

**Interview with Mary Bergquist  
July 15, 1998**

**Beginning Tape One, Side A**

Question: Okay, this is **Neenah Ellis** interviewing **Mary Rita Bergquist** on the 15th of July, 1995. We're in **West Park, New York**. Tell me your -- when and where you were born and what was your name?

Answer: I was born in **Bridgeport, Connecticut** in 1923. What else do you want to know?

Q: Your family name.

A: Oh, my family name was **Hannan, H-a-n-n-a-n**.

Q: Uh-huh, and tell me a little bit about your parents and you know, what it was like -- what -- you know, what your life was like in **Bridgeport**.

A: Oh, my father owned a lumber yard in **Bridgeport** and my mother was just a housewife and we had five children. We owned our own home and went to school there until I graduated from high school and went in training.

Q: What year did you graduate from high school?

A: This -- I -- I -- from -- 1940, then I went in training. I graduated in June and then I went in training in September in **Saint Vincent's** in **New York City**.

Q: And why did you decide to go into nurse's training?

A: Well, my aunt was a nurse, she worked down Doctor's Hospital in **New York** and she always liked it and she had been a nurse in the first World War and -- just figured that it was something I wanted to do. I enjoy helping -- working with people and --

Q: Had she told you stories about being a nurse --

A: She had, yeah.

Q: -- in the war?

A: Yeah, yeah, she did. In fact, she married -- while she was in the war, she married a doctor and she had a really nice life and she traveled a great deal and she wou -- then, after she came out -- well, I guess she had -- after she was divorced, she worked as a -- in charge of the operating room at Doctor's Hospital in **New York** and so I decided to go into **Saint Vincent's** for training.

Q: And when did you get out?

A: 1943. And I -- shortly after that -- well, most of the girls were going in the service and -- **[inaudible]** I went, I wanted -- my best friend was going into the army nurse corps, but I didn't -- flight -- flight nurse. I didn't particularly care for that, so I just went into the -- the army nurse corps.

Q: Do you think most of the people in your -- that graduated from nurse's training with you, went into the service, was that your impression?

A: I think -- I think most of them did. Not -- not all, some of them were getting married, some of them were -- wanted to stay and work at -- you know, stateside, but I would say the majority of us went into the service, either the navy or the army nurse corps.

Q: Mm-hm. It's so -- did it s -- fe -- it felt like sort of the thing to do? A lot of people --

A: It did.

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah, everybody was going there at the time. Well, I can remember working on one of the wa -- halls and they came and said when -- that the Japanese had attacked **Pearl Harbor** and we all thought that was such a shocking thing, that you know, they -- here these boys were taken so completely unawares and decided that this would be the type of the thing we would like to do, you know, go in and help take care of them.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Mm.

Q: And -- and you enlisted then, in '43 did you say?

A: '43.

Q: Where at? Where did you go in?

A: I was inducted in **Fort Dix, New Jersey** and then we went to **Atlantic City** for our basic training. I can't remember where I went. I stayed at **Fort Dix** for quite awhile, until we got our or -- oh yes, I guess I stayed there until we got our orders to go with the 131st evacuation hospital.

Q: And what was the basic training like?

A: Oh, I remember long marches along the streets in **Atlantic City**. It was a nice place to take your basic training. Climbing under fences and practicing with your gas masks and ex -- a lot of exercises and -- and the social life there in the evening was -- was good. We like the different -- like **Glenn Miller** was there. In fact we saw him the first -- the last time he played in the States and he flew from there to **England** and his plane was lost. But the basic training, you know, was very strenuous and concentrated. And right from there, I forget where I went then. I remember staying there for quite awhile.

Q: Mm-hm. And then you got orders to join the 131st?

A: 131st, yeah.

Q: And -- and then what happened? Where did you go or what was the --

**[indecipherable]** the next major thing that you remember?

A: I remember getting on the ship, the **Queen Elizabeth**, that -- we were all surprised that we were going to go over on that. And that was a very hairy ride, with the mines and whatnot in the water that time. And we ended up in **Greenock, Scotland**. And that's where -- I was saying downstairs -- excuse me -- the Salvation Army was there to greet us with coffee and donuts. And then we went on from there to **Alteringham, England** and we were living in a private home wh-when -- all I can remember it was freezing. They only heated the house with fireplace -- didn't keep you very warm. But we rented bikes and we rode around the countryside and then we were assigned to a general hospital, I can't remember the number of the general hospital and we worked there with the boys that were being brought back from **Europe**.

Q: This was the winter of '45 -- '45, right?

A: '45, right, yeah, yeah. I remember going to Christmas eve mass and it was so foggy, we had to hang onto one another walking down the street and you couldn't see in front of you. And from there we got our orders to go -- to get the h-hospital -- to get -- we -- a lot of -- I guess some of the girls went to different hospitals, I'm not sure about that, though.

Q: In **England**, you mean?

A: In **England**, yeah. General hospitals.

Q: But they -- but you were just taking care of **GI's** -- American **GI's**?

A: **GI's**, oh yeah, just American **GI's**, yes. In fact I met a boy I knew from home, from **Bridgeport**. He -- I had him as a patient. He had been injured at **Anzio**. And -- fact I saw him several times after we got out of the service, exchanged experiences. And then we got -- the hospital unit got together again and we went over the **chelver** into **Sudan, France**, as I remember and we set up our tents and all named -- heh -- gave them all different names. I think I lived in Fools Rush In. And some -- Idiot's Delight was one, or something. And --

Q: What was it like living in a tent? This was in the spring, now?

A: This was in the spring, yes.

Q: April? March, April?

A: I guess. Must have been, cause I know we were in **England** in Christmastime and then -- yeah, it must have been early spring. It was fun. We had -- we slept on cots and we had air mattresses, and so it was fairly comfortable. The only thing was the showering and bathing and all, that was rather difficult, but then we started to get patients there to take care of, they were bringing some back from the front and we got our first experience there of actually being an evacuation hospital.

Q: And how was that different from what you'd done before?

A: Oh, oh it was quite different, because you were all set up in tents, you know and it was -- well, you know, it -- it -- the -- the general hospital in -- in **England**, I think that must have been a regular hospital that they had taken over and they had all the facilities, whereas out in the field, you -- you know -- you didn't -- you just had temporary,

makeshift things, but it didn't seem as though we were there too long. As I said, I can't remember all this.

Q: How was it -- that was the first time you had -- were caring then, for --

A: For actual casualties that were coming in from the war front, yes.

Q: What was that like?

A: Well, it was very challenging. You could hear -- in fact, from where we were you could hear the bombs and hear shooting and stuff.

Q: Were you frightened?

A: Not -- not really. No, no. We knew we weren't right up on the front line, we were far enough back, that -- and --

Q: Did you talk to the injured men?

A: Oh yes, yeah. Oh, yeah, I talked to them.

Q: What did they want to talk about?

A: Most of them wanted to talk about their girls back home and how homesick they were and couldn't wait til they got back and if they weren't injured very much, they said, "Oh, this means I've got to go back into the war -- fighting again," you know, and I -- but others that were being -- that's -- if they were more seriously wounded, were shipped back to **England** and then they **vess** eventually they went home or were taken care of there. And I think it was there that we got word that one of our nurse's husband -- it was at -- yes, it was at the Battle of the Bulge and her husband was lost and reported as either dead or a prisoner of war and then as we went along -- can't remember where we were, **Mike** showed up. And that was exciting, you know, that he was actually a -- a prisoner,

taken a prisoner and a colonel friend set them up in a house and they were able to be together there. Then we moved on -- oh, we had to get our **Eisenhower** jackets or something, so we all piled in the big truck and went into --

Q: What were those?

A: They were those short jackets that -- they named them after **Eisenhower** because I believe he wore them. And we didn't have them to -- to go on further, so we drove into **Belgium** and oh, those people were just so happy to see the Americans, they were so friendly. And --

Q: Why did you have to get those jackets?

A: I don't -- I guess it was accepted ca -- to wear in the battle areas, or something. I don't remember, but I know we were told we had to go up there, so we got in big trucks and went along and were singing the army songs as we went up to pick them up. And then shortly after that we must have moved out and I --remember exactly where we went from there.

Q: Wha -- When you were there -- this was in **Germany**?

A: Right.

Q: What -- What was your particular responsibility? What -- what was your job? Were you in a ward or an operating room, or --

A: N-No, no, I was in a ward, yeah.

Q: Caring --

A: Dispensing medication and dressings and yeah [**indecipherable**]

Q: These were men who'd been operated on, some of them?

A: Some of them had been operated on, yeah, some of them had -- you know, a broken leg and some shrapnel wounds and -- helped to take care of them.

Q: Mm-hm. And then you stayed there for awhile and then moved? You moved a lot?

A: We moved quite often and I can't remember all the different places we moved. Can't even remember where we -- I should have read my thing I have at home. I didn't re -- expect to have to tell it.

A: But you did -- you did move around?

Q: We moved around quite a bit, yeah and finally we got -- we went into **Austria** and that was just gorgeous. We lived in regular homes in **Austria** and they -- right through -- it was near vee -- it was near **Linz, Austria**. And it was across from ver -- **Vienna** and very often at night, the Russians would be shooting out the lights and shooting at the wires and the -- your electricity would go out. They had maids who came and they polished your shoes and did different things for you while you were there. These were, I guess, local Austrian girls. And then we had to go to -- the only thing I can remember is go -- they told us we were going to a concentration camp. And the one thing that I can remember most about that was for miles before we got there, was the smell -- the dead bodies rotting, oh. That was just -- it was hard to believe. And when we would get there, you just see the bodies all piled up, you know and then they eventually would dig trenches, they would just -- they couldn't make coffins for them fast enough and dug -- put them in common graves. And we went in and they were -- most of those people that were not dead, that were s -- who they had -- most of them, they had practiced on. They practiced taking out an appendix or practiced removing an arm or a leg and these people



needed to be nursed back, you know. And you al -- you couldn't speak their language, but you could almost feel that they knew what you were saying and you -- course, sort of knew what they were saying, they were just so glad to see somebody come in. Their food was so terrible and most of them looked like skeletons. I have pictures of them. And --

Q: What was your work -- daily work there?

A: Mostly just taking care of these patients, a lot of them of course, they had had operations and they were left in -- had -- all infected and you had to take care of those and put clean dressings on and try it on some of them that -- help with the therapy, to help them to get walking. They were ba -- they put them -- like if they had taken a leg off or something, then they would be walking on crutches and you would be helping them with that, and --

Q: What was the place where you worked, and what was --

A: It was a tent. Most of these patients were all like in tents or shacks, if I remember. I'm not sure which -- what it was. It wasn't -- it was nothing, you know, like -- it didn't look like a hospital at all, excepting that there were rows of beds where the patients were in. A lot of them had casts on as I remember and they wanted you to sign it for them.

Q: So you didn't set up your hospital -- tent hospital there, you worked in their --

A: Well, I think our -- our men had gone ahead and I think they had set up some of this, because by the time we got there, they were -- the area where we were going to be working was set up.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Yeah. Cause they went on ahead of us, now that I think of it and I -- unless they -- I don't think that they were -- had any type of hospital set up before they got in there, but -- but they might have, I'm not sure.

Q: So you worked with people? Others have told me that they never touched patients or they were not supposed to touch patients, but it sounds like you were changing dressings and --

A: Oh yes, you were changing dressings and helping them to wa -- and then you'd take them outside and have them walk and get out in the fresh air, cause most of them hadn't seen daylight or sunlight and all they gave them was bread and water and -- to eat. And I loved the bread, it was that dark bread that they get overseas. But I mean, not -- not any nourishing food, they hadn't had. And --

Q: Were they men or women or both, or --

A: They were both. They were both, but mostly men. The majority I -- as I recall, were men. But they -- there were some women there, too, yeah. I didn't see any children. There might have been, but I don't remember seeing them.

Q: Did you -- do you remember caring for women as well as men?

A: No, I don't. I don't remember having women patients. I remember just having male patients, as -- now that I think about it.

Q: And do you know -- d-did you know then who they were or where they were from, or --

A: No. You knew where -- they -- they would tell you where they were from, yes, they would tell you where they were from, but --

Q: Did you know at that time whether or not they were Jewish people or not?

A: No, I didn't, no. Some of them would -- you knew -- they said they were, but most of them you would just t-try to get out from where they came from. A lot of them seemed to be -- come from **Poland** and -- it was hard to understand them, but you -- yo-you know, you tried to decipher as much as you could.

Q: Mm-hm. Did they try and express to you anything at all -- some of them?

A: They tried constantly to express their gratitude, you know, for what we were doing for them, they -- and hope that they would get that -- w -- you know, well and be able to go back home again, if there was any home to go to, [**indecipherable**] often said that. They didn't know what the conditions were going to be like back home.

Q: Were you able to do much for them over the period of time you were there?

A: I think that they -- a lot of them I -- we thought -- felt were improving and were putting weight back on and -- especially I can remember one young man on crutches and then he seemed to be able to wa -- go to a cane and could walk with a cane and did get help. Course a lot of -- I guess they just kept them in a bed, or in -- I don't know where they kept them and -- so that they didn't get up and were able to really move around until we had gotten in there, I guess.

Q: Do you have any i-idea of what else was going on there while you were there? I mean, was there continuing to bury bodies while you were there? That was going on?

A: Well, we s -- oh yes, they were continually burying the bodies, yeah, yeah. They -- a lot of them died while we were there, too, but they also were burying the bodies that were piled up when we got there. And when they could then eventually they had a cemetery

and they would put, you know, little markers on each one. But at first it was just a communal grave where they had to put the bodies. And there was the crematorium that they used to burn them and gas them. They had that and they burned that down while we were there to prevent the spread of disease, I guess.

Q: You saw that?

A: Mm-hm, yeah, yeah.

Q: What did you think when you saw that, did you --

A: Couldn't believe it. And what upset me the most was you would see these reels from home and people said, "That's not true, that's all propaganda."

Q: What do you mean reels?

A: They said they were army -- my parents would write, you know, they were army reels and that would say that it was all propaganda, that these things didn't happen. In the movie theaters, apparently **[indecipherable]**

Q: Oh, newsreels?

A: Newsreels, yes, yes. They must have shown them and I said, "Well then, let them come over here and see it." And because, it -- even today you'll hear people say that they don't believe it existed and it certainly did.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Mm.

Q: When you were seeing that, did you have any sense of -- of how widespread it was in **Europe?**

A: No.

Q: Did you --

A: No, we really didn't at that time, no, til we then heard about so many of the other concentration camps and all. They were much bigger than camp **Gusen**. I guess **Mauthausen** and some of them were much larger and had a lot more, you know, prisoners than we did, but at that time we had no idea of that, no.

Q: Were -- did you have any sense of how the people in the town were reacting to this? Did you have any contact with people in the -- in -- in **Linz**?

A: Not really, not really, no. Just the girl -- th -- some of the women that would work -- work at the camp that were -- you know, lived in the village, but they didn't say very much, and -- of course there was a language barrier. Couldn't really understand them all.

Q: Do you remember people coming to **Gusen** from the town to -- to do work or --

A: I don't remember -- not at the -- no, not with the patients they weren't, no. Not that I remember. They could have, but I really don't remember that.

Q: Did you have any other s -- did you have any sense of -- of what kinds of things the people were doing and when they were inmates there? Were they --

A: Don't think --

Q: -- do you know about the -- I mean, for example, I know there was a quarry nearby where people had to carry stones.

A: Yes, yes, I do remember hearing --

Q: Did you see that, or --

A: I don't remember seeing that, but I do remember hearing about it, yeah. They had -- they -- they di -- I know they were tru -- cruelly mistreated because they also had a -- the

commandant hung in effigy. I guess the prisoners that were there and they finally had gotten home, I have a picture of him hanging there and was something else I had -- just **[indecipherable]** skipped my mind. Oh, taking their skin and making lampshades out of it.

Q: You heard about that or you saw that?

A: Oh yeah -- no, I heard about that, but I did see one of the lampshades and they said it was made from the skin of the patients that were there. This was the commandant -- commandant's wife or somebody made -- was supposed to have made these.

Q: Where did you see that lampshade?

A: There, there.

Q: Oh.

A: Yeah.

Q: Were all of the -- all of the survivors who were there ill or were s-some people able to go around and --

A: Some of them were able to go around and do some of the -- the work, you know, cleaning up and yeah, they weren't a -- they were functional, yeah, they weren't all, you know, like bedridden people or that had things wrong with them, no. That -- wa -- that's where we were supposed to, you know, do most of our -- was with the sick ones, but there were others walking around and -- all looked like skeletons, though.

Q: How long were you there at **Gusen**, roughly?

A: Seems like we were there about three months or so, but I'm not -- I really can't remember. I have all those things written down at home **[indecipherable]**

Q: And then after that?

A: From there, can't remember where we went. We went to a camp, but I can't remember where -- cause I remember being there on **VE** Day and celebrating --

Q: **VE** Day?

A: -- the victory. Yeah.

Q: **VE** Day before you went to **Gusen**.

A: Well, that was before, that's right, that's right.

Q: Right.

A: That's right. No, that's right, yes, yes [**indecipherable**]

Q: Other people have mentioned a camp called -- it's named after a cigarette -- in **France**.

A: Twen --

Q: 20 grand?

A: 20 grand, yes, yes, right.

Q: Is that the one you're thinking of?

A: 20 grand, yes, that's what I'm thinking of.

Q: In **France**?

A: In **France**, yeah.

Q: And you were --

A: And from there we learned we were going home -- to go to the **Pacific**. And some of them that were -- we were -- there were several ho-hospitals there and a lot of them were going directly to the **Pacific**, but we were supposed to go home -- wi -- go home on leave

and we went home on the **General Bliss** as I remember and were home on leave when they dropped the bomb on **Hiroshima**. And then I was shipped out to -- where was it, it was where they have the racetrack -- racetracks out -- hm, we used to go to the races once in a while, that -- **Bonnie** -- did you interview **Bonnie**?

Q: Not yet.

A: Oh. She and I were roommates there.

Q: It wasn't **Texas**, was it?

A: No, it wasn't **Texas**. Gee, I know it as well as I know my own name, but my memory's getting very bad.

Q: But you didn't go -- at any rate, you didn't go --

A: We did not go to the **Pacific** and then was discharged from there. And I got on an army plane and flew out to **California** to visit my sister and that was it.

Q: So you were in for what, about a year?

A: N -- About 18 months I'd say, yeah.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm. And I wanted to go back and ask you what you thought when the bomb was dropped on **Hiroshima**.

A: I was very, very happy to think that it would save so many lives instead of, you know, continuing this horrible war and I wasn't anxious to go to the **Pacific** myself, being selfish, but I was so glad for the boys that didn't have to, you know, lose their lives fighting over there. Yeah, I know I thought that it was a very, very wise decision at the time.

Q: Yeah.



A: Yeah.

Q: When you look back now, 50 years later on that year, and especially on that experience you had, witnessing what had happened at the concentration camp, what does it mean to you? What -- how -- how has it affected you?

A: Well, it was an experience that I would never have wanted to miss. I felt that, you know, we did a lot of good and got a lot out of it myself, I enjoyed it and I'd do it again if -- if the opportunity had come, you know, if I was to go into the service. Not now, but, you know -- but I really thought it was a very rewarding experience. Patients were all so very happy you know, were glad to see you and you felt that -- as I said, you felt you were doing something. I felt I was doing more there than I would have been if I went to work in a -- a hospital or -- here in the States or, you know, into one of the -- couple of my friends went into the -- like **Sikorsky's** and different places, worked as industrial nurses, but I thought being an army nurse was the best.

Q: And the experience you had, especially at **Gusen**, how do you think of that, how does -- what -- what did you learn from that?

A: Well, I -- hopefully I learned that -- that this would never, ever happen again. And I have often -- I've spoken to some groups and -- to let them know that it really did happen and I had sent the pictures to school and my children, you know, have brought it up when they've been in school and studied it. And gone into school occasionally and talked to some of the classes, because so many of the people still felt that it was -- it was just a lie, that it never had occurred and so I felt it was important to let them know that it did. And racial discrimination and whatnot certainly shouldn't be a part of our lives.

Q: Yeah.

A: Learned that.

Q: What else? I -- I -- I know we just kind of did a brief review, but what did -- is there anything you'd like to say, or any particular memory that you want to --

A: No, not really. As I said, a lot of it I just can't even remember any more.

Q: It seems -- it's so interesting to me that 50 years later, this group of women is still in touch with each other.

A: Yeah, yeah, we have kept up. We have a round robin and then we've gotten together, you know, for reunions, but -- well, in my training school is the same thing, we -- we've gotten -- every five years we go to **New York City** and get together and have a reunion. It's nice to keep -- we have so much in common. I think this is, you know, what keeps -- keeps us coming and getting together.

Q: You ha -- is it just what you did then that you have in common?

A: No, I think living for that length of time together and living under not very good conditions, you know, you just sort of got much closer to the girls than you normally would, you know, if you were in the every day world. You slept together, you wash together, you eat together and you were -- had a common purpose.

Q: All right. Good, good. Well, thank you. Let me -- I have to say that this is the end of the interview with **Mary Rita Bergquist**, July 15th, 1995. This is **Neenah Ellis**.

**End of Tape One, Side B**

**Conclusion of Interview**

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