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Clarice Luther - Oral History Interview

This interview is being recorded for the Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation's Oral History Program.

I am interviewing Clarice Luther, who served from January 2, 1943 to October 21, 1944 in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps. This interview is taking place at her home in Sacramento, CA. I am Rose Luther, interviewing her. I am one of her daughters.

Please give us your full name for the record:

Clarice Marie Luther

I wrote comments ahead of the oral interview, and I am using that reference.

What were your parents names, where were they from and what did they do for a living?

My parents were Arthur and Maudeste Joyer. They were farmers in Minnesota. They were well known and respected in the area where they farmed.

Where were you born?

I was born at home, August 31, 1917, near the town of Elk River Minnesota.

Tell me about your siblings.

I was the fifth child of 10 children born to them. They adopted an 11th child. All of my siblings were healthy. They all worked on the farm as they grew up and were productive workers as adults.

Where did you grow up?

My first 15 years, I lived in a fine home with a farm. At the time of their marriage, my mother and father moved in with Art's parents, George and Justine Joyer, to help Art's parents in operating the farm. This was not uncommon at the time. Maude and Art continued living there, raising their family from 1912-1932.

2.

What was it like growing up there?

Throughout my life I have had a vivid memory of my years growing up on the Farm. It was an idyllic place. There was a lake, a fruit orchard, and a stretch that was kept natural with all kinds of trees and wildflowers. The home was on 40 acres, with an additional 40 acres a quarter of a mile 'up' the road.

I loved helping with all aspects of farm life, riding my pony, caring for the animals, vegetable gardening, and cultivating. Farming was done with horses; they were harnessed early each day. Main crops were wheat, hay, oats, corn and potatoes. For threshing and haymaking, neighbors and crews worked together. Other chores were milking cows, egg gathering, quilt making, keeping the woodpile up for the wood burning cook-stove. Laundry took all day. The water had to be pumped from our well, heated, then transferred to the hand turned washing machine and wringer. Items were hung inside or outside to dry. Bread and other baking was done two to three times a week. Butter was churned. Canning of vegetables and fruits was done by the hundreds of quarts. At butchering time, meat was canned too.

Tell about the schools you attended:

The school I attended for grades 1-8 was in "District 12". It had one room for all eight grades. We walked or were taken in a horse drawn sleigh.

In high school I attended boarding school about 70-80 miles from our home, with three of my sisters. I missed farm life and was very lonesome. It was Depression time and money was not available for transportation back and forth to visit. I graduated from High School in 1935.

After that I attended nursing school, following the example of my aunt, Annie Martin, who was a nurse. I was encouraged to do so by a brother who said, "I have \$6.00 for you to take the train", which he gave me for train fare to St. Francis Hospital school in Breckenridge, Minnesota. On my first day I went to the office and asked to borrow \$50.00 for necessary uniform clothing. I kept a tiny, lined spiral notebook of expenses beginning in August, 1935.

Prior to that I did not have money, so I began keeping track of every cent during nursing school and continued when I began working in 1938 and 1939.

I was in nurses training three years including a year at St. Mary's Hospital in Duluth, MN. We worked 12-hour days or nights. We were also going to classes. These were still Depression Days. Even the hospitals had financial problems. I graduated from nursing school in 1938 as part of a small class.

3.

Did you work as a nurse before entering military service?

If so, where and what was your assignment?

Yes, I continued to work at St. Mary's Hospital in Duluth about 2 more years.

It was a large hospital located overlooking Lake Superior.

Our wages were \$32.50 every two weeks for 12 hour shifts, 6 days a week.

There were times as a young nurse I had night supervisor responsibility with another young nurse friend, for the entire hospital of 400 patients. There was not much help available. I worked all areas including Pediatrics and Obstetrics.

Later I moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota and worked at Abbott Hospital there.

I worked in general care and continued with heavy responsibilities.

What made you decide to join the military?

When I heard about Pearl Harbor, I made the decision, 100% that I would join the Army. I decided to work near my family for a while before signing up.

Why did you decide to join your particular service?

Even though I had friends that joined the Navy, I followed the example of my aunt, Annie Martin, who served as an Army nurse in WWI. She was my model.

What did your parents and family think about you joining the military?

When I decided to join the Army, I went by bus from Minneapolis, to Fort Snelling, St. Paul, to join the Army Nurse Corps in Winter 1942. As the only woman enlisting that day I lined up with hundreds of men for a physical, each wrapped in a sheet for a quick health examination! It was definitely an unusual situation, and no one pulled the sheet!! I did not tell my family I had enlisted until a week before I was going to leave. They were very sad. When I told my mother, she said, "You will never be back". That is in fact what happened. I occasionally returned for short visits.

Other family members also served during WWII, including two brothers who joined the Merchant Marines, and a brother who joined the Navy. Some family members worked industrial jobs for military hardware supplies.

Tell about your first duty station.

After being accepted, I traveled to the Presidio in San Francisco by train, one registered nurse with 200-300 men. A big group gathered around me on the train. We started singing at night, and we kept singing current songs.* I waited at the Presidio for orders. My first assignment was to Camp Adair, Oregon. There we evaluated drafted soldiers to determine their medical condition and ability to serve. Also soldiers in training sustained injuries to be treated. There was an incident of numerous soldiers who bivouacked in poison ivy and required treatment.

**This sentence was added after the oral interview.*

4.

At Camp Adair, there was an incident that destroyed all my clothing and personal items. A nurse left a cigarette burning that smoldered and smoked in the barracks. I lost gifts my family gave me on leaving home such as a small suitcase and a hairbrush set. Each was precious because we had so few belongings, but we did not dwell on that and let it pass because such serious business was going on.

Tell about your next duty station.

Later I was transferred to Torney General Hospital in Palm Springs, California. Torney General Hospital had been the El Mirador, one of the most fashionable resorts of the day. When the U. S. entered the War in 1941, the hotel was taken over by the Federal Government and converted into a hospital for treating soldiers wounded in the South Pacific. We evaluated soldiers brought in from battlefields to determine what care they needed and where they should be sent for follow up treatment.

I recall a young soldier who had been disfigured from his injuries and was too embarrassed and self-conscious to go out in public. I went for walks with him and one day he even accompanied me while I bought a pair of shoes. I believe I was able to help him begin to adjust to being out in public. That type of need for personal attention was repeated so many times by patients. I could have spent much more time because they needed to talk about their injuries, and family at home.

We nurses represented their loved ones, mother, girlfriend, sister.

Later in my life after the service, I worked in Pastoral Care, giving time to listen to patients. Looking back, my informal training for that began in the military.

According to a 1989 article in The Desert Sun newspaper, Torney General Hospital had a staff of 1,300 and treated 19,000 soldiers during its four years of operation.

Describe the paperwork you were required to complete.

We had to make quite definite reports about what was going on with each patient.

What kind of training did you receive once you went on active duty?

As part of the Army Nurse Corps training, I received instruction on:

- Military law, Safeguarding military information, and Military Customs.
- Organization of the Army and Medical Departments,
- Individual defense against chemical, air, parachute, and mechanized attacks.
- Operation of clinics within the Army hospital and ward management including Admission, transfer and discharge of patients, Emergency medical treatment, Control of Respiratory disease, Intestinal diseases, and Insect-borne diseases,
- * Treatment of chemical casualties, Care of mental patients, Hospital diets, Procurement of supplies, Disinfection of wards and equipment.

* This line was not in the oral interview.

5.

In addition we had regular physical exercise classes and Dismounted Drill.

What did you find most challenging about your military training?

The physical training. I had always worked hard on the farm, running, working with equipment and the crops, and riding my horse. However I was challenged by the walking we had to do to get in shape.

What clothing and equipment were you issued?

As part of my equipment I was issued a gas mask and a helmet.

We were issued ample basic clothing. Some items were:

- A dark blue wool $\frac{3}{4}$ length wrap-around cape (which I still have)
- 6 white, long sleeve uniforms and 6 white duty caps
- 2 pair each of white and black shoes
- a trench style overcoat with removable lining, overshoes and gloves
- and a cream color dress uniform, cap and gloves

It was a shock to me to get so much beautiful clothing.

At the time of my marriage, officers who were patients of mine gave me a new cream color dress uniform and cap. I had completed their morning care and left the room. They called me back and asked me to look under a cloth on a table. They had surprised me with the new uniform after having other nurses find out my correct size. That is what I wore for my wedding. My husband also wore his army uniform.

Did you want to serve overseas?

Yes, I wanted to go overseas and other nurses I worked with were going. I was not able to go because I did not weigh enough. I was 5 foot, 2 inches tall and I was considered to be 5 pounds below the minimum weight for height and age. I tried to gain weight and could not reach the requirement.

I received V...-MAIL notes from my friends who were assigned overseas, and am enclosing a few copies of those. Each was vague about where they were stationed: from "Germany", from "Somewhere in the British Isles" in March and April 1944, from "England", and one from "Paris".

Finally, at age 87, I visited Paris for the first time. I spent weeks in Lyon also and was deeply touched by memorials I visited for heroic people who lost their lives in the War. French people we met were grateful for American assistance in WWII, and embraced me when they learned I had served in the Army Nurse Corps. I get tearful remembering those encounters.

6.

What are your most vivid memories of your time in the military?

The pressure was incredible because of the number of patients and seriousness of their injuries. There were not enough nurses for the time needed by each. Many had been drafted, were not prepared for service and were lonesome for home. Patients' emotional needs were great.

Describe your relationships with other members of the health care team:

All were excellent.

How did you view yourself: Were you a nurse in the military or were you a military person who happened to be a nurse?

Very definitely I was a nurse in the military.

Are you still in touch with any of your former military colleagues?

I stayed in touch for many years with close friends I made in the military. We wrote to each other and visited when we could. Nurses Evelyn Dehler and Martha Bronson, and Dietician Genevieve Scheier were some friends I remained in contact with for many years, eventually losing track of each other. I still think of them.

Did you think about staying on in the service?

I did think about it and was not able to. I met my husband who was also in the Army, at the desert base near Palm Springs. We married while I was still in the service, April 1944. He had already been discharged. Shortly after that I became pregnant, and was discharged from service October 1944.

What did it mean to you to serve your country?

The drive behind it was Pearl Harbor. We didn't want that to happen to us again.

Did having WWII experience make any difference for you? Were there any surprises?

My Army Nurse Corps experience was memorable, caring for heroic men and women. It forever changed my attitude, seeing so many going to their death and so many injured.

What advice would you give to a young person today thinking of joining the service?

They should take a serious look to understand what it includes.

7.

Where were you on V-E Day? and V-J Day? What did you do to celebrate?

I was out of the Service, living in Sacramento.

It was an unbelievable celebration everywhere.

Describe your transition to civilian life. Were you treated any differently because you had served in the military?

Not really. I went right into having a family. We moved away from the people we had served with, to a new city, and were seen as a young married couple with children.

What have you done since leaving the service?

I raised 12 children. One child died at age 12, in a tragic accident. My husband died in 1962, when the youngest child was 4, and the oldest was almost 17.

About a year later I took an RN refresher course and returned to work in a general hospital to support my family. I worked 15 more years in nursing and 10 additional years in Pastoral Care at the same hospital. I worked until age 75.

When my children were grown, I returned to avid flower gardening and quilt making.

Other interests throughout my life have been reading, writing letters, cooking and baking for my family, and taking trips to visit my grown children.

I remain closely connected with my children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Even those who live at a distance remain in contact by phone and letters.

Is there anything else you would like to say that I didn't ask?

My life has been so varied and full. It is impossible to explain all the facets.

I have been told, "You should write a book".

Thank you for sharing your thoughts, unique stories, and memories.

(Minor edits were made on this written form, after the audio version. Children's ages at my husband's death were corrected to youngest 4 years, and oldest almost 17.)