

HISTORY
OF THE
NAVY NURSE CORPS

NO. 48

IRENE GALILEY MERKER

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE

1997

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
THE HISTORY OF THE NAVY NURSE CORPS

INTERVIEWEE: IRENE GALILEY MERKER
INTERVIEWER: EVELYN M. CHERPAK
SUBJECT: THE HISTORY OF THE NAVY NURSE CORPS
DATE: FEBRUARY 4, 1997

C: This is the first oral history interview with Irene Merker. Irene was a Navy nurse on the Solace, and she was at Pearl Harbor. Today's date is February 4, 1997, and I'm conducting the interview in N-22 in Mahan Hall at the Naval War College. Irene, I'm so pleased that you consented to be interviewed today on your career as a Navy nurse and your time on the Solace when you were at Pearl Harbor on that fateful day of December 7, 1941. I'd like to begin the interview by asking you where you were born and when you were born.

M: I was born in Shamokin, Pennsylvania, September 10, 1910.

C: Where is Shamokin located?

M: Shamokin is in the central part of Pennsylvania. It's in the hard coal regions of the state.

C: Did you spend your growing-up years there?

M: No. I spent my growing-up years, up until age 14, on a farm in the rural area of Shamokin. And I lived in Shamokin from 14 to 18.

C: In the city itself?

M: Yes. Well, it's not a city.

C: A little town.

M: And then I went into training.

C: What did your father do for a living?

M: My father worked coal mines. And because of his health, he gave that up, and we moved onto a farm.

C: Mining was a dangerous business in those days, health-wise.

M: Yes, it was.

C: Black lung disease.

M: Black lung. There was no protection. It was before occupational health associations.

C: What did your mother do?

M: My mother was a housewife.

C: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

M: Yes. I had five brothers and two sisters.

C: So you had a large family.

M: Yes, we did.

C: Where did you go to high school?

M: I went to Coal Township High School. That's part of Shamokin.

C: When did you graduate from high school?

M: Nineteen twenty-eight.

C: Nineteen twenty-eight, you were 18. Why did you decide to become a nurse?

M: I think that I had always wanted to be a nurse. And I don't know where the idea first came from, but it was just one of those things. That was one reason. The other reason was that there wasn't much else for women to do except teach or go into nursing.

C: That's correct. That's the only professional occupations that were open to them, more or less. Well, where did you decide to go to nursing school?

M: I had several choices, but I decided to go to the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing in Philadelphia, which appealed to me. Also it wasn't too far away from home.

C: It was an urban environment, and it's a very good nursing school. It still is. How long did you stay at the University of Pennsylvania? How long was your training there as a nurse?

M: Three years.

C: And when did you graduate?

M: In 1931.

C: And where did you work before you joined the Navy as a nurse?

M: I started out as a graduate at the University of Pennsylvania for a year in the operating room. Then I was offered a position as a supervisor of an operating room at the Chestnut Hill Hospital in Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania.

C: Well, you advanced very rapidly, didn't you? It seemed to me. And how long did you spend at the Chestnut Hill Hospital in this position?

M: Until I joined the Navy in April 1938.

C: Why did you decide to join the Navy and leave this rather nice position that you had?

M: I guess I joined because I wanted to do something different. I had a choice of a position at the Bombay Hospital in India. It seemed exciting, but too far away. So I chose the Navy instead.

C: What appealed to you about the Navy vis-à-vis the Army Nurse Corps?

M: Oh, it just seemed the right place to go; I never had any interest in the Army Nurse Corps.

C: Well, in the Navy you can travel quite a bit and go to interesting places, I imagine. What did you have to do to join

the Navy? What procedures did you have to follow? Did you see a recruiter?

M: No. I wrote to Washington. To the Bureau of Medicine.

C: The Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, perhaps. And there must have been a director of the Navy Nurse Corps, too.

M: Yes, there was.

C: So you filled out an application, I guess. Is that what you did?

M: Yes.

C: And then did you have to report anywhere for physical examinations or for interviews?

M: I filled out an application and also had a physical exam.

C: Were you sent anywhere for training and indoctrination before you were assigned?

M: The first six months of my first assignment was considered a probationary period. After six months, I was accepted into the Navy Nurse Corps.

C: Where was this first assignment, this first six months? Where were you stationed?

M: At the Naval Hospital in Washington, DC.

C: And what kind of nursing were you doing there?

M: I was assigned to the surgical wards.

C: Taking care of patients?

M: Yes.

C: That just had surgery. How large was this facility? Do you remember how many beds or how many--was it enormous?

M: No, it wasn't huge.

C: Was it right in Washington, DC?

W: Yes.

C: Okay. Because the Navy now has Bethesda Naval Hospital.

W: Yes, it was before Bethesda.

C: Right. Well, you were quite adventuresome. It seems like you were looking for adventure if you had applied to Bombay in India. And the Navy, I guess, offered some adventure for you. How did you parents react to your choice?

W: My parents were deceased at that time. And my family supported me in whatever I chose to do.

C: Oh, that's good. Your brothers and sisters. As a Navy nurse in Washington, DC, did you have to work long hours?

W: At that time we worked 12-hour shifts.

C: Oh, really! Oh, that's quite exhausting, I would imagine.

M: It didn't seem so because 12-hour shifts were the norm.

C: Right. For a 12-hour stretch. It just seems today that it would be kind of long. Did you work on weekends when you were in the Navy?

M: Yes.

C: Did you have a special uniform that you had to wear?

M: I was issued the Navy white uniform.

C: The white uniform?

M: Yes.

C: That the nurses wore. Did you find this first six months challenging?

M: It was exciting. I loved nursing so. Yes, it was exciting.

C: Did you have to live in a specific facility? Or could you live on the economy out in an apartment of your own?

M: No, we lived at the nurses' quarters.

C: Was that at the hospital? Or adjacent?

M: It was adjacent to the hospital.

C: Okay. Did you find the work stressful at all?

M: Not at that time.

C: Were you given a commission at that time, after your six months probation?

M: No. There were no commissions for the Navy nurses at that time.

C: Okay. Did you have a rank at all?

M: No.

C: Just a Navy nurse. Okay. Did you date Navy men at that time?

M: Yes.

C: Did you socialize with the nurses?

M: Oh, yes.

C: What did you do with them?

M: Oh, we had the usual kinds of activities women had: played cards, went walking, sightseeing. There was a lot to do in Washington. There never was a lack of places to go or things to do/see.

C: Right. Not a dull moment there. How were you treated by the doctors, by the physicians in this first assignment? Were you well treated?

M: Yes. We were part of the unit.

C: Part of the team then.

M: Yes.

C: Okay. What did you specifically like about this assignment in Washington?

M: Washington was an interesting place to be. I liked what I was doing. I enjoyed the people, and it was just a great place.

C: Was there anything you didn't like about this assignment?

M: I'm sure there were small petty things that we complained about, but at the moment I can't remember any major issue.

C: Nurses did a lot of work then that they don't do now, I imagine, that's given to the nurse's aides. Can you comment at all about that?

M: We had corpsmen who were forerunners of nurse's aides. The nurses took care of everything associated with care of a patient.

C: What did the corpsmen do?

M: Well, the corpsmen were assistants to the nurses. They were assigned duties that did not require the skills of a nurse. They were under the supervision of the nurses.

C: That's good. That's great. So you had a good working relationship with them.

M: Yes.

C: How long did you stay at the naval hospital in DC?

M: Until I went aboard the Solace.

C: And when did you get assigned to the Solace?

M: The summer of 1941.

C: And how did that happen? Did you put in for it?

M: It happened as a dare. My roommate and I decided it would be neat to apply for assignment on the Solace. But never expected to be fortunate enough to get it because assignment on the Solace was very special--there were only 13 openings. So no one was more amazed than we were when we received our letters of acceptance.

C: Oh, so you both got on the hospital ship, the Solace.

M: Yes.

C: Oh, that's great. That must have been very exciting.

M: We were very thrilled and excited.

C: Oh, that's great.

M: And when we came down to reality, we were a little bit concerned, too, about what we got ourselves into.

C: Is that after you got on the ship?

M: No. Before.

C: So you felt some trepidation or some concern?

M: Some concern whether we would measure up.

C: Be able to do the work?

M: Be able to do the work. And adjust to life aboard a ship.

C: All right. You're going to be at sea, you'd be concerned about that. Where was the ship located when you first reported to it?

M: When we went aboard it was in Brooklyn Navy Yard, we were there for the commissioning ceremonies.

C: Do you remember who commissioned the ship? Was it anybody important?

M: Yes, it was the Commander-in-Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, Rear Admiral Benjamin Perlman.

C: Do you know how many hospital ships there were in the Navy at that time?

M: The Solace.

C: That was it.

M: That was it.

C: Oh, isn't that something. And war was fast approaching.

M: Who knew that?

C: But we didn't know that. How many nurses were assigned to the Solace?

M: There were 13 of us, including our chief nurse.

C: And how many MD's were assigned to it?

M: I don't remember.

C: Do you know how many patients it could handle in service?

M: About 200.

C: That's quite a bit. It was a large ship.

M: Well, it seemed large at that time. Not anything like the present hospital ships.

C: Can you describe your living quarters on the ship? Where were you bunked, and what were your living conditions like?

M: There were two of us assigned to a cabin, and we had an upper and lower bunk. We drew straws as to who would take which. It was rather small, come to think of it. But it was adequate for us.

C: Where were your bathroom facilities? Were they in your room, or did you have a head outside somewhere that you had to use?

M: We had a shower in the cabin.

C: Well, once you got on the Solace, did the ship take off? And where did it take off to, if it did?

M: Yes, the ship did take off and proceeded to Honolulu.

C: So you had a nice long trip.

M: Yes.

C: From Brooklyn. Did you have any patients aboard at that time?

M: No. But our first patient was as we were going through the Panama Canal, a patient with acute appendicitis.

C: And that was somebody on the ship.

M: Yes.

C: So you had a few people on the ship that you had to take care of. Can you describe the journey and what was going on on the ship, what you were doing during this journey to Pearl Harbor,

and how long it took? What were your impressions of this rather long trip?

M: We were busy "setting up" our departments. The OR was set up for an emergency at any time. At that time we cut our own bandages, and made our own dressings, and autoclaved our sterile supplies. We had trays of instruments that were sterilized. So we were busy with all of those details beforehand. And that took up quite a bit of time. But we also had time to tour the ship. And we had activities in the wardroom. It just seemed as though there was plenty to do.

C: So you were kept busy during the day preparing the ship for use.

M: Yes.

C: Did you stop at any ports along the way?

M: We made a brief stop at Norfolk, Virginia.

C: And you transitted the Panama Canal.

M: Yes.

C: That must have been interesting.

M: It was very interesting and exciting. We went ashore in Panama for a one-day sightseeing tour.

C: Do you know how many people were on the ship as you set out? How many in toto were on the Solace? You had your 13 nurses and then the MD's. And then I imagine you had corpsmen.

M: Yes.

C: That were on. So that was basically the complement of the ship, and of course those who did the other work on it. Would you say that the nurses on the ship were a cohesive group?

M: Yes, very.

C: Ready to work together?

M: Yes.

C: And they had bonded together. Did you live with your roommate--I meant to ask you--from Washington?

M: Yes.

C: Oh, that's great. Well, you had a nice long trip, and a little bit of an adventure. And then you landed at Honolulu. And was the ship stationed there?

M: Yes.

C: That's where it was going to be. And obviously you continued to live on the ship, didn't you, when you were there?

M: Yes.

C: In Honolulu. And this was before--when did you land in Honolulu? Do you remember what month it was?

M: The end of October, beginning of November.

C: Of '41. Well, you landed in Pearl Harbor--I mean in Honolulu, in November, late October, 1941. And you were based there. And what were you doing there? What kind of nursing were you doing on the ship at that time?

M: Only taking care of our own personnel. We didn't take patients aboard.

C: For your own crew then.

M: Yes.

C: Not for anybody at the Navy bases in Pearl Harbor or at the air stations.

M: No.

C: Oh, that's interesting. Were you kept busy with your own people?

M: Yes.

C: Well, you must have had hundreds on the ship then.

M: We didn't have that many, but it was all very new. And we were adjusting to life aboard the ship and setting up a routine, which is different than being in a hospital.

C: But your quarters certainly were different.

M: Yes.

C: Just operating on a ship.

M: Yes, our ship had a stabilizer on it, so that helped.

C: The cramped quarters, I imagine. Did that bother you, the cramped quarters of the ship?

M: No, it didn't seem to.

C: You managed to function all right.

M: Yes.

C: In that situation. So you were kept busy enough, you think. Did you ever have a chance to get off the ship?

M: Yes, we did. We went into Honolulu and toured, and took sightseeing trips around the islands.

C: Did you have weekends off?

M: Yes.

C: Oh, okay. So you could leave, and you had liberty then.

M: Yes.

C: Okay. But the rest of the time you were stationed on the ship. Well, things, I guess, were pretty routine until December 7, 1941. Did you encounter any problems, any medical problems or

problems that would impact on your nursing, on this ship? Was there a lack of anything that wasn't available or necessary for your work?

M: Well, we thought we were pretty well equipped to handle anything that came along.

C: Good.

M: Not expecting anything extra major.

C: What did you like about working and living on the ship?

M: I liked the closeness of the group. And we were just one big happy family, and it was great.

C: Oh, that's great. That's great. How did the physicians treat you? Were you treated well?

M: Yes, we interacted with the physicians, and it was--

C: They treated you as professionals?

M: Yes.

C: That's good. Was there anything you disliked about this new exciting assignment on the ship?

M: I can't name any instance.

C: Well, December 7, 1941, certainly was a surprise to everyone in the United States, the attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese. Where was your ship located at that point in time on that day? And were you in the line of fire?

M: The Solace was anchored across from Ford Island, and we were in the line of fire because we were right in Battleship Row. So we were right in it.

C: You were near the Arizona and the Nevada?

M: Yes.

C: At that very strategic point. Was your ship hit?

M: No, it was not hit. But I was told--I didn't see it or wasn't aware of it--but there was a torpedo that landed just near the ship. But it didn't affect our function at all.

C: Oh, that's good. So your ship was unharmed then throughout the whole raid. Were you on the ship at that point in time, on that Sunday morning?

M: Yes, it was just before eight o'clock in the morning. We were waiting for the chaplain to come aboard to say Catholic Mass.

C: Were you on deck?

M: Yes.

C: Oh, so you could see the whole thing!

M: Yes.

C: You saw the whole raid. Can you describe it for me?

M: Yes, I can describe it. As I said, we were waiting for the chaplain to come aboard, and I was aware of a lot of air activity. I thought this is a strange time to be having any kind of a routine exercise. I happened to look up at the planes; they didn't look like our planes because they had an orange sun painted on the wings.

C: The rising sun.

M: Yes, the rising sun on the wings. We could see that. Then the next thing we knew, we saw something hit the Nevada. Then the shells/bombs kept increasing in frequency. The first bomb that exploded aboard the Arizona was just incredible. The bombs continued to drop and explode all around us. By that time the call to battle stations sounded. From then on I didn't see very much, but could hear the explosions of the bombs in the OR.

C: Oh, that must have been terrific, the noise.

M: Yes, it was.

C: And your battle stations, they were below deck, I assume.

M: Yes.

C: Now, what was the battle station per se? Where were you at that point in time? Were you in your room? Were you in the operating room?

M: We immediately went to our stations in the operating room, and proceeded to prepare for casualties.

C: Right. Exactly. What was your reaction at this time? Were you frightened?

M: Yes. Naturally I think there was fear. But that soon gave way to the pressure of preparing for casualties. We started to set up instrument tables, assigned positions for the corpsmen and the doctors. It wasn't long before our first casualties started to arrive. From then on we set up as many operating spaces as space allowed, manned by doctors providing first aid.

C: Did you set up other OR's besides the two you had?

M: Spaces in the OR's that were available and wherever we could put a table with supplies. The doctors would screen the patients, on the order of a triage.

C: Right. I was going to say. Yes, the worst cases and those you could save would be probably first in line. Those who were too far gone would be kind of left. Well, that was horrific! You must have worked extremely long hours then, around the clock.

M: We worked around the clock, yes, we did.

C: How many days did you work around the clock?

M: It was Sunday and Monday, and sometime Monday night or Tuesday that we stopped. And we were getting not caught up, but at least it slowed down enough that we could take time out for a shower and some sleep.

C: Yes, rest, you would need that because it must have been very, very stressful.

M: We were kept so busy we didn't realize it. We just automatically did what had to be done.

C: So you didn't even think about it.

M: No, you just had to keep on. Because you had to keep up with sterile supplies, and the instruments had to be cleaned and sterilized. We did have help come on from the Naval hospital, and from other hospitals from the area. So we did have relief come on aboard.

C: So luckily you weren't the only facility available for the casualties.

M: No.

C: They had hospitals on the island.

M: Yes, they had the Naval hospital. They also had the Army hospital, and a civilian hospital onshore also.

C: So that was some help. You were in the operating room at this time?

M: Yes.

C: Throughout that whole period. Do you know how many casualties your ship probably handled during this time frame? Just endless? Did you save many of these people?

M: Actually, I didn't see any statistics. We didn't save enough --we did all we possibly could.

C: Well, that's for sure. It must have been horrendous. After your very difficult two days there, did you get up on deck on Tuesday, let's say, and look around and see the damage?

M: Yes, we went on deck and did look around at the scene. Battleships and cruisers and their vessels, some listing, some sunk. It was just a horrible scene.

C: It must have been a horrible scene.

M: One could never describe it or ever imagine that it could be real. The thing that kept coming back to mind was this invincible navy that we had, and there it was helpless.

C: Crippled. Exactly.

M: Crippled. Unable to move. We didn't hear about some of the ships that had made it out to sea and some that were on the way in that were intercepted. We didn't even have news. It was all hearsay, and anything we got from communicating with other ships or other facilities. We didn't get ashore for two weeks.

C: So you didn't get really much reliable news then, would you say?

M: Not in the beginning, no. It was all just conjecture and what we imagined was happening. Some of it was exaggerated, some of it wasn't as bad, some was worse than reported. But it was all very frightening and very devastating.

C: Oh, I'm sure it was.

M: We just felt so helpless. And it was good that we were kept busy.

C: Yes, I think that probably is a good saving grace. Because it would have been devastating.

M: If we had known that this was going to happen and that you could kind of prepare for it, if there is such a thing, I don't know whether it would have been any different or not.

C: Right. If it would be.

M: I just don't know.

C: But you were prepared enough on your ship to deal with the casualties.

M: Oh, yes.

C: You sound as if you had gotten ready and gotten established enough to handle that. Of course the Navy always drills, don't they?

M: Oh, yes. We had battle drills periodically. So that we knew where we should go and what our assignment was and how we proceeded. Things just automatically fell in place.

C: Right. That's what we need to have, and that's what you would need to have in that kind of situation. Did you feel stressed out as a result of this Pearl Harbor bombing and the casualties after that?

M: They didn't speak about stress at that time.

C: That's true.

M: Yes, we were tired, we were exhausted, we knew we worked hard. But I must say that wasn't a common complaint.

C: Right. That's something that's late 20th century, I believe. But it must have been a very difficult time. How did the other nurses handle it?

M: Fine. We didn't know what was going on, but we just did our jobs.

C: So they were all professionals, and they handled it. Well, it was about the 9th of December that you finally got some rest and could get back to your cabins. But after that time, did things fall into a routine? Were you under as much pressure as you were before, dealing with the injured?

M: No. It seemed more that we fell into a routine. We had more help aboard so that our days were not as long, our hours weren't as long. And we could survey our stations and assess what needed to be done, and how to prepare in the event that this happened again. We were more knowledgeable in what needed to be done, and how we needed to be set up to be more efficient.

C: Could you make any independent decisions or take any independent actions during this time frame of the terrible casualties?

M: I don't know exactly what you mean.

C: Well, were you under, shall we say, the advice of the physicians as far as treating people? You had to follow their orders?

M: Yes.

C: You didn't have more flexibility than some of the nurses do today?

M: Yes, we cooperated in what needed to be done. The operating rooms were not that busy, so we went out into the wards and helped with the nursing care. We able to relieve the ward nurses for needed rest. We helped out wherever there was a need. Like any other patient care, helping each other.

C: Right. Did you have a chance to get off the ship after this period and after the let-up in treating casualties?

M: We did get off the ship about two or three weeks afterwards, when we went ashore.

C: Can you describe that first Christmas in 1941 after the attack?

M: It was going to be a pretty bleak Christmas. We were away from home. Mail did begin to come through slowly. There was no shopping to do. We just wondered what would happen. There wasn't the excitement or the preparation that one has. But a group of five corpsmen went ashore and managed to find a Christmas tree. So we did have a Christmas tree. We couldn't light it up at night because all the blackouts. That was the other thing we had to be very careful about, which was hard to remember, that you had to keep all your curtains drawn at all times, and there couldn't be any light visible from the sky or the land. We did decide that we were going to do something for Christmas. Since we were the only women aboard, it was up to us.

C: You said you were going ashore?

M: Yes. Some of the girls went ashore and purchased whatever they could find. But we did decide that everybody would get a Christmas gift. We pooled and wrapped whatever we had. It ended up some of the fellows getting perfume and scented soap, but they took it in stride and thought it was great. It did help the

morale a little bit. It was the only happy time--the only thing that we could do to raise some feeling of home to the whole situation. The sailors were all very young, so we tried to help them overcome homesickness.

C: Yes, that was quite a sad time. War had been declared by then.

M: Yes. We did circle the ship and sang Christmas carols. We did do that. We did try to bring the spirit of Christmas aboard.

C: Despite the serious devastation.

M: Yes.

C: And the great losses that you had to cope with. So it wasn't the happiest time. Well, you remained on the Solace until, was it February '42?

M: April of '42.

C: Oh, April '42. So you were there. Were you in Pearl Harbor and Honolulu during this time frame, until April '42?

M: Yes.

C: That's where you stayed.

M: Yes.

C: The ship stayed there. And you continued in the operating room there?

M: Yes.

C: Did you feel that there were any frustrations that you had to face as a nurse during this time frame in early '42?

M: There naturally were things we would like to have done differently if we had the option, but we didn't. It was up to us to make do with what we had and do the best we could as far as supplies.

C: Did you have a lack of supplies?

M: We had enough supplies. We had enough food and all of that for staying out at sea for a long time. But it was the matter that it was up to us to replenish supplies as they were used. And you never knew how much you would use. And then things as far as sterile supplies, they had to be re-sterilized periodically, so that you had to go through your supplies constantly and make sure that they were ready to be used in case of a disaster.

C: And you had to have enough medical supplies.

M: Yes.

C: Did you ever run short of things?

M: No, not that I know of.

C: So that never impacted the treatment of patients.

M: No.

C: Well, that's good. Do you remember who the CO of your ship was, the CO of the Solace, the commanding officer?

M: Medical-- Well, our medical CO was Captain Harold Jansen. The CO of the Solace was Captain Benjamin Perlman.

C: Did you have R&R during this time frame?

M: Yes.

C: And where did you go, and what did you do on R&R?

M: We went ashore, and we stayed at one of the hotels on Waikiki, and we were out on the beach. And we'd go into town or whatever we wanted to do.

C: So that was well deserved. During this time were you dating any Navy man or anyone else?

M: No.

C: But you, I assume, socialized with the nurses and with the medical personnel on board the ship.

M: Yes.

C: Why did you decide to leave the Navy in April '42?

M: I was engaged to be married, and my fiancé--there were rumors that perhaps the ship may go out to sea, and my fiancé just said that he didn't want me to stay aboard ship anymore.

C: Well, where was your fiancé?

M: In Newport.

C: Oh, Rhode Island?

M: Yes.

C: Oh, for heaven's sake! And what was he doing?

M: Well, he was a civilian, and was a musician.

C: Where did you ever meet him, may I ask? Since he wasn't in the Navy, and you were in the Navy for so long.

M: Well, somewhere along there I skipped something. Oh, I was stationed at the Naval Hospital in Newport.

C: When were you at the Naval Hospital in Newport?

M: I was transferred from Washington, DC to the Naval Hospital in Newport in 1940.

C: Okay. Oh, I see. So you were right here.

M: Yes.

C: Is that where you met him.

M: Yes.

C: Do you remember how long you were in Newport? Was this immediately before you went on the Solace?

M: Yes, I went on the Solace from Newport.

C: So you did some nursing here at the Naval Hospital, and that's where you met him.

M: Yes.

C: Well, you were quite adventurous to go off on the Solace despite the fact that you had a serious romance. That didn't deter you.

M: No, not at the time. But after war was declared, then that was different--my picture changed.

C: Yes. Now, did you feel that you wanted to get out of the Navy yourself?

M: No.

C: Oh, you didn't want to get out of the Navy.

M: My fiancé strenuously objected to my staying in the Navy.

C: So when he said he wanted you to leave the Navy, you complied.

M: Yes.

C: You decided to leave.

M: Yes.

C: And opted for marriage.

M: Yes.

C: Which you did. Oh, that's interesting. Were you sad to leave the Navy?

M: I missed it. I enjoyed it. I liked everything I did in my life.

C: When did you finally marry?

M: April 22nd

C: 'Forty-two, 1942.

M: Yes.

C: Did you get married here in Newport?

M: Yes. It was wartime, so the wedding was very simple. My fiancé had no family, and my family was not able to come. So it was just a matter of friends.

C: Yes, a small wedding here in Newport. Was he drafted into the service at all?

M: He wasn't eligible because of his health.

C: Okay. So you settled down here, I assume, in Newport, Rhode Island at that point in time.

M: Yes.

C: Did you ever work as a nurse after that, after your marriage?

M: Yes, I did. I did private duty for a while. My husband had a position in Burlington, Vermont. And when we went to Vermont, I was not happy just staying at home. So I was going to go back to nursing. But there was a provision that if I went back to nursing, I would not do anything where I would have to work nights. And the only available area was public health nursing. So

I applied and did work with the Visiting Nurse Association in Burlington, Vermont.

C: Oh, that must have been interesting.

M: Well, it was different.

C: Yes, different than your OR duty.

M: Yes.

C: Yes. In the Navy and in the 1930's before that. How long were you up in Burlington?

M: Five years.

C: Then did you return to Newport?

M: Yes.

C: Did you do any nursing here in Newport after that?

M: While I was in Burlington, my director of nurses thought that I should pursue more experience in education and public health nursing. I received a scholarship to go to Simmons College one semester, which I did. And enjoyed it. So after that I continued

with my education, got my BS and master's in public health nursing.

C: Oh, how interesting! Where did you get your BS and MS?

M: Simmons College, and the MS was a combination program at Simmons and Harvard.

C: Oh, very good! Oh, that's excellent! So you really went quite far in the nursing field.

M: I stayed in it until I retired.

C: At that point in time. Did you work in public health after that, after you got your degrees?

M: Yes.

C: Do you remember about what time frame that was, what year?

M: It must have been about '56.

C: You returned to Newport. Okay.

M: Yes. The director of nurses in Burlington suggested that I contact the Providence District Nursing Association, which I did. And I received a position there and worked there until I retired.

C: With the Providence Nurses Association.

M: District Nursing Association.

C: District, uh huh. So was that more of an administrative job?

M: I was supervisor, and then I helped set up the program for the elderly. We did a research project on housing for the elderly. I set up the programs in the high rises--they were all high rises at the time--for the elderly. Their medical care and nursing services.

C: That's very, very interesting. When did you retire?

M: In 1975.

C: That was just 21 years ago. You had a nice full career in nursing. But a dramatic change from operating room to public health and to administration.

M: If there weren't an age clause, I'd still be doing it.

C: Oh, really-- Oh, wonderful! Oh, that's great.

M: I haven't done anything with nursing since I retired. I have tried to keep abreast of new technology and nursing practices.

C: Well, things change. I guess medications change.

M: Dramatically.

C: And procedures dramatically. But you had a very, very interesting career. What was the significance of your Naval service for you and for your life? What impact did it make, and how important and significant was it for you?

M: I don't know. It was an experience I wouldn't have traded for anything. But you asked about stress. And maybe this was my reaction to it: I never mentioned anything about my Navy nursing experience until many years later. My family knew very little about what my experience really was. They knew where I was and what my stations were. But as far as the actual experience, they really didn't know. And I never brought it up. My husband didn't want to hear about it. That's one thing.

C: Why didn't he want to hear about it?

M: I don't know. He didn't want any part. I think he was so worried. And maybe he thought that I would regret, say that I was sorry, that I had left. I don't know.

C: Because you seem to be a very adventuresome person. If you had applied for a position in Bombay, India, and also the Navy, you were seeking adventure and something different and a change.

M: Well, I still am.

C: Well, that's good. That's great!

M: That's why I'm here.

C: That's wonderful. Did you get any medals as a result of your Navy service?

M: Yes.

C: You got the Commendation Medal.

M: Yes.

C: And you mentioned before you're a member of the Pearl Harbor Survivors' Association. Can you tell us about that? What is that, and what is its function?

M: It was an association formed for survivors of Pearl Harbor. We had reunions. They were not very often. I didn't attend too many of them although it was great to see friends and reminisce and learn about their other adventures and their other experiences. Some were married, some were career Navy people. And so it was kind of nice to get caught up on what we were all doing.

C: Now, you mentioned also that you're one of the few survivors of the Solace, surviving nurses, of the 13, the original 13.

M: Yes. I think there's only one other person besides myself. We lost contact with each other.

C: That happens over time.

M: You lose contact.

C: Right. That's true after a long time. But you mentioned also you're a member of a Navy nurses' organization. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

M: Well, it's an organization that is aware of the fact that we are a unique group of people, and we like to get together and share experiences, and also keep abreast of what the new

developments are and changes in the Navy Nurse Corps. It's just--as a person that hasn't had much contact with the service since retirement, it's nice to hear what's going on, and chat with the girls that are still active. And those who are retired, and their experiences and their careers after retirement. At present we are working on setting up a nursing scholarship.

C: And this is a Rhode Island group, isn't it?

M: This is a Rhode Island group, but there is a national-- This is the Rhode Island chapter, and there are chapters in various parts of the United States.

C: Well, that's great. So you still have some connection--

M: Yes.

C: --with the Navy Nurse Corps through the organization, the Rhode Island chapter, of the National Organization of Navy Nurses.

M: Yes.

C: Earlier in the interview we mentioned the fact that you did not get a commission in the Navy when you first joined in 1938.

Did this change at all during your four years in the Navy-- almost four years?

M: No. The nurses received their commission in '42.

C: So you were gone by then.

M: Yes.

C: And I assume it was an officer's rank that they got.

M: Yes. And they were first lieutenant/jg.

C: Yes, lieutenant/jg.

M: The ranks advanced same as other personnel. Recently we had a rear admiral appointed as chief of the Navy Nurse Corps.

C: Right. Is there anything else you want to comment on regarding your Naval service, either on the Solace, which was very exciting, or in Washington or in Newport, Rhode Island-- which we kind of dismissed? Any other memories? Any outstanding events that you can comment on?

M: Yes. While I was stationed in Washington, at one of the ceremonies, we had the opportunity to shake hands with President Roosevelt, which was kind of special.

C: Absolutely! That must have been a thrill.

M: That was a thrill.

C: To meet him.

M: But other than that, my mind is a blank.

C: You didn't meet any other outstanding people?

M: Oh, I'm sure I did, but I don't remember.

C: No outstanding admirals in the Navy? Spruance or Halsey or Nimitz, did you ever encounter them?

M: Yes, at the officers' clubs I saw them.

C: You saw them.

M: Yes.

C: But that was about it. You were never formally introduced. Well, I want to thank you very much, Mrs. Merker, for coming here today and sharing your memories of nursing in the beginning stages of World War II with us.

M: I'm sorry that my recollection wasn't more and my descriptions weren't more coherent. It has happened a long time ago.

C: It's a long time ago.

M: Yes, it is. A long time ago.

C: Fifty years plus. So thank you very, very much; and we'll get this transcribed and edited for you.

M: Thank you for asking me.

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