't really care for people like that, you just went down and helped those that looked the sickest. I mean you didn't get an assignment, this patient's yours and that patient's yours and that. You walked into this building, you see all these bodies up in the bunks, just about skin and bones, I wouldn't even call them bodies, skin and bones, you know. You just went around with that and if somebody told you to do something for them, you did them, but I mean, it was no actual nursing care like you

would see in a hospital, washing them and doing things like that. They couldn't, there wasn't anything left of the poor souls. There were the -- few that left -- I don't know how many of them lived after they got back to their own country. I don't know how they could have survived.

Q: Were there hundreds of them, or thousands of them? Do you have any sense of that?

A: I have no idea and I can't remember, but I'm sure there were quite a few barracks with quite a few people in them. I am not su -- I'm sure there weren't thousands, cause the -- they didn't **[indecipherable]**, but I remember distinctly going over and seeing the gas chambers and seeing this wall that they walked them up and the crematoriums, you know, and that -- that kind of turns your stomach. And then the story came out that they had captured the commandant on the camp. I think -- I thought it was the inmates that were able to, that were still there, that -- that had captured him, but it -- it might have been some of the soldiers, too, but I think it was the inmates. And they brought him down, I guess and then they hung him. I s -- you saw the picture of him hanging there.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: I didn't feel sorry for him at all, because the stories that we did get, through interpreters, that some of them, I -- one had a son or something si-sit on the wall of the concentration camp and just kept shooting things. And somebody told us about wives of the soldiers or the commandant making lampshades out of the skin of these people. Somebody said something about making soap out of the fat, whatever fat there was left. No, it -- it was -- pull your **[indecipherable]** memories back that I forgot about. But I

remember all those things and I remember living in a -- houses that used to house the **SS** troop or officers. The nurses lived in those. I can't remember where the men lived.

Q: Were they nouse -- nice houses?

A: No, they were just like barracks, except low rooms with two beds in them, that was it. But they were clean.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And overlooked the **Danube**. I always dreamt of seeing the **Danube** and here I was looking at the **Danube**. It wasn't blue, believe me. And I enjoyed **Austria**. I went down to a church one night in **Linz**. And I'll never forget it. I'm Catholic and we went to the church and they were having benediction and all these priests, this choir was singing. It was the most beautiful thing I ever heard in my life. I wish I'd had a tape recorder to tape it. It was a beautiful church. I nev -- I forgot what the name of it is, some of the girls probably know. It was fabulous.

Q: I understand that at **Gusen** there was a quarry where the people were forced to work?

A: I heard the story, but I don't remember too much about it.

Q: Did you see the -- there was a -- supposedly a big stairway where --

A: Yeah, I've got a picture of that. I just showed you the picture, yeah. We saw that.

Q: Can you describe that?

A: It's just a big stairway that went up, I think. I heard since it's 180-some steps or something like that, but -- it's gruesome what one human being could do to another human being.

Q: Yeah.

A: And not think anything of it.

Q: Yeah. Anything you want to say or talk about?

A: No. I think you racked my memory pretty well. I guess I tried to block a lot of this out, but this is **[indecipherable]** stand out in my mind.

Q: Do people ask you or do you ever tell people about your experience?

A: I've told people about it, but I mean, I don't go overboard. I haven't made any speeches. I haven't broadcast the fact too much that I was -- they knew I was an army nurse in my hometown here. And -- but I never went into anything, like I didn't join the reserve or I didn't do -- I went on with my life after it was over with.

Q: Have you ever thought about maybe talking with schoolchildren or anything like that?

A: No. I'm not a great public speaker anyway.

Q: You're shy, I think.

A: No, I'm not shy. I taught nursing to -- to high school students for years. No, I'm not that shy. But that was -- it's one of those things.

Q: Okay, good.

A: Did you get enough?

Q: Yup. Hang on a second. This is the end of the interview with **Dorothy Maroon.** Tape side **A.**

A: Good, okay.

Q: I'm back with **Dorothy Maroon**. Tell me, you -- your yee -- your unit -- members of your unit have been in touch with each other for 50 years.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Why?

A: The nurses.

Q: The nurses, right

A: Nurses basic -- basically.

Q: Why and how do you do that?

A: We were very close, we really were, the closest group of girls I've ever been with. And I mean -- we went through a war together, we never fought. We did everything for each other we could and we came home and we had a few reunions. I think we had one here in **West Park**. At the time -- this was years ago. I think we had one at **Ruth Eberly's** house. Then we had one in **Brooklyn** and just about -- say about eight, nine years ago, most of the girls who had married, their children are grown up and we always kept in touch with Christmas cards, if nothing else and we decided to start having the reunions. And I was lucky enough to have a big enough place that they could come and it was central and we started having it, mostly up here. In the wintertime, occasionally we have one at **Ellen Bo -- Ellen Marchese's** place in **Florida**. Just a lunch. And then last year we had one up at **Louise Birch's** place in **New Hampshire**. And I must have had about five or six here. But we always had a good time and -- and it's good to see them all, really good. Love seeing them, hope we can keep it up.

Q: That's a remarkable record.

A: Yeah, we'll there are only -- there were 40 nurses originally, we can only account for about 17 still living. And we got nine here today, which is pretty good. One that's not here is in **Texas**, one is in **California**. You can't expect them to come all that way. Since we've been having the reunions the last three or four years, we've lost about three or four more.

Q: Yeah. 50th is --

A: It's a long time. But we like each other very much. We get along very well together and if we have a reunion, everybody chips in and helps and it's not bad.

Q: Yeah, good.

A: Okay?

Q: Great.

End of Tape One, Side A

Conclusion of Interview