

Helen Jean Couch Darling
Narrator

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Interviewer

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RG: Helen, if you would introduce yourself for the camera, your name, where you live, your military history.

HD: I'm Helen Jean Darling, I live in Odessa, New York. I joined the WAVES in October, 1944. I was sent to Hunter College for six-week basic training.

RG: Hunter College, that's interesting.

HD: Yes, we were there. They had to get all the people out of the building, in order to have the waves live there and train there. That was a hardship. There we were measured for our uniforms, made by the best seamstresses they could find, all women that worked in New York, and good clothing stores and everything. My navy suit was made of wool gabardine and that was the best fitting suit I ever had, because they took every measurement possible, so they would really fit.

RG: So you joined in October '44, and you stayed in the WAVES until when?

HD: April, 1946.

RG: You went to Hunter College for your basic training and then where?

HD: Then they sent us to St. Albans Naval Hospital, which is located near Jamaica on Long Island, New York.

RG: And you stayed there until you were discharged from service?

HD: That's right.

RG: For people who don't know, what does "WAVES" stand for?

HD: Women's Auxiliary Volunteer Emergency Service.

RG: What was your job?

HD: I was training to be a bedside care person. These days you would call them nurses' aids. We were allowed to give pills, shots, and medications, which nurses' aids don't do these days. In charge of each ward we were assigned, there would be two or three navy nurses. They were women who already had their nursing degrees. They were in charge, and we enlisted personnel did the work on the wards in the hospital.

RG: And your rank was what?

HD: Pharmacist's mate, second class.

RG: From my military experience, the term I always heard was "hospital corpsman". How did a pharmacist's mate and a hospital corpsman work together, or was that not a rank that was used in your era?

HD: It's one and the same thing. The pharmacist's mates and hospital corpsmen trained navy men to go into the field—with marines—as the medics.

RG: So that's where my experience comes from, I was in the marine corps. I'm used to the term corpsman, we always used to refer to them as corpsmen. Were there corpsmen at St. Albans as well?

HD: Some were training there. Of course, then it was getting to the end of the war, so I think a few had left, but not a lot.

RG: You told me before we began the tape about your background before you went into the navy, would you share that as well, please? You grew up in Ithaca?

HD: I was born in Ithaca, grew up in Odessa.

RG: And went to college in?

HD: In Ithaca. Cornell.

RG: Cornell, for a degree in?

HD: Bachelor's of science in microbiology.

RG: And did you go directly from college into the service?

HD: The summer before October '44, I did work at Arnot, in the lab.

RG: That's Arnot Ogden Memorial Hospital in Elmira?

HD: Yes.

RG: What made you join the service?

HD: That was a long time ago, I felt patriotic and I wanted to do something in the medical field.

RG: An awful lot of people had the same kind of idea, they felt very patriotic and they wanted to do their part. Did you enjoy your time in the service?

HD: Yes, some of the best friends I have I made in the service.

RG: And are you still in touch with some of them today?

HD: Yes.

RG: That's wonderful. In some ways, that makes it all worthwhile, the sacrifice, because I'm sure, to one degree or another, there was sacrifice on your part . . . Tell me what a typical day was at St. Albans, while you were there.

HD: Well, they got us up early and we were in cubicles. Four girls in a cubicle. Then, they allowed us to go to breakfast, then we would just report to the ward that we'd been assigned to.

RG: And just a general day of patient care?

HD: Yes, I was first assigned to the plastic surgery ward, which was a new field at the time. There were two doctors there, Dr. Hammond and Dr. Hardy, and they did plastic surgery on arms, legs, whatever was needed.

RG: And were many of the patients men that were wounded then sent back to combat?

HD: Yes.

RG: I would assume that for plastic surgery, there were some radical injuries and wounds.

HD: Yes. Marines were hospitalized in naval hospitals.

RG: That's right. They saw some awful fighting. Must've been some horrific sights and experiences that you went through during that time.

HD: There were. We were there when Admiral Nimitz's fleet came into New York harbor. They unloaded many guys, and they all had to come to St. Albans to have a final physical exam before they were discharged, so we were pretty swamped. That trip, they brought men who had been on the March to Bataan. We saw some of those people.

RG: Talk a little bit about the hospital itself. Before we began taping, you were telling me about the size of the hospital. Fill the people in about how big that place was.

HD: The wooden wards housed fifty beds. They were built around a hallway, which was octagonal. To walk around the hallway was a mile, in a circle.

RG: The octagon was the center of the hospital, and everything radiated off of that. And the wards contained fifty beds, how many wards were there?

HD: Maybe forty or fifty.

RG: That was a very large hospital, that would compare with some of the largest hospitals today.

HD: I think so.

RG: And with some obviously very wounded and injured individuals. Did you enjoy your stay at St. Albans?

HD: Yes, I did. We had a lot of good times. On our days off, usually there was a bunch of us women, we would go to New York at night. Go from St. Albans to Jamaica on a bus and catch a subway to New York. We knew the subways by heart. We could go any place we wanted to. We learned where to get off and everything. We could walk to lower Manhattan at night with no fear of anybody.

RG: Did you go in uniform or in civilian clothes?

HD: Uniform.

RG: That would be just the opposite today, wouldn't it? People usually leave their uniform at the base. So, a woman from Odessa in the Big City, you felt comfortable there? But it was a different era from now, I guess.

HD: We always went together. Sometimes we got free tickets for shows. I think I saw Oklahoma four times. We went to a certain office to pick up free tickets.

RG: In some of the photos you showed me, there was one of a group of WAVES—and I think there were even some men on board—on what they call the “beach bus.” Did you get to ride the beach bus very often?

HD: Yes. We were allowed to take patients to the beach, on stretchers or wheelchairs if they needed. The Atlantic Beach Club, which was a fancy beach club, had leased the whole beach area and the clubhouse to the hospital. It was for use of all the patients, so we could go and swim there. The beach club was part of what is now Kennedy Airport.

RG: That all got swallowed up? That would be amazing, something as exclusive as that, that they would lease it to the navy. But it was a different era. Would you do it again?

HD: Yes.

RG: Any regrets about it?

HD: Not really, no.

RG: Would you recommend to a young woman just graduating from college, as you had, that the service might be a good career choice?

HD: I think I would, yes.

RG: What did you do when you returned home? What kind of work did you go into?

HD: I worked back at the lab, at Arnot. Got married. Lived in Elmira and my husband worked on the dike the year it was built, after the flood of '35 or '36. We did move back to Odessa

because my husband didn't have work anymore. Then he went to work with a friend of his, building houses. Then we built a house next to my dad's house.

RG: But the whole time you worked, your worked at the Arnot, in the lab?

HD: From there, I went to Schuyler Hospital. I worked there part-time, until my kids were older. After the flood of '72, they moved Schuyler Hospital from the old hospital, which was on the ground level of the valley, so to speak, to the new hospital up on a hill. We had to move quickly because they had to bring people from Corning over to our hospital, because what they called the pavillion—where the old people lived—was flooded. They lived in the hospital and what's now the New York Fire Academy in Montour. It had been a local high school for ages.

RG: I'd been to the Academy a couple times but never knew what it was. I figured it had to be a school that was converted for the purpose of the Fire Academy . . . The experiences and the training that you had in service, did they help you in later life, after you had left the service?

HD: I think so. It made me more aware of who people are, how you should treat people, and what you should expect of people.

RG: That's an interesting perspective. I've never heard a veteran take it from that perspective.

HD: I learned to appreciate friends and friendships. I had met my husband after the war, he had been in the army in the South Pacific. I was on one side of the world, he was on the other.

RG: Did you know him before you served?

HD: I knew who he was, because he had lived only eight miles away, in Mecklenburg, New York.

RG: Is there anything about your time in the service that you would like to add? Any information I haven't asked you about?

HD: Yes, to get back to the hospital, we used to take patients to the auditorium. They had a big auditorium there, and they had shows and different things. One night, we were asked to take people down, and I was wheeling somebody in a wheelchair. It was a musical fair and it was Glenn Miller Orchestra. St. Albans was their first stop when they came from overseas. We didn't know that Glenn Miller was no longer with them, remember that?

RG: Yes, I remember he was lost in a plane crash. You weren't aware of that?

HD: No, I knew that Tex Beneke was leaving the band, however. We did hear the Glenn Miller Orchestra that night.

RG: Any other famous people that you ran into or had anything to do with?

HD: Besides seeing President Roosevelt?

RG: Well, let's talk about President Roosevelt.

HD: I didn't tell you that we had passed in review for the army?

RG: Tell me about that day, that had to be a highlight for all of you.

HD: We were just in our platoons and there were nine or ten platoons, nine rows of twelve girls each. We saw him, not closely, but we did know he was there. We marched by the car that he was in.

RG: Were there only the WAVES or were there others as well?

HD: Only the WAVES.

RG: And you have a picture of President Truman, tell a little about that.

HD: He was in New York on Navy Day. He was in a parade, in an open-top car, so we saw him. And on V-J Day, I was in New York with a bunch of friends. That day, everyone was milling around in Times Square. No cars there, just people walking around, hugging and kissing, yelling, and eating ice cream cones.

RG: Got to be a very happy memory. How long did that kind of celebration go on that day?

HD: All day.

RG: How did you get the news?

HD: I don't know, we just knew that it was V-J Day.

RG: Were you in New York already and the news came that it was V-J Day? Or did you come into New York because it was V-J Day?

HD: We went New York because we knew it was V-J Day.

RG: That's great, they had enough of you so that they could release some of you to celebrate.

HD: Yes, I remember on V-E Day I had to work, so I wasn't in New York on that day.

RG: You got the second one, and the bigger one. I can remember V-E Day and I remember there was a bit of caution. V-E Day was not the end, we were still at war and couldn't celebrate too much. That was my memory of it, you might have a different memory of it.

HD: I had to work on V-E Day, that's all I remember.

RG: What else would you like to tell us about your time in the service?

HD: They sent me to the Bronx, where they trained merchant marine men, to type medical records. I had not typed that much in my life, and I had to type the medical records and make

four copies. It was kind of hard if you made a mistake. I remember I improved my typing, but some of the officers gave me a sidelong glance once in a while.

RG: Is it typical of the service to have a person with a medical degree in microbiology typing medical records?

HD: Yes. I couldn't be an officer in the medical corps because I didn't have any experience. The lady that was the head of the lab at St. Albans said she had done that before.

RG: But you seem to be pleased with the fact that you were enlisted, that doesn't seem to bother you at all.

HD: I don't think so.

RG: On a personal note, why microbiology? What made the young lady from Odessa go to Cornell for a degree in microbiology?

HD: I knew one girl who had done that. My father wanted me to go to Cornell because my three older sisters had not been Cornell graduates. Two went to Elmira, and one graduated from the Eastman School of Music. I was the last one left, I had to go to Cornell, because my dad had graduated from Cornell. In those days, home economics was the thing to go in, but I didn't want to be a home ec. person or a home ec. teacher. The other side was to go to the Adjutant General School and take basic sciences. So I did that.

RG: You're one of four girls. Very unusual in that era, to have four daughters, all college graduates, wasn't it?

HD: Yes, from a small town, I suppose. My dad was the son of a banker, and my grandfather died before he got to live in the big house in the town. He had to take over the bank business, and he did make money until the crash of '29, then he lost about everything. He still had two girls in college. I don't know he finally got them all the way through, but he did. He took out loans on the big house, and he told me it took until 1952 to pay off the loans.

RG: That's a long time. Did any of your sisters go into the service?

HD: No, they were all older.

RG: Anything more that you want to add?

HD: I can't think of anything at the moment.

RG: You really do have a fascinating background and a fascinating story. I've enjoyed doing this interview very much. Like I said, I'd like to make sure there's nothing left that you want to say.

HD: We all in my class wrote a history of our moments in the service, and it was put in a book. I've written down certain things before.

RG: Good, so it is recorded in more than one place. Thank you very much for your service number one, then thank you for your time.

HD: You're very welcome.