

General Rosetta Y. Burke
Narrator

Wayne Clark and Eric Stott
Interviewers

September 4, 2007
at the Henry Johnson Charter School
Albany, New York

WC: General Burke, for the record, please state your full name and date of birth.

RB: Rosetta Y. Burke; February 28, 1937

WC: Where were you born?

RB: Pittsburgh, PA

WC: You grew up and attended school there?

RB: Both Elementary and High School
Then I came to New York City for nurses training

WC: When and where did you enter military service?

RB: I entered the military in Feb 1962. I had completed nurses training and was looking to complete my bachelors. That was a way to help me complete the rest of the education that I wanted

WC: Did you go into the Army or the National Guard?

RB: I went into the Army Reserves. I stayed there from 1962 through all of my civilian education—both my bachelors and my masters. I did some military education as well and finally transferred to the National Guard from the Reserves in 1992. I was sworn in on my basic [pay] entry date in 1992

WC: Let me go back a little bit – when you joined the Reserves, did you come in as a second lieutenant?

RB: No. Because I had already been nursing for more than six years, I came in as a first lieutenant.

Which can count against you because then they start looking at your years in service and those four years that they give you then counts against you at the time they're looking to see if you want to stay in or be retained.

WC: Initially, did they send you on to any military schools?

RB: Not initially, no. I went to other schools because I wanted to. There was an opportunity for me to study various courses to enhance my being an officer. I went to general combat schools, the national security school, etc. Between the Reserves and the National Guard, I completed my [work college]. I went in to [work college] on the correspondence course as a Reservist but I graduated as a National Guard person.

WC: How long was that course?

RB: The course was approximately two years. You start in the summer and end in the summer, for two years.

WC: Do you want to talk about any of your command positions?

RB: I came in as a nurse and ended up as an assistant to the adjutant general, which made me an anomaly. They never had a female assistant adjutant general.

Coming into the Reserves as a nurse, I went through the various parts of being an instructor, an assistant to the chief nurse.

I went from one unit to another in the Reserves. With going to civilian school and military school, I was promoted from [unclear] to full-bird colonel. By the time I became a major, that meant that in the Reserves I starting looking at being put into a chief nurse position.

Usually you stay in that position anywhere from 4 years or more before they transfer you so that somebody else can learn what you have been doing. You show them how to become a chief nurse of your unit and you become a chief nurse of a different unit, possibly moving up, which happened to me. I went from a field hospital to a station hospital and finally to a general hospital.

WC: Where was that?

RB: The field hospital was in the Bronx. The station hospital was in Newburgh. The General hospital was in Albany. 364th General Hospital which is now debunked.

Prior to taking the flag down and the whole nine yards was when I was interviewed by the adjutant general in the National Guard who wanted a program to start with the challenge and the core cadets and so it was called a community initiatives. He really wanted the challenge program itself in New York to be one of the first 10 states, which it was, we did that. In the process of doing that, I came in as a full bird colonel which is different – usually you don't transfer from the Reserves to the National Guard as a full bird colonel – that doesn't generally happen – but I was able to do that.

At that time, I was also being considered to be a general officer within the nurse core. When I was interviewed by the adjutant general and explained to him what I was going through, but also having a love for children the same way he did and wanting to do something in the community to help New Yorkers not go through the problems with children going into corrections, that's where I was actually retiring from, I decided to transfer from the Reserves to the National Guard.

In the process he told me that he could not promise me anything. I was coming to try and do a program for him. At that point he had a spot as his assistant. I started using that spot after I came in as a nurse as his assistant as a full-bird colonel but my paperwork, which had already been accepted by the Reserves, was able to go through in the National Guard way. When the warden looked at my paperwork, they couldn't refuse because I had passed all the things I needed to do including going to [work college] which I didn't need to do. I was already in [work college]. I had punched all the tickets. So I became a General officer. It was the first time a female had become an assistant adjutant general as a general officer. Usually they serve in major ranks. Sometimes lieutenant colonel but never actually all the way up to be "the" assistant's assistant.

WC: Who was the adjutant general?

RB: General Hall.

WC: How did you get along with General Hall?

RB: Wonderful. I had no problems with General Hall whatsoever. As a matter of fact, the reason why he interviewed me at all was because at the time I was retiring from the state-I worked for New York State as a correction superintendent, sometimes referred to as wardens outside of NYS- I was running a prison in Summit, New York, which is up near Stamford. It was a boot camp kind of program that I had with both females and males – I dared them to even look at each other (laugh) and we did really boot camp types of things. Most of the inmates, who were between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, could not keep up with me. That was one of the issues of the commissioner at the time that I was put into the jail as a warden. He always teased about females being colonels.

In the corrections system, the paramilitary types of ranks go the same way. When the commissioner-Jack Coughlin-had a problem on his farm, he would come up and ask for a nurse and I would come down with my trusty scissors. I knew he had put a bandage on it and it had lasted too long and needed a new bandage. He was the colonel coming in. He was a tease.

Then I was retiring from that whole system and General Hall heard about me running a program that was similar to what the challenge program would be. If I was running that kind of a system I must know how to open this type of a system.

That is how the transfer came about. He and I got along very well. The whole thing of my becoming a general officer was a fiasco because we changed governors at the time I didn't know where I stood.

As I became general officer, I lost General Hall but got General [Fenimore].

General [Fenimore], who I had known before, working with him while I was doing these children type of programs, decided when I told him that I could not stay any longer because of my age, I had maxed my time of being in the military, I turned 60 so I had to come out, he decided at my retirement party that he had gone to the board and made sure that it was a thing to do and that's how I became major general as a brevet. That's another nuance because they don't have many females or any that I knew of when I was made one as a brevet major general. It was nice to be able to wear two stars in New York State.

Even though I couldn't go out of the state doing that but it's also nice to see it on my resume.

WC: What are you doing today?

RB: General [Fenimore], at the time of my retirement, had gotten notice from Ansel [Prodinger].

[Ansel] was the selective service system state director. He had gotten that position from General Flynn, from my understanding. Way back when, General Flynn was the adjutant General. He had to also be the director for the selective services. The selective services is for the registration of young men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-six which is a federal thing that young men have to do otherwise they become a federal [unclear] and lose out on the privileges that they would ordinarily get once they decide that they want a scholarship, grant, federal job, state job or county job. They can't get it if they didn't register.

[Ansel]had decided that he wanted a retirement position as the state director at the same time I was retiring from the military. It seems as though moving the directorship position from the adjutant general to someone that's retired that only when somebody else in that position retires does the adjutant general have to look for somebody else. It became an opportunistic time for him to say to me that I want you to go into that position. He could still have a handle on my workings and I could still be of assistance to him. So I am still doing this since 1997. I am

still doing the selective services. So I have a [unclear] with a group people that are with the selective services.

WC: You've really had quite a distinguished career.

RB: Different, Yes. From nursing in various fields – I not only nursed in the Hospital from the pediatric ward to the psyche ward, then from psyche ward in the regular city hospital I went to the state.

I transferred to the state so my timeframe kept going in this thing that's why I asked you about being able to count your time which was very good for me because when I decided to retire from corrections, which nobody thought I could do at the age of fifty-five, but I could because I had thirty-seven and one-half years. My time went all the way back to when I entered nursing school because I entered a *city* nursing school that paid a little stipend so that time counted. So for me to pay back that time it counted so that it would add up to this time. I have been retired from the state for fifteen years. It really worked out well for me. The retirement from the military continues now.

WC: Has it been ten years? It doesn't seem that long.

RB: It's been ten years. Time flies when you're having fun.

WC: Have you continued to stay in contact with people that you were in the service with way back in the 1960's?

RB: Yes, but not all the way back to the 60's. I don't see many of them. I do see one or two that I have met in between in the early 70's and so forth. A lot of people, believe it or not, are passing away. More often I am going to funerals verses keeping in contact. Although the nursing group that I was chief nurse of at the 364th General Hospital here in Albany, and I meet for dinner about every month or every other month. So yes, I do keep up. Often, as I'm going through the street or into the gym, because I still go to the gym for exercise, I'll meet somebody that might be from either the Reserves or the National Guard. Of course, being at the selective service system, I still need to keep contact with adjutant general ??, if he ever has time to meet with me.

WC: You've seen a lot of changes in your career. Would you say that opportunities for women have increased over the course of your career?

RB: Combat opportunities, yes. It was not necessarily an open thing for women to go into combat when I first entered. More often than not, women came in as nurses or administrative

kinds of positions like in the kitchen or mailroom. If they were in the hospital setting, they might be in physical therapy or in the dentist area, definitely nursing, your female doctors. The command positions would come out of combat. So if you were in a combat position you could get a command easier than if you were combat support. The hospital itself is totally combat support but many of the doctors who were male at that time, specifically one but I won't mention the name, thought that he would not have any nurse being the commander of his hospital, no matter how many hospitals he had under him. But I am seeing nurses who are becoming commanders. My thought at that point in time was that he had his feelings but I believed that because the nurse was in the hospital 24/7 and definitely was the one who was there to say which patients went where and so forth that is sanctioned, that the nurse could just as easily be the commander of the hospital.

Combat is much more prevalent now. What is funny about that whole situation, if you look at the history, women were in the military way before we were even being accepted as being in the military. We dressed ourselves as men and joined the military. If you go back to the revolution, you're talking about Molly Pitcher. A musket ran between her legs as she was firing the cannon. So we've always been in the military and we've always been in combat. They just didn't understand that we could do as much combat as we have been. Yes, it's not easy for the media or anybody else to hear about a woman missing in action and/or being a prisoner of war, but we served. That becomes the risk. There are many more things that possibly can happen to us but they happen to the men too. We don't want them to happen to anybody whether they are male or female. Being in the military, that is a risk. We fly planes now!

WC: One of the things I've noticed at DMNA in Latham, the number of women not only in command positions as company commanders but women first sergeants, platoon sergeants, etc., right beside the male soldiers. Women have come a long way.

RB: Yes, they have come a long way. A very long way from the time I first entered. Definitely.

WC: Thanks you very much for your interview.