

WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Helen Hunter Weant

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: January 16, 2009

[Begin Interview]

TS: This is Therese Strohmer and it is the sixteenth of January 2009. And I'm in Colfax, North Carolina, visiting with Helen Weant. And this is an oral history interview for the Women Veteran's Historical Project at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Now Helen, go ahead and say your name the way that you would like it on your collection.

HW: I believe, Helen Hunter Weant.

TS: Okay.

HW: — Collection.

TS: Okay. Well, Helen, why don't we start out? And thank you for having me here, I appreciate it.

HW: You're welcome. I'm enjoying it.

TS: Go ahead and tell us when and where you were born.

HW: I was born in Sloan, Iowa, in February 24, 1920. And I was living out of Sloan, Iowa, on a farm with my family—with my mother and daddy and two sisters.

TS: So you had three girls in your family? What kind of—So your dad was a farmer?

HW: Yes, my father was a farmer. He farmed with his brother and they—well, it was real hard going when they came. They came from—once came from—well—

TS: That's okay.

HW: One came from Norway [HW corrected later: My grandfather George Hunter came from the Shetland Islands in Scotland] and the other one is from—and my grandmother came from Sweden. No, not Sweden—oh—

TS: You just told me a little while ago. Let me think where.

HW: It was—[sigh]—

TS: Here, let me see.

HW: Scotland!

TS: That's right. It started with an "S."

HW: Yeah, Scotland, and I guess they migrated over here and married—my grandfather and grandmother. And they settled in the little town of Sloan, Iowa. My father wanted to— Well, they weren't married then. They married over here [HW corrected later: They migrated separately. Annie Anderson, my grandmother, came from Oslo, Norway to Minneapolis, Minnesota.]

TS: You said that they had met in Indianapolis, I think?

HW: No, no. [Minneapolis, Minnesota].

TS: That was your grandparents?

HW: Yeah. Well, anyway, they migrated and met, I guess in India—[HW corrected later: Minneapolis, Minnesota].

TS: Indianapolis?

HW: Minnesota, I think is the place. It must have been where they migrated into, but I don't know exactly. But my grandfather [George—HW added later] was a fisherman, and he came over to look for gold [in California on his 2 trips around the world and then went to Minneapolis, Minnesota to fish and he met Annie my grandmother.]

TS: Oh.

HW: That was my great great grandfather, I guess. And he had some brothers with him. And my grandmother, when she came over she went to Minneapolis, Minnesota. That was where she and her family came in. I don't know how many came with her.

TS: Right.

HW: I don't—in fact—her parents came from there. Whether she was born here or not, I'm not quite sure about that. But anyway, I guess they landed in Minnesota. And then my grandfather, he must have met her in Minnesota somewhere. And they came out [HW added later—and purchased 80 acres on the Missouri River outside of Sloan Iowa]. I have always envisioned them sort of coming out in covered wagons [chuckle]. Well, they could have. I don't know, because they were kind of—things were sort of old-timey. My

grandparents surely did. Yeah, I think that my grandparents probably came in covered wagons out here and settled.

Anyway, my grandfather, he got his gold in some way. And he got enough gold where he could go back and build his mother a house [HW added later—in Cummingsburgh, Shetland Islands, Scotland]. That's what he—that was his goal. I guess in the meantime he meet my grandmother and came back.

TS: Oh, I see.

HW: And they had a big family. They had a large family. And my mother only had a sister and a brother. And she came from—The farthest that we can go back is that she came in around Indiana, down through the middle of the country. I don't know. Her father was a merchant. And he came out and settled in the Sloan community, and set up a little grocery store. He had groceries. He had the little wagon. He'd go out and sold [sic] his goods—you know—called from door to door. And they had—in that grocery store, they finally got a barber shop.

TS: Oh.

HW: But it was out in the country. It was out in the country. I was away from any little town even, and so it wasn't too far from Nebraska. You could go across the Missouri River. And a lot of Indians came over from Nebraska to shop there to buy groceries. I guess they came over by boat, or something. And anyway, my grandfather, of course, had done quite well since—probably—ten miles to another town would have been quite long for those people in those days to go get groceries, you know.

TS: Yeah.

HW: And anyway, he had the little grocery store and my uncle—my mother's brother—he helped his daddy some. But in all that, my grandparents sent my two—her sister and her brother and herself to Des Moines, Iowa, for what you might call a little girls'—a little—What's in between college and high school?

TS: Like a prep school, sort of—

HW: Kind of, yeah, but it was probably a—

TS: For girls.

HW: Finishing school.

TS: Finishing school, oh, for girls.

HW: I guess they sent—somehow or other, they were able to send them to finishing school for a year or two, I guess. My mother took business, kind of, and handwriting. She's got the

most beautiful handwriting that you have ever seen. She took business and handwriting and maybe speaking—elocution—that’s what they called it in those days.

TS: That’s right.

HW: And so she helped her dad in the store for many, many years. So she and my daddy weren’t really married young. They—I don’t know. They probably were, I would say, late twenties or early thirties, which would be older for that—

TS: Right. For that time.

HW: My mother and sister, they—my mother came back after school and helped, she and her brother, in the grocery store. And the brother did a little farming too. They had a little land that they farmed. He had enough schooling that he could help with it, and my mother kept books. That was her duty—was to keep books.

TS: So how did—When your parents got married they lived in Sloan?

HW: Yeah. Well, out in the country. They all lived out in the country. This little town of Albaton, it’s called, was where my grandmother’s people settled. It now is just about two houses and a little place people come to get—like a hardware thing. Well, that’s not very much—but anyway, in the meantime, it was a lot more thriving than it is now, of course.

TS: Right.

HW: You wouldn’t even call it a town now.

TS: Right, because of the farming communities have kind of diminished some.

HW: Right. Any way you can get rid of the building and you can plant something there.

TS: Right. That is true. So how was it for you growing up in that community?

HW: Well, we all went to Sloan, Iowa. By that time, we were going to—They had school buses by that time in Sloan. Sloan wasn’t ever a large place. It was probably averaging two or three hundred people in there, you know. But they had schools—they had a consolidated school—and all the little towns around it all had their schools. But when we come along and it got time to go to school, they had school buses that come and pick us up.

TS: Did you like school?

HW: Pretty good. I wasn’t—I wouldn’t say that I was the smartest kid in the block. My oldest sister—Well, I mean she turned out to be the [chuckle]—Well, we always said that she was the spoiled one. She got to do everything. Of course, she was more capable than the rest of us at that time. And my middle sister—she was very good with her hands—

sewing. She had her girls all join 4-H clubs and all of that, you know. And she lived in— She ended up in Cherokee, Iowa—living. And Maxine ended up in Kansas. I came to North Carolina [chuckles].

TS: So you covered a few states there.

HW: Yeah. Right.

TS: Well, you're the youngest—you're the youngest girl and your dad was a farmer. Was your mother—Did your mom work?

HW: She worked at home. And she really worked, I tell you. My daddy had them a lot of people working for him in the fields.

TS: You said earlier that your dad and brother worked together on this farm.

HW: Yes, yeah. Not on the—well, he had his farm—my daddy—but all their tractors and all of the equipment, they—

TS: They would share them?

HW: My uncle had seven boys and a girl. And—but they didn't—they did mostly their thing down there, but their crops—My dad would use his equipment for doing theirs for a long many years. And we always did say—I don't know—They never—What kind of bookkeeping they had I will never know, because they all put it in one place. And they had those seven boys, and I don't know.

TS: You're not quite sure how they had it all arranged?

HW: No, I don't. They were all—They got along very well till my daddy got sick and had cancer and all that.

But, let's see. Where am I? We all went to a consolidated school, and then I went into nursing. My oldest sister she went to junior college—Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and she got hurt and ended up as a recreational director in the small schools. And then after that, she went to the Red Cross and spent—till she got out of the service. She went all around—She just about went around the world. She left New York and came in San Francisco when she came back. She met her husband, and he's a pilot, and they were married in France—in Paris! [chuckles]

TS: Oh how nice, well, let me back up just a little bit. Now, you were growing up as a young girl—let's see—In 1930, you would have been ten years old. So you were a young girl during the depression. Do you remember those years?

HW: Oh, yes. Yes, I sure do.

TS: Why don't you tell me about that?

HW: Well we had to have all of our—All of our clothes were homemade. My mother was able to [get]—the telephone operator[HW added later—to sew for her]—those that rang like that.

TS: Yes, yeah.

HW: She had—Well, her husband had left her, and she had three children. So my mother got her to do her sewing for her.

TS: Okay.

HW: And she made all of our clothes. And Mother did all of the cooking and things for all of them—when we had thrashing with the harvest crews. The corn huskers come in and get the corn out of the ground. She would do all of the cooking and feeding them. Summertime, when they would put all of the grains out and they would get it in the—what was it, corn? We had a lot of migrant workers come up from Missouri to find work. And so they—One thing I have to tell you that on our farm—Of course, my daddy with his health—he didn't work. But my mother had moved her—this old barber shop that they had at her father's store, up to the farm. She put our hired men out there in the barber shop. That was—Well, they had to have a place to live.

TS: Yeah.

HW: So they hunkered down out there.

TS: So it was just a building that they could— [HW added later-- stay in and sleep and come in the farm house to eat.]

HW: And she would feed them. They took care of themselves. Yeah, I don't know how they got their baths.

TS: Well, now, growing up on a farm and during the Depression, did you feel like you were—

HW: Poor?

TS: Poor, yeah, but for like food and things like that. Did you feel pretty well fed?

HW: Well, we had enough to eat. We really did, because they had gardens and things like that. I don't think that we were ever without food. And mother fed us—all those hired help that we had—all those men. It was in corn husking time when they would come up. In what other season—[HW added later—My father also raised cattle to feed and sell later.]

TS: Thrashing.

HW: Thrashing-time, yeah. They had nine or ten different workers, and that was—they were sharing too. But Mother did all the working and the feeding. [HW added later—She did have help cooking, ironing and washing.]

TS: Now did you participate in any of this?

HW: Oh, yes.

TS: What was your job?

HW: My father wouldn't let me go out to the fields. He wouldn't let us around those men. And that was—I thought about it an awful lot. He was well versed—My mother probably made sure that with all those men out there—I do remember being real scared one time coming home from school. They would tease us a lot, or, maybe, we got to where we would tease them and then run—say something and then run. And I know I did get scared one time. I don't know if the man had had a drink of something or not. But that really wouldn't have been allowed very much unless it was late in the—But I was home kind of by myself. I think I came from school by the school bus or something. Maybe I probably tantalized him—I don't know, but anyway, he starts chasing me, and I got real frightened. I really did. And I went and hid someplace. And, you know, he quit. He gave up. That really frightened me. And I think that that really taught me a lesson to stay at my distance, you know, and more so. And you know, you get like you were just plain family around them because they were amongst you so much.

TS: Right. Did you tell anybody?

HW: [HW added later—Not for a long time. It was a hard life, because we had to work too.

TS: Oh, sure.

HW: We had to wash and iron. Ironing was my job. I seem like I've ironed my whole life, and I'm not too good of an ironer now.

TS: I bet you're pretty good.

HW: But we knew what hard work was. And still, I think we had some of the things—Maybe some of them had it a little harder than we did too. I don't know, but we weren't petted. We weren't petted.

TS: Yeah, you told me that you weren't spoiled [chuckle].

HW: No. We weren't spoiled, no.

TS: Well, when you had this guy chase you—did you tell your parents about that at all?

HW: I didn't. I never did, I don't think. Because I was scared to. I don't know of what—I was just scared.

TS: Just uncomfortable?

HW: Yeah.

TS: Did you have games that you played as a kid?

HW: Oh, yeah. And in the evenings we'd have Monopoly and things like that. We would play it with the workers—the men. Bad weather—there was no place for them to go—[so they would] hang around the porches and things like that. So we—But things really went well most of the time. My mother did work hard—she really—but she did have hired help a lot of the time too, as we had school and things we couldn't help. She had hired helped particularly in those two seasons. She had so many people come in and eat.

TS: She would have people come in and help her?

HW: Well, the workers came in for lunch and supper. In the summer, we would have to make lunches and send them out to the fields.

TS: Yeah, so you kept busy, huh?

HW: Yeah, there was plenty to do.

TS: Now well, did you think as a young girl—Did you have any ideas about what your future would be like? Did you have any ideas like that?

HW: No, when I graduated from high school, I really didn't know what I wanted to do. My two other sisters had gone to college. Times were tough, too. My oldest sister, she borrowed money from—she had an uncle that was in one of these—not American Legion, but it was some type of a—

TS: Organization?

HW: Organization that he could help her get a loan that way.

TS: Okay.

HW: So she started out college that way, and each of us were expected to pay back. You see, we weren't really spoiled. We had to pay back whatever they had because they didn't have it to give to us. If we were going to do it and they'd borrowed—well, we just grew up to expect to. I don't think that they ever told us that we had to. We expected to because they were doing it for us and that.

So my other sister, she is a domesticated—like—She liked to sew and things like that. And I like to bake. I like to bake. She went—my father must have been—maybe

they had a better crop that year or something or other. Anyway, she started out in Ames, Iowa. It was for the girl's part—It was agriculture for men. And it was women—had—winded up being 4-Hs and stuff like that. She brought up all of her girls in 4-Hs and worked with them in it and was in—and promoted that in her family. And she didn't have to borrow money, but she was sick a lot, too. She had headaches a lot. I remember when we got a car, finally, we'd leave school and take her down to the next town so she could get a chiropractor to give her treatments for her headaches. But she was a fine girl and she did marry. She married a little man that lived in a small town that lived around where she went to school and went to college.

TS: So for you, what did you—

HW: Well, then, I—We were still in the Depression, pretty much, when I went to school. But we had two people. We had an aunt—my uncle's wife—and I didn't know her. I just remember her funeral. She was a nurse in the whole community. And she just did everything for everybody. And everybody thought that she was just the finest lady there ever was. And I guess she was. I was pretty small, but I remember her kindness. And that was the first funeral I think that I had ever gone to. And I don't know—It seems like I remember—I want to say an ironing board. I would get it under the ironing board and just kind of peek around things. It was hard for me to understand what was going on.

TS: Right.

HW: That ironing board kind of goes through my mind. That's kind of crazy. But I had that association. Everybody talked about how wonderful— And one of my cousins married a nurse. And she went to Lutheran Hospital in Sioux City, Iowa. So that's where I ended up.

TS: Do you think that it's because of maybe your connection with these two women who had been nurses?

HW: Well that was closer to meeting what I felt I was. You know, I liked to help people. I liked to be around people. I like people. And I don't—And as I say, it wasn't really easy or anything. I wasn't the smartest person in the world, but I got through it and always enjoyed being around people and doing.

TS: So it was Lutheran?

HW: Lutheran Hospital School of Nursing.

TS: And where was that at?

HW: Sioux City—Sioux City, Iowa.

TS: And about what year was that?

HW: I went in—I graduated in—

TS: Thirty-seven?

HW: Let's see. Forty-two, I went in forty-two into the service. Three years—I went to three years of nursing school.

TS: That's okay. So it was before the war.

HW: Oh, yes.

TS: So you were for three years. And how was that? How was the school?

HW: It was a good—a regular hospital in Sioux City, and that was the first time that I had ever been away from home, too, of course.

TS: Oh, how was that?

HW: Well, I accepted it and went on. I don't—Once you accepted things, I guess, you just had to go ahead and do them. There wasn't anything going back. And anyway, I got through and we had old dormitories. We lived in dormitories. And most of my friends or roommates were from Nebraska. We lived across the river from Sioux City and South Dakota, Nebraska. Iowa came to one point there all together. Then it was three years and then I—my first job was—I went to Ames, Iowa, that's where—What did I say about Ames before?

TS: Is that where— somebody moved there. I don't remember it. I do have—You did talk about Ames, Helen. I forget. Sorry, Helen.

HW: That's okay. Anyway, that's where I went for my first job. I had my first job there.

TS: In a hospital?

HW: I was there just about a year. Yeah. I decided that I believed I wanted to do something else. So I guess I went to the—I inquired about going into the army, and they told me I had to go out to Omaha, Nebraska. I would have to go through the Red Cross, but they told me that I had to go get an examination to see if I qualified. And then from there on, I would be with the Army Red Cross. I would be going through the Red Cross. And so they—I went home and waited and didn't probably wait very long.

TS: Now, is this during the war?

HW: No. Yeah. It had to be '39, probably '39 to '40 that I was in school. Thirty-eight, thirty-nine, and forty, probably [was when I was in school]. I got my first job probably in '41.

TS: Now when you—Before the war here started, were you aware of the war in Europe?

HW: Pardon?

TS: Were you aware of the war going on overseas?

HW: We knew it was going on but it—We didn't listen to the radio. See, that was all we had was the radio. Some reason, I guess it was only in the evenings that we had time to listen to the radio or anything—or going to church—or anything else. We had all these things that you had to do, you know. And the fact that my sister had gone in through the Red Cross too.

TS: But had she gone in after Pearl Harbor happened, or before?

HW: The war was going on, but so she went directly to an army camp.

TS: So probably after—Do you remember Pearl Harbor? Do you remember hearing about it?

HW: Yes, I do.

TS: Can you tell me what you remember about hearing about it?

HW: Was that in '45?

TS: Forty-one.

HW: Forty-one—

TS: December of forty-one. [December 7, 1941]

HW: Yeah, I must have. I mean, I can't—

TS: It's okay if you don't remember.

HW: I wasn't particularly—I don't think that I was frightened by the war.

TS: Okay.

HW: I didn't think that it was going to hit—that I was going to be involved. At that time I didn't have any idea that I was going to be involved in it, you know.

TS: Right.

HW: Because, I was out in Iowa, in that little isolated place.

TS: I see.

HW: And I didn't have any brothers going.

TS: Right.

HW: And I guess I did start hearing about people being drafted and things like that. But then after I—When they first sent me to Fort Leavenworth, to go through all my examinations and stuff, then I was assigned to Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

TS: Well now, how did you—Why did you think about going into the service? You said that you wanted to do something different.

HW: Everybody—Well, everybody else was talking about it on the radio. I guess we had television by that time.

TS: Not quite yet, I don't think.

HW: Well anyway, we heard on the radio that: "They need nurses! They need nurses!"

TS: Oh.

HW: You see, after I graduated I worked one year in Ames, Iowa. Ames, Iowa, was a college town, too. And I—somehow I don't think I was real happy. I was satisfied with my job, but it was really the first time I have ever been completely away from— not having family close by or something. And I wasn't too homesick. And I still had a little bit of [inquisitiveness?]. You know, I wanted to know what that's all about—things like that. Be where, kind of where some action was or something.

TS: A little more adventure?

HW: I think that was it. I think there was [that impulse]. As far as I had, you know, from that little small town. So I just thought, "Well, I think that is what I should—That is something that I could do for the country. And for—"

TS: Okay.

HW: Yeah.

TS: Do you remember seeing the posters that they had?

HW: Oh yes, "We need you now!" That was for particularly nurses.

TS: Yeah. So you felt that they were maybe talking to you a little bit?

HW: It was getting harder in hospitals and things to have nurses—you know, to find help. Everybody was going to the service. They were getting scarcer every—

TS: Yeah.

HW: I wouldn't have had any trouble for a job. And I don't know why I really signed up for Ames— maybe it was because my sister had gone there. And I thought that would be more activity than any of the little small places that I had been. And my sister—

TS: Right. Now did you have—Was there a reason that you picked the particular service that you picked?

HW: Yeah. I went—I was sent to Sioux Falls and it was just a regular camp—hospital. And I worked there. And I guess there was just restlessness a lot with everybody. I was completely—everybody was new to me. I was—But they came through one day—this man—and I think that we were all quarantined and couldn't go home or anything. And we had to stay right there. And we were isolated, kind of. And this man came around and he said that “we're looking for nurses that would be interested in going to air evacuation. It's a new thing that is opening up, and we're in need of people that would be interested in training for that.”

Well, I had never been in an airplane my entire life, but I guess there was an adventurous type of blood in me somewhere. Because what I did, I'd have to go on my own. I didn't have anybody going with me, you know?

So we signed up. There was about thirteen then on the camp there—nurses that had signed up. And I don't think that I got— I didn't go with any of them. I mean if they were—I guess we were called at different times or something. But then I was called, and I had to go back down to Omaha, Nebraska, to be—no—they said, “Wait there, we'll send for you”.

We was [sic] sent to Bowman Field, Kentucky, there for our Air Force training.

TS: So at first you were in the Women's Army Corps? Then you signed up for the air evacuation, and that put you in the Army Air Force?

WH: Yes.

TS: Okay. So that was in—it looks like here—So, from June of '43—

WH: I went to Bowman Field, yeah.

TS: I see. Okay, so even before—So, you'd been in here for about a year before you went to the air evacuation corps?

WH: Oh, yeah.

TS: What did you think of the service even before you got to the Army Air Corps? How did you like the—

WH: Well, I liked it, I guess, all right. I wasn't what you would call—you were tired. A person was tired in those days. When they worked all day they were tired. It wasn't that you

didn't have something to do, but if you didn't, you could rest. But in the air force I met this boy, of course. He was from Colorado. He was an enlisted man, and we dated. In fact, I accepted an engagement ring before I went to—

TS: The air evacuation?

WH: The air evacuation. It wasn't—I think we met once in Chicago before—while we were still—He came up and we met in Chicago. And he visited my folks once or twice. And he was a very, very nice fellow. But in all of my moving around, I guess I started dating or something. And when I got back to—from Sioux Falls on to—

TS: Back in Kentucky?

WH: From Bowling Field, Kentucky, yes. Then we were with just a lot of girls, and we were doing things together and things like that. It was hard to be engaged. You just didn't see each other.

TS: Right.

WH: Right. And we were pretty tired after that.

TS: Well, let me ask you, with the—When you joined in the Women's Army Corps, what did your father think about that?

WH: Well, he didn't have a whole lot of objection. He didn't—I mean nobody tried to talk me out of it.

TS: Okay.

WH: Well, they didn't. I guess they just felt like we had to do what we felt like. They wanted us to go ahead and improve ourselves if we could. You know—A farmer's life, it wasn't glamorous and a lot of it was hard work. It was rewarding too, you know.

TS: And your sister had gone before you. She was in the Red Cross, but she still—

WH: Yeah, she was still going around the world.

TS: So she was doing that when you joined?

WH: Yeah.

TS: So, that was something she had done before. She kind of set the pace for—

WH: Because we wrote letters—I was reading a couple of letters the other day. She hadn't heard from me. She had sent me something and she hadn't heard from me. She had hoped that when she got home at night there would be something for her that she had to read,

because she was getting anxious to hear what I was doing and where I was. She worked in the little field hospitals pretty much and she had a big job. But she was always the one who could get letters on time, and things like that, and say a lot in a few words, you know.

TS: Right.

WH: Well, I would probably—As you can see, I go way around the mulberry bush.

TS: That's all right, Helen.

WH: But then let's see—

TS: So she found out about you joining then. What did she think about it—your sister—your older sister?

WH: Well, she was engaged, I guess, to this airman up there. As soon as they—She was out in Corsica or some place. I don't know.

TS: You said that they got married in France, right?

WH: Yeah, they did. And she had to buy—She ordered her wedding dress to be sent to her. And I don't think it came, in a way. There's a story about that. She had ordered it, and it didn't come. And she had borrowed somebody else's who had one that she could borrow to wear or something like that.

TS: Oh, yeah? She had to borrow a dress?

HW: Yeah. But they were married in Paris. And her children were out—Not long ago one of her sons and his wife went to France, and they went to that church where they were married. And they saw their names there where they had been married.

TS: Oh!

HW: It was just a church. I guess it was a church. And that was quite a thrill to the family, and all that.

TS: Yeah. Well let me take you back to the air evacuation school, then. So you're going to this air evacuation school, and now, did they—Did you do a lot of flying on planes? What was that like?

HW: We had went [sic] to school, and had to learn all about the school itself. And had to go to classes on certain—We had a regular course about different countries and foods and then about bivouacs. We had to— We did go on bivouacs. And we was [sic] trained to do that. And once we got to all these places, we never used it. But anyway, it was good for us, I'm sure, but it was hard. And those tests were pretty hard too.

TS: So when you graduated from that did you feel pretty good about yourself for getting through the course, because it was so tough?

HW: Oh, yes. Then after we graduated, I guess we were sent to our homes.

TS: Okay.

HW: I didn't have to go back—oh, no—We graduated, that's right, and then the first place I went after that—they sent me to—

TS: It says here Dunnellon, Florida.

HW: Yes, Florida, and there we went to pick up patients from the general hospitals. And we took them further back—maybe it was from smaller hospitals, and we took them back to general hospitals. Like, Georgia had a huge hospital. And we even took them to the Midwest some, and that was giving us training. And that was more or less what our training was. In the meantime, we were kept pretty busy.

TS: You kept busy?
And so, then you went to—let's see—it says that you were in Florida.

HW: In Dunnellon. We were out in this small, little place. We were kind of in a little—like you were in Girl Scouts, and would have kind of a little screen all around it and things. That's where—we had something like that.

TS: That's where you stayed?

HW: Yes. There were four of us. We had four of us to a house. But there was about two of those out there, because we were just on detached service. They put us there for training.

TS: How many other women were in your unit with you?

HW: Four. There was [sic] just four of us.

TS: Just four?

HW: There were just four women at a time there.

TS: Did you travel together to pick up the patients and things like that?

HW: We always had a technician with us, and there probably wasn't more than one flight out a day, as I can remember. Two nurses didn't go at the same time.

TS: No, just one nurse and a technician?

HW: One nurse and one technician.

TS: I see, you could cover more ground, I guess.

HW: Yeah. And a lot of times you would go and come in a day.

TS: Can you describe for somebody who doesn't know what you did, what it was your job was?

HW: Well, what generally we did—We'd get up and go out to the airport. And we had to go on the plane and make sure that it was equipped right, that there was [sic] enough cots—well, there was—they'd pull these down, you know.

TS: The cots from the side of the plane?

HW: Yes. Then we had to set up our little kits to make sure that we had everything ready with the medical supplies and things like that. But going on these little trips like that— you very seldom had to use them. Because you'd be there before you hardly got out. Maybe you'd be flying for a couple of hours, but in that time you would just make your rounds—make sure that people were comfortable or if they needed something.

TS: On the plane, right?

HW: Yes, basically.

TS: Checking their vitals—making sure.

HW: Oh yeah, yeah.

TS: So, you would like wait on the plane and then they would bring the people on?

HW: They were out in ambulances from the hospitals. And the technician—We didn't do any lifting much of those litters, it was mostly men. Their crew, and our medical technician, would load them on, and we didn't have very much lifting to do really.

TS: So once they're on the plane, then you're making sure that they're okay?

HW: Yeah, you would go make your rounds.

TS: Well, how about many patients would there be?

HW: About twenty-five. Twenty-five was the most—

TS: Twenty-five, oh, with one nurse?

HW: Well, with a technician, yeah.

TS: So it might be a couple of hours?

HW: We always—most of the time we flew on C-40s [Lockheed Model 12-A/C-40]—C-47s [Douglas C-47 Skytrain]. They were the smallest hospital planes that they had. They later got B-22 [no aircraft known by this designation; maybe B-18 or B-23; the XB-22 was an experimental modification of the Douglas B-18, which eventually saw service as the B-23, a configuration very similar to the DC-3], where they put more. I never traveled in a big one much.

TS: No?

HW: Those were kind of for going overseas—

TS: Yeah.

HW: —and for longer trips where more space was needed.

TS: So when you got—you finished in Florida— do you remember where you went from there— after that—your next duty station? It says here that you went to Fort Mason, California.

HW: I went back to—we went back to—let's see here. [pause]

TS: Yeah, so it shows here that you were out in California for a little bit.

HW: I was out—Well, of course, I was out in Florida. I went back to—let's see— where the headquarters was.

TS: Back to Kentucky?

HW: Yeah, I guess. We waited. Well, I think they sent those orders to Dunnellon—that we were going to go ahead so long to report to a certain place in California.

TS: Fort Mason.

HW: Well, we always got to—We had ten days—

TS: Leave?

HW: Leave. Before we left—I was then assigned to go to Fort Mason, California. Then we sat around there for so long. They put us up in hotels there. And we were really in San Francisco. That camp was just sort of—that was where they lodged us—was in the hotel in San Francisco. It was about five weeks that we were there waiting for orders to go overseas. Finally, after about three weeks of just sitting there, they decided that they

would put us to work. They sent us out to one of the hospitals to work—which was good. We needed something to do, we really did.

TS: What did you do while you were waiting?

HW: Well, we'd go out and just go sight-seeing, really. There wasn't—

TS: You didn't have a job at the time.

HW: No, you couldn't do much. Our pay wasn't all that big. But then we were kind of glad to get back with something to do out at the hospital.

TS: Right.

HW: Then we didn't have to wait too long. We'd sit around there for all those weeks, and they decided that we could do something, you know. We were glad to do that.

TS: Now is this where you went to Guadalcanal from here—from out of San Francisco?

HW: Yes.

TS: Tell me about that. How was that?

HW: Well, we went by boom.

TS: By boat?

HW: By boat.

TS: You're in air evacuation and you went by boat?

HW: Came home by boat.

TS: Oh, okay.

HW: The ship— We were on a real nice ship going over. It was a real nice boat. We were pretty much on a semi-luxury ship, really, going over. But we had to have blackouts, and we had to think like that at night time. We couldn't have lights on. We'd have to have our shades pulled to dark at night. That gave us, I think, a first inkling that it could be kind of dangerous where we were going.

TS: Right.

HW: We had no idea where we were going.

TS: Oh, you didn't know?

HW: No.

TS: They were like, “Get on this ship and—”

HW: We didn’t ever know where we were going. And they didn’t give us any history of where we were going, or anything. It was—Of course, when we signed up they said that we would probably be going to some of these countries in the Pacific. But not too much, because we didn’t even know where the Solomon Islands were.

TS: Right.

HW: And had no idea where we were going, and what it was going to be like. It really—so when we got there—I don’t know. It’s hard for me—

TS: So you had—Well, let me ask you about your ship. As you said, it was sort of semi-luxurious. Did you have your own berth?

HW: Yes. We had probably—I was going to say—I don’t know if it was ten or six or what to an area. We’d have litters. More or less, we were sleeping on litters on the ships. And it must have taken us close to a week—I think—to get there, and everything was darkened all the time, at night particularly. Because, they were spying on us too, I guess. In that mode of thinking that we were—we didn’t know where we were going. And we didn’t even realize that they would probably be looking for us.

TS: Right. So you made it there safely?

HW: We did get there safely and then that’s when we got put in a hotel for at least—for five—at least five, or—it seemed like a long time. The waste—We thought of all that waste. Here we are just sitting here. We couldn’t go far—because we couldn’t get far away—in case they called us.

TS: Where was it that you landed off of the ship?

HW: It’s right outside of—

TS: Was it in the Solomon Islands? Is that—

HW: It was the Solomon Islands, yeah.

TS: We can look up where that was.

HW: We had no idea. We didn’t even know what Solomon Islands—

TS: Where were they?

HW: --what are the islands out there, hardly. And so it was just like—I guess it was like going to a bare beach, maybe, when we disembarked.

TS: Yeah.

HW: And we didn't go to any hospitals. We never did see a hospital, or I didn't. We came in first around by New Zealand. Then we got there and we went—It seems like we got on another boat from there and we went on up some islands in and around—until we got to this Guadalcanal. We didn't even—I couldn't tell you hardly what the Guadalcanal—Well, it's kind of getting far away.

TS: That's alright. Do you remember the weather at all? Do you have a remembrance about that, how it felt?

HW: Sticky and hot, I think. Yeah, sticky and hot. I know we were always afraid of these little jigger things.

TS: The bugs?

HW: Huh?

TS: The bugs that were there?

HW: Yes.

TS: Like a tarantula or—

HW: A little—

TS: Lizards?

HW: Like a caterpillar—kind of lizard. They would come around.

TS: They would crawl on you?

HW: Yeah. We were in these little houses. They had these little huts.

TS: Like a Quonset hut?

HW: Quonset. It was screened in and you rolled down the sides of it for rain and stuff like that. It always had a sticky feel in it. And that sand—so much sand on your feet! You just drug in sand. You would sweep. But, on the field there at Guadalcanal—I'm not certain, but it must have been the second move, we went from there—but you wouldn't even see any natives, because we were so far away, and we were so well guarded.

TS: Okay.

HW: We didn't see anybody except that plane and getting off and on it. And we were around patients, right when we were flying.

TS: That was the only time that you were around patients?

HW: Yes.

TS: So now when you get to Guadalcanal, then you like take a flight, and then you go pick up some patients?

HW: Well, they moved us out there to—on the Guadalcanal area headquarters there where everything was set up. We had a mess hall and things like that there. And we had our orders the night before—where we were going, when, and how many were going. And they would pick us up. I guess we would go up for breakfast and then from there the chiefs would take us out to the airplanes.

TS: I see. And then were you still flying the C-47s?

HW: Yes.

TS: So you would take the plane and then you would go somewhere to pick up the men that were wounded?

HW: Yeah. One of these islands—And we never could hardly find a map to try to find out where we were.

TS: Yeah. So you were just—You just went up and you didn't quite know where you were going and then you would pick up some patients.

HW: Yeah.

TS: Same sort of thing where they would put them on and you'd stay on the plane?

HW: Yes. And there's that ambulance out there waiting on the plane. And some of the doctors would be—this is like over particularly in France—I'd read some of that and get some of my information from that. They said that one of their generals—or something—went to inspect the plane—or was riding on the plane—and he said, "Thank God they sent a nurse." Because, so many—I guess that was when they were landing and loading those very sick patients—and I guess, it would look like that they had been more cared for more than if there hadn't been a nurse.

TS: I see.

HW: They probably had to bring so many in without technicians and nurses. You know, just kind of plop them down more or less. I guess that was a remark that had been made several times by the higher ups.

TS: They felt that it was more comfortable. That it made—maybe—the men more comfortable—

HW: Oh, yes.

TS: — to know that there were nurses on the plane?

HW: Oh, yes. They were glad to have nurses and technicians on the planes.

TS: When we were at lunch you said that the men that were on the planes were not necessarily in that bad of shape. Not that they weren't injured, because they certainly were injured.

HW: Yeah. They were, yes. There was only once or twice that I had to medicate. I mean, it wasn't very often that you had to give medicines on the plane. And dressings—I really don't think that we ever did have to do any dressings. You just had to talk with them, to keep them interested, and try to soothe them so that they could rest and not be afraid, because they were soon going to be helped—you know—and things like that.

TS: I see.

HW: Particularly when you had a person with an arm or leg off due to amputations—or something like that. A lot of them were pretty scruffy, you know, because they had lived out there for a while—tough talk and all that stuff. But, you kind of had to stay away from that as much as you could. You had to talk about different things—their families and things like that would help. It's—more or less, help them get their minds off themselves a little bit—and maybe they were in better shape than they thought they were then. They would get help and they would get back to normal and be with their families again.

TS: So you were kind of a—

HW: Yeah, kind of a—

TS: —nurturing. So some of them were in pretty bad shape then?

HW: Yes.

TS: But the flight was so short that you didn't have to give medications or dressings, I see. That's what you were telling me?

HW: Yes, more or less. Yeah, that was it.

Yeah, of course, the weather was bad out there. The weather—that was one of the worst drawbacks of the whole thing. A storm would come up real, real fast and you would be thinking—are you going to go down.

TS: On the plane?

HW: Yeah, on the plane. Can they keep control of this plane? And, they still had their own course that they had to take it. You just didn't know what was going to happen.

TS: Were you nervous?

HW: Oh, yes! I prayed a lot. I was so glad that I had my religion, because I certainly think that is what kept my mind—I was able to keep my mind from going berserk.

TS: Yeah.

HW: It was scary—it was. We did lose a girl.

TS: Oh, you did?

HW: Oh, this is one thing that I wanted to tell you. One time—and this was on Guadalcanal—I was—I had met—I was reengaged at that time—

TS: Oh, right.

HW: —to a North Carolina boy. He was a bomber pilot, and he was about ready to go home. He was—more or less—went on the short trips around. He wasn't going on too many bombing missions at that time. He was kind of through with his period of time on Guadalcanal. And the men—you didn't have much civilization out there—but the men—and the officers and men—always seemed to get a little bit better than everybody else. So they were fixing themselves a whole new lounge or something—fixing it up.

TS: An officer's club sort of thing?

HW: Yeah, an officer's club and they were going to open this particular night—that day. Well—what do you know—I had to go out on a flight, and it was an overnight flight. And I was just sick, because I had to—and also Bob was real disappointed, because he asked me if I couldn't get somebody to take my place. So anyway, this one girl that was going out—she had come in from a—the one place that we had to go, Green Island [located off the coast of New Guinea, also known as “Nissan Island”], and that was where you had to spend the night. If you got that far, you were going on up the next morning to take what you brought in there to another place and spend the night there and go on down the canal. Well, I talked to her. She had brought—The night before she had brought a group in coming down, and she was going back down the canal that day and that next morning.

And I asked her—I said, “Would you consider changing trips with me if I could get permission to go back and take your flight back, and you take my flight up?”

And she said that she would be glad [to] and that would be fine, to do it.

This was late when this was decided on—when I got around to asking her. And then I had to start finding out and get my permissions. So I kind of had to wait to the next morning, pretty much, before they were going out. Maybe I had gotten permission. No—I had to get up the next morning, because by the time that I got my permission to change with her she had already left to go to the plane, because she hadn’t heard from me. I told her that I would let her know if I got the permission. And so I got the permission. And then the only thing I could do was find a jeep—and somebody to take me out in the jeep—to try and catch her before it took off.

TS: Right.

HW: Well, I got out there, but the plane was going away, sailing away into the sky. So, I had to give that up. Well, I didn’t think about that day and at that time. We didn’t see each other a lot of times for maybe—Of course, we lived in maybe twenty different little buildings out there. You had different roommates, you know. We had the same roommate, but they were all scattered around.

TS: People were coming and going all the time.

HW: Right. I don’t know when I found out, but that plane went down and never came back.

TS: The one that you were trying to switch?

HW: That I was trying to get on. And I tell you—always when I think about that I just get chills all over me—and for her family. I guess in time you kind of forgot that a little bit. You know, you couldn’t do anything about it. And we didn’t hear anything for a long time. I didn’t know that she didn’t get back. But since I’ve been back here—through the internet and stuff—there’s a lady that lives here—she lives up in one of the cottages. Her daughter is a nun and she’s on [the] internet and things like that an awful lot. I was talking to her—Her father was in the Seabees [United States Navy Construction Battalion], and he was on Guadalcanal and he had just died shortly—several months before this. And they were getting all of his history together.

And she said, “Helen, I saw the other day where this man was looking for a nurse that had been in World War II. It was on a certain day and she was on a trip with her patients and they haven’t heard from her since.”

Goodness, this would be months—or, half a year since then—and nothing was ever said again about that. Well, when it happened.

TS: Right.

HW: And she got me thinking. And I went and looked at the dates, and I know that that was the plane I was supposed to—that I tried to get on. And I tried to start looking for some information about it and never could. But this girl—this nun—she got on and she said she

found—heard—and this one man was looking for somebody in one of those—I'm not acquainted with computers much.

TS: Right.

HW: His name was Kevin and he was looking for somebody that knew this nurse. He was looking to find out what had happened to her for his aunts. One of his aunts wanted to know if they could find out any more information about her. She never did come back, and just what happened? Well, I never did hear until one day I picked up one of my papers—it was in '44—and read in that thing that this outfit had told who in that group had been sent someplace and those missing in action—or unknown—and her name was on that.

TS: What was her name? Do you remember?

HW: Eloise Richardson, and she lived—I think she lived up in—

TS: Well, let me—So, when you were in Guadalcanal you didn't realize that that plane had been lost? You didn't find out about it until years later?

HW: They're very secretive about everything. They're very secretive.

TS: I guess so. That's interesting. Well, what don't we take a short break, because you've been talking [for] about an hour. You probably are tired. Let's take a little break here.

[End of CD 1—Begin CD 2]

TS: Okay. We're back here with Helen after a short break, and we were just talking about after Guadalcanal. Where did you go after that?

HW: To Biak.t

TS: To Biak, and where is Biak?

HW: Well, it was—didn't it say that it was at the western edge of—

TS: The Philippines? Is that the one?

HW: That region of—

TS: I think so. I'll go grab it. I think it's in this one right here. I'll look at it. So it was in the—
[sounds of pages turning]—maybe it was this one over on the table.

Let me pause this for a second.

[Recording paused]

TS: Okay. Sorry, Helen—you had said that Biak is an island off of western New Guinea?

HW: Yes, western New Guinea.

TS: So in October of 1944 is when you left there and you went there. Do you remember anything about Biak?

HW: Well, we were—I remember we lived in a long building. Just like—

TS: Kind of like a barracks?

HW: A barracks, yeah. It was all one building instead of little ones. It was all one. I remember my—Bob. He was still in Guadalcanal. What he would do—they had him busy delivering things all about around these islands. He was taking equipment or whatever was needed—people, I guess. He was doing that. I don't know if he was waiting for his time to go home. He wasn't flying in battle anymore. He was a—

TS: Supply?

HW: Flunky.

TS: [chuckles]

HW: He would take the trips on up to deliver. I don't know if he delivered any troops or not, but he would bring supplies. He would also go back down to Sydney, Australia, and pick up supplies and bring them back. So I got to see him every once in a while. Maybe once every two months or something, he'd go up on a flight and stay over.

TS: I see.

HW: So we would see each other. [pause] I'm trying to get a better picture of that.

TS: One of the little brochures we were looking at was talking about how you were in the jungle war. You were picking up the men that were fighting the jungle war. Do you have any sense of being out?

HW: Not—

TS: Not where you were stationed at?

HW: I tell you, we were very well guarded, we really were—the women. Green Island was the one place where we would go and have to spend the night. We had one or two buildings

where we could sleep—you know, set up for sleeping. You had this big walk—and then you turn—and then you would go to the latrines and the showers and things like that. But, you had to walk way out there. Of course, it was all—the war in there—there were things around us—walls around us.

TS: Like a compound.

HW: Yeah, I don't think there were any tops. I think it was just open space, but fences all around, which were pretty high. And we had a guard—they had a guard out there. There was generally only one girl up there overnight at a time. Occasionally they would get overlaid there some place. And that was kind of scary, because all behind those walls was nothing but black soldiers. That was their outfit. The ones that were all in and around those—And, you know, we never did hear of anything, anybody trying to get in at night over there. Now, there could have been, but we never heard about it. No girls were ever really frightened or anything.

But you didn't have the easiest feeling. It wasn't just lie down and go to sleep, you know—then you'd hesitate about going out to the latrine. You'd hesitate about taking a shower out there. You know, it wasn't a comfortable feeling, I guess, is what you'd say. But, we got along. But nothing did happen, or at least I didn't hear about it.

TS: So, you're saying that you were feeling pretty isolated as a woman like out there by yourself?

HW: Yes.

TS: I see.

HW: We were [isolated], because there was just that guard and a whole company of black soldiers out there. And not that you'd think anything would be planned, but sometimes people would go berserk and they would just do queer things—a bunch of men particularly—if they get dared to do something or just go crazy or something—stir crazy. But that was what I remember of living in Biak—having to go up there on a long trip.

TS: Was it that they were the black soldiers, or was it—

HW: Yes. They were.

TS: Was that the part that made you nervous about them?

HW: Yes, because, see, I have no bad feelings about the colored people at all. I've never ever had to live around them very much. In Iowa we didn't have any—you never saw a black face.

TS: Right.

HW: So, then I hadn't—being up there just by yourself—it's just that nothing was going to happen to you—it was what you heard about.

TS: Right, I see.

HW: That's what we were feeling.

TS: I see—a discomfort.

HW: And then you were up there not knowing which way to go if anything happened.

TS: Yeah.

HW: But I have to say, they took care of us very, very well.

TS: Well, that's good.

HW: They were very guarded. I didn't hear a whole lot. I'm sure there were incidents of some kind along the way, but I was never involved in anything and I never did see anything.

TS: Well, that's a good way for me to ask you how you feel overall that you were treated during the time that you were in the service by—

HW: Very well.

TS: —by your superiors. Did you feel that women were treated pretty fairly?

HW: Well—you know—I have to say, yes. Because I was never—I never saw any mistreatment, and I really didn't see too many people from other places that I lived treating—particularly the blacks—having trouble in that way. I'm sure there was some of that went on, because I don't think—but I never heard of it or seen [sic] it.

TS: Do you think the nurses had a different experience—maybe—from other women who were in the military?

HW: I would think so—particularly overseas. We were just so well guarded and everything. Of course, we were the first ones out there, just about. We were only the third class to graduate from air evacuation. We were just some of the first few that got over there.

TS: Yeah, that's another thing—this air evacuation was really new. Did you have the sense at the time that you were doing something kind of on the cutting edge? Did you realize that at the time?

HW: Yes, in a way. Of course, we didn't know what to expect really. They didn't show us a picture of what we were going to be seeing or anything.

TS: Right.

HW: And being a little farm girl, I'd never been out in the world very much [chuckle]. And so I had a lot of different experiences in my life that I would have never known about if I hadn't gone into the service. Seen a lot of things that I wouldn't have seen.

TS: Well, you told me how many hours that you had flown. If you could go ahead and say it on tape—I think you've said it a couple of times before we got it on tape.

HW: Nine hundred and twenty-four [hours], and that was on my record. And there were many days that we would take short flights—like two hours flying here and two hours flying there. And then the occasional five hours—four hours—and those shorter trips, because we were just going from island to island.

TS: Would you pick up patients on each island and fill up the plane, or would they all be in one place?

HW: They'd be in one place generally.

TS: Okay.

HW: Yeah. Now in one island—you would pick up in just one place. Now, maybe you went to more than one that day—but there were several. You would not go to more than two, I don't think, in one day.

TS: But, you might pick up of a couple of them—

HW: Yeah, to bring back.

TS: Oh, I see. Did you feel like you were doing a lot of nursing?

HW: Well, no. Not because—if I had been in a hospital I would have been getting that experience a lot more.

TS: Right.

HW: And we never got to be in a hospital. I can't say that I did do [get] a whole lot of nursing experience. Except maybe, counseling or—

TS: The nurturing side of nursing?

HW: Yes, I can't—because I didn't do it—I can't—

TS: Did that ever—was that ever a concern of yours? I guess what I'm—

HW: Yeah. I think I just thought that maybe I should be doing something; but in that short of a trip you couldn't start any of these big dressings to change, or anything like that. You'd be landing before you got started, hardly, you know.

TS: Yeah.

HW: And I'm sure there are girls that have had other experiences than I have had— that does [sic] this work. There's longer trips that they take too—Those that are larger planes, and they really have small hospitals set up on them now. I wouldn't say that we had little hospital-atmosphere there. It was just—We didn't even serve meals, you see. We didn't even have food to give them. I guess we had probably something to drink.

TS: You're kind of like an ambulance service in the air. Just kind of making sure—

HW: Yeah. I guess we were just breaking the ground. I'm sure that every month or so we'd change things, you know, in where we went. Then they started going places and picking up more people with bigger planes. They were probably having to have more equipment to work with, you know. That's kind of the way that I felt, that we were just guinea pigs.

TS: Trying to see how it worked to get them.

HW: Yes.

TS: Take good care of the men in the best way. You were there if anything ever went wrong. It's just that nothing ever went wrong on the plane for your patients, right?

HW: Well, no, except for that girl.

TS: Right.

HW: I tell you—I guess that really works on my mind occasionally, because it all becomes fresh to me again. And then this fellow wanting to know—I had often thought that I would like to write her family, but then I had no address or anything.

TS: Right.

HW: So, I never did. Then that has all come up through our discharge papers.

TS: Right. Well, now, did you—besides having that feeling about the weather when you were flying—did you enjoy flying?

HW: Yes, it could be beautiful flying. Oh, it really could. But, when it was storming weather—and it was bad weather—as a smaller plane, you know, you'd get a lot of ups and downs.

TS: Did you ever get sick at all?

HW: No, I think that I have a strong stomach. No, it didn't make me sick. I just got nervous.

TS: Got nervous when it was shaking—turbulence and things like that?

HW: You see, I couldn't even swim.

TS: Did you ever feel like you were in personal danger?

HW: Occasionally, when we would get in those storms, I felt like it could happen. I'd be frightened. As I said, I did a lot of praying.

TS: So you went from New Guinea, then Lah—

HW: Leyte.

TS: Okay, Leyte. I'm sorry. That's the Philippines? Leyte, Philippines?

HW: Yes.

TS: Was that any different from the other places?

HW: I think that was where we saw more—it was more tropical. There's more human life around us, then in these other islands. We had these little girls come up to us—little Taiwanese—people from Taiwan—

TS: Filipino?

HW: Filipino girls, yeah. We'd let them go ahead and clean up and sweep up. It was sand. They would come by once a week. They were fun. They loved to come and talk and ask questions. This one little girl was just real lovely. I wrote to her several times. I just wonder every so often what happened to her. I would just love to know, because she was a smart little girl. And they would bring us eggs. They would bring us—

TS: Fresh eggs?

HW: Yes, because that was something we hardly ever did see—fresh eggs. And I guess we paid them money for it, you know, and all that. But, we enjoyed them coming. My girlfriend—that little short girl with the darker skin—she and I were real close friends. She wrote to them too, a lot. Marsha, my daughter, had a friend that was Filipino. And I started asking her, you know, I would like to know where I could find out her address—find out if there was any way of communicating—writing—I could find out about what happened to her, because she was real interested in the United States. She was really interested in school. And I think that she had a pretty voice, if I'm not mistaken. And I just felt like she would be the one who would really kind of go someplace, you know.

TS: But you haven't tracked her down in some years?

HW: No, I haven't.

TS: Now one of the other things it says on here is that you, besides bringing patients, you also traveled with some prisoners of war?

HW: That was my last—yes—that was in [unclear]—the northern—that was the last place—trips we made.

TS: It's okay if you don't remember exactly where it was.

HW: Well, it was closer to Tokyo.

TS: Okay.

HW: Tokyo, Japan—up in that area.

TS: More northern?

HW: Yes. We were all hoping that we would get a trip up there, but we didn't. The only trip—maybe I made two trips up to—

TS: To this area.

HW: And I just brought prisoners home, and that was a little more involvement. It was a longer trip too. It probably took as much as four hours, or something. To be on a plane with a bunch of people with a lot of psychological problems was a little bit frightening, when you hadn't been around it for awhile. But I think the most we did—most of them could be satisfied smoking a cigarette. You had to stay right beside them when they were smoking a cigarette, because they might drop them or hurt themselves or something like that. So you really kind of had to guard them. And talking—trying to keep their minds occupied was something, because it was a longer trip, too. That was—

TS: Are these American prisoners of war?

HW: Yes.

TS: So they're all Americans?

HW: Yes.

TS: So they had been through a trauma?

HW: Yes, yeah.

TS: I see what you're saying now, okay.

HW: I had that all in my mind—where that [location] was.

TS: It's okay. We can edit that on the transcript, where it was when we find it. It's all right.

HW: If I can get the name of it, it will help me.

TS: That's okay, Helen. That's something that we can look up and add to it later. So you're—

HW: That map that we looked at, I think, shows that, or comes close to it.

TS: Okay, let me pause it and find it.

HW: To you [chuckle].

TS: That's okay.

[Recording Paused]

TS: Well, that's okay if we can't find it, Helen. We'll figure that out.

HW: [Churwahwa? or Torawa?]. It was on the way up to Tokyo. Where the bomb had been dropped, but they were going to go in on a big thing and try to get in there and to get hold of something.

TS: Right. Here, I'll take that from you.

Now, so when they—that's a good question for you then—What did you think about the dropping of the atomic bomb—that you were over in that area at the time?

HW: Well, I guess I hated to see it being done, because it was just such a bad thing. It killed so many people. It just like fried them, just about.

TS: At the time that it was dropped though, were you aware of the kind of damage it did?

HW: No, I wasn't aware of it at that time. But I guess hearsay and seeing the lay of the land and things over there just made it—just a little bit more real to you, you know.

TS: Right.

HW: It just sort of was a larger area than what I was traveling in, but it was getting—but they was [sic] trying to get those Japs. That was what they were fighting the whole time, mostly over there. All of what we were fighting most of the time—pushing them back and off—It's interesting to hear some of the men talk that were in the battles. I get

something sometimes, I get the stories of the people who have been in those [battles]. I don't get a whole lot of literature anymore, you know.

TS: So you think the men were more relieved then, that it was dropped?

HW: Well, probably the anxiety of what they were going to do more or less. See, we didn't talk to pilots and the officers a whole lot. We didn't go into big conversations with them about things. They went their way, and we went our way, most of the time.

TS: So what would you talk about?

HW: Well, their families—or were they were from and things like that—and talk about each other—what one person used to do, when we were civilians.

TS: Before the war?

HW: Yeah. And there again, we just weren't thrown with a whole lot as far as being real, you know—they all went their own ways.

TS: Right. Everyone was coming and going in the type of work that you were doing.

HW: Yes.

TS: That you were doing—It was pretty transient, wasn't it?

HW: Yes, right, right.

TS: Now, how was it that you met your husband?

HW: I met him—

TS: Your second engagement, right?

HW: Yeah. I met him on Biak.

TS: Biak, that's right.

HW: Well, he came over to—We did have chapel. We had chapels and things. They had little theaters but we didn't get to see a whole lot of picture shows, because, well, it was mainly for the enlisted personal. And you didn't ask people to do a lot of things for you just because you had officer's things on, you know. But I guess at mealtimes and they had the—CF—what was the entertainment that they would bring over occasional?

TS: The USO [United Service Organizations]?

HW: The USO, occasionally—Well, I saw very few of those, but I do think that I did see one. And that was good, but it was good for those soldiers to see human beings and entertainment.

TS: Right, to take their minds off of the war sort of?

HW: Yes—talk their language a little bit. We were just kind of isolated from the outside world, a lot.

TS: Yeah, because you were gone for a while from the United States.

HW: Yes.

TS: Did that bother you at all?

HW: Well, I guess I would get homesick, yes. I would get homesick some. I guess you had to steel yourself to the fact that that is where you are at this particular time, and keep on having the faith that this was not going to be too much longer. I was glad to get home, of course.

TS: Well, you told me a story—when we were having a little snack—about how your soon-to-be husband took you on a little ride to get something.

HW: Well, I guess he got permission. I don't know. I don't know [chuckles]. It was little bomber. A B-25 bomber plane [North American B-25 Mitchell], I think. It was just about— well, probably maybe 25 miles from one island to another. That was about the distance. It didn't take you long, but to be on that plane it took you a lot to get up in the air and come down. But I'm sure that he had to have permission. He couldn't have just taken off into the air without them knowing about it.

TS: Now did you go with him?

HW: Yes, yes.

TS: And what was it that you were after?

HW: Coffee and doughnuts!

TS: That's right [chuckles]!

HW: That's what the Red Cross was for—to have the coffee and doughnuts. And that was the only one that we had seen since we left the United States.

TS: That's a great story that you were able to go and catch a bomber plane to get some coffee and doughnuts. Well, do you have any thoughts about [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt at all?

HW: Well, I wasn't a Democrat. Well, you know, that just goes with where I lived. We were all pretty much—well, not always—Republicans out there on the farm. Of course there were Democrats too. I guess the only thing that I thought, you know, he was evidently a good president. And he was—you forget that some of the stories that are told about him afterwards kind of ruins it for what you thought about him in the beginning.

TS: True, that's true. You can't always remember what you thought back then, I'm sure.

HW: I was probably pretty much accepting of things, because I've always been of [the mindset of] if you can't help do something about it, you might as well accept it and do the best that you can. I kind of live that way a lot. I've never been one to get my thing going and walk the streets.

TS: Well what did you think then of Eleanor Roosevelt?

HW: Well, she must have been a pretty strong lady, I think. To put up—I'm sure she did a lot of good too. I was never so close— See, I was still not really into politics at this time. I knew, of course, about—you couldn't help but know about the Roosevelts.

TS: Right.

HW: I guess I have heard more about them since I've been out of the service than before. I guess I was just accepting of whatever went on. I just accepted it and went on my way.

TS: When Roosevelt died did you have concerns about the future of the country, or anything, with Truman taking over?

HW: No, I don't think I did. I just trusted my United States of America.

TS: Well, you were pretty young then, still. You were still in your twenties, right?

HW: I was in my early twenties.

TS: That's pretty young.

HW: Yes, it is. You haven't—you know—all I know was the little farm country, how they felt. They were very conservative in everything. They were very conservative in just about everything, and I thought that was a good thing. I was raised up to work for what you get.

TS: Right.

HW: I never had a lot of extra fancy things, and I always probably wished for a lot. But until I could get them, I couldn't worry about it. I did the best I could.

TS: Now, did you have any sense of—when you were in the service—that you might like to stay and do this? After the war and all. Did you ever think that you would stay in?

HW: Well, if I had just been a little bit more involved, I think that I probably would have. In time you just sort of—I liked nursing. I like people, and if I could do for them—I always liked that. I didn't have very many strings to pull. But I'm glad that I had the experience that I did, and hope that I helped some people. I really do.

TS: I'm sure you made the people on those planes felt a lot better.

HW: Well, I hope so. There was a lot of sad ones on there too.

TS: Was that hard for you—do you think—emotionally—to have to fly with them when they were so injured?

HW: Yeah. I guess it played on your mind more if you didn't feel like you had been real quite successfully in soothing them, or making them feel a little better.

TS: Right.

HW: And there were times when you had that feeling. You know, there wasn't anything more that I could do than I did.

TS: And you only had a short period of time to try.

HW: Yeah, that's right. And you didn't ever see them again.

TS: Right.

HW: You didn't go back visiting, because you couldn't. They wouldn't take you. We were really isolated.

TS: Yeah. So you were kind of in a difficult position really, where you weren't treating them later.

HW: Right. We couldn't just get in a car and something—whiz out to go down to a drug store here or there. We were really kind of isolated and having little day room cares. We would go over and listen to music. And I guess they had some games. Like a lot of girls, they get kind of set in their own little patterns, you know. And there's others that can make fun wherever they can go.

TS: It looks like you headed to the beach a few times.

HW: Well, yeah—in the daytime. You wouldn't go out there at night, no!

TS: Why not at night?

HW: Too much danger around. I don't think they would have let you go out to the beach at night.

TS: Probably not.

HW: It was—you felt—I always felt fairly safe when I was back in my little place where I was supposed to be. You didn't wander around by yourself at all.

TS: Well, you got a few medals and awards while you were in. How do you feel about those? Can you tell us about those at all?

HW: Well, those were—where it was very dangerous for you to be—I mean flying. It was a territory where you could—if you were in a storm or anything—and you could go down on those islands and maybe never ever be found again. I think that was the worst fear—or just being stormy—you'd just be in the water and not come back up. Things like that.

TS: There was danger for sure.

HW: Yes, there was. They flew—had to fly very low at times, so you wouldn't try to be in vision. And other times you would have to clear out of maybe an hour or two around something to go back to where you wanted to go. The weather was one of the big handicaps there. The weather was—could be very bad—or being shot at.

TS: Yeah.

HW: Yeah. Coming over on the one ship, that one ship—you know, we had never had blackouts before. At night we had to shut everything off, pull all blinds, and everything—turn lights off too, and that was a new experience to me. I have had lots of new experiences, I really have. Maybe I didn't make the most of them, I don't know. Maybe I should have been more inquisitive—a daredevil or something.

TS: I think flying on a plane in a warzone, that's pretty daredevil, Helen.

HW: At times, I did think so too. But I was always so thankful when I got back safe. I really was.

TS: Well, you received the air medal. That's a pretty prestigious—

HW: That's because we were flying in dangerous areas. See we were still kind of new out there, and they were still trying to get places secure. They wouldn't send us in unless they were pretty sure that it was safe. They would take an island, but then they would have to make sure everything was secure before—I don't know how they knew, but they knew probably how many Japs or people were on that island. They knew how many they killed that day. I don't know, but they had their ways I guess—how to secure.

TS: So they had to secure a particular island for you to be able to go in and do the evacuation.

HW: Yes. And make an airport too. That's where the Seabees came in. The Seabees—I tell you—I think they probably need more praise than they get, because they had to go in all that—just as soon as they secured something, go in there and make an airplane field, or airplane run—

TS: They made a lot out of nothing a lot of times.

HW: Oh yes. That's what Robert Connor he was an architect [engineer—HW corrected later] before. He built a lot of churches and things in High Point [North Carolina], before he went into that. And he was just such a rugged looking fellow. And they were smart—that family is a very smart family. She is just as smart as he was. She still buzzes around here just like she's sixteen years old. She's just so active. She goes up on those machines every night. But he did pass away. His mind was pretty good up until the very last. And she did everything. She would drag him along to everything she went to.

TS: And he was a Seabee?

HW: Yeah, he was architect before. He was a well educated man.

TS: I see, so that helped him probably figure stuff out.

HW: Oh, yes. I imagine he was an architect on a lot of those airfields they started over there too. I just don't know, but they were trying to learn all they could. Mrs. Connor[?], she's a go-getter.

TS: I was going to say, you have this beautiful shadow box up here with a picture of you receiving your air medal, but it's also got your flights wings too. How do you feel about having your flight wings?

HW: Well, I'm kind of proud. I'm proud, yes. I was. I really was. It took a long time for me. If it hadn't been for my daughter, I guess it would have never been done. That's how long it takes for me.

TS: Yeah, she made that for you. Well, it's interesting too to see, you know, you have your husband on the one side there and he has his wings from his flying, and you have yours.

HW: Well, he has an air medal too. I didn't find that until after she had this made.

TS: Well, that's okay. He has his other medals up there.

HW: Well, I don't have any of my clusters up there.

TS: Well, that's okay. Well, you've got your nurse's pin too. Well, how do you—What do you have to say to people who think that women who served in World War II and did

things—like you—did cutting edge things like air evacuation—that you were like a pioneer for women in the service?

HW: Well, I think we were really. I really do. Well, we didn't dare go into—We didn't get into a hospital. From the time we—That still puzzles me—particularly on Guadalcanal. I think we were there probably the longest, and how we never got to see a hospital.

TS: It wasn't your mission though.

HW: They issued us a pistol. We had a pistol to carry if we needed it. But nobody ever carried it.

TS: Oh yeah, here it is. A Colt revolver, how about that?

HW: It was never shot.

TS: Did you practice with it? I mean, did you do training on it?

HW: No, not overseas we didn't.

TS: When you initially got it?

HW: In the bivouac thing we have [sic] maybe target practice a little. But no big thing—standing and making sure that you had everything right, and did it again the next day in case you had forgot. We didn't have that good of training, really. As I say, it was such a new thing I guess, that—

TS: Well, what do you think about—go ahead, I'm sorry.

HW: The nurses—I read that book on the nurses over in France and Italy. Now they had what you call nursing experience. They had to go in and revise [improvise] things—make things out of nothing. I don't know if—We didn't have training for that. If we had to do that, I don't know if we would have been able to—maybe we would be given something, craft something in our minds and we'd work something out.

TS: Right.

HW: To me, that was—those girls did far more that I felt like I had done in my life as an army nurse.

TS: But it's no small thing to get in an airplane and go through a dangerous zone and pick up wounded men and bring them back safely.

HW: Well, that's true. I guess what I do is think of the things that I didn't do or couldn't do, or something.

TS: Right. Well everybody had their different mission.

HW: Well, that's true and we could only do so much.

TS: That's right.

HW: But I'm sure that I'm just real glad for having done that. My other—middle sister she went into the WAVES.

TS: Oh she did? So you had the WAVES, the Red Cross, and Army Air Corps? There you go.

HW: She was there—Well, we never did really find out. I think her husband told us that she did mostly paperwork. I guess they had her—

TS: Administrative, clerical?

HW: Yeah, someplace like that. She died when she was sixty-six. She had cancer, but she had four children. And we keep up with her children. Her husband is having his ninetieth birthday in a few days.

TS: Oh, how about that? Excellent—that's excellent.

HW: We've always kept up with them. The rest of my family—my sister had—well, she had twins.

TS: Which sister are you talking about, the older sister, or your middle sister?

HW: The older sister. She had—Chris and Craig were her first ones [third and fourth—HW corrected later], I guess. Her oldest—no, Philip— then Chris and Craig were the twins, and then John [Anne, then Phil and then John was the youngest—HW corrected later].

TS: Have any of those grandchildren—or children—gone into the service?

HW: Yeah, her granddaughter, went into—she went into Annapolis.

TS: As a cadet?

HW: Yeah, in Maryland, wasn't it, in Annapolis?

TS: Yeah, the navy academy.

HW: Yeah, she went through and got in the navy.

TS: How about that?

HW: She's been in Hawaii, now, living. And she met her husband. And he's Jewish, and that was something new into the family. But, they just seem to be really happy together. He goes to church with her all the time. She's quite close to her faith. Now they have a little boy. They've been over in Hawaii, and both have been in to Iraq and all around. He's there now on a mission, he's been sent back.

TS: What do you think about that—the idea that women are more—what they're doing nowadays in the military?

HW: Well, I don't know. She never—if she got any combat, I don't know, but I don't think so. She would parole borders—

TS: Patrol?

HW: Patrol the borders of these countries. That's a lot of what she did when she was flying.

TS: Oh, she's a flyer?

HW: Yeah.

TS: She's a pilot?

HW: Yeah. [HW added later—A helicopter pilot.]

TS: Oh, how about that?

HW: She and her husband both. I think they had to sign up for six years, and she will be getting out the—it's March—around the first of July.

TS: So what do you think about women in combat, then?

HW: Well, they seem to be pretty strong girls. She's a very strong girl. She's not a skittish person. She's very sincere—serious. Now, she has a little baby now. While they were over there they saved so much money. You know, they get paid pretty well and they save a lot. And they bought this little house over there in Hawaii, and of course real estate over there is sky-high; so if they ever want to sell it, I'm sure they'll do all right on that. But he's got—I don't know how much time he's got—I think a good half a year yet, before he gets out. I don't know what their plans are after that.

TS: Yeah.

HW: They sent her to dig—on digging missions. To dig bones up on different things—to find bones. I don't know if it was the veterans who had been killed, or what.

TS: Where was she sent to do that?

- HW: Well, I'm not sure. She was living over in—still living in—they were based still over in Hawaii.
- TS: Hawaii? That's interesting. Do you think that your life has been any different because of the time that you served in the military?
- HW: I'm sure that it has in the fact that, you know, I guess I've seen the world a little bit, you know—different parts which I would have never known. I think it's widened my thoughts about different things, that had I had just been in that one spot—I would have been more accepting of things—not exactly accepting—at least understanding of different people. Even the colored people, I understand them more. I could even—well, I really like them. I think there's a lot of nice—and don't mind being around them—but of course there's others that you wouldn't want to. But isn't that true with the white people? So, there you are.
- TS: Well, would you say that you're independent? Where you independent before you went in the military? Did you think that you got maybe more [independent]?
- HW: I'm a little bit more independent than I was before. Well, I've had to be. I've had to be.
- TS: Do you think that it helped make you more independent, the service?
- HW: Yes.
- TS: Yeah?
- HW: Yes. I believe so, yeah. I've not been—These latter years I have become a little bit more open and comfortable around more people in different situations. I used to be kind of shy and not sure of myself and that. I think I have learned some things that I needed to know, and maybe some things that I shouldn't have known, you know. But I'm not sorry about the service, and everything—I don't know. Everything seems like it has turned out very well for me—that I never expected.
- As I started to tell you—I went in the Presbyterian home—retirement home. I was working though. I was working out at the little daycare centers—daycare at different places—different shifts. So I was living in that one little apartment. I lived there until 2-0-4 [2004] [March, 2008—HW corrected later]. I went in 1999 to live and in 204 [2004] [2005—HW corrected later] my two daughters took me on a week's trip—on a cruise to Hawaii. So the day we got back they told me about two hours before we landed. They said, "Mother, when you get there you're not going to have an apartment to go to. That pipe outside your room flooded—broke and flooded the whole thing, and they had to move you completely out."
- TS: Oh, my!
- HW: So they gave me a choice of where I wanted to live, there. So I did buy—I was just in that one bedroom, so I then got a two bedroom for the price of one, you know.

TS: Oh, right.

HW: [It was the] same price. The only thing that was really damaged was that I had bought all new carpeting for that. Of course, that was gone. It was the bedroom and the living room—they were the two rugs that got ruined. I had a little slit of a kitchen.

TS: Yeah, I remember you telling me, putting your baked good things out there. Well if you—So you got out in 1946, right?

HW: Forty-five—wait, forty-six—married in forty-seven.

TS: Okay. So—

HW: Then we came to High Point [North Carolina] to live.

TS: So you've been in this area ever since?

HW: My husband was a traveling salesman in the beginning. Then he—Through our church he got really interested in going into—well, starting a daycare—not a daycare—it was called an urban ministry. It was an urban ministry.

TS: Okay.

HW: And he was the first director of an urban ministry in High Point.

TS: Oh.

HW: Which was very good—It did very good. It had the pitcher and the cup and the telephone—twenty-four hour telephone. Oh, just a lot of counseling and things like that. That was pretty good. It was a good service. And then he—Eventually, his health went down and he had to give that up.

TS: Did you continue with nursing?

HW: Pardon?

TS: Did you continue with nursing?

HW: Pardon?

TS: Did you continue as a nurse, working as a nurse?

HW: Oh yes, I worked all of the time in a retirement center.

TS: That's right, okay.

HW: [I worked] in different ones. When I first got out, the first job that I ever had was over here at the Presbyterian home. I worked for three years.

TS: That's right.

HW: Then I went out after marriage and never—well—went to different places. Most of the time, I was working in nursing homes. I went back to the hospital before I started having my children, but after that I never did get back into hospitals. I guess my hours and the way Bob's hours were—

TS: Yeah, it's tough in a hospital. I remember, because my mom had to work that too. Well, looking back on your service years— we've talked about quite a lot. We've covered a few things.

HW: Yes, we have. We've covered how many years? [chuckles]

TS: Well, is there anything that you would like to add that we haven't discussed about the time you were in the service?

HW: Well, if I think of something can I call you?

TS: Yeah, that's fine, Helen!

HW: As I say, my mind is getting so—slowing down so bad.

TS: I think that you've certainly covered quite a lot.

HW: Oh, goodness.

TS: You've done good. Well, I appreciate the time that we've spent together.

HW: I've appreciated you coming too. I've enjoyed it. I wish what-cha-ma-call-it—well, I want to give you her—

TS: Well, okay let me stop this.

HW: You're through then?

TS: We're through.

[End of Interview]