

**Interview with Ruth Kirby
July 14, 1995**

Beginning Tape One, Side A

Question: Okay. This is July 14th, 1995. This is **Nina Ellis** and I'm interviewing **Ruth Eberly Kirby**. We're in **New Polz, New York**. Please first tell me your -- your -- where you were born and where you grew up.

Answer: I was born in **Grenridge, New Jersey** and I grew up in **West Hallwell, New Jersey**.

Q: Uh-huh. And when did you decide to become a nurse and why?

A: I decided to become a nurse when I think I was about eight years old and I had been bitten by a dog in the neighborhood. He had jumped and caught my ear. We were jumping rope on a porch and he was lying sleeping and I guess the boards may have pinched his skin. And he jumped up and caught my ear. And I went home, which was a few doors away, crying, with my ear hanging and my dad took me to the doctors office -- in those days that's what they did. And the doctor sewed it back on and his nurse was so darling to me and I was so impressed. She had a crisp white cap and a sparkling white uniform and I was just impressed with her. I remember that my -- I was crying and my dad said oh, he's getting all wet, my tears were rolling down his back. And she was just such a remarkable person and that -- I thought after that, "I'd like to become a nurse, too." That was really the beginning. I always fell -- and I used to play with my animals and with my dolls and always took care of them and wrapped

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them up, bandaged them. It was just -- and my mother couldn't tolerate the sight of blood, so -- it was my dad who was the one who really took over all the time, but that was really what -- I can still see the office, I can see the doctor and the nurse and that was -- that impressed me. So that -- as I grew older -- I was also interested in maybe becoming a kindergarten teacher, but because I wasn't able to really play the piano the way they requested, I -- I decided well, nursing is the thing.

Q: And when -- what year was it when you went into nursing school?

A: I went in in 1940, cause we graduated in '43. Graduated from high school, applied immediately, was accepted and went into nurse's training in Presbyterian Hospital, **Newark, New Jersey.**

Q: Mm-hm. And at that time then, the war was -- **America** wasn't yet in the war in **Europe**, but I'm -- what was your consciousness about what was happening there?

A: Well, in '41, when we heard the announcement that **Pearl Harbor** was struck, then -- I knew then that I wanted to be in the army and my roommate wanted to be in the navy. I was just very anxious to serve my country in the army if the war was still going on. And of course, that's what happened. As soon as I graduated in '43, applied to join the army and I was accepted and from there on, it was just -- I was very excited. It was a wonderful experience. It's something that I cannot tell you all the experiences we had and what we learned and what we saw and did. And we were very young, as I said. It was a remarkable experience, one I shall never forget, treasure every minute.

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Q: Why the army for you?

A: I don't -- I wanted to be a hospital nurse and at that time they were -- the army nurses were on the hospital shifts. And that's what I thought, I'd like to do that. And -- but then once -- and I also wanted to go overseas. That was -- when we had our basic training I knew I wanted to finish with all of this and I wanted to go overseas and work with the [indecipherable] right there -- right where everything was happening.

Q: Did you have any members of your family in the service?

A: My brother was in the Coast Guard, that was all.

Q: And when are you -- when were you inducted then?

A: In 1944.

Q: What month, do you remember?

A: I think it was in September. I really don't have that in -- yes, because I think our class was class number 10 and I think we graduated from basic training in September in **Atlantic City**.

Q: When did you start basic training, was it before or after the invasion -- the **D-Day** invasion? Do you remember?

A: Well, I think we had six weeks of basic training, so it would have been --

Q: Right in that summer?

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Ah, **D-Day** was early June, so it --

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A: That's right.

Q: -- might have -- might have been after that.

A: I think it may have been after that.

Q: And once -- once you knew that American soldiers were fighting and dying in **Europe**, did that change your attitude in any way, about wanting so badly to go?

A: I wanted to serve my country and do what I could. They were giving their all and dying for **America**, so -- and I felt that was my responsibility, I felt that calling, the same way I felt the calling to become a nurse. And I think it is a special thing and there are only certain people who -- who do these things. I always felt I wanted to help people and do things.

Q: What was your family's response to your wanting to go and serve?

A: Well, my parents weren't happy about my entering training, because in those days nurses were just considered people who handled bedpans and things like that. That was true in those days. That's what they thought. And I pleaded with my family. And I needed 100 dollars to give in order to get into the hospital, into the program. And finally I convinced them and they did send the check in and I was accepted. But -- and as far as going overseas, my brother was in the service, but they knew then and they were the proudest parents to have a -- a nurse in the family. And they knew that if I wanted it, that was fine.

Q: So you finally got their blessing?

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A: Yeah.

Q: Yeah. T-Tell me about leaving -- leaving the **US** for the first time, what was that like? What -- what -- what -- what were you thinking about? What do you remember?

A: We were all very excited. I was excited. And it was before Christmas. I knew we were going and of course we couldn't tell anyone. And we were all packed and we had things pinned under our liners to our coats because we couldn't get everything in our luggage.

Q: Like what?

A: Like towels and strange things. Just extra things that we just couldn't get into our foot lockers and into our duffel bags. And we were all dressed and it was -- I think in - - late at night that we looked up -- we -- we came from **South Carolina** up to the harbor and I shall never forget looking up and seeing **Queen Elizabeth** on that ship.

Q: You went up to **New York**?

A: Mm-hm. Huh. And it was so impressive, I could not believe it. This was the original **Queen Elizabeth**. Largest ship, at that time, in the country. And -- and then we were all huddled into staterooms with tier after tier, I don't know how many, I guess about three or four, one on top of the other. But we had a porthole and that was important, cause we could look out of the porthole.

Q: And when you -- when you boarded, what -- what did you know about your destination? Did you know where you --

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A: [inaudible]

Q: Nothing?

A: No, uh-uh. We just knew we were going to the European theater. And then we landed in **Southampton**. I remember seeing the White Cliffs of **Dover**, which I have since been there and I have a chunk of them home. And -- and then it was so bitter cold and rainy and damp and we were all hungry and we were all coughing. And our chief nurse lined us up every day, I'll never forget this either, with the same spoon, doling out -- there's your dose, everyone had a dose of cough syrup. We all survived. It was -- it was just a -- one big happy family.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And -- and we still are, the girls who are left. We're -- we have bonded well.

Q: Mm-hm. On that crossing, was -- how long did it take to --

A: Five days. We zigzagged. And I think we had saltwater in the faucets. Course you didn't shower or do anything like that. We had special soap for saltwater, to wash. And it was very crowded, but we did play cards and talk and wonder what the future held. And we were always singing. I was always happy to sing, and --

Q: Hold on just a second. What -- what were some of the songs that you all would sing?

A: I'm having a hard time thinking now. They keep reminding me what they were. I kn -- I really don't remember. The regular songs of -- you know, that everyone was

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singing at that time, in the 40's. And we harmonized and we just in general had a good time.

Q: There was a high spirits going across?

A: Mm-hm. Yes, we were. We were all -- everyone was anxious to see what was going to happen next.

Q: How old were you?

A: 22.

Q: And most people were about the same age?

A: Basically, mm-hm.

Q: Finished with nursing school.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Yeah.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: You arrived in **England** and -- and this was what month?

A: In December, a few days before Christmas. It was the first Christmas that I would have been away from home. And my parents had -- they knew that something was -- we were going somewhere and they had sent a couple of gifts that we packed in our luggage. And then we arrived in **England**. As I said, it was bitter cold, rained a great deal. And we were billeted in a private home, which many of the people opened their homes to the Americans. And we had a very **[inaudible]** had a bathroom with a

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bathtub, we could take a bath. We had two bunks in our room and we were four girls who have always stayed good friends. We were -- served together, all of us. And we still -- we're all still living.

Q: And how long were you in **England**? What did you -- and what were you doing there?

A: We all -- we had a -- we went to work in a hospital -- bib -- in **Wales**, I think it was. And we had the **GI's** from war, that we took care of. Our corpsmen were there helping us. We were transported there every day and back again. I did general duty and general nursing. And that's when I first realized that these American boys are remarkable, because of the spirits they had, they were just the best patients you could imagine. They were wonderful. You knew they were Americans, they were very, very happy to be alive and happy to see a -- an American nurse and -- and thinking of going home, because that's where they were destined for.

Q: Were these men who had been wounded in the ba -- in the fa -- recently wounded --

A: Mm-hm.

Q: -- in the Battle of the Bulge --

A: Mm-hm.

Q: -- and the fighting --

A: Mm-hm.

Q: -- that was taking place there, just before Christmas, yeah.

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A: That's right.

Q: Some terrible fighting.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Lot's of psychological trauma, too?

A: Yes. Mm-hm. Things that we were seeing that we had never seen. But when you're young, those things, you know, looking back you think how could you ever have done that? But you do it. If there's a job to do, we did it. We were always happy when our shift was over, we could go back to our rooms and talk about what had happened and - it was just repetitious. The next day would be the same or worse or better. And it was bitter cold, bitter cold. But -- and I remember -- which is something I had never seen, early in the morning when we were walking down to the mess hall for our breakfast, I saw a cart with huge pails of milk and that was the milkman delivering -- that's how they delivered the milk in **England**, which of course was totally new to me, delivering it that way. And it was a -- it was beautiful where we were, it was a beautiful countryside, but we had a great deal of fog and rain.

Q: Mm-hm. And when did you then go to **Germany**?

A: I've forgotten when we crossed the channel. I think it's in that literature, what month it was. We weren't in **England** too long, just long enough to reorganize and get -- know what our next experience was going to be. What they wanted, where they

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wanted us to go. Landed in **France**. And we were in **Germany**, we were set up in a field, in tents. We were --

Q: Where -- where was that?

A: In **Germany**, we were in --

Q: We're now -- we're in -- let's back up a little bit. I never asked you to tell me the name of your unit and who you were attached to, so tell me all of that and then let's pick up with March of 1945.

A: We were with the 131st evacuation hospital, a semi-mobile unit and I think we were part of the first army and then we eventually joined General **Patton**.

Q: Third army?

A: Third army, mm-hm.

Q: Mm-hm. And you crossed the English channel to **France** in March of 1945, you had been in **England**. And were you sent directly to **Germany**? The fighting was moving closer and closer to **Berlin** at that time.

A: We were in **France** for awhile. I remember we were billeted in a castle. I don't think -- I don't recall working there. I think it was just a stopping off point. In fact, we were allowed to go on down to the beach, but I don't think we were there long and then we went to **Germany** and that's when we were in our tents, we were set up in tents and also had occasions -- soldiers coming in off the front lines.

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Q: Do you happen to remember wh-where you were? Near what town or city in those tents?

A: I don't know whether it was **Düsseldorf** or if that's where we went through, I'm not sure what the town was. I know it was a valley. It was just flat land. And I'm not -- I'm really not sure of the name of the town.

Q: And there were wha -- 39 of you, 40 nurses?

A: We always said 40 nurses and 40 officers and about 206 enlisted men. Mainly the enlisted men were from **Oklahoma** and most of the doctors and nurses were from the eastern seaboard. Just happened that way.

Q: Hm, hm. So those officers were mostly doctors?

A: Yes.

Q: Uh-huh, 40 doctors and 40 nurses.

A: Doctors and dentists. We had two dentists. And let's see -- they were me -- they were all doctors.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

A: And the 40 nurses.

Q: And there was a surgery that did surgery on the --

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Mm-hm.

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A: Yes. We had an **OR**. The enlisted men were the corpsmen. They were remarkable young men. They worked very hard, they knew what they were doing and they were cooperative and helpful. It was -- as I said before, just one big, happy family.

Q: Okay. In the spring of 1945, you must have known the war was coming to an end.

A: Yes, we did. We were aware, but had no idea that it was going to be as quickly as it was. And when they told us and then we left, from there we were -- from **Germany** we were going to **Austria**, but we didn't know that. And through all the villages we saw all the white sheets and flags of surrender, out of all these little villages. It was very interesting, I had never seen anything like that before and they were all waving and very cheerful and happy. Everything was quiet. And that's when we went on into **Austria**. I think we arrived there -- I think it was May eighth or ninth. I'm not sure when.

Q: Right around the last day -- right around the surrender --

A: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

Q: Do you remember where you were when you heard about the German surrender?

A: Well, I think we were still in **Germany**. We had heard about President **Roosevelt** dying earlier in May, when we were in **Germany**, in that valley. And then we heard that the war was over and we were jubilant.

Q: What did you do? Did you have a -- did you have a party, did you --

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A: We all celebrated in our own way, I guess -- several of us did -- had a big party with all kinds of things, we were drinking. Just didn't seem to matter, it was just a jubilant feeling to know that all of this has now ceased and that hopefully we could get our boys back home and I was looking forward to going to the **South Pacific**, but that didn't happen. And we knew that we probably would be discharged after we returned back home. We didn't know how soon that would be, because we had another chore to do. And that was when we arrived in the concentration camp in **Linz**, outside of **Linz, Austria**. And that was when we drove in in the two and a half ton truck and we were just overwhelmed at what we could see from where we were. And -- and the odor was something you'll never forget. Once you have that in your nostrils, you'll never forget that. And I know our colonel did say that it was up to us, either we -- we didn't have to serve this duty. And I thought that was strange. And of course we all said yes we would and we did.

Q: Hm.

A: And we were there.

Q: Were you told what it was going to be? What you would do?

A: Well then, we did. They were -- they did tell us and of course we -- we were still -- we had no idea what we were going to see when we did go in the next morning. And we had to wear our fatigues with our leggings on and our sleeves tight and we all had olive drab turbans that we put on our heads so none of our hair was showing. And we

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went in like this and then the first thing they did was spray us with **DDT** powder, down the front, down the back, in our hair and down our legs. And then we went into the wards and there were just. They were all men that we had in that particular ward and it was just -- they were skin and bone, like skeletons.

Q: By wards, do you mean that these people had already been removed to hospitals or to some kind of temporary facility? Were they still in the concentration camp itself?

A: Yes. They were in the camp and they were like barracks. We called them wards because they were all in -- they were all in cots -- bunkbeds. They didn't have any sheets. Some of them were fortunate enough to have straw on their beds -- in their bunks. Just lying there, just with their wide eyes, because they were so emaciated. And they were suffering from many diseases and we were told we really couldn't touch them and they were not to touch us, because of all the diseases they had. And our main thing to do -- we couldn't give them any food, we started with sulfa drugs, **sulfaphisol**, because that was the antibiotic of that time. And when I tell you they had to take six or 10 pills at a time, it wasn't easy for them. And I remember several days later, after they removed the dead, you would see all the pills left in there, under the straw, in their beds that they just couldn't take.

Q: They couldn't swallow them?

A: Couldn't swallow them, mm-hm. But they were very happy in their way, that they could show their appreciation. They were so weak, it was just -- they could scarcely

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talk, half of them and -- but they knew you could tell where -- their eyes, that they knew we had come to liberate them. And that was just every day, the next day when you'd go to the ward, there'd be X number of inmates who no longer were there -- patients, I should call them, who were -- had died through the night. And that was day after day after day. It was very, very depressing. And -- and difficult to cope with even at that age, cause we had never seen anything like that and couldn't understand why all this had happened.

Q: What were you told about it before you --

A: We really weren't told that much, it's just that this was a concentration camp the Germans had and that we were going to, you know, release these men and send them off to hospitals, where they could be treated properly, which is what they did, those that they could, they stayed until they were a little stronger. And they did eventually have liquids and some form of nutrition. But it was just total devastation to see what people could do to other people. Human beings, these were human beings and they were just unbelievable skeletons.

Q: You said you weren't able to touch them?

A: No, they didn't want us to touch them because they had all kinds of diseases and they didn't want us -- and there was nothing -- we couldn't bathe them, they had the -- some others -- town people, I think come in and help clean them up or take care of

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them as far as minor little things. They were too weak to be handled or really treated in any way.

Q: These were the local Austrian citizens who volunteered or were pr-pressed to --

A: No, I don't know where they really came from or who they were, but I know that someone else -- all we did mainly was just go from patient to patient and wait until they took all their pills, it was just constant -- cause there were many that we had in these large wards.

Q: And how long did that go on for? How long were you there?

A: Well, let's see. I guess maybe three or four weeks. And by that time, each day -- well so many had died through the night and then each day some would be moved to safer quarters, so that little by little, the camp was em -- being emptied. And we remember looking out of the ward window one morning and they were -- two patients were walking by with the carcass of a horse. You could see the frames of his bone structure and the ribs and couldn't imagine what was happening and they were of course had ki-killed the horse and were eating the -- the meat. It was unbelievable. And down at one corner of our ward, one patient was cooking -- had collected some weeds from the yard, the campgrounds and he was cooking them and that -- that's what they existed on, too.

Q: So some of the people there were able -- were up and around, not --

A: Yes --

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Q: Yeah.

A: Mm-hm, some were. Even though they were just skeletons, they were able to walk around. They were weak and they shuffled and -- but they still were determined and of course when they saw the Americans, they knew they were going to be all right, so that that encouraged them to use up every ounce of strength they had, which they did.

Q: Did they try to talk to you at all?

A: Well, the communication, of course we didn't speak their language, so it was difficult. But sometimes you could almost know what they were -- I -- they were grateful for our being there. And we were women, which they didn't know at first what we were, cause we had everything covered up. But -- and then they realized that we were nurses. And we had Red Crosses on our arms, so they knew. It was just an unbelievable experience, cause then as we would go back through the courtyard, we saw all these mounds of bones and bodies and the huge trenches that they'd just tossed all the bodies in.

Q: They were opened --

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Trenches they had --

A: Until they filled them to their capacity and then they would bulldoze the dirt back over all these corpse.

Q: That was going on while -- while you were there?

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A: While we were there, mm-hm. We saw that. It was horrible. It was a horrible thing that had happened. And I feel that's why it's important to -- this is part of history and it -- it should be taught in the schools, what happened there, because there are non-believers, which doesn't -- hardly seems possible.

Q: Had you known anything about the camps bef -- ear-earlier that spring, before you arrived there?

A: No. I didn't know anything about them, mm-mm. Had no idea, had no idea.

Q: Hm. Hm. And how long were you there then?

A: I think it was three or four weeks, I'm not sure. I know we were there in May. I think we must have come home in June. Our reward for the experience at the concentration camp was to come home, back to the States, which was -- we were very, very anxious.

Q: I bet.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Were -- were you writing letters home during that time that you were there, trying to describe that?

A: Yes, we did. My mother saved all of my letters and I have all of the -- I have them. All the ones -- and of course they were disbelieving, they couldn't imagine what was going on and what we were going through. But they knew it was true, or it wouldn't be there in the letter.

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Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm. Wh-When you came back -- excuse me -- when you came back and finished your service, was that experience something that you reflected on frequently in those years after the war, or was it something that you tried to forget about or --

A: Well, you never forget about that. But sometimes it was difficult to talk about it. We didn't discuss it all the time. They -- they were aware of what we had experienced.

Q: Your family, you mean?

A: Mm-hm.

Q: And your friends?

A: That's true.

Q: Did people sort of tiptoe around you on that subject, not wanting to ask because they thought it would be hard for you to talk about? And was that the case, that it was hard to talk about?

A: No, no. For awhile I think it was difficult, but then as time went on and you reflect back and of course then when we'd get together with our girls or our nurse friends, we talked about it, but we didn't really dwell on it, because it was painful, it was a horrible thing that had happened to these people who were just human beings. Innocent people. I never saw any women or any children there. We just seemed to have the men on our section.

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Q: And has -- how do you think that experience, having seen what you saw at such a young age, it -- how did that affect your life? Did you think about it during the years at all, did it -- do you think it changed you in any way that you can measure, as a person?

A: Probably made me a stronger person. Not understanding of what I had gone through, but I knew that -- and a great compassion, I've always been compassionate, but I think this really encouraged me to be even more so and to -- to treat all kinds of people as you would yourself have treated. I think it's -- we're all created here and it's -- you just don't do these things to a human being.

Q: Have your children asked you about it?

A: My children, when I first mentioned something, they said, "What World War?" I said, "World War Two." And of course they were young and they -- they really meant it, "Which war, Mom?" So after I told them. Then the main person -- I have twin sons and then a daughter and then a younger son. My daughter is the one who is the historian and she's extremely interested and very understanding and kind of has relived part of this through my letters and through the things that she has read and that we have talked about. And she's very patriotic. The anniversary of the end of the war, she took pictures of my uniforms and the flags and all my souvenirs. And this was her -- this is what she wanted to do, she wants to preserve this like a museum I guess, to pass on down. Cause she too says it's part of history. It's my legacy to my children.

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And they're all very proud that I had served in the army. They think that was a wonderful thing to have done.

Q: Sounds like you're proud of it, too

A: Yes, I am. I'm very proud. That's a wonderful part of my life. That was very important to me, it was something that I -- I wanted to be a nurse and I wanted to join the army and I wanted to go overseas and I felt that I had really succeeded in all these dreams I had. And from then on, of course it -- true life is a little different, then. I married and had children and I'm still a nurse. I'm not working now, I've retired now, but th-that is a very important part of my life, too, being a nurse.

Q: I know it's hot. Is there anything that you want to say or mention or a story that I didn't -- **[indecipherable]** didn't come across, or --

A: I don't think so.

Q: Okay, good. This is the end of tape one, side A, with **Ruth Eberly Kirby**.

End of Tape One, Side A

Conclusion of Interview