

U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum  
Interview with Roberta Jones  
May 31, 1997  
Margaret Garrett, Interviewer

Tape 1 of 1, Side A

Name at birth Roberta Arlene Stubblefield. Born October 15, 1921, St. Louis, Missouri.

When Roberta was six months old she moved with her family to Pocahontas, Arkansas. They next lived in Oklahoma for a while, and then back to Pocahontas until she graduated from high school. She grew up in a lower middle class family as far as income. During the Depression they were quite poor. Her father did farming, had a grocery store. For a while he worked for the WPA. Her father lost almost everything in the Depression. A few months after the family moved back to Arkansas someone set fire to their house. They were not home when it happened. The fire was extinguished after it had gutted one room. Her father had that rebuilt. She was nine or ten at the time. A few months later they were visiting her grandmother and someone set fire to the house again and the house burned to the ground. They were left with nothing except what they had worn to her grandmothers' for their weekend. She remembers coming back and looking into the ground which had been the basement and seeing her little wagon. Everything was destroyed. They never found out who had done it or why. Her father had lost his job as deputy sheriff or something like that in Oklahoma and in addition after coming back to Arkansas without work someone burned his house down. He did have a little 40 acre farm that they could move out to but it was blow after blow.

Roberta had very loving parents and two sisters. They didn't know they were poor. Her mother was a saint. Her father was wonderful too. He didn't reach out to the community the way her mother did. Her father took care of the family. Roberta was the youngest of three girls. Her sisters were wonderful. They were five and two years older than Roberta. They are still close.

Roberta started nursing school six months after high school, when there was an opening, at Baptist Memorial High School in Memphis. Her mother

wanted her to be a nurse. Her mother had a lot of doctors in the family. There was no money for Roberta to become a doctor. Nursing school was very hard. Roberta would have loved to go into journalism but there were not a lot of choices during the Depression. Nursing was ok. She knew she could get a job. This was 1940 to 1944. She finished training in January 1944.

Roberta then applied to be a stewardess. People from her hospital started going into the Army and she decided that was what she wanted to do. She was 23, right from nursing school, no experience. She knew she wanted to go to Europe, to Germany. There was a lot of glamour and adventure attached to the idea. She knew there was danger but she thought she would not get hurt. She signed up through the mail and got a commission through the mail.

Roberta first went to San Antonio, Texas, for basic training. She had to stand on the train much of the time. A chaplain, an enlisted man, and she shared one seat for the eight hour trip. After basic training she got orders for Camp Swift, Texas, where the 121st Evacuation Hospital was activating. From there they went to New York by train, stayed there a few days. They then boarded ship in a blackout and went to England. They did not know where they were going. It took five days to get to England. In England they were working in a hospital for a little while. They had American casualties from a big battle. They also had to wait for some heavy activity to loosen up so they could cross the channel and go to France.

Then they went to Luxembourg. From Luxembourg, on one occasion, another nurse and she and a doctor and a couple of corpsmen were sent to somewhere in Germany. That was a short distance. They went in one Army ambulance at night. It was complete blackout. There must have been dim lights to see a little bit. When they reached their destination they were bawled out for having come because it was so dangerous but their commanding officer hadn't know that. The communication was not so good. They were attached to a a very small outfit. Help was badly needed. There were a lot of German and American wounded there. Roberta and others lived from day to day. Roberta had no thought of the war ever ending. They never knew whether they would be moving up the next day. They only kept the patients less than 24 hours, then the patients were sent back to the rear. Everything was so fast they didn't think about

tomorrow. They followed where the fighting was. They were advancing. This was the end of 1944. It was heavy fighting but advancing constantly. They always set up their tents in the field, unless there was a building handy. No flooring in the tents. She was a general duty nurse, put in anywhere she was needed.

By this time they were attached to Patton's Third Army. They were near Buchenwald. Patton had been there. He wanted everyone to visit Buchenwald to see what was there so that they would become so furious that it would make better determined, fighting men. Roberta's commanding officer thought it would not be a place for the women. There were very few women. He did not want the women to go there but Patton said everyone would go. So all of them had to go. It was just one day. They went in shifts. Roberta was in the first shift. The liberators had handed out food. Nothing else had been done. The bodies were still there.

They went on a dismal day in the spring. Roberta had heard that this was going on but she didn't know anyone who had seen it. When they arrived they didn't speak to each other. It was such a shock. No one broke down and wept or had hysterics. She just remembers silence. She walked through it in a bit of a daze. They were shown through the camp, perhaps by some soldiers. The inmates were still dressed in their striped uniforms. They were so happy and trying so hard to do anything they could for the liberators. Roberta thinks it was American and British who liberated Buchenwald. All she saw were American soldiers. Roberta and her group went through the barracks. They were wooden buildings, not very large. They had bunk beds four high with just a few inches between each two bunks so you knew there was no way for a person to turn over. No mattresses or anything like that. There were two men there still in their striped uniforms. They were skin and bones. The men had been given some black bread and wanted to share it with Roberta's group. Had they been more mature they might have let them share it with them but they thought they could not take their bread. Then they were shown the crematoria with bodies ready to be cremated. They were shown the gas chambers and bodies stacked so high. They were taken to an administrator's office and shown a lamp shade made out of human skin.

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Tape 1; Side B

Roberta's unit did not come home when the war was over. Being the kind of hospital they were they did not keep patients. They were waiting; had orders to go to China. They never went because the war was winding down in China. They went to a smaller concentration camp. She does not remember the name. They went to the Administration building, three nurses and the chief nurse. The Americans were issuing clothing to the inmates, who had on their striped uniforms. A column of men came to get their clothing, stark naked. They came to where the women were and smiled and acted as though they were clothed. The nurses had to look at them as though they were clothed and smile. The nurses were told that the men were political prisoners. The men didn't seem to acknowledge that they didn't have clothes on. The chief nurse was just a Captain because it was such a small outfit. The skin was against their bones. Their eyes were expressionless yet they were glad to be alive because they were free. That was the second camp.

The third camp was probably the worst. It was in Austria near Linz. It was an old German Luftwaffe camp. The American women did not do any work there because the men were afraid the women would be attacked by the inmates. The men from their hospital went in and cleaned the place up so they were stationed there for some time. The men took care of the sick. The place had been built by the Germans to keep the inmates in. They were there a few weeks. There were so many children of all ages. Most of them were French. The nurses would go for a little walk around the compound. The children would line up along the fence. They were just skin and bones. The nurses might have chocolate or fruit with them but they had been told not to give the children anything because they were on a restricted diet. Cargo planes came to take the French to Paris. They were so excited about going home that they took every piece of wood they could find, made a big fire, and sang "The Marseilles." That was impressive. The nurses stayed at that camp while the men cleaned up until they went home.

At that time the Americans were not expected to have any emotions because they had to do all they could to help those who had been traumatized. She doesn't remember discussing any of this with the other nurses or doctors or corpsmen who were there. They saw it and that was it. After she came back home she didn't talk about it, except a little bit now and then. When her children were older she did tell them. Once and a while now she does tell somebody a little bit about it. It was something that wasn't discussed. Now she thinks it is entirely different. They encourage discussion. It is therapeutic. She probably told her children a lot when they got older. She wanted them to know. Her generation is the last generation that had the first hand knowledge. She knows a lot of people think it never happened. She thinks it is wonderful that the Museum is keeping records on this and thinks it is very important.

After she came back to the States she stayed in the Army for a while. Maybe a couple of years. And then she got married and got out. The patients she had were wounded military so it was like family. They had all been through the same thing. It was a continuation. People did not talk much about what they had been through. They thought about it but they didn't talk about it. One of the hospitals she was with was in California and was for plastic surgery. Mostly burned patients. Pasadena. Pasadena at that time was populated by retired wealthy people who did not want the patients on their streets. They did not want to see them because they were too badly wounded, too disfigured. They didn't want them in their restaurants. These people had defended them and the nurses and doctors were very angry about it. They would go out with them because the men were too embarrassed to go out with anyone but hospital personnel. Now she can see maybe the local residents did have a little bit of a point because it would be hard for civilians to face. At the time it hurt her. The men in addition to being patients were good friends.

Roberta was also at Camp Swift in Texas and Camp Polk in Louisiana. She met her husband at Pasadena. He was in the Army; in x-ray. Then she did another year of nursing during the Korean War at a hospital in Michigan as a civilian in an Army hospital. That was the end of her nursing career. She had stopped nursing for about two years when she got married. During the Korean War they were desperate for nurses. Her husband was a master sergeant in x-ray, in charge of the enlisted men. Her husband retired from the Army after 24 years; at Walter Read. He never went overseas. She never talked with her husband about her war experience. She did keep in

touch for years with two or three people she had been overseas with. One of them is now dead. They never mentioned what they had been through. Now she finds that strange. Roberta was next to the youngest of the nurses.

Now she thinks about her overseas experiences quite a bit. Something will remind her of what happened then. Someone told her recently that she did not think it ever happened. She can't imagine that there could be anyone who could think it never happened.

She found exciting and something that she was glad to do: They were set up in Germany and some of the men who were captured at Dunkirk--this was five years later--had been prisoners all this time. Not in a concentration camp but a prison camp. They were liberated. They came back through her hospital for a few hours. Her hospital was still a little tent in the field. The men had been wounded seriously and had not had very good care and desperately needed care. Roberta and the other nurses were the first English speaking women they had seen in five years. They wanted to know what was going on in England. It was exciting to talk with them. They had just heard, because they got no news in the prison camp, that American soldiers married all of the English women. That was a terrible thing for them to hear and Roberta and the nurses were happy to tell them, not so. So then they went on back to England.

Conclusion