Interview with Louise Birch
July 15, 1995

Beginning Tape One, Side A

Question: Okay, this is July 15th, 1995. I'm **Nina Ellis**, speaking with **Louise Birch,** in **West Park, New York.** Tell me please, when and where were you born?

Answer: June 21st, 1921, **Cleveland, Ohio.**

Q: Uh-huh. And tell me something about your family and your background.

A: Mother and father, father was a newspaper reporter in **Cleveland**, transferred to **New York City** and became sports editor of the **New York** World Telegram. I have a brother. My mother and father divorced and saw very little of him. And -- but my mother, I think was loyal to him all the time. The one thing that I remember about him, when I wanted to become a nurse, he said to my mother, "There's not going to be any damn maids in our family."

Q: That's what he thought of nursing?

A: Mm-hm. Well, in those days -- you're thinking -- talking 1939 -- is when I graduated from high school. So my mother said I could go to college and become a teacher. Well, I didn't want to become a teacher, I wanted to become a nurse. So I stayed home for a whole year and did absolutely nothing. And she finally said to me, "Go, go," you know. "I'll pay for it," because in those days you had to pay for a nursing education. And it was Dad's responsibility. So, anyhow, make a long story short, I became a nurse and he never congratulated me or anything, until I got in the service. And he wrote me a letter that he wanted to come down and do an article on the nurses, the army nurses. And by the time I

got the letter, we were all -- already overseas, living in tents. In fact it was **[indecipherable]** who helped me compose a letter back to my father saying, “You wouldn’t want to do a story on us. We don't look like nurses, we don’t act like nurses. We’re,” you know, “we’re living in tents and,” you know, “walking in mud and not the sterile atmosphere that you think, the white, crisp nurses.” So he dropped the subject. He never said boo to me a -- the rest of my life -- or his life. And --

Q: Where did you get the idea that you wanted to be a nurse and why was it such a strong motivation?

A: Well, actually, it goes back to -- I was five and a half years old, had a real bad operation and I al-almost died, evidently. It was rare in that time -- and I won’t go into it, because, well -- but anyhow, two holes in my belly here. And I can alway -- and I had specials around the clock and I can always remember, you know, begging my -- my nurses to, “Oh, I’d give you a drink if you were thirsty,” you know, and -- cause I couldn’t have any water, anything to drink and stuff. And that must have been what was instilled in me.

Q: You remembered that?

A: Cause I had no idea what nursing was like when I went into training. In fact, my mother, when she finally said go, she said, “I give you a couple of months and you’ll be back.” And I said, “No, I won’t, I’ll stick it out.” And I did.

Q: Well, where did you get the idea that you wanted to go in the service?

A: Well, that -- that’s almost another s -- chapter in my life. I had my boyfriend through high school was -- had gone in the service before he was drafted, so -- and he and --

volunteered for the airborne. He was in the 82nd Airborne Division. And in training we weren't allowed to be married. And we had been really romantic and he knew he was going overseas and so he got leave and I sneaked out and we got married. Well, his -- his family knew about it and my family knew about it. It was a real simple ceremony and we just had a weekend pass. And that was the last I saw of him. He went o -- he was in the invasion of **Sicily** and he was mi -- th-that's a thorn in my side, he was considered an **MIA** for a year. Then he -- they you're dead. Not like the **MIA's** today that they're still -- you know, I know that they have to look for these people, but they didn't look for the boys in the World War Two. And there were many of them that they never found. And unless there's blue eyed blondes running around **Sicily**, then I don't know where he is. And -- so I went trying to find some trace of him. I'd written to his chaplain and I'd written to a lieutenant that used to censor our letters and never got any response. Went to the Red Cross, never got any response. So, I finally found -- when I was in the service, and I was stationed down **Atlantic City** in what they called **England** General Hospital -- it was one of the big hotels in **Atlantic City** at the time, they made a hospital. And I found a -- a fellow that was in his company. And so he invited me over to his apartment with his wife and we got talking and he knew that my -- my **Hughie** had jumped, and he -- cause I wondered, you know, did he even make it over there? And he said, "Yeah," he said, "but that was a" -- I guess that whole operation was a **faux pas**, you know. They went off of target and whatever. So anyhow, at least I knew that he did his duty, **[indecipherable]**

Q: What was his name?

A: **Hugh Sheridan.** And that's why they call me **Sherry**. My maiden name was **Williams**. So at least I found that out.

Q: When did you find that out?

A: Well, actually it was a year that they -- well no, it wasn't a year, because they had listed him as missing in action and his pap -- picture was in the paper and a l -- his -- his family had given this little blurb that -- you know, he'd just gotten married, etcetera. And I knew my directress of nurses would see this paper, cause it was a local paper. By this time I'm out of school, but I felt so bad, cause I had lied to her, you know, to get this little pass that I had. So I went back to her and, you know, in a teary eyed, nice, you know, "Miss **Copeland**, I want to talk to you and --" so I started to say something, she said, "I know." She said, "I know you got married." And I looked at her and -- but she didn't know, you know, that he had been missing. So she was sorry about that. But it was okay and I guess she probably felt good that I came back to confess my crime or so. But -- you see, we were Catholic and -- and the banns had to be announced in the church and they were announced in his church, where -- where she went.

Q: Oh, so she knew.

A: And she picked up the n -- the names and she must have even known who was writing to me, I don't know. Cause they knew everything. So that's --

Q: So he was lost in --

A: **Sicily**.

Q: June '44?

A: Actually, July.

Q: July.

A: July ‘43.

Q: Oh.

A: And I got out of school. I finished school probably September ‘43. And by the time you took state boards and, you know, to get your **RN**, cause you couldn’t join the service until you got your state boards and had physical, papers, it was ‘44. It was early ‘44 that I went in the service.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And was stationed down **Atlantic City** for awhile. And then got my orders to go to Camp **Polk** where the 131st was being started.

Q: Uh-huh. The full name of your unit was what?

A: 131st evacuation hospital, semi-mobile. In other words, you could pick up half of that hospital and move it on, while the other half was still operating, although we never did that, but it was equipped to do that. You could even take down half of the operating room, which was a huge, big tent. Look -- it was several tents put together. Looked like a big circus tent, almost. And you could take down half of that and move it on and move half of the wards on. And we had two teams, you know, nurses and doctors and stuff. But we never did that. We -- we all -- when we set up -- set up as a whole and moved the whole unit as a whole, so --

Q: So it -- it’s -- it was like what -- what we might know today as a -- a **MASH** unit?

A: Mm.

Q: A mobile hospital?

A: Yeah, mo-mobile army surgical hospital. And I imagine today that that's what they call it. I don't think they call it evacuation hospitals any more. The patients that we had stayed maybe -- maybe two nights at the most and then they were either taken by ambulance or air evac-ed out.

Q: So this was 1944 they were forming this unit at **Fort --**

A: **Polk.**

Q: Where was that, what state?

A: No, I'm wrong. Fort **Jackson**.

Q: Fort **Jackson**.

A: Fort **Jackson, South Carolina.**

Q: Uh-huh. 1944.

A: Yeah. Fort **Polk** is where we got just -- and broke up, yeah.

Q: And you stayed in **South Carolina** until when, do you remember?

A: Well, it -- we headed up north in December, early December and by this time we knew that we were heading someplace. We had gotten a leave to go home and it was a short leave, probably 10 days and then we would up at -- and I don't remember whether it was Camp **Kilmer**, someplace in **New Jersey**. And we did a lot of training, as far as marching with packs on our backs and --

Q: What el -- what other kind of training?

A: Well, well I think we did that down in Fort **Jackson**, we dug fli -- trenches. We put up tents and we hiked and I was -- I think I told you about the gas chamber that we went through. And then we --

Q: Tell me about that again, on tape.

A: Well, it was this -- almost about the -- the length of a barrack, maybe shorter, but there was nothing in it but tear gas.

Q: Underground, or it was --

A: No, no up -- up above. It was all sealed, full of tear gas and there was a sergeant or some **GI** sitting at the end with a pad of paper and a pencil and a desk and you went into the far end and walked through this whole chamber of gas, with a gas mask on. You always had to have your gas mask on and you had to put it on properly, too. Cause if it wasn't properly fit then you got the gas. When you reached this officer -- enlisted man, whatever he was, took off your gas mask and told him your name, rank and your serial number. And if you got nervous and flubbed -- cause he must have had it right down there what your s-serial number was, if you missed a number, he'd say, "Repeat that." You know, and -- but it was one way to teach us all our serial number, because that was very important. And then you -- you got out into the fresh air and then --

Q: Oh, where he was sitting -- he had a gas mask on?

A: Oh, he had it on too.

Q: Oh, was a gas --

A: Oh yeah, he wa -- he was sitting in there with his mask on, but you would take yours off. And he was just delighting in every, you know, especially with a bunch of females you know and we were all screaming. And -- I imagine -- I know the men had to go through this too, probably even harder. And --

Q: And -- and you had to dig trenches and --

A: We -- we dug a slit tr -- well, what they call a slit trench, which would just hold a -- a body, you know, in case you got bombed, you could jump into it. And we put our pup tents up. And those were small tents, they were like two men tents. And as I remember, each one of us carried a half a tent at all times. So if you were ever caught someplace with no shelter, you could double up and -- and -- and put some s -- kind of a shelter up. All those things I think are in the bottom of the **Atlantic Ocean**, cause when we came back, stuff was going over the side.

Q: Oh, really?

A: Yeah. Well, you didn't want to -- hey, you didn't want to carry this home. Hopefully you wouldn't need it again, but --

Q: Did they teach you how to use a weapon?

A: No, no --

Q: Never?

A: No, never --

Q: Never had to use it?

A: No, no. We were given all sorts of films on disease, body lice, sanitary conditions, and I don't even think there was a film for us on weapons. And there were no weapons in our hospital, although I do have a picture of our dental assistant and he's got a bandoleer of, you know, shells on him. I don't know where he got it. But --

Q: And did they -- did you have special training in how to treat combat wounds?

A: Well, that was -- in the army you do everything, as they say, by the **AR's --** Army regulations. There was only one way to dress a wound and you did it that way. You might not like to do it that way, but the army wanted you to do it that way, so yes, we had -- had all these army regulations on how to treat this and that. And going over on the ship, I was assigned to -- to be an orthopedic surgical nurse. And I met the orthopedic surgeon and he gave me a whole list of what we would do for all these orthopedic -- amputations or whatever, you know. And you read them and okay, we'll do what we have to do.

Q: Were they substantially different from the way you had learned in nursing school?

A: No, no, but -- no, not really, you know, the -- you -- you still had a surgical technique that you had to follow. But they had a particular way of doing things and the army is a stickler for that. Y-Y -- In the hospital you might have several different sizes of bandages, you know. In the army, you have one or two sizes. I do -- it may be different now, but i-in wartime it wasn't anyhow.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: While we were in **England**, I saw returning casualties from the Battle of the Bulge. For bandages they used the latest issue of "Stars and Stripes", which was the magazine. They

had no bandages. And we'd get them in the operating room and we'd have to wet down this leg that was -- had all this paper -- newspaper stuck to it. Cause that's the only thing they had. Cause that was a different situation. So you can't say that they went by army regulations. You do what you have to do.

Q: Mm. Mm. Let's pick up our chronology. You had to leave in December, you went home.

A: We went home for a short leave and I can remember my mother gave me a **Hagen Hague** bottle of Scotch, **pinch** bottle and I hate Scotch. And so we got back to base --

Q: Why did she give you Scotch?

A: I don't know. She -- it wa -- evidently this was a very -- and is -- I don't know, cause I'm not a Scotch -- it's a very good brand of Scotch. And she said, "Take this back, you know, they might want to have a little party or something." And when we got back to camp, the door came down and you could not make a phone call, you could not write a letter, you could not have any visitors. It was -- and I'm trying to think of the name they used. I want to say black out, but it wasn't -- was the censo-censorship. So my mother never heard from me and she's saying, "Oh, **Louise** got caught with that bottle of -- in her --" She said they put her on -- you know, put her in the brig or something, cause I got -- and I went in -- I can remember going in to the little commissary there and they had a fl -- a florist in there that you -- they could wire flowers out. I'll fix -- I'll get in touch with my mother. So I wired her a dozen red roses. Course she got them a month later, but I thought they would go right out, you know. But they were smart, you know, and just all I put on is, "I love you", you know. And -- it didn't work.

Q: And you -- and you shipped out

A: And we shipped out, yeah. We were -- we were like that for maybe three or four days I think, that you couldn't do anything. And -- and the other girls must have told you the story about crossing the **Hudson** at night and this fog rising up and that's a vision I'll never forget.

Q: Tell me about that.

A: I can't remember exactly whether -- I know we had gone by train to this barge. Now it seemed to me the train was on the barge, but I could be wrong. But I remember crossing, it was dark, night and crossing the river and this fog coming up. And there was this big gray thing in front of us. It was huge, huge, several stories high. And you're looking up at it and you could just make out, **Queen E-l-i** and then you don't know what was in around -- and of course it was all painted gray. The **Queen Elizabeth.** And we were, "My God," you know. And I -- I get goose pimples right now. This is it. And we all had steel helmets on and they chalked mark -- you're all numbered. And we lined up and they had the -- the roster and you know, one, two, three, four. And then you got to the gangplank and they checked the one, two, three, four and you got up on top of the gangplank and one, two, three, four and they showed you which way to go. They had our quarters all -- the women were, of course all segregated, cause there were thousands -- thousands on that ship. All the doors on the stateroom were removed, there were no doors on the stateroom. They had guards either into the hall, so nobody could go -- nobody else could go and we only could eat twice a day, because there were so many on there to feed that I guess the ki-kitchen was going

constantly. You -- you got your -- your seating thing, which was like 10 o'clock in the morning and maybe nine o'clock at night. That's when you ate. Two meals. Cause they couldn't feed everybody three meals.

Q: Were you able to mingle with the men at all? Did you talk to them?

A: Oh we -- yeah, we -- well just -- just the officers. Course it was very segregated. The huge, huge, big lounge. You couldn't find a place to sit, everyone was sitting on the floor. The few that got a chair were lucky you know, and they weren't about to give it up. And the officers all mingled -- there were many air corps fellows going back to **England**. There were many other units. I found out after the war that one of my friends, who I knew as a little kid, was on that same ship. And he was in -- in fact, he was in the 120th evac hospital.

Q: Watch your microphone there.

A: That liberated **Buchenwald** and I tried to tell -- tried to get him to talk to me, no. He's busy right now, his wife had got cancer. But anyhow, yes and -- and while we were there, some of the nurses from another unit put on a little skit. That's why I know it was the same boat that this friend of mine went on, because he was talking about the **[indecipherable]**, I can still see the girls up there singing, "Don't Fence Me In." And they had big wings, suppose -- supposed to be Air Corps wings on it, you know. And of course the Air Corps guys went ape over that. And so we had a good time and --

Q: So there was another unit of nurses? Yours wasn't the only one?

A: Oh, this was in **Buchenwald** they went to .

Q: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

A: A -- a unit replaced us when we left. The 58th field hospital replaced us. And I have no idea, you know, what happened then. That's why I was disappointed -- well, maybe **Mike** would know, when he comes back with **Bonnie** because I'm sure his outfit stayed there.

Q: So you got to **England** right after Christmas?

A: Just before Christmas. Just before Christmas and we knew we were going to be away for Christmas, so all the nurses went into the **PX** and we all bought three gifts. Handkerchiefs or aftershave or a razor or something and wrapped it up for the enlisted men. And we had that -- I think we bought an ornament, too. It seems to me we -- but we carried those. So when we got to **England** and course holly grows wild over there, so we had a ball cutting it off and trying to make our quarters a little bit more cheerful. And Christmas night we took all these -- grab gifts you'd call them, but we thought it was something -- up to the enlisted men's quarters and we all -- we're great singing group, not that I have a voice. I'm losing what I have. But we sang all the time and I am sure the men got so sick of hearing us sing. And **Ecky** was one of the ringleaders, cause she ca -- has a voice. You know, all kinds of songs. And we sang Christmas carols for the -- the enlisted men and gave them a little present, so that made it a little nicer.

Q: You all -- seems like you saw it as your responsibility to care for the men as well as the injured.

A: Well -- well it was -- it was hard, this segregation thing, you know. And -- and I -- you know, the -- the men thought of -- of the nurses as -- for the en -- for the officers only. We weren't supposed to fraternize with them. And how can you do that with somebody you're

working with? I mean yo-you -- you had a little law and order, let's say, on the wards and stuff, but you still were friendly. Like one night at Christmas time, we had this house that we turned into a sick bay, so anybody in the outfit, whether they were officer or enlisted men was sick and needed care and stuff, were sent there. So, of course the nurses had to man it and one night we're sitting there and one of the **GIs,** the enlisted man who was taking care of the fires -- each hou -- in **England**, each house -- room, has a little fireplace and God, if you don't keep that going, you freeze to death. And he'd go around -- and so we're sitting there and we're talking about Christmas back home and we're sad, you know. And this guy says to me, "Boy," he says, "there no -- no place like Christmas in the **Adirondacks**." Which is, you know, right up here. And I grew up in the **Adirondacks**, summertime. And I said, "Whereabouts in the **Adirondacks**?" He says, "**Speculator."** And no one has ever heard of **Speculator**. Well, that's where I grew up. I -- off the bench **[indecipherable]** and I jumped in his lap and I'm kissing him and going on. And the poor kid, he's scared to death, you know, what did I do wrong, you know, I'm going to be court-martialed. But I was so -- someone has heard of **Spec**. And then he said to me, "You know, I recognized you, but I didn't recognize your name." And that's because I had my married name.

Q: Oh.

A: But that was, you know, it --

Q: You all were homesick, huh?

A: Oh yeah, oh yeah, we just -- especially at Christmastime. And this boy happened to be Jewish too, so that really didn't mean as much to him, but the fact that he was even near any area. You know, when you -- when you meet a soldier, "Where you from?" Everyone know wa -- where you from. Most -- the Amer -- majority of our enlisted men were from **Oklahoma**. A bunch of **Okies**. A few, like **Mark**, happened to be from **New York,** and we had a few from **Pennsylvania**. Us girls -- most of us girls were from **New York, Pennsylvania** and **New Jersey**. Our officers -- our doctors were mostly from **Ohio, Pennsylvania**. And you know, so there were little areas. So you were always looking for someone who knew your hometown so you would have something to talk about and would remind you of home. And I -- and -- and -- you know, the -- especially the -- the fighting soldiers, you know they were so glad to see somebody. First -- first you know, it was an American voice that they want, oh, were so glad to see and then the American woman and then, you know, where are you from? Where are you from? And if you were even two states away, you know, you were their sister. So --

Q: What was it like caring for the men who had been injured coming back from -- they -- they were in the Battle of the Bulge, some of them?

A: At that point, see, it was right at Christma -- I was in the operating room, so I really didn't care for them. I saw them and saw their wounds and that's all I -- because they were in and out and -- and we had two tables going at the same time, in one room. And --

Q: These were people who were pretty badly injured?

A: Well yeah, they had all sorts of inj -- in -- in the room I was in, it was an orthopedic room, so it was either real brad -- bad fractures, some amputations, something like that. But there were other rooms that had chest wounds and you know, abdominal. So they were, in a way, worse off, because it's a little easier to fix a bone than it is to fix a -- a shatter --

Q: Soft tissue, yeah.

A: You know, lung and stuff. So I really -- in fact I had to relieve one day in the -- in the chest surgery room and I oh, get me out of here. You know, I was scared. I gi -- bega -- I never saw so much blood in my life and -- you know, and they work so fast, whereas orthopedic is, you know, you aw-aw.

Q: It's slower?

A: Yeah, it's slower, because you know, most of the bleeding had already been under control because it hadn't -- didn't -- didn't just happen. But, you know, they were repairing what they could and even -- even that they would probably have to have more surgery when they got back to the States, cause there were nerve damages done, which the -- I don't think they would attempt to do there. But -- it's an awful thing to say, but it was good to take care of our -- our soldiers. And --

Q: What do you mean by that? I mean --

A: Well, that's what we were there for. And -- and when I was stationed in **Atlantic City**, these soldiers were -- were all injured ones, but they were up and about on crutches and in wheelchairs and you know, slings and whatnot. So they were sick, yes, but they weren't sick that way. Had a couple of real bad head injuries that upset me because they couldn't talk

and -- but they weren't fresh wounds and -- and in **England** was the first time I saw a fresh wound. And then in **France** we sat up -- set up the hospital in **Fran-France**, but we didn't have any patients. It was like a dry run, cause that's the first time we had set up the tents. We had to make sure all of our equipment worked. Trying out generators and dis -- water distillers and autoclaves and -- and our -- all of our instruments were shipped over covered with some sort of a grease or Vaseline or something. We had to clean all that off -- it was to protect it, you know, from the salt water, I guess, whatever. And we cleaned the instruments and even made little -- some of the girls made soap -- hand soap, little -- little compartments for some of the more delicate instruments, the -- you know, to protect them. And then we went on to **Germany**, that was the first time we had -- had fresh patients.

Q: In April?

A: April, yeah. April, yeah.

Q: April 1945?

A: '45, yeah.

Q: And these were coming off the battlefield?

A: Yeah. Or one -- our -- our very first load of patients was a -- a truck accident, the truck had tipped over and a whole bunch were injured in that. In fact, we even had some German **POWs** that had gotten injured and we treated those. But then there were -- the war was starting to wane down, so the one -- that furious amount of accidents where a lot of mine -- you know, people walking into personnel mines and stuff like that. I remember -- and I can't remember wh-what happened to wa -- one night in the operating room, was this kid with

this head wound and we had just set up the distilled water and it was -- the doctor yelled at me to get a pitcher of water and pour it out -- you know, to debride it, to get the dirt out. And I said, “No, the water’s too hot.” And he says, “Pour it.” I said, “It’s too hot.” He says, “Pour it, God damn it, pour it.” And when I did I could see the kids toes jumping and oh, I -- I felt terrible. And he came later and --

Q: His toes moved?

A: Well, yeah. Because the -- of the nerve reflex

Q: Nerve --

A: -- you know. And I felt terrible, I felt so bad. And he came to me later and apologized, he says, “I shouldn’t have yelled at you.” And I said, “Well, I shouldn’t have questioned you.” And he said, “He couldn’t have felt that.” He said, “The damage that was in his brain,” he said, “but I had to” -- you know. So that was one incident I remember.

Q: What -- was it a generally tense situation? I mean I don’t know about what the normal state of an operating room is, but how is it different in that -- in a -- in a -- in a -- you know, behind the lines?

A: Yeah, well I think any operating room situation, even if you watch **MASH**, is tense while they’re doing the operation. Once it’s over, and it’s -- I know on civilian -- cause I worked in civilian hospitals in the operating room -- once it’s over, the laughter starts and they ask how your golf game is or they’ll start, hey did you hear this joke, you know. It’s very blasé. And I think there, too. Although they did things a lot faster. They had to move, keep moving.

Q: Because there was always another --

A: There's another one waiting, yeah. We always had what we call a pre-op tent that came out this way and then the big operating room tent was this way and the pre-ops were in there on the stretchers and --

Q: Waiting.

A: -- waiting.

Q: So it was a constant emergency surgery?

A: Yeah -- next, yeah -- next.

Q: Constant.

A: Yeah.

Q: Yeah.

A: Some of it wasn't considered emergency, but it had -- it wasn't life or death -- some of them weren't life or death, but they still needed attention and you took the first ones first, that's triage. But --

Q: Who would do those assessments, the triage assessments, a doctor in that area?

A: Ah, well yeah, and -- and -- and the nurse -- like **Woody**, she was head of the **OR** that I worked in. I don't know, cause I was in the operating room. Actually, I don't remember those in the -- I know we had a sergeant who was in charge of the ward itself and he was an older man, so whether he was -- you know, some -- the corpsman, God bless them, was a lot better than some of the nurses. They were great, really great.

Q: How many -- on a typical day, how many surgeries would you do?

A: Oh, that would be hard to tell because we moved so much. We moved an awful lot. He just couldn't keep up with -- the third army was moving through. And we weren't that busy. I can -- wards were never full, whether they shipped them back out faster -- like I said, the war was waning down and they could get them moved out further -- they wanted to get them to general hospitals as soon as they could. And then back home. So they -- we were never out straight, I wouldn't say. In **England** yes. **England** was different**. England** was **[indecipherable]**

Q: What do you mean by out straight?

A: Well --

Q: Working around the clock --

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah. One right after the other and at night time, you might be called out at night. But, you know --

Q: That would happen? At night --

A: Yeah. Oh, yeah, yeah

Q: -- you were on call, virtually every day, all the time?

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, there was always this two team units or one -- somebody was always there to work the hospital, if some of us got to go to a -- a so-called party, you know, as long as there was enough left to cover the hospital, that was okay. You know, you could get leave to go. So --

Q: So half of you were always on and half of you were always off?

A: Oh, actually -- yes, I suppose you'd call it that. I was going to say we were always all on unless there was something doing, which wasn't that often. It sounds like we were just one big party, but it certainly wasn't. And -- and we made -- made our own parties a lot of times. Just for something to do, something different.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: I think that's probably why we got along so well together, because you could always think of something else to do.

Q: What do you mean?

A: Well, if you had to, you know, you -- y-you sit in the tent and you might write letters or read books and somebody would come in and make a lot of noise and you'd say, "Oh well, quiet down." And, you know, they realize, "Well, maybe I should go out for a walk," and then you'd go out for a walk. And you couldn't walk far, cause you weren't allowed to go too far. So, I don't know, it's -- it's funny, thinking back of -- we didn't take it lightly, but we didn't let it get underneath, you know, let us get down. We -- we had a job to do, we were there to do it.

Q: Let me check this. While you were in **Germany**, in April, was your general attitude -- what was your general attitude? Were you feeling, "I'm glad to be here. I feel good doing this." Or was it, "This is terrible, I want to go home."

A: Well, I always wanted to go home. I know that when I was in **Germany**, I hated the Germans with a passion. Just hated them with a passion. And I -- I couldn't even be civil to them when I would look at them. I've changed since, believe me. Cause I've been back and

found the **[indecipherable]** people. But it was -- we were almost like cattle being led. You're -- you're in the service, you're told when to get up and go to bed and when to eat and you didn't question what you were eating, you ate it. You went to work and you did your job. And why am I here? Because I joined. I wasn't drafted, I joined. This is what I want to do. I never thought of coming home as a -- it seemed to me that everybody in that era joined the service. So, it was the thing to do. You had to do it for your country. And we weren't doing it maybe we weren't doing it for the country per se, we were doing it for our men, our fellow men. Fellow Americans. And that's what we wanted to do, that's why we were all there, to help them over, cause they're the ones that did the dirty work.

Q: Yeah.

A: And we'd tried to make it a little nicer, a little softer or healthier.

Q: Did you think about your husband?

A: Yes. Yes, I did, yeah. Wondered, you know? He used to have a -- on his dogtags he had a little vial with my hair in it and he had said to me the last I saw him, he said, "Don't ever believe I'm dead unless you get this back." And course, I've never gotten it back. But there were -- I've heard so many stories since, how -- must have been an awful job for these -- I don't know what they call them, they had a name -- that buried the dead. And this especially, in the Battle of **Normandy,** I heard this from one of the **GIs**, the -- the -- the -- the invasion of **Normandy** was so horrendous, that they had a truck of left arms and a truck of right arms and a truck of left legs and when they went to bury a body, if it was missing a left leg, they went to that truck. So, you wonder. And even when I was in high school, my

chemistry teacher in high school was a doctor, a female doctor and she was a doctor in World War One. And she had all these slides to show us. They were slides of heart tissue and lung tissue and all sorts of tissues that she had taken out of World War One dead soldiers. And she told us then -- and here we are, that's way back in the young -- late -- early 30's, that they stuffed them with straw and sent them home to be buried. So you wonder, you know, what came home. Maybe he's better over there, not knowing, you know. Blown to bits or something, I don't know. But that stuck and I -- I -- I can always remem -- I can remember we had these seats in -- in hi -- in -- in -- in our chemistry lab that were two to a desk, and I w -- I -- listening like this and all of a sudden I hear bump and the girl next to me fainted right out on -- of her seat. But I don't know if they could do that now. Maybe they do, I don't know.

Q: I don't know. So you were caring for e -- wounded soldiers and grieving at the same time, or --

A: I couldn't have been grieving. As -- now this is a -- a year later, for one thing. I was busy doing my work. I thought of him, I car -- I still have the same picture I carried with him -- with his wings, and the last letter I wrote him, or he wrote me, excuse me, which was a **V**-mail letter, but they never photographed it. And I am curious to know why it was never photographed, because they came all photographed, I don't know if you're familiar with the -- well, **V -- V** mail, you would write on this certain paper, you could only have one sheet and they would photograph and put them into microfilm. And then they sent that microfilm. They'd get thousands and thousands of letters on this little spool of microfilm. And that

saved hundreds of cubic feet in a cargo ship, sending all these letters back and forth. This letter, dated July, it looks like seven, but he made it an eight and he was missing on the 10th. And it says, “I’m going to be busy for awhi -- this’ll probably be the last letter you get from me, cause I’m going to by busy, but you’ll hear about it soon enough.” And that -- why would they sent that handwritten, you know, piece, the original piece. So I still have that and his picture, which I carried all overseas with me and kept even when I remarried and my husband knew it was in my drawer and it stayed there and it’s still there.

Q: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. Let me turn the tape over, while we have a break.

A: Okay.

Q: This is the end of side one with **Louise Birch.**

End of Tape One, Side A

Beginning Tape One, Side B

Q: This is side two with **Louise Birch.** July 15th, 1995, in **West Park, New York**. W-We stopped before, we were talking about being in **Germany** in April, 1945. You must have gotten word there about the death of President **Roosevelt**?

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Do you remember anything about that?

A: Well, being a staunch Republican, I said, “That’s too bad.” Which is terrible. But everyone was stunned and you know, what’s going to happen now? That, I think was the first concern about everybody, what’s going to happen now. Because he certainly, you

know, did give us good leadership. But then we heard about this guy named **Truman** and went on with our work.

Q: And shortly thereafter?

A: It was **VE** Day. And I think I told you about stealing the denatured alcohol out of the operating room and --

Q: No, you didn't.

A: Oh, didn't I?

Q: No, you -- I think you need to.

A: We had what we call solution basins, they were little porcelain basins that we'd soak instruments in in alcohol and stuff and we swiped -- we had this denatured alcohol -- would kill you, you know, kill you. Put that in and we had powdered grape juice, it'd turn it all purple. Whoosh, whoosh it around, whoosh it around. Oh.

Q: Terrible.

A: Terrible. And -- and -- our whole, **Ecky** was the only one that was sober that night and she had these what we call number 10 cans. You know, peanut butter and jelly came in them. She had one by each one of our bunks. Cause we would just roll out of bed and go naa, you know -- couldn't get up. It's a wonder we didn't die.

Q: So you had a big party.

A: Well, not really, you know. We just -- just among ourselves, saying oh, you know, whoopee do. Cause at that time we were right next to the 34th evacuation hospital. They had brought us in and we were supposed to help them out or you know, relieve them of some of

their duties. They didn't like us and we didn't like them. And I think it was just a -- an ego trip, you know? Maybe the nurses were afraid that we'd infringe on their officers or whatever, but we could care less, you know. We -- we were our own li -- we were very cliquey as you can notice and we were our own little establishment and so we did what we had to do and they did what they had to do, until our men up and left us. And then we had to stay with the 34th, because they --

Q: Well, what happened there? Your --

A: Well, that was right after **VE** Day, maybe two days after, three days after, I'm not sure on what date. We were used to hearing our tents being pulled down, cause the hospital was always moving. And one morning, there's the tents coming down. And they came and told us we had to move out of our tents, but we weren't going with them. And they had one big tent. So all of us 40 nurses were in this one big tent. We had to stay behind and we j -- we just felt so abandoned, because we'd been a family for so long. How could you do this, you know? "We're going on to **Austria** and you're staying here with the 34th." And oh, there were tears, because we had some romances going on and you know, "We don't know. We don't know nothing. You stay here, they'll feed you, you work with them and that's it." And some of the girls were angry and some were sad and some were indignant because, "How could they do this to us, you know, we're part of this unit and they're leaving us." But off they went. And we didn't know why. And so we made hay, you know, we played around and make -- did what we had to do.

Q: You worked with the other unit?

A: We worked with the other unit. Not too much. They -- they were -- they were getting rid of -- their patients were being pushed out back to the general hospitals too. And I can't remember, except for just horsing around, like we found that old cart and we used to run around the place pulling this cart and --

Q: Horse cart?

A: Well, it was -- I don't know wh -- maybe it was, but it was like a pushcart, but a big pushcart. We'd put two of the girls in it and two would pull it, you know and it was stupid, you know, but it was silly. And I can remember sunbathing, we -- i-it was -- it was getting, you know, it was May then and it was -- it was getting warm and the -- the earth -- I -- I can still smell the earth. The earth was very sour. We were set up in what might have been a pasture or something and you don't realize, **America** here is a new country and our earth is still new. But that's centuries old over there and it stunk. The earth was sour like -- like it was moldy, but it had an o -- so when the sun hit it, **ooo**. But anyhow, one morning, down the dirt road comes our trucks, **trumbling** around and yea, tooting the horn, you know. "Pack your bags, girls, we're going." And you didn't see a happier bunch, you know. And in the trucks we went. One truck's for our bedrolls and two trucks for the nurses. And off we went, singing all the way. And the tarp was down off of the trucks because it was nice weather. And we didn't even ask them, just went and sang and drove through the roads and the countryside was so beautiful, the **trollian** houses with the flower boxes and all the flowers were starting to bloom. And then the -- we crossed the -- into **Austria** and you

could see these -- these rolling **Alps** in the background, some still had snow on it. And it was just ideal. We were in heaven, really in heaven.

Q: The war was over?

A: Yeah, the war was over and this was beautiful and serene and happy and what more could you ask for? And there's the **Danube** and we crossed the **Danube** at **Linz** and I remember going across the bridge at **Linz** and the **Danube** and someone mentioned, "This is the city **Hitler** was born in. **Linz, Austria**, he was born here." "So? He ain't around any more, we don't care." And we drove out, just through a corner of **Linz** itself and off we went. All alongside the river we were driving. Just beautiful. Singing away, having a ball.

Q: How long did you travel? Just one day?

A: Oh yeah, not even a whole day. Wasn't that long, I think we were not too far from the Aus-Austrian border. And all of a sudden the singing stopped, one by one we stopped singing. "Something's wrong. Something's wrong, what's wrong? I don't know, what's wrong? Something's the matter with the air." We didn't even see the place and we could smell it. And the truck came down around the corner and there she was. This big, gray, granite wall, with guardhouses every so often and barbed wire **[inaudible]** and we just -- first your mouth would open and then your hand went over your mouth. And we drove up in front of these huge gates.

Q: Watch your microphone, yeah.

A: We drove up in front of these huge gates. And usually the enlisted men got right out of the trucks and opened the tailgate for us, so we could get down. This time they didn't. The

gates were shut. And we just sat there, all with our hands over our mouth, eyes as big as saucers. At that time we didn't see any bodies. There were a few -- I like to call them stick figures. You know how you draw a stick figure? Their hips stuck out, their legs came down and this little ball on top for a head. A couple of them were walking around.

Q: Outside of the gates?

A: No, inside, cause we were inside the -- the wall came around and then the -- the -- the big gate was in here on the -- on the block house. And some had striped uniforms on, some had just a blanket on them. Stark naked. Some had the blanket wrapped around their heads so you wouldn't know who they were. They were afraid of being recognized, that's how -- and, you know, "What? What is this?" And the other girls may have told you the same thing, our colonel came out and the first words out of his mouth were, "There are no Americans here." Which would -- cause you didn't know what you were looking at. There was no identification on them.

Q: You were afraid that could have been an American **POW** camp?

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Q: You didn't know.

A: Yeah, we didn't know. You couldn't tell. Just a -- so then he started his little spiel about, "You girls were not sent over here to do this work, you girls were not trained to do this work. You girls were not -- are not equipped to do this work. And I will not order any one of you in this camp." He was visibly upset and I personally think that he had grandiose

plans of -- for himself, being in some nice hospital, doing some great deeds. I don't know, that's my personal opinion.

Q: This was your commanding officer?

A: Commanding officer.

Q: What was his name?

A: Colonel **Dale Friend**. Who has -- was quite a researcher at **Peter Bent Brigham** Hospital in **Boston**. But -- so after he gave his spiel, the **GIs** let down those tailgates and we jumped out, two oh one. Everyone of them. And I think he was shocked that we all responded in that way, cause he just stood there. "Now wait a minute," he says. "There's going to be rules and regulations." Or words to that effect. "You can't be here after dark, you can't be here by yourself. At all times you're with another person, even in the wards. You have to be completely covered. I don't want them to even know you're f -- a female." Yeah, supposed to wear a -- the turbans and masks over our face. Our -- our dungarees that we had. Little puttees around our ankles and our boots.

Q: What are those, I'm sorry?

A: Puttees are actually left over from World War One. They're a canvas, like a ski sock and they -- and they buckle across, so they keep your pants into your boots, because of course, typhus was such a rage there, anything get up your pants and you've had it. So -- although we'd all been inoculated. So, with that, you know, they -- they took us to our -- our nurses quarters, cause we didn't go right into the camp itself then. And -- which was nice, it was the first time we had a nice hou -- we had three nice house -- I think there were three, yeah.

Three nice houses up on top of a hill, overlooking the **Danube**. Couldn't have been better. And these German girls all -- you know, I do -- I do -- can I do -- can I do, you know, and they couldn't do -- like, one of the girls was saying today, you remember you put down -- you put down your -- your panties and they'd snatch them up and go wash them. You put them -- take them out to put them on, they're gone, she's out there washing them. They couldn't --

Q: They were from the local --

A: Yeah.

Q: From **Linz**?

A: Yeah, yeah. They couldn't do enough for you. And I -- still having this hatred in me, I -- you know, who you trying to kid, you know? Which side were you on, you know? Now, you're tone -- turncoat? I -- I didn't trust anybody that was like that. I -- I really couldn't. I figured, last week you were doing that for the Germans. But anyhow, th-they were victims.

Q: And what -- had they been working for the German officers?

A: I don't know. I don't -- I don't know.

Q: You don't know?

A: I wouldn't be surprised, you know?

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And there again, it's survival. A sense of survival. Just like the poor inmates in the camp. Why did this one live and thousands other die? They had a survival. And I'm sure a lot of them must have had a guilty complex going home. Especially if their whole family died.

Why did he live? That's -- you know, I would -- I would have no idea what that feeling is like, but I imagine there must be a lot that -- that have that feeling.

Q: So you would -- you would have your quarters and then they would come and get you and you would go down to the camp?

A: Yeah, yeah the trucks would always take -- we couldn't walk. We were in -- supposed to be walking outside the areas, because you didn't know what was out there. The trucks would bring us down to the camp and we would work and eat and they would take us back to quarters and we stayed there.

Q: And the name of the camp?

A: Was Camp **Gusen**, which was a satellite of **Mauthausen**. **Mauthausen** was up on the hill and they brought down -- well, **Gusen** enough -- had enough of it's own patients, but some of the patients from **Mauthausen**, because there was no medical facilities up there. And our wards were set up, they must have told you, in former **SS** barracks. But we used the same -- I guess you'd call it the same three tiered bunks, for the inmates, except there was only one in each bunk instead of three or four. And they had beds of straw, because I, you know, I never questioned, when I was there, where'd all these blankets come from? Or where'd these pajamas come from? And evidently they must have flown them in and it wasn't -- this **Mike Wordell**, who I'd wanted to come, he told me -- and I didn't realize it at the time, there were two units that were sent in, which were called delousing units. That's all they did. And they were behind the walls, delou -- cause these guys all -- pa -- inmates,

patients, whatever you want to call them, had to be completely deloused before they were brought out to us.

Q: So that had been going on before you arrived?

A: Yeah, yeah, before we arrived. And then -- and while we were there, because as we would have, say eight deaths a night, we'd have eight -- eight empty beds, they'd bring out -- but they were -- they were doing this behind the wall. Washing them down and delousing them and giving them either a blanket or pajamas, whatever was flown in. And I didn't know about that, I didn't even question, "Where is this all coming?" I should have said, "How come?" You know?

Q: And what did you do then, you would come every day into the same ward?

A: We'd come in -- into the same ward, yeah.

Q: And how many people were -- would be in there, do you know?

A: I would say at least 100, but I am not sure. 120 - 140, I'm not sure. Rooms on both sides and they were big, big rooms. And --

Q: And a hallway in the middle?

A: Big hallway and open door here and an open door at the other end, so that you could -- the hallway itself was very dark, but you could see light at the end of the tunnel. And I -- I like to think of that, yes there is a light at the end of the tunnel. One of -- and I think I told you that we were not allowed to have any physical contact with the patients. We could not -- inmates, whatever you want to call them. We were not allowed to give them nursing care. They brought in either prisoners of war -- German prisoners of war or people from the

community. Went out in trucks and rounded them up and they stayed there for the day, fed, washed and cleaned. These guys did what they could.

Q: So you didn't touch them?

A: We didn't touch them. We weren't allowed to touch them. The only thing we did was give them medication.

Q: Every day?

A: Every day. Those that needed. We learned the word diarrhea in three languages and I'm not sure that I can even say the -- the names today and I'm sure they would too, because one was Russian, one was Polish and one was, I guess French, because we had a very sweet Frenchman who spoke beautiful English. And whatever we were saying, he says, "Sister," cause they call the nurses sister, "don't say" -- and I think we were -- I forget the word we were saying, but -- excuse me, but we were saying shits. And he wanted -- he said, "It's deeareeah. That's not nice," he said. Cause we'd stand at the -- at the door and yell out these three words and those who had diarrhea, would raise their little old hand up, you know and we'd go over and we'd give them their medicine.

Q: Huh. And that's how you cared for them, huh?

A: That's -- that's the only way. I don't think we kept any records. Maybe number wise, I -- things like that I don't remember. I know we didn't keep records, cause we didn't know their names. Towards the end of our stay there, things seemed to ease -- you know, maybe because we'd been there long enough to not be so tense, that we were able to talk to some of the patients through an interpreter. And I got a couple of names that I wrote to their -- one

was a sister back in the States and one was some other kind of a relative. To tell them, you know, they're begging, "T-Tell **America** I'm here," you know. And at that time you couldn't say exactly where they were, you know, just someplace in **Austria** was the term you had to use. A-And you couldn't say exactly what their condition was. When I got back to the States and I must have given my address back at the States, I got a letter from one woman in **Evanston, Illinois** and she had gotten my letter and sent me a check for 50 dollars, to do something for her brother, it was her brother. And so by this time I'm back in the States, so I wrote back to her exactly where he was, exactly his condition and sent her back the 50 dollars. Hopefully he was still alive. And I said, "Contact your Red Cross. Now you know exactly where he was. Whether he's still there now, I don't know." I never heard from the other one that I wrote from, but -- to -- so I -- you know, sometimes I think -- I wonder how he made out. Did he make it out of there, did he make it to **America.** So --

Q: So you -- you did - -you were, after awhile, able to have some communication with some of the people?

A: Some of the -- some of them. Not very many. Our -- our corpsman happened to be a great guy. He was -- I think he was Mexican and he spoke Spanish fluently and he could speak a few words of German or Polish, whatever it was. And he was able to -- well, this, you know and then you could do with hand signals, too, you know and there wasn't much you could talk to them about. They were too weak for one thing. I don't know if I told you the -- an-and **Ecky** knows I will tell you the story where we weren't supposed to look like women and like I told you, we used to give out these medicines together and she'd give the

pills and I'd be behind her with a bottle of whatever it was I had to pour out and give it to them. And I'm waiting for her, she's bending over, giving this guy his pills. And out from the other bunk comes this little bony hand and pats her on the fanny. And I'm standing there -- not laughing out loud, but saying, "There's hope for them after all. There's still life in them," you know, really -- which you -- and of course, she didn't even feel it, it was so weak. And when she stood up and I'm -- and I says, "Who we kidding? They know who we are." You know and she's, "Why?" And I -- I get tears. I can still see him now, doing that. It was -- it was cute. It was pathetic that it was cute.

Q: Did you know who these people were? Were they -- did -- I mean, som -- they were from different countries, were there -- there were some Jewish people, mostly Jewish people, do you know?

A: Oh, I think there were -- I -- I -- I would -- I couldn't swear, but I would say I thought most of them were Jewish.

Q: At the time, you did, yeah.

A: Yeah. But we had Frenchmen. We had one Spanish guy who worked on the ward. He was another one I didn't trust, cause he was a -- a -- a trustee for the Germans. And he was -- looked well preserved. And he had been in the Spanish revolution and had gotten caught somehow and you know, and the Germans helped them out. **Roberto** his name was**.** But he helped us out. But these people, no, we didn't know who they were. Had no idea. There was even Russians there too, I think.

Q: At the time, did you feel that what you were doing for them was helpful?

A: It must have helped a little bit, but it was like swimming upstream. You made a little progress, but not much, you know. You nourished them, but you had to start out with, you know -- thin, thin soup, because you couldn't give them food, per se. And just the thought that they were free, you know, must have been something.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And I'm sure, you know, I see pictures of these survivors now for the ho -- in the Holocaust and God, they look great. So they -- you know, they -- life does -- you know, the body does improve.

Q: Oh, you mean survivors today?

A: Yeah, yeah. That they interview on **TV** and you would say n -- look at them. You couldn't have been in a concentration camp, but you know. You know yourself, if someone's really sick and loses a lot of weight, gets better, they do come back, but -- the body is a wonderful machine. So -- it's too bad it gets abused.

Q: How long were you at **Gusen**?

A: I would s -- I think about five weeks we were there, because we left to go home, either -- it was either on my birthday or the day after. It was either June 21st or 22nd, I remember. My birthday.

Q: Mm-hm. And were you informed suddenly that you were going to leave and --

A: I think probably a week's notice, yeah.

Q: And did you -- by the -- by the end of that period, did you feel as if some of the people that you were caring for had made progress, or -- was the situation better when you left than when you came?

A: Well, the -- the attitude was better, you know. It wa -- it was a lot more relaxed, because we went in there with -- so tight and so tense and you were all literally afraid of them, because, you know, they were so riddled with disease and hey, you know, you're protected. And --

Q: Did any of the nurses get sick?

A: Well, as far as we -- now, they're talking about the **DDT**, which you heard about. The -- you know, several of our nurses have developed breast cancer. But, with the ratio of breast cancer today, I -- I can't see blaming it on the **DDT** that we had --

Q: You didn't tell me this -- you were sprayed with **DDT** every day?

A: Every day, yeah. Down our pants, up our arms and in the back of our necks. She had an old **flint** gun, I don't know if you know what a **flint** gun it. It's a -- it's a ca -- a canister on the end of a sh-sh-sh pump thing. And I think **flit** they used to use for flies or mosquitoes or something. You'd fill this canister with whatever and that was filled with **DDT** powder. And we'd stand in front of our chief nurse and pull our pants out. How degrading, when you think of it. But that's how we had to go on . The first couple of days that we worked at the camp, we felt so bad, so dirty, so contaminated, that we would come back to our nurses quarters and literally strip, outside the door and just drop our drawers right there and these nice German girls would grab them and wash them for us, cause we didn't want to go in the

house with this aroma around us. You know, and -- and that odor clung to you -- your clothes after awhile, too. So -- and after awhile you didn't notice it.

Q: What other kinds of things that you know of were going on at the camp, in addition to the care that you were giving? What else was happening there, do you know?

A: Well, I know they got musical instruments for some of the inmates that were musically inclined. I don't know where they came from. I imagine they just walked into somebody's house and took them. That's what they usually did. This **Jeannie Striker** that I gave you her -- her papers, she worked with the women. Now, I never saw the women. I knew they were there, but I never saw them. Some of the men went in town and got bolts of material and brought it out to the women and she said they practically clawed at the material, they couldn't wait to get a piece of it, to make themselves, you know, a top or a -- you know, a **muumuu** type dress or shorts or something, something to put on their bodies. And -- but that's the only story I ever heard from her from the women.

Q: Do you know if there were children around?

A: I never saw a child, no. Thank God.

Q: So there were survivors there who were well enough to play musical instruments?

A: Yeah, but, you know, there were all grades of **degration** or something. I don't know what you want to call it. There were some that could not move at all and some that walked around. And yes, they could play a violin. Maybe not as well as they did in days gone by. And the spirit is always there, I guess, if you're a musician. I'm not. But --

Q: Was **Gusen** by that time, being called a **DP** camp?

A: Mm-mm, mm-mm.

Q: Never was?

A: Not as far as I know. It wasn't at that time, anyhow. And we were the 131st evacuation hospital at **Gusen.**

Q: Mm-hm. Were there people arriving there from other places?

A: Mm-mm.

Q: I know that happened in some other --

A: Mm-mm. We had more than we could take care of.

Q: Do you have any sense of how many?

A: Oh, someone at one time told me there were four -- we had 4000 pa -- we were a 400 bed hospital, originally, this little tent hospital -- and that we had 4000 patients. But there were, according to that confession, there were what, 60,00 inmates there? So that's just a drop in the bucket.

Q: Did you have a chance to walk around the camp at all, or -- did you go up to **Mauthausen,** the main camp, or --

A: I never got up there and you had to have -- you had to know somebody to get up there, because that was off limits as far as I know. I did get in -- behind the camp there was this nice, rolling hill and I did get back there and inside that hill was a complete factory -- railroad tracks and everything. And I was told they were making **Mezzerschmidts** planes in there. In fact I brought home a piece of -- still have it -- piece of balsa wood that was painted like a -- a dark, dark olive green and you can just about see a swastika on it. And

someone else told me it was a news -- news -- ammunition place and this **Mike** that I talked to on the phone, who didn't make it here, that was our interpreter, he claims that they were making parts for the **V2** bombs there. But it was a complete factory back there, all underground in a bi -- big cavern. And when I went back to **Germany** and **Austria** years later with my daughters and I -- we were in **Strasbourg**, that was as far as we were -- we were going to go. I said, "Hey, we have enough time to go to **Linz**." And my daughter, at this time, she was doing all the driving. "Oh Ma, you're crazy." And I said, "No," and I just, by my nose, crossed the bridge, turned right, follow the river. And she said, "Do you know where you're going?" And I said, "No, but it's in this direction." Oh, and she was getting so upset with me. You know, it's like looking for a needle in a haystack. And I said, "Slow down." In the -- over on the horizon, I saw that same hill. I says, "We're coming there, we -- I know we're coming there." And there it was.

Q: The camp?

A: The camp. **TV** antennas out of what was our wards, lace curtains, flower boxes.

Q: People were living in those buildings?

A: Oh, painted white and beautiful. I have pictures downstairs, I'll have to show you. They had -- just before you got to the camp, there was a -- a memorial to the camp built. And it was like a -- a maze and you went ar -- and there were all pictures and sayings all around this cement wall right in the center, where the ovens -- but it was locked, you couldn't get in. So I went -- there was a little, like I call it a 7-11 Store next door. By this time my daughter's really mad at me. So I went next door and I -- you know, we wanted the key to

get in there. Oh, **hese wasa sloe shanol**. He couldn't speak English, I couldn't speak German and he was very upset that I wanted to get in there.

Q: In where?

A: In -- into this little maze, see, it was locked. There was a padlock on it. And I say, I want to get -- and he was upset, he was visibly upset. And I didn't know what he was saying, he didn't know what I was saying. So finally I'm going -- cause we all wore the Red Cross on our sleeve. "Boom, boom, **cranksfester**." And that's what I thought was nurse in -- in German. Boom, boom. All of a sudden he got the message and he -- his wife comes out with wine and cheese and they're hugging me and kissing me and my daughter's standing there like this. She was so mad. He come over and opened up the gate and oh, oh, oh -- couldn't do enough for me. So, you know, I walked all the way around in -- inside with the ovens they had. I've got pictures downstairs in my album, I'll have to show you.

Q: So, that was the crematorium there, is that what you mean by ovens?

A: Well it -- th-they had taken the ovens out of -- you know, where the crematorium was in behind that -- that's another story that -- where I'm telling you the -- the barracks were made up like nice houses with **TV** antennas. And then there's the big block house, which had the big gates in it and those -- it was all boarded over, the gates had been removed to someplace. Maybe -- maybe they were in the maze, I forget. But we drove up on top of the quarry, which is famous for those last steps and looked down into what was the big compound. Course all those barracks were blown up and burnt down. Guess what they were using it for? They made tombstones there.

Q: From the stone in the quarry?

A: **[inaudible]** all these beautiful carved --

Q: Hm.

A: Yeah.

Q: Tell me about the quarry. What -- what do you know about that whole --

A: I'm losing **[inaudible]**

Q: You want to -- let me --

A: I just saw --

Q: I understand there was a quarry at this **Mauthausen - Gusen** complex --

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: -- where people were forced to carry stones. Did you hear about that, did you see evidence of that?

A: Well we -- we have the picture that the -- our chaplain gave us of the steps, they call them the steps of death, and --

Q: What were they? They were --

A: They were just granite. Everything that **Mauthausen** and **Gusen** was built at were huge blocks of granite and it all came from that quarry. And they're still using the quarry to make tombstones. But I drove down there once, I must have had a date with somebody that had a Jeep and it was weird, you know, these -- you -- like in a -- almost in the **Grand Canyon**, these walls and walls of rock, you know. And I saw the steps and that was all and I wanted to get out of there, cause it was eerie.

Q: And -- and the -- these were steps that went up to the quarry, or --

A: No, th-they came out of the quarry and they -- they must have built these steps cause they were also of these big blacks of -- blocks of granite and then there's a big wall to one side, in fact other side of the steps, that they must have built as they went up. And when they got to the very top, I don't know what was up there, more for maybe trucks or something to take these blocks or quarries -- o-of granite someplace else. But it was eerie. And then to drive up there 20 years -- was it 20 le -- years later? Hm. Must have been more than that. But to look down and see all of these tombstones down there in that compound, I thought, "You son of a gun." So somebody's making a good business. So -- even the roadblocks, there was a roadblock between our quarters and **Gusen**, that of course had been discombobulated for us to go through, but that was built of big blocks of this quarry.

Q: Hm. We got to middle -- late July an -- when you left **Gusen.**

A: June.

Q: Jun -- July. I thought you said --

A: Mi-Middle of June we left **Gusen.**

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Yeah.

Q: And where did you go?

A: We went back to **France**, by -- this time we went by train. The nurses and the officers were in first class cars and the men were in horse cattles. Again, segregation. And every so often the train would stop and they would say, nurses, we -- we're not to look out to the side

because the men were all having their relief break. And the -- the train would stop and start because the tracks were, you know, in repair or -- you know. It was -- it was a -- seemed to me a long ride to where we got. Then there were trucks that took us first to -- I f -- I think they took us first to what we call Camp 20 grand. They had all these little like **reppo-deppo**'**s,** which were replacement depots for different units and they were named after cigarettes. First we went to Camp 20 grand, then we went to Camp Lucky Strike, which was great. It was up on top of a hill, overlooking the -- the **Seine** in -- in **France**, except this was just a huge rockpile. There again, we had to live in tents again. They were pitched on these rocks and we had to wash our hair out of tin cans and we had a good mess hall, which was run by the German **POWs**. And they would be quite fresh to us, but sometimes they'd say, "No sugar today for your coffee. No sugar today. No sugar today for your coffee." Well, I don't take sugar in my coffee, it didn't bother me. The other girls -- at night they'd have sugar cookies they'd make for us. You know, they'd try to make up, you know, they -- they would do this on purpose to make something nice for us. So th-they were also trying to be nice. See, I'm still -- had this distrust of the people. And -- I didn't -- I didn't like anyone that got too familiar. And we finally found out they had a ship, we were going home. We had our footlockers all packed and away they went and they went down to the harbor and somebody's packing the -- the -- and they -- course they were all stenciled with our names. "Who's this **Mary**? Females? No way. Unload, unload," and the poor **GIs**, just cause we were females, our men couldn't go either. So they --

Q: Huh. Why? Why?

A: There were no facilities on that ship for females and why they kept the men behind, because we couldn't get on, I don't know.

Q: What does that mean, no facilities for females?

A: Well, they would have to have a place that was closed off where the men couldn't -- we couldn't --

Q: Mingle.

A: No men could communicate.

Q: So they couldn't segregate you, so you couldn't go.

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah. You know? So we couldn't g -- so, cause we couldn't go, our men couldn't go, which I thought was so wrong. And here these guys have been sitting, waiting to go home too, just as much as we had. And then we finally got the **General Bliss**, which had an area that they could, you know, core our -- you know -- yeah --

Q: Cordon off.

A: Cordon off.

Q: That was a big ship, the **General Bliss**?

A: Ha -- It was big, but it wasn't that -- it wasn't as big as the **Queen Elizabeth**, that's for sure.

Q: And where did you leave from, what port?

A: We left from **Le Havre**, in **France** and we wound up in **Boston**. And it was great, you know, when the boats were out there and welcoming -- and bands were in the boats and from there we went to -- in fact, w-we -- I remember it was the fish pier in -- in **Boston**,

which is still there and we got on trains that were right there at the fish pier and they took us down to Camp **Miles Standish,** on the Cape. Not quite too far down on the Cape, but some part on the Cape. It's now a big campground, I guess. And they were great. They had -- you know, welcome home and we slept in -- like it was a huge ward, so we were all together, but there were sheets, the first time we'd had sheets in -- oh, months and months and months, we haven't had a sheet. And it was great. I remember calling my mother, cause you could call whoever you want to call and they had the -- papers had a habit of printing what units were landing when and where and she had seen in the paper that the 131st was coming into **New York** Harbor at such and such a date. Well, that must have been the first boat that they were loading our stuff on. So she says, "Where are you?" I said, "Up in **Massachusetts** someplace, Camp Miles Stand," -- "You get right home here." I said, "Huh? I can't. I'm still in the army, you know." "Well, you were supposed to arrive," -- **buppabuppa.** I said, "No, Mother." So we finally went to Camp **Dix** and got our leave papers. We had 30 day leave and then we were booked to go to **CBI**, **China-Burma-India** area. And we knew it and then we figured -- but while we were on leave, **VJ** was declared, so --

Q: You remember the dropping of the bomb?

A: Yes, I do, yes. And I'm sorry to say, I was all for it and still am. Not now, I wouldn't want to drop today. I mean what they're making today is 10 times bigger than that. But I just felt that it saved our men a lot. And to me it was -- they're the ones that started it. **Woody** and I are going over to **Hawaii** for the **VJ** ceremonies in August, yeah, the end of August, so --

Q: So you knew right away then that you wouldn't be going over?

A: Well, we didn't, but you know, we didn't know whether we'd be made to go in the army of occupation or what, so we had to report back to Camp **Polk.** Now **Woody** was in the service longer than I -- girls that had longer service, they had points and you got out by a certain point system. If you were married -- not a widow, but if you were married, if you'd been in the service so long, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, you could be discharged. And we had seven discharged from Camp **Polk.** Another gal and I got orders to go to **San Antone, Texas**. Fort **Sam Houston**, which is a huge hospital. When I got down there, hadn't worked on a ward, didn't know what to do. Didn't know how to do anything, actually. Hadn't worked -- how to make a bed, even. And this young whippersnapper had just gotten in the army and I'm saying, "Well, how do you do this," and, "how do you do that?" And she -- she thinks, well, I must have just got in the army before she -- you know, after she did and so she's giving me this **[indecipherable].** She says, "Well where were you last month?" I said, "I was over in **Germany**," you know. Or where were you when **VE** Day, that was -- I can remember her saying to me. I said, "I was in **Germany**." "In **Germany**? What were you doing there?" So she thought I had just joined the army, acting so dumb, well how do you do this and how do you do that? And so I met my present -- my ex-husband there. He was in the Air Corps and we got married and life starts anew.

Q: Yeah. How long did you stay in the service?

A: Well, I got out just before Christmas then, so -- so it was about 18 months total, I was in.

Q: What a year.

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah. In fact, I was embarrassed because when I met my husband to be, he was very shy and didn't say boo and I thought, "Oh, what a dud you are." You know, and so I'm telling him how I -- cause you got 300 dollars when you were mustered out. In other words when you were discharged, they gave you 300 dollars to survive on. And I told him how I was putting up a notice on the ward, I'd pay anybody on the ward my mustering out pay that would marry me to get me out of the service.

Q: You did that?

A: I did that. And he -- in the meanwhile he's -- we had had a date and he had this little brown bag and he had --

End of Tape One, Side B

Beginning Tape Two, Side A

Q: This is the third side of the interview with **Louise Birch**. Go ahead.

A: Talking about Captain **Akata**, our Japanese dentist, whom -- I was insulted that they had a Japanese man in our -- our outfit, at first. And it was he who told me about our American concentration camps. His family wen -- had all been taken from **Hawaii** and put in those camps. Had all their cameras and binoculars and radios all confiscated and never got back. And I didn't know about that. I never heard about that. And originally, as I said, I -- I disliked this man intensely because he was Japanese and he turned out to be the most lovable guy there, a doll and I intend to look him up when I go to **Hawaii** next month. I -- if -- I don't know if he's still living, but h-he was just a --a great guy. Just sweet, and --

Q: So those were the kinds of lessons you learned?

A: Yes, that, you know, there's good and bad in everybody. And it was a -- a rude awakening for somebody who didn't know nothing. And that was me.

Q: Okay.

A: Okay.

Q: Anything else you want to say?

A: Mm-mm.

Q: Okay. This is the end of the interview with **Louise Birch.**

End of Tape Two, Side A

Conclusion of Interview