

**Lucy Abbot
Veteran**

**Bill Payne
Interviewer**

**Interviewed on November 28th, 2004 at the
American Legion Post in Saugerties, NY**

Q: Good morning Lucy.

LA: Morning.

Q: What's your birthday please?

LA: February 25th 1923.

Q: And you served in the United States Army in the Women's Army Corps?

LA: Of course,

Q: you weren't drafted?

LA: No, no. They had a big recruitment at the old Armory on Broadway in Kingston. I think it's a neighborhood center now. I was working in a cigar factory and I hated it and I wanted to be a nurse, and the WACS was the only thing I could join that would guarantee that I would be a medical technician so that's why I went with the WACS. And I enlisted I believe in March but didn't go in active duty until April.

Q: What year was that?

LA: I wrote it down. I enlisted on the 30th of March 1945. I went on active duty 18th of April '45. I went from Poughkeepsie and the port Oglethorpe Georgia.

Q: Were you living in Kingston at the time?

LA: Yes, and I went to Port Oglethorpe, Georgia. And that was a shock to your system. Part of living in these barracks with all these women and somehow, we had got acquainted in Poughkeepsie and then in New York with the ones coming from the New York area. But the biggest shock was that discrimination was still so prevalent in the South. That just blew my mind. And that continued when we went to Chattanooga Tennessee quite often. When we went into town, we'd see these signs, "blacks only," "whites only," it was just a shock to someone who grew up in Kingston and went to school and whose best friend was a black girl. It was something so entirely different than what we had grown up with.

Q: Were there black soldiers in the Women's Army Corps?

LA: Yes, there were some black women yes.

Q: Were they segregated on the base?

LA: They kind of had their own units.

Q: So now you went to boot camp or basic training, yes? What was that like?

LA: That was different (laughing).

You had to get up at I don't know what time in the morning, and doing drills and exercises, and then having to have your area spotless and organized the way they wanted it organized, in the way they wanted it before breakfast.

And then we did some -- for me -- some very rigid drills and marching and then we even got into a point of going into a gas chamber and putting on gas masks and all that even though we weren't going overseas, we were trained in that.

Q: You remember who your instructors were?

LA: Not really.

Q: What were they like, anyway?

LA: There were both kinds. Sometimes we felt the men were less hard on us than some of the women. Like the women were out to prove the point they had attained this rank of captain or something and you were going to march to their tune. But that was kind of fun too, you know we laughed about it. At night we got over all the aches and pains and sores.

Q: So you got through it ok? How long was it, do you remember?

LA: I think that was only about a month, because we almost right away went right into the medical training.

Q: Where did the medical training take place?

LA: Also at Port Oglethorpe. I was sent to Fort Jackson, South Carolina, and there was a base hospital there. And that made me glad I was there but also made me change my mind and I never wanted to be a nurse again.

We got a lot of the young men home from Japan there and they say it wasn't a death march, but that's what they called it at the time, and those young men, that was sad. And the talking they did, one young fella, we used to sit up nights holding him, because he fell and his buddy picked him up to help him, and they killed his buddy. Right then and there, because you didn't stop and help anybody.

Q: He had to watch them kill his friend?

LA: Yes, and then he was a prisoner of war, and it was (voice trails off)....

Q: And he was held in the Philippines?

LA: Yes, in the Philippines.

They were nothing but skin and bones. They had to be so careful what they ate, they were so hungry and yet they couldn't eat right away because they weren't used to it. They had nothing in a way and had to come back. And from there I went to North Carolina. That was a completely different experience. It was on a mountain, a predominantly tuberculosis hospital.

They never had winter so the year we were there, then the civilians couldn't come to work on the mountain road. And I said, can't you put salt boxes on the hill and they didn't know what salt boxes were, and I said you get stuck and you throw this salt on the road.

And I was there for Christmas Eve and it was entirely different. We went to the Catholic Mass and when we came out, it had snowed and the trees were frozen and glistening, and we New Yorkers were so happy. And the southern people were so angry at us because the next day they couldn't make it up to work and we had to work double duty, which was kind of all right.

Q: You were awarded some medals for your service?

LA: Towards the end -- the American theater victory ribbon.

Q: And for good conduct?

LA: Yes.

Q: And after the war was over, there were women's' army corps medals given?

LA: Yes, I have to go down there and see them and talk to them about that.

Also, there was an experience when I went from there to, I think, Augusta, Georgia... But it's by the side of the big golf course where they play all their big tournaments now. That was different. Because there was a colored woman in the hospital. She had a child and nobody to take care of him and we New Yorkers took her child into our barracks. And we were severely chastised and the child had to go back to the mother's room.

Q: And the hospital was segregated even though it was an army hospital?

LA: No, she was in a room with another, but we couldn't bring that into our barracks, we had to bring him back, because we couldn't bring a black child in. It wouldn't look well, and they might associate you with blacks. I didn't understand it and never will, just that a poor youngster maybe 3 or 4 years old had to just hang around his mother's bed.

Q: No place for a child?

LA: No. Not at that time.

Q: And you were able to stay in touch with your family while you were away?

LA: Yes.

Q: How did you do that?

LA: Telephone and letters.

I had two sisters and a brother and a mother in Kingston. I graduated in 1942.

Q: When you were in different hospitals and bases, how was the food?

LA: Kind of good, I never complained about it. You had to get used to some of the regional cooking maybe.

The Christmas that we were in Swannanoa [N.C.], there were a lot of German prisoners of war on that base, and they worked the kitchen, and had learned enough that they could tell us Merry Christmas, as we went through the chow line. And when they were talking about sending some of them back to Germany, several went out and hung themselves rather than get sent back to Germany after being here so long. They liked our way better.

Q: You had plenty of supplies, you didn't have any shortages?

LA: We didn't seem to, it was a good outfit the medical, we never heard about shortages of anything.

Q: What was the actual work you did with the Patients?

LA: We could give medication. We could even give some shots. It depended if they were intravenous. We would wash and change bedding. We would help them get up and get into chairs and move around. Sometimes we even spoon-fed some. There weren't aids at that time like we have in hospitals today so that's what we did. I think there was a shortage of nurses even then.

Q: Did you have any particular things that you used to do for good luck or any things that you did to entertain each other?

LA: Not really, we went to the noncommissioned office to play games or watch shows that were being put on for us, things like that.

Q: Did they have live shows?

LA: Sometimes. There were select towns we could go to at each like from Oglethorpe, we could go to Chattanooga because the towns around Oglethorpe were not desirable or something and Chattanooga was closer.

Q: So they made a difference about where the Women's Army Corps members were to go on leave? Or on liberty?

LA: And part of it was influenced by the segregation I think.

Q: Did you get to come home at all? Please hold up the picture of you when you were home.

LA: (holds up picture) This one was when I was home visiting a friend's house and the one the other picture, which is just a close up of us, well that was done while I was in

service. There was a woman artist came around and she drew pictures of us which I have a copy at home.

Q: Back behind you here at our museum we have your uniform.

LA: Yeah except for shoes.

Q: That uniform is in great condition. So where were the other places you travel to? That was all the places you were stationed?

LA: I developed rheumatic fever in service and I traveled on a hospital train which I have a picture of maybe. They were something to travel on. I went to O'Reilly General in Missouri but then I came back to Fort Jackson South Carolina and stayed there and worked and that's where I was discharged from.

Q: You developed rheumatic fever while you were in?

LA: Yes, and they could find no reason to think it was otherwise.

Q: And when you were traveling on the train you were moving casualties one hospital to another?

LA: Yes, and sending them closer home basically. They were sent to a hospital that specialized in their problem and as soon as they could they moved them to hospitals near their homes.

Q: What type of casualties were there?

LA: Well these are casualties mostly from the Pacific Theater.

Q: What kind of injuries did they have?

LA: Some had lost arms or legs or head injuries but most of them were prisoners are war and it was more starvation that we were trying to treat build them up after they have been liberated from the Philippines and brought home.

Q: Had they got into Japan yet at that stage?

LA: Yeah because it was almost the end when I went in. I tell my grandkids now when I went in, the other countries said, well if they are taking Lucy Smith in service we better stop fighting them because the war shortly stopped. (laughing) That's what I keep telling when they ask me a question for social studies or something, that I really stopped the war.

Q: How did you treat these fellows who were prisoners of war; what kind of treatment did you give them? They must have had different diseases and so forth they contracted over there.

LA: A big thing that surprised me was this tuberculosis or and some fungal infections on arms and feet were there had been injuries. As I remember most of the care was just ointment and shots just a lot of tender loving care making them comfortable. I will say that the military tried to bring important family members to see them as soon as they

were settled in and there were families were coming and that was so good and was good for the parents to see these young boys that they were back home.

Q: You could see a difference between the way we treated the German prisoners of war from the way our prisoners were treated?

LA: That was so different because they always had freedom; yep you know they ate in the cafeteria after we were served. They didn't go in town by themselves or anything but they were not locked up in cages or anything. They just roamed around. They had a particular uniform they wore it was kind of a drab jumpsuit type thing.

Q: Do you remember anything humorous? You've already told us of numerous occasions that happened, do you think of anything else that occurred?

LA: Another Christmas one, we were near a children's home and we did a Christmas party for them. It was unbelievable to see these youngsters and we had some big woman that worked in the kitchen dress up as a Santa Claus. They couldn't believe there was a lady Santa Clause. We had bought gifts for them. It was a good feeling for a holiday to be away from home. I mean it helped get over that I'm not at home with my family doing what I normally do, but we are doing good. Even with the fellas and everybody got Christmas dinner carried on a tray. They got Christmas dinners and Thanksgiving dinners, whatever the holiday was. And Easter dinner. I felt the patients received excellent attention and care.

Q: What did your family think of you going into the woman's army corps?

LA: Well I don't know. I just had to do it because I wasn't going to spend the rest of my life in Kingston working in the Martin cigar factory and I thought I wanted to be a nurse. They were recruiting men as you know it was a big recruitment and WAC was only one that would guarantee me Medical Corps training. When I came home, I had to go to hospital for testing to see what I could go to school for. My highest rating was musical. Well I can't read notes, I can't play an instrument, I can't sing, so the thought they had was that maybe bookkeeping accounting. First, I went to the business school and I became a bookkeeper.

Q: This is after you came back?

LA: Yes, this was after I came back. For Sears Roebuck.

Q: What was it like on your last day the service, do you remember?

LA: Kind of sad. You had these friends and who's going to take care of these patients. I have greatest you know attitude and yet joy because you were going home you were going back.

Q: You were in the war when it ended? The European ended the Japanese right, you remember that?

LA: Yes. We were in Mississippi in town when the word came out and we were all

running for churches so we could go say a prayer or something and the military came with these big trucks and they were just swooping us all up. We had to get back on base right away they were afraid of maybe what we would do because it was men and women both from the base in town and you had to go back home to the base. We kept thinking, what are we going to do, we are just glad it's over you know but they made us all go back to base and there were curfews for three or four days. They were afraid if we would drink, would we fight. It took a long time for me to accept Japanese people partly because of what I saw. It took me a long, long time. I know they say forgive and forget, but we saw the shape of some of those soldiers and then when you read the story about the women nurses that were captured.

Q: When you went in, it was not out of the question that you could have been sent overseas. Could happen and you heard those stories, what do you think about that?

LA: I think I just wanted to get out of Kingston and this was an opportunity and then I could go to school for something when I came back and I think that whatever happened, happened.

Q: Did your education get supported by the GI Bill?

LA: Yes, yes.

Q: So when you went to business school, you had GI Bill benefits right?

LA: Yes, that's right.

Q: OK now you develop some friendships in the service obviously, did you keep in touch with those folks?

LA: No, which is sad.

Q: No reunions?

LA: I don't know of any offhand.

Q: When they dedicated the women's' memorial down in Arlington Virginia did you get to go down?

LA: No, I didn't. I would like to go and see the World War II memorial. I told my kids, that's where I would want to go.

Q: I just saw it a couple of weeks ago. Went there at night actually. Now the question is, did you join any veteran's organizations?

LA: Well I came back to Kingston and I tried to join the American Legion in Kingston, and they didn't want women but I could join the auxiliary which I did for a few years. Then I married and eventually moved to Saugerties, and Jimmy Gage [head of the American Legion] got a hold of me, I don't know how he knew I was in the service. I was at the library.

Q: How long ago was that?

LA: Ten years ago. I joined the legion about ten years ago. And I didn't come to meetings because I didn't know who came to them for a while. And I met Pat Morton through food closets and things like that. She encouraged me to come out but I've reached the stage where I forget it's the third Thursday.

Q: How do you think your military experience influenced you in your life?

LA: Well I think maybe you have developed more compassion. Some understanding of different people and cultures. I think that was the biggest thing

Q: Anything else you'd like to add?

LA: I don't know. I'm glad I did it. I've never been sorry. And it was a good experience, good remembrances. Some of it was hard in the beginning and some of the things you saw and the basic training, to me who was a couch potato was rough but good. Can't believe I was that small. I'm not sorry I did it. I wouldn't tell anybody else who has thoughts to go ahead and do it, it's good even today.

Q: Thank you, Lucy Smith Abbott.

This is November 28th, 2004 at the American Legion Post in Saugerties.

Thank you very much Lucy.

LA: You're welcome.