

**Katherine Abbott  
Veteran**

**Elizabeth Connolly, Interviewer  
Student  
Interviewed on January 11, 2006  
At Veterans Home,  
Glens Falls, New York**

Q. I am Elizabeth Connolly, and I am here with Kay Abbott at her home.

A. That is Katherine Abbott. K.A.T.H.E.R.I.N.E.

Q. I am sorry. I am here with Katherine Abbott at her home in South Glens Falls, New York, On January 11, 2006. When and where were you born?

A. Glens Falls, New York. September 8, 1917.

Q. And you went to school in South Glens Falls, New York?

A. Yes, South Glens Falls.

Q. And you became a nurse right after high school?

A. Yes, I did.

Q. What branch of the service were you a nurse in?

A. The United States Army, and then the United States Air Force. It became the Air Force after the Army.

Q. What made you decide you wanted to be a nurse?

A. Well, (laughing), I don't know. I wanted to do something, and we didn't have enough money for me to go to graduate school. I had wanted to be a school teacher. We had a large family, so we didn't have that much money, and we didn't have student loans then, so my Mom suggested I might like nursing. I did apply at Memorial Hospital in Albany. That is a three year course.

Q. What made you decide to be a nurse in the Army?

A. A friend of mine, a classmate got me into it. So we decided to go in, and after that we heard about the School of Air Evacuation Squadron. We applied for that. We did fine, and then we went overseas.

Q. How long were you in Nursing School for in the Army?

A. That was about two months. We went to basic training originally and this was something new that they added, the School of Air Evacuation, and I think that was six or eight weeks. We were in Bowman Field, Kentucky.

Q. And that was after the war had already started, when you did this?

A. Yes. This was in 1944-1945. I was discharged I think in December 1945.

Q. When you heard about Pearl Harbor, and the United States joining the war, did you think you would join the army?

A. No, I had no idea. I was as shocked as the rest of the world. It never entered my mind at that time that I would join the army. Then my five brothers went in the service, and my classmate talked me into going in. I thought it sounded like a good idea. I was done with training and graduated by then.

Q. Where did you say your first base was?

A. In the United States or Overseas?

Q. In the United States?

A. Mitchell Field in Long Island. That is where I had basic training. Then they transferred me to (unknown), Richmond, Virginia, as just a nurse in the regular Army Corp. They built temporary basic wards, and you went from one ward to another outside, as they were barracks type buildings. And that's when I applied for the School of Air Evacuation.

Q. What were some of the Islands you were shipped to?

A. Hawaii. Johnson Island, that is a small island. Guadalcanal. Guam. Saipan. Tarawa. Biak. Lady of the Philippines. (Unknown Canal).

Q. When you flew, did you stop directly on the islands, or did you go to a hospital ship?

A. It was just Island Hopping with our plane. We had nothing to do with the Navy or their ships. They had their own Naval Nursing Corp.

Q. How often would you go out on flights?

A. It all depended on the patients, and how the war was going. I can't really tell you that, because it varied. We were not lazy for very long. I can tell you that. We shuttled from island to island, and transferred from nurse to nurse on the wards in shifts. So, we did fly day and night with only one nurse and one medical technician aboard and we shuttled and we changed planes, and rested until we were to go out again. So we just kept things going.

Q. Did you have to do any overnight stays on the islands?

A. Oh, yes. Many times. As I said, we flew day and night, so it depended on how the war was going, as to what bases where you transferred to.

Q. Did you find it to be hectic? Very fast paced?

A. No, no really. We had a few boring times. If there was something wrong with the plane, we'd have to go back and change all the patients, and move everything to a new plane, but that didn't bother me. They were pretty good. We tried to have the safest planes for the patients. They weren't just cargo.

Q. Were the planes specially marked on the outside to identify them?

A. No, they were not. They were just marked U.S. Air Force.

Q. Were you ever scared of enemy fliers?

A. No. They had fighter pilots on call or on alert at all times, because of us. But we weren't in the battle zones at all, except at Okinawa. We went in at midnight. We flew in. We were at one of the islands, Guam I think, or Saipan, and we took off at midnight, and so we landed at eight o'clock in the morning, daylight. On the first trip I had, our Navy was shelling on the Southern tip of Okinawa, and that's the closest I ever came. The Japs did fly below the radar, on the Island of Biak, and I was stationed there. I took off with a load of patients at 7:00 P.M., and they flew in at 7:30pm, while another plane was being loaded. They just dropped one bomb. No one was really injured. They hit the enlisted mans area. That was the only time that I came close to actual fighting. They managed to make it pretty safe for us when we were transporting patients.

Q. How many patients could you fit in one plane?

A. Twenty eight.

Q. So they were pretty large planes?

A. They were four motored cargo planes, and as I said, it could carry three tiers of four patients each, on each side of the plane. That's twelve times two is twenty four, and then four on the top stock of the plane on the floor. They were safety hooked, as they say, so it was pretty safe. They had some patients that were ambulatory, that could move, and they would be put on the top layers, as we couldn't always get to them that quickly. This was they would be the last cared for. We didn't have anything really bad, because our planes weren't pressurized, and no oxygen, so we couldn't go any higher than nine or ten thousand feet. That is what is called primitive. We were pioneers in the Air Evacuation. They had just started, as I say. Today, I believe they are much improved. They use helicopters.

Q. How many nurses would be on one plane?

A. Just one, and the medical technician.

Q. Per plane?

A. Yes, per plane. That is a good question.

Q. So you had to tend to all twenty eight patients?

A. Oh yes, all twenty eight. Did I say, there weren't any really critical patients because we didn't have much. We were just transporting them and getting them home.

Q. What did you and the doctors you worked with do, go to one patient at a time, or go around checking them separately?

A. You mean aboard the plane? We had no doctor. Just the nurse and the medical technician. There was no one else there. It was a cargo plane, all the way back there is nothing but space, and that is where we put the patients. On each side, and down the center of the plane. There was just one nurse and one medical technician to care for them all.

Q. When you went to the islands to pick up the wounded soldiers, where would you receive them?

A. Well, we were on call, and if the patients were being brought in by ambulance, we had to be there to see that they were put on the plane and secure their liters to the wall. There were hooks on the wall to snap them to, and we had to make sure they were safe.

Q. Once you picked up patients, where would you fly them to?

A. From Island to Island. As I said, we transferred nurses and were shuttled, so they were on the plane continuously (the patient), until they got to Hawaii. Then I don't know what they did. They probably rested and get checked out for the long trip home by plane.

Q. So all of the soldiers you transported were wounded enough that they wouldn't be going back into battle?

A. Oh, yes. Definitely. They were being discharged. We also had prisoners of war, once the war was over. They were released. I had a plane full of released prisoners of war, twenty eight of them. They were all ambulatory, walking around and all. I had just that one plane full.

Q. They were all brought to Hawaii first?

A. Yes, they were shuttled back to Hawaii, and then on to the states, as soon as possible I suppose. As soon as they could be checked out at the hospital.

Q. Did you have the opportunity to make friends with any of the soldiers that you took care of?

A. Oh, No. There were too many different soldiers. With twenty eight patients, there wasn't time to get to know them. I don't remember any of them, and I am sure they wouldn't remember me, because they also had different nurses and technicians all the time.

Q. Were you always with the same technician when you were flying?

A. No. They were a pretty good group. They were really efficient. They were a good crew. Good people to have aboard with you.

Q. When you were looking after them, how much could you really treat them onboard? Could you give them pain medications?

A. It was mostly that, helping with pain. We had some tuberculosis patients, he was bleeding –coughing up blood- and he was only okay sitting up in the one seat we had. Most of it was dealing with pain though. Codeine and morphine were some of the only medications we carried and then we had penicillin. We have them penicillin shots every three hours. That is about all the medications we had because we had no facilities for any medical treatments aboard the plane. We were for transport. We needed to keep them comfortable and that was the best we could do. That was about it. That was ancient. We were just starting out. Now today, they must have helicopters loaded with everything, more so than we had. But we did our job. We got to fly.

(Pause for drink)

Q. How long had you been active before they allowed you a break in Hawaii?

A. I don't know. I don't remember. I wasn't weak or sick or anything. It was just a lull in the war.

Q. By the extent of the wounded, did you get any idea how bad the fighting was?

A. No, because we didn't think or talk about it.

Q. Was it hard for you to be away from home for that long?

A. No. I got to go to California once, and I called home. I didn't realize there was a three hour time difference. By the time I got a phone in California, it was 10:00pm, and so I called home at 1:00 am in the morning. (laughing) All I heard was "Hello...where are you?" Like I said at the beginning, I didn't realize it was one in the morning there. I just couldn't wait to call, but there was a line, so it was 10:00pm before I could get a phone. So because it was 1:00am in the morning, we didn't have much of a conversation really. (Laughing).

Q. Was that the only time you got to talk to them during the war?

A. Yes. Because it was so close to the end of the war. I came home in December 1945, and I went in, in 1944. I was overseas from January, 1945.

Q. When you were at the bases, what did you do to amuse yourself while you were not flying?

A. Not much. We read. We'd go to the officers club. We'd sit around and talk. There were dances occasionally, but that was about it. I did not see a movie or any of the USO shows because we were flying at all hours, and so I never hit a show. I wasn't bored. We talked a lot, and whatever. You just kept busy doing something. One day we took a truck out, the kind of truck that will drive in the water. We drove it to the ocean, and went swimming, but we never realized that there were sharks all around us. (laughing). So we did some crazy things. When you are young, you think of something. We went walking, and whatever the island had to offer, we tried. (laughing)

Q. Were there any islands that you enjoyed more than others when you were staying there?

A. No. I really didn't think about it. I just took things as they came along. Some of the islands were really, really hot, like Guadalcanal. But you get use to it. It didn't do you any good to complain anyways.

Q. How did you hear about Victory in Europe?

A. I don't really remember. I remember an announcement about the death of President Roosevelt. And the end of the war in the Pacific. We whooped it up after that. I don't remember. Oh yeah, they told me from home that my brothers were coming home from Europe, and that they might be sent to the Pacific, but by then the war was over.

Q. Did you know about the Atomic Bomb before they dropped it? Or was that a surprise to you?

A. It was a surprise. They wouldn't have told us that. We did meet the crew that dropped the first bomb. They were a nervous wreck. It was something horrible. We didn't know they were going there. I don't believe anyone did.

Q. Do you remember what island they took off from?

A. I believe it was Tinian, near Saipan. All the B-19s flew off from there. Occasionally one wouldn't make it and go into the ocean in a puff of black smoke. It happened a couple times. I think that was the outfit that dropped the bomb. The B-29s were the big bombers. Most of the pilots were nervous. It was nerve wracking. Even the fighters were nervous. (garbled.)

Q. Were you glad the Atomic Bomb was dropped instead of them invading Tokyo?

A. I never thought about it. I did go to Tokyo after the war was over for five days. I saw the Emperors fish pond with the gold fish. They were huge. But the people themselves were nice. They didn't fight the war or cause the war. Of course, Our American soldiers were there at the time, so everyone was behaving. But the normal people had nothing to do with the war or fighting it- the women- the children- the young boys. So one of our waiters at the hotel said, "Big bird fly over, drop big bomb." Talking about the plane apparently.

Q. Did the civilians seem more relieved than anything?

A. Oh, yes. They just accepted the loss of the war. They're like ordinary people they did suffer during the war, the normal everyday people. They were just like we were. They had nothing to do with it, but they had to put up with it.

Q. How long were you in the Pacific before you came home?

A. I came home in 1945. I went over in December 1944. I spent Christmas there, so I was there nine or ten months.

Q. When you got back home, did things seem different at all?

A. No. It was just good to be home. I didn't go back to work for about three months, but that was alright.

Q. How do you think the war has influenced your life?

A. I never thought about it. I worked at the VA Hospital for twenty eight years and I had two years, federal service, so thirty years. So I did well with my pension.

Q. How did you get your Air Medal?

A. I had over one thousand flying hours over the Pacific.

Q. Who recommended you for those medals?

A. They keep a record of the hours of flight and then you get it automatically after you have the needed hours in combat zones.

Q. Have you kept in contact with anyone you met in the war?

A. Some of my flight nurses, that were in my squadron. I think there is only two of us left. I just heard that one of the girls in Connecticut died, three days after Ann Margaret died. One is very sick in Washington D.C. Her daughter had twin daughters. There is a couple more. We are all up there in age. They'd have to be, as they had to be minimum

of twenty one to be an Registered Nurse. I hear from them and that's about it. We're all old women. There's not too many of use left.

Pause

Q. Do you have a memory that sticks out the most about the war?

A. No, not really. I think back often, but nothing that would be interesting to many other people. I can't think of any memories. It was an experience. I lived through it. I enjoyed it, and I was doing something worthwhile.

Q. So you are glad you did it?

A. Oh yes, it was an experience. I am glad it's improved, because it was so basic, and now it's really improved. You can tell by the news from Iraq. The program is much more efficient.

Q. Do you think that it's important for teenagers like me to learn about World War II?

A. I think so, yes. It is part of our history. Looking back and noticing all the improvements going on, in medicine. Life is improving. I think it should be remembered, as a part of our history.

Q. Is there anything else you would like to talk about?

A. No...I quit. (Laughing.)

Video shows photo of Katherine Abbott in uniform and her medals.