

NEW YORK STATE MILITARY MUSEUM

INTERVIEW - KATHLEEN MION

MARCH 26, 2003

MALE VOICE: This is an interview at the New York State Military Museum, Saratoga Springs, New York. It is the 26th of August 2003, approximately 10:00 a.m. The interviewers are Mike Russert (phonetic) and Wayne Clark.

Could you give us your full name, date of birth, and place of birth, please?

KATHLEEN MION: My full name now is Kathleen Ann Mion. I was born August 3rd, 1966, and I was born in Plattsburgh, New York.

MALE VOICE: What kind of educational background did you have prior to entering the service?

KATHLEEN MION: I received my Associate Degree in Nursing in Clinton Community College in Plattsburgh, and then from there I went to Rochester, New York and graduated with my Bachelors at Nazareth College in Nursing.

MALE VOICE: Did you work prior to entering the service?

KATHLEEN MION: When I took my Nursing Boards after my Associate Degree program, I worked in Rochester at

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Rochester General Hospital while I was continuing with my BS program as an RN.

MALE VOICE: Okay. When did you enter the service?

KATHLEEN MION: I entered in February of 1990.

Yes. And I did my military training.

MALE VOICE: Okay. Why did you enlist?

KATHLEEN MION: During my Bachelor program we had a lot of nurse recruiters come in and out of the colleges trying to get people interested in the military, and I spoke with Army recruiters and Navy recruiters, and I actually went on two recruiting trips, one to Jacksonville, Florida, and one to Portsmouth, Virginia trying to show us the way of the Navy and the Nurse Corps and the Medical Corps, and trying to get us interested, and it was -- at that time it was very appealing, and I was young and didn't really know where I wanted to go in my nursing, and so I figured this would be a good chance to experience a whole lot of different things, and to see maybe some of the country.

MALE VOICE: Okay. Why did you select the Navy

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over the others?

KATHLEEN MION: They took me on some good Navy trips, and to be honest with you, I also was looking at the duty stations and where you'd actually get stationed with like the Air Force or the Navy, and the Navy had some really nice duty stations on the coasts near the water, which I love, and they just had a very professional group of instructors and officers that I spoke with. So they were able to sway me. I'm very happy I chose the Navy.

MALE VOICE: Okay. Where did you go for your basic training?

KATHLEEN MION: Newport, Rhode Island at the Naval Educational Training Center in Newport, Rhode Island.

MALE VOICE: Did you receive just basic drill training or --

KATHLEEN MION: It was called OIS, Officer Indoctrination School. Because I already had a Bachelor Degree, I went straight in as an officer as opposed to enlisted, and they basically -- it was kind of knife and fork school. It wasn't as rigorous as a lot of people entering for the real basic training. This was to teach you the

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different ranks, and basically just an introduction to the Navy, the difference between officers and enlisted, and what was to be expected of you know, the Medical and Nurse Corps.

So I was with like lawyers and other nurses, some JAG officers, dental -- the dental corps, and there was a lot of physical training also, but a lot of it was classroom instruction.

MALE VOICE: Did you receive any further medical or nurse training that you had already had?

KATHLEEN MION: Not in that program. That was basically an introduction to the military.

MALE VOICE: Okay.

KATHLEEN MION: And so not at that time. I already, you know, had my nursing.

MALE VOICE: Okay. Where did you go for more specific training?

KATHLEEN MION: At the end of that, then I was commissioned an ensign in the Navy, and I was -- I got my first choice for my duty station. We got a chance to pick three different choices, and I got my first choice, which was Portsmouth Naval Hospital in Portsmouth, Virginia.

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MALE VOICE: Why did you pick that?

KATHLEEN MION: Because it was one of the -- they call it one of the big four hospitals. Bethesda was another big one and Balboa in San Diego was another big one, and I figured I could get the largest experience and training just to start out, so that's why I chose there.

MALE VOICE: How long were you there?

KATHLEEN MION: I was there until October of '93. So about three years.

MALE VOICE: Okay. Did you -- what were your experiences like there? What were your experiences like? Could you relate some of them or --

KATHLEEN MION: Oh, it was excellent. When I first checked in I stayed in an officer's quarters until I found a place or an apartment where I wanted to live because I was not living on the base. As a single person, they don't really have the base housing. It's more towards families, and it's hard to get into, so I found an apartment, and my assignment was on a pediatric surgical floor where we prepped patients and they had surgeries, and we took care of them after for pediatrics, which was an excellent experience, and

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then I was there for about six months, and got the call we were shipping out, flying out to Saudi for the war.

So I was only in the military for six months when that all happened.

MALE VOICE: You mentioned, did you receive specialized biological chemical warfare training at all?

KATHLEEN MION: This was over -- over in Saudi.

MALE VOICE: You didn't receive it until you were there?

KATHLEEN MION: Yes. Because it was -- I guess they didn't really know who was all going, and at first we were put on alert like stating that a lot of people from our hospital was on the fleet hospital billet. I believe somewhere between 7 and 800 of us went. So they got a lot of reservists to the hospital to maintain it while we were all taken away supporting the war, and I don't think there was time to get everybody, you know, everything ready even beforehand to give us the training, and so there was, you know, plenty of time while we were there, a lot of down time where we got a lot of instruction over there.

MALE VOICE: When you -- how did you get to Saudi

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Arabia? You flew over?

KATHLEEN MION: We flew over. Yes.

MALE VOICE: Did you go as a unit or --

KATHLEEN MION: We went in different planes, and we went different waves, and we went over as a unit, yes.

MALE VOICE: What was your unit?

KATHLEEN MION: I was in like the second wave, and it was mostly with nurses and doctors. The first unit was a lot of people preparing, like the CB's would go over in the first unit to prepare the area, you know, do a lot of the -- I guess the building, the maintenance stuff, and then you know, the medical staff to erect the hospital along with CB's and everything, and you know, get the units the way need them, went over after that.

So it was like the second wave. I don't really know what it's called.

MALE VOICE: What culturally, how do you think it was -- I'm trying to think of -- how did you think you fit in with the people in Saudi Arabia? Did you have to wear a berka (phonetic)? Were you --

KATHLEEN MION: Culturally when we got off the

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plane it was dark, and then we took buses to where we were going, but we were dropped off the plane, and it felt like you just stepped into a sauna. We were wearing, you know, fatigues, long sleeves. You get off, and the air you can cut it with a knife. It must have been about 120 with humidity, and so we couldn't really see -- you know, see the surroundings. We were like in a dark area, and then we took our buses where we were going, and our hospital was put up in basically a big huge parking lot like the size of a football field, and we were not exposed to the outside culture.

The CB's were allowed to go in and out of town. We were not. We were pretty much enclosed in a gated area, and they didn't want us to be out and about in society or the local towns.

So I did have some taste of it when we got some R & R, which was much later in the game. I got a week of R & R, and we went to a town that was, you know, farther in Saudi, farther away from the border where we were able to get out, but no, I was never required to wear any of the berka or anything like that. We wore fatigues. We wore our fatigues, and when we were in our compound, which was just about all

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the time, we could wear you know, appropriate civilian attire, shorts or sweats.

MALE VOICE: How would you rate your training for the experiences you had there?

KATHLEEN MION: Well, it's kind of --

MALE VOICE: Do you think you were prepared?

KATHLEEN MION: It's kind of tough because you don't know what you're getting into. I think I was as prepared as they could get us, they could do without -- you know, I think you're best prepared by being in a situation, and that if you're in the situation again, then you're okay.

"I've been through it. I know what to do," but I think considering what we were getting into, they prepared us. We had a lot of down time when the war was starting. So we had a lot of staff taking turns actually working in the hospital.

When we weren't working in the hospital, then we were training, whether it was, you know, heat training or chemical warfare training. You know, they trained us a little bit about the culture, you know, and the different people, so yes, I'm happy with the training.

MALE VOICE: How much chemical, biochemical warfare

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were you -- training were you given? Were you given any or -
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KATHLEEN MION: We had several classes on the different gasses, the mustard gases. We had I guess experts on the situations come in and give us significant training classes, and we -- sometimes they would be a whole day. You know, like if you didn't do a shift in the hospital it would be a whole day of actual training, and we got, you know, to where the mask, the gas mask, and the appropriate gear -- mock gear they called it, if you had to actually take that out and use it. So several -- multiple classes. It was ongoing also.

MALE VOICE: Did you ever have to actually put on the mock gear, the full mock suit?

KATHLEEN MION: One time when it was -- we would do drills with like some gear that was already out of the package that was just there for us to practice with, but our own mock gear we had to take once when the sirens went off and SCUD missiles were taking out some -- so it was an actual -- it wasn't a drill. This was an actual thing that got -- you know, nothing happened, but we were in the sand bunkers

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and we had to --

MALE VOICE: How long did you have to wear the suit for?

KATHLEEN MION: I'd say less than two hours, and then the drill was called off, and --

MALE VOICE: That must have been awfully hot.

KATHLEEN MION: It was hot. It happened to be later in the season. So thing actually -- you know, if I say it was 80, 90 degrees, that was actually cool to us, so you acclimate, and that was at night time, and we were in our tent, and there were ten girls in the tent, and we actually had to help one girl get to her suit because she was really kind of -- had a little anxiety attack, so it was stressful, and it didn't last long. Thank God that was an isolated incident.

MALE VOICE: Did you -- were you aware of any missiles ever coming into your area?

KATHLEEN MION: It did, and that was taken out, and it wasn't -- I mean, it wasn't directed at us, but it was in sight, and so everybody within a certain radius, you know, the sirens would sound, and whether -- you know, whether it

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was 50 or 100 miles away, you know, if you're in a certain radius everybody gets notified and yes, so we got it.

MALE VOICE: Could you maybe discuss your -- some of your experiences there? I remember hearing you say something about there were some patients that were POW's?

KATHLEEN MION: Rare, but we did get a handful. The POW's were supposed to be brought to a different unit, but occasionally if there was one in our area or one was apprehended or -- we did have a very good hospital that had some specialty training. We had four ICU units in terms of care units, and I believe six operating rooms.

So this couple times that we did get some of the POW's it was because they needed our specialty care or they just happened to be in the area, and we don't -- you know, obviously you don't turn anybody away. You have to just treat everybody like yourself, and we did get a couple.

MALE VOICE: What kind of medical treatment did you give Americans?

KATHLEEN MION: Oh, everything. I'd say you can get into the -- I don't know if you're looking for combat or --

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MALE VOICE: (Inaudible).

KATHLEEN MION: In the beginning before the actual ground war started, what we got mostly was, until everybody acclimated, most with heat exhaustion, heat stroke. We had some heart attacks, you know, people that just medically that's what happens.

We got some snake bits and some scorpion bites with a lot of swelling that had to be treated and air vac'd out. What else? Believe it or not, we were slower than a lot of the other ones. My best friend worked on an orthopedic ward, and she got tons of the marines and sailors with broken bones out there, you know, stepping into deep whatever. A lot of broken bones, a lot of minor surgeries, out there playing around or just working around, a lot of injuries like. They were always (inaudible), but we got the, like I said, the heat things, dehydration, severe dehydration, things like that in the beginning, and then after -- once the ground war started, we did get some tank accidents. Some guns, but not -- certainly not what we expected.

MALE VOICE: What kind of medals and citations did you receive?

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KATHLEEN MION: Oh, Lord. I can't give you the names of them because I don't have them in front of me. We got I think a total of eight or nine medals. I didn't get anything that anybody else didn't get especially, but it's because of setting up in a war zone and being (inaudible) hospital we really were awarded with a lot of commendations and things like that.

MALE VOICE: Were you able to keep in touch with those back at home?

KATHLEEN MION: Writing, and you know, until you're there for a while everything is slow, but once you're there the mail system gets, you know, a lot quicker. I got a lot of care packages, a lot of letters. I believe it was after the first three months that we were able to make a phone call to get phone lines set up, which were just outside of our compound, and we'd wait in line for about eight hours and be able to make a phone call, but you know, as time went on, after the first three months, you know, everything got a lot quicker, the mail and the phone calls.

MALE VOICE: What was the food like?

KATHLEEN MION: Very fattening. In the beginning

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we got MRA's, which you know, you kind of eat what you can out of them. They're not too edible. And they were able to give us tomatoes and some fresh fruit, things like that, and once the mess hall got set up, I don't know if it was because -- it was just very fattening. Loaded with gravies and a lot of starches I guess to keep you going, so people were packing on the pounds because we were stationery a lot. So you had to be selective in what your -- I'd just skip meals every now and then.

MALE VOICE: Okay. What do you think was one of your most -- or some of your most memorable experiences?

KATHLEEN MION: Well, for the war it was just (inaudible) I think you come together as a group, as a unit, as a hospital, you know, with the doctors, with the corps men. It almost seemed like we weren't separated officers, enlisted, doctors. It was just like, you know, you're all there to serve a purpose, so I met some of my closest friends during this time, just the camaraderie. You had to stick together and be one, so that was just incredible, and I think especially trainings over there -- I mean, I would never have all those trainings, all the courses. That's all extra that

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you wouldn't get unless you're in a situation like that. So that to me is just a plus.

You know, the snake venom, just the different things because of the culture over there, and we were able to learn about the culture and, you know, what's allowed and what's not allowed, and I guess the fear, and you know, once the ground war started we were actually so excited, and it's like okay, let's go kick some butt and do this, and once the war started it just -- it was just like okay, now we're here to do our job and it was pretty exciting.

MALE VOICE: You mentioned that you met General Schwartzkopf. Could you tell us about that?

KATHLEEN MION: We didn't have a personal conversation.

MALE VOICE: Yes. I know.

KATHLEEN MION: Even though I would have loved to, and at the time until I'm like he turns I'm like oh, my God, this is who this. He walked into my -- the intensive care unit that I happened to be working on. We had four and only two were open at the time because we didn't have enough patients, and so he came in and, you know, we were all in

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awe. He's a wonderful man, and he happened to come over and shake the hand of a patient that I was taking care of, who I believe was there having a tank injury. I think that's what he was in there for, but he was fine. He was healing well and he was going to be leaving in a couple days, and so at that time, you know, he spoke with me just briefly, and I introduced, you know, Ensign Twining and the nurse taking care of this gentleman. I just gave him an update on how my patient was doing, and then we got our picture taken, and then he just kind of made the rounds and walked through and it was wonderful.

MALE VOICE: Okay. Do you think -- what do you think about our involvement? Do you think we were justified being there?

KATHLEEN MION: I was coming up in my (inaudible) at the time. I never thought anything like that would happen. I don't even really think that I understood the extent of that or the magnitude of it at the time. I just got in the Navy and I was probably as green as they get, so my opinion, we were there to do a job and we did it. I don't really think I can comment whether I really think we should

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have been there or not.

MALE VOICE: When did you -- how long were you in Saudi Arabia?

KATHLEEN MION: I left at the end of March and I got there at the end of August.

MALE VOICE: March of?

KATHLEEN MION: March of '91.

MALE VOICE: Okay.

KATHLEEN MION: So I was there (inaudible).

MALE VOICE: How long were you there once the war ended?

KATHLEEN MION: Well --

MALE VOICE: I don't know exactly when it ended.

KATHLEEN MION: The ground war was really quick, and that pretty much was the end of it. After I left at the end of March, I mean the ground war started February, so it's probably less than two months, and then another group came over just as -- I mean, basically was -- they declared the end of the war, but another wave came over to I guess maintain and take care of, you know, a smaller portion of the hospital and the support staff.

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MALE VOICE: So you didn't get to break things down and --

KATHLEEN MION: No. We didn't break it down. We set it up, and that was enough. That was enough work. We did it, yes.

MALE VOICE: Now, you stayed in service until '96. Where were you assigned after --

KATHLEEN MION: After the war I was back in Virginia until '93, where I did most of my work in the emergency room. That was a really fast paced emergency room, and from there I transferred to Camp Pendleton in California, and that was the Marine Corps base, Camp Pendleton, and I worked there for -- until I got out in '96.

MALE VOICE: Did you basically do the same --

KATHLEEN MION: I had emergency room. Once you get into a special thing, they want to keep you there because you're trained and you're good at it, and you know, I took charge nurse position and, you know, with time it had, you know, (inaudible), but yep, I ended up doing most of my military career was actually emergency room. Once they get you, they don't like to let you go, which is a compliment.

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You're trained at what you do so --

MALE VOICE: Do you still work as a nurse?

KATHLEEN MION: After I got out of the military, I went and actually worked as a civilian at Balboa Naval Hospital, and then from there I got a position in the VA Hospital, which I really enjoyed, and then had some problems with a former relationship, so I came back home.

Where I worked, emergency room in New Hampshire and then I did some same day surgery here, and now I'm a full-time mom and happy doing that.

MALE VOICE: Okay. Did you stay in contact with anyone that you served with?

KATHLEEN MION: My best friends are the Navy nurses that I met, two in particular. One just recently got out of the Navy. She was doing Reserves, and because of a sick child she got out of the Reserves, and the other one is now a nurse anaesthetist that just got back from a ten-month deployment because of our recent war, and she was on a ship doing nursing anaesthesia, and she's high up there in the ranks, Rob, and you go, girl. Those are my two best friends, and will always be.

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MALE VOICE: Have you joined any veterans organizations at all?

KATHLEEN MION: No, I haven't. Not yet.

MALE VOICE: How do you think your time in the service changed or effected your life?

KATHLEEN MION: Definitely a positive. I mean, sometimes I wish I could go back in. Sometimes I wish I would have stayed in longer, but you have to sometimes make the decisions of children, and you know, some people can do it all, and ER I had a really tough schedule with holidays and nights, everything, and so, you know, I chose a family life, but I miss it, and it was probably the best experience of my life, and days I'll just always remember.

I had excellent, excellent training, everything from all the specialty trauma trainings, this is outside the war. They were always just -- it was continuing education. I mean, just always, you know, leadership training, advanced cardiac life support, trauma, TNCC, all of my specialty trainings that is really hard to get as a civilian on the outside, which I've learned, so I should have taken advantage of more of the opportunities because it was wonderful.

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MALE VOICE: Why don't you -- you have some photographs. All you have to do is just show -- if you hold just right up in front of you, this way Wayne can zoom in on it, and everybody can (inaudible).

KATHLEEN MION: I was waiting to go to Saudi at a terminal -- I guess an airport terminal.

MALE VOICE: Now, who is with you?

KATHLEEN MION: This actually is Lieutenant Santana, the one in the middle. She was my boss on the pediatric floor.

MALE VOICE: Okay.

KATHLEEN MION: And I'm the one over here, and this right here was another nurse. I think she was a lieutenant (inaudible) at the time, and I was an ensign, and she worked on our pediatric wards.

MALE VOICE: When was that taken?

KATHLEEN MION: When it was taken?

MALE VOICE: Do you remember when?

KATHLEEN MION: It must have been taken in August of '90 because that's when we were waiting to go over, the end of August of '90.

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MALE VOICE: Okay.

KATHLEEN MION: This is myself working a night shift in the intensive care unit over at Hospital 5. Not much action going on. That's why you see me sitting there at the desk. I don't even know if we had any patients. Probably no patients at the time, which is a good thing.

Christmas time, sitting there opening up the care package.

MALE VOICE: Bring it closer to you.

KATHLEEN MION: This is Christmas time opening up the care package.

MALE VOICE: Okay.

KATHLEEN MION: Sitting at work. We must have been allowed a five-minute break here. They were erecting probably the hospital, making sand bunkers, and you see me there laying on the ground with doctors and everybody.

MALE VOICE: When you erect the hospital, what did you have to do exactly?

KATHLEEN MION: We pretty much had to do everything, all the poles, all the -- I mean, it was just huge. I don't even know how long it took us, but it took a

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couple weeks probably because it was a very large fleet. It was a very large hospital, and according to my understanding, it was like the first fleet hospital that was actually erected. So I know a lot of our higher ups, a lot of our leaders got a lot of specialty awards because it was kind of like the first thing, so in a war time situation.

MALE VOICE: Now, did CB's have to level the area?

KATHLEEN MION: Like I said, it was a huge tarmac.

Big huge tarmac, and so they had to bring in, you know, huge cinder blocks, and we had a lot of equipment, and huge cinder blocks to secure things to the ground, and the hospital was air conditioned. Thank God for the patients and (inaudible), but our big tents that we slept in weren't.

That's just doing some sand bankers, filling up the sand bags. This actually is that intensive care unit I worked at. The girl's another nurse. She must have just gotten some groceries at our little tiny store, and there's a lot of patients that you can actually see laying in the cots right there.

I don't really know what I'm pointing at, but that's the hospital unit again. You can see some hard hats

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and the beds. Hard hats will travel, and this is just inside my tent sitting on the cot, shots for Mom. Nothing too important.

This was back home. I believe I was doing an interview for a paper, and just setting up an ID for a patient probably in the ER, but they wanted kind of an action shot, so that's pretty much all that is.

MALE VOICE: Okay.

KATHLEEN MION: And we were able to do a little walking around. This wasn't a dangerous situation, but it's my best friend, actually Nan and myself on a tank.

MALE VOICE: Okay.

KATHLEEN MION: That's as close as we got to the big (inaudible) right there (inaudible) tank, and

MALE VOICE: All right. Well, thank you very much.

MALE VOICE: Yes. Thank you.

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