

INTERVIEW WITH JOAN PIPER (NURSE) 3/2/95

Interviewer: Pam Schweitzer.

P: You've said you are willing to talk to us about the period of the war. You were based locally in that period?

J: Yes. Dulwich Hospital. I was working as a nurse. Started training in 1942. Because it was during the war we were farmed out to other hospitals if necessary. You must remember, a lot of people who were finishing their training wanted to go into the services, the QA's and the nursing services, so we were farmed out to fill in spaces.

(Gap to fix tape recorder)

Training at Dulwich started in 1942. We were all resident then. You weren't allowed to be non-resident. We had our fire passes and places where we used to go for shelter. My shelter was underneath the matron's flat in the basement.

P: In the main old building of Kings?

J: Yes, the one off E. Dulwich Grove. Matrons house was by the front door and we were allowed to go in the basement. We used to go down there 10 o'clock every night, sleep all the way through the air raids and come up at 6 in the morning.

P: Did you have proper beds laid out down there?

J: Bunks. Not beds, bunks. Two or three high.

P: And they provided blankets?

J: Oh yes.

P: And you spent all night there. Were you half on duty or there for emergencies if necessary?

J: We were there literally for our own sleep. We could have been called for emergencies but we weren't usually from the basement.

P: And this was while you were trainees? How long was nurses training in those days?

J: Oh yes. We did 4 years at the hospital altogether, but 3 of those were training and one of those was a contract year which we did as a sort of acting staff nurse. By the time it got to 1944, I'd just started my third year of training. One morning in May we were all called to the matron's office, about 12 of us. We lined up outside thinking "What have we done wrong?" It was like that in those days, you see. We went in - and she was rather a dramatic lady, she wore one of these caps that came right out here - She stood up and she said "Nurses! The call has come". We thought she'd gone quite mad. She said "Sometime soon you'll be asked to go away suddenly. You can't leave the hospital without giving us an address or a phone number. Whenever you go out you must know where you are going. Please get all your uniforms together and a change of underwear." Which I thought was particularly funny. That - all your uniforms and only one change of underwear.

Anyway, about a fortnight later, I was home actually because I used to live in Streatham then with my family and there was a call. I think I was out with my sister. There was a call "Would I report back immediately". I was taken into the office and I thought "They're all quite barmy here. "Must be ready tomorrow morning". "Oh yes. Alright. Thankyou". So we were ready the following morning, we all went down to breakfast. In those days we didn't have a catering officer. We had what was called a housekeeping sister who had obviously done her training

and was now doing the housekeeping. She kept bringing out the food. "You must have a good breakfast. You don't know when you are going to get your next." I thought I was going abroad.

P: You didn't ask?

J: We couldn't ask. We weren't allowed to ask. Anyway, we were all lined up in the hall after we'd had our breakfast and along came this Greenline bus with other people in it. I think they'd come from St Giles. So we all got in and once we started off, having been waved goodbye to the matron and the home sister and everybody else, we said to the driver "Where we going? Where we going?" "I can't tell you that" he said. We was ever so disappointed when we landed in Sutton!

We got to this rather large hospital and it was filled with nurses, medical students and doctors from a lot of London hospitals and it was quite empty and very large. We were told that we had got to make the beds up. Nothing else. The following morning we went down to breakfast. I can remember that breakfast. It was eggs, and mine was hard-boiled. Can't remember any more meals that day but I can remember the breakfast because in the middle of it the medical superintendent came in and said "Gymnasium everybody. Everybody to the gym" So we all went to the gymnasium and he started "Ladies and Gentlemen, today we invaded Normandy. Will you go back to your wards, get ready for patients please."

The hospital train came through the grounds of the hospital. We had a railway going through the grounds. We took our quota of patients, Americans, British, German POWs. When we couldn't get any more in, the train went on to Horton in Epsom and gave them the rest.

P: So you'd been specially set up to deal with the casualties of the D-Day.

J: Looking at it afterwards - We didn't think of this to start off with - We'd all done something in the way of surgical nursing or theatre work. I'd done both. We looked after them for 3 weeks. To start off with we slept in dormitories at the top of a very high, narrow building. Until we looked out of the window one night when we'd been woken up by all the noise, to find funny things going across the sky. Later we found out they were doodle-bugs. The next morning we were allowed - in our off-duty, not on-duty - to borrow a wheelbarrow and take all our bedding and what property we had down to a basement and we were allowed to use those trestle beds in the basement for the rest of our stay. Until of course we got bombed. Three weeks after we got there the theatre was bombed and we all came back to London.

P: Can you say something about your experience of nursing people who had been caught on the Normandy beaches?

J: It was very strange to me to find that they arrived in our hospital, which was some way from the coast, and they were all still in their wet uniforms. I didn't think, really. I somehow thought somebody would look after them and dry them before they got to us. But they were still wet where they had been picked off the beaches.

P: I wonder how long that process was? They would have had to cross the Channel again. How were they ferried back?

J: The little ships.

P: I thought that was Dunkirk, the little ships.

J: Yeah, but they obviously sent out the little ships for the Normandy ones as well.

P: I don't think they did, you know.

J: I don't think they had enough planes to go over.

P: I'm wondering whether, having discharged the men, the wounded were shipped back in the empty vessels. I suppose they must have been?

J: I don't know. I don't think anybody ever did know, actually.

P: I must ask because I know some people who had that experience. You must have had people in pretty poor shape?

J: Not all that poor because if they were very badly off they were left nearer the coast and the rest were sent up to us. Although, don't suppose we were all that far away from the coast anyway. Our wards were full. I know one thing - We didn't nurse the Americans and the British too close together. We put the British one end of the ward and the Americans at the other. They didn't get on very well. The German POWs we had in the side ward. We had a military office in the grounds which had several army people in. We always used to have on on guard with the POWs. It made me laugh - this particular man always took his boots off and put his plimsolls on because he thought it disturbed them. I thought it was rather nice.

P: Was there any conversation between you and the men about what was happening on the mainland of France?

J: We were very busy but I can't remember anything really important. The atmosphere was quite good really.

P: I'm intrigued because D-Day was the focus for a lot of bad feeling as well as good feeling. From my understanding of it, a lot of people felt that the whole operation had been muffed in a really catastrophic way.

J: That's why I think we got the Americans and the British fighting.

P: There was a lot of tension between them, and over policy too.

J: I can't remember anything specific about that.

P: What was your particular role?

J: I was a student nurse. This was 1944. I started in 42 so I had just entered my third year.

P: How long was your attachment to that unit?

J: Until 3 weeks when the operating theatre was bombed and we all had to come back to London. That was difficult because meantime the doodle-bugs had taken quite a hold on London and we hadn't got any beds. So some arrangement was made whereby the patients who could travel were evacuated up North leaving beds empty for the casualties coming in. We had Green line buses fitted out as ambulances. They took 12 stretchers, if I remember rightly. The assistant matron used to come round the wards and ask for volunteers "You, you" and we got up about 5.30 in the morning, had a quick breakfast, went to casualty to collect our number of patients, got them into the ambulances and I think we went off about 10 ambulances at a time as far as I can remember, There was nurse in each one and a doctor in charge of the lot. We went to Marylebone and unloaded them all onto the hospital trains.

P: What were hospital trains?

J: Full of stretchers and nursing and medical staff.

P: Did it have conventional seats?

J: No.

P: They were converted for the duration of the war? Were they fitted with anything other than stretchers? Did they have equipment?

J: I don't think so. As far as I know they were only equipped with staff and stretchers because I think if they had thought they had needed any more they probably wouldn't have gone that far.

P: Where did you find you were travelling to?

J: I wasn't travelling. I unloaded them on there and came back. We then came back and made up all the empty beds and within half an hour or so we found out we'd got a ward full again. It was just like that. It went on and on and on. It must have been rather distressing for the patients cos the relatives were told the day before and they had to make sure that they brought in a change of clothing for the patients who were going to be evacuated. They didn't particularly know where they were going and how they were going to correspond with them.

P: Was there any rhyme or reason about how patients were picked. Was it to do with how fit they were?

J: It was to do with their condition and how fit they were. I cut a piece out of the paper about these hospitals being evacuated, about the organisation needed for wartime hospitals.

P (reads): "Let us not forget the big organisation needed in this country to cope with the expected casualties. Many civilian hospitals were cleared of patients to receive men of all nationalities. As a staff nurse at a big Infectious Diseases Hospital which was cleared to receive casualties I remember Italian soldiers sitting days on the curbsides of streets in Leeds until they could go home. We used the newly available penicillin antibiotics in very limited doses on friend and foe alike. Many of the German SS troopers were very scared of the injections so we had a team of people to help us administer each valuable dose."

J: The first penicillin I ever saw was given to a German POW.

P: What was the attitude of the nurses to the POWs. Were they stripped of rank. Could you tell whether they had been SS or any other kind?

J: No. As far as we were concerned they were patients. They had the same kind of treatment as anybody else. The senior officer in this lot of casualties - cos we had to evacuate some of those from Sutton, send some of those North to make room for others coming over - he thanked the medical superintendent for the treatment that his men had received and said he'd seen that all the patients, whatever the nationality had received the same treatment.

P: Some of the men I was speaking to said they had quite reasonable treatment in Germany as POWs. Far better than people had had in the Far East, for example. And a darn sight better than Jewish or Polish prisoners.

J: I think if you are a nurse or a doctor, a patient is a patient. As far as we are concerned and as far as most Europeans are concerned.

P: How did they communicate with the German POWs? Were there some people who spoke German on the ward?

J: Not many. I remember being on duty one day. A nurse came out and said "I don't know what that young German wants in there. He keeps on talking and I haven't a clue". I said "Well, I don't speak German. Lets go and find out". I went in and he started all over again. I said "I know what he wants". She said "What is it. He hasn't said anything." I said "No but he wants a urinal" ... (?) We got on.

P: People talk about war as a great leveller. Was the hospital as hierarchical as it was ever in peace time?

J: To a certain extent. I'll always remember one incident - this is when we got back to Dulwich and we were dealing with other casualties - We had so many in one day, we had stretchers lined along the corridor, both sides cos they couldn't get in the casualty department. As soon as there was a bed upstairs or we found a bed somewhere we would tap a porter on the shoulder "Take this one to so and so ward." One of my friends tapped this chap and said "Take this chap upstairs, Ward C2" He turned round and she said "Oh, I'm so sorry." It was a chaplain. "It doesn't matter dear," he said. Everybody sort of mucked in.

P: Was the whole hospital taken over by military personnel or was it a couple of wards?

J: Usually a couple of wards.

P: So at the same time there were still V1 and V2s landing on London?

J: Oh yes. They started in 44 and they were still going on in 45. So we had all these casualties as well as the service people.

P: You must have found yourself dealing with pretty horrible injuries.

J: We did. We never quite knew, even when we were off duty whether we were going to be called into theatre or called into casualty. When you were in casualty sometimes you'd look round and think "Who's that over there - Someone with her head done up in a towel. Must be Nurse Harrison". She'd been washing her hair, you see when she was suddenly called to casualty so she came down as she was. One didn't worry about that. If you were called, you were called. That's it. Nobody minded. I never heard anybody say no. You were needed and you went. The matron was really very funny. I shouldn't keep on saying this about the matron but she did try and help, poor soul; it must have been some years since she'd been doing any practical nursing. I met her once down in the casualty department. We used to keep a whole lot of blankets on a bed covered by a heat cradle so that people could have warm blankets. I saw the matron go to fetch a blanket. She didn't pick it up like anybody else would. She sort of draped it and went down the ward like this. I thought "She really ought to be on the stage." She was great fun really. Although she didn't think she was funny.

P: Did you have lots of time off or were you working very long hours?

J: We worked 48 hours officially, but unofficially you worked anything.

P: Did the nurses go out together in their free time and go to the pictures and go to dances and things? Were there social events within the hospital?

J: We tried to get some within the hospital, but it depended how many people were off and what they were doing. We had all sorts of things - table tennis and beetle drives, dramatics, once you could get the people there.

P: When you had casualties coming in who had been bombed out and caught in a blast and so on, there must have been quite a sophisticated almoner's service, a system for rehousing people. How were people filtered out of the hospital if their homes had been destroyed? How was that organised by the hospital authorities?

J: I'm not quite sure, but they managed to get them out somewhere or other. We had St Francis. I'm not sure how many patients they had in St Francis's at that time.

P: Was there a middle station where people could convalesce before being sent out to the front or the home front.

J: I'm not so sure about convalesce because a lot of these hospitals had been taken over for other patients. They probably had to go to relatives or somewhere outside London.

P: Were there ever shortages of medicines?

J: I never heard of anything being short, ever. When you come to think about it, they must have had some time at the beginning of the war to sort out these things. They sorted out the evacuation of the hospitals, didn't they? They must have thought about drugs. I never remember being short of anything. 39 to 40 was a bit sort of quiet.

P: Was it a time you look back on as being very full, very active, very stretching. Quite good memories of it?

J: Can't remember a lot of conversations. I remember on I thought was particularly funny at the time. As I said, we were in this basement in Sutton, this was prior to the bombing of the theatre. I woke up one morning and my friend who was in the next bed said to me "You didn't wake up last night." I said "No. I had a good night's sleep last night." She said "They wanted volunteers. You were sound asleep and I couldn't wake you." I said "Sorry about that." It was the sort of time you went to bed thinking "Thank god for that" and you went to sleep and that's it.

P: What about romances?

J: I don't think they was ever there long enough. They sort of travelled through, you see. But it was great fun. I remember particularly being put in one of those bins they put dirty laundry in. I was on this ward with a lot of servicemen in Dulwich. The assistant matron was going to do the round. You could see her at the top of the ward. I was down the end talking to these two soldiers and one of them picked me up and ducked me right in this thing and put the screen round me. I thought "I know I shall sneeze. Something will happen". I could hear her coming down the ward. I daren't do anything. I heard them say "Good morning. Oh, good morning Miss McCabe. Oh much better thankyou. Feeling much better now. Yes soon to go out." And there was I behind them. Did all sorts of things like that. But it was great fun really.

P: Were they officers or..?

J: Mixed.

P: You said you started there in 42. Before that?

J: I'd been in offices. I did some temporary Civil Service work in Soho Square at the Assistance Board during the Blitz period, but it was dull. I didn't have to start until about half past nine in the morning and we didn't get off until about six in the evening and I used to finish my work at about half past three in the afternoon and it was dull. So I said I was going nursing. I remember my mother and father saying to me "You don't get much in the way of wages. We can't afford to give you anything". I said "Don't worry about that". We got £40 a year - my first year was £40.

P: Did you have to pass exams to become a nurse or were they screaming for volunteers at that time?

J: I suppose they looked at education and what you'd got, matriculation, school certificate in those days. You sat an entrance exam of some description.

P: Do you have very close friends from that period, other nurses?

J: I still have some, yes.

P: You stayed after the war period in Dulwich, in Kings?

J: I stayed in Dulwich and took my first part Midwifery in 46. I then went to Lewisham and took my second part Midwifery. Then they wanted to send me somewhere else to another hospital. I said "No, no. I promised the people at Dulwich I should go back". So I did go back. I went back there till 1950. Then I went to St Giles and nursed there until 1968 and then I went to Kings and nursed there until 1982. I retired at 60. I had Sylvia Henley Ward on the 7th floor and I had a mixed bag of patients. I had NHS patients, a small ward of diabetic pregnancies and I had 7 private patient beds.

P: Going back to the war period - Do you remember anything significant around VE Day. Were there still people still coming in from unexploded bombs and things or did things just change around that time, the whole atmosphere of the hospital?

J: I think we had a few but we didn't have great numbers about that time.

P: Were there special celebrations in the hospital?

J: I think I was very busy around that time. I remember VJ more because we'd gone back to Sutton then and we were still coping with doodle-bug casualties. We'd gone back to Sutton.. Then VJ Day came along and my friend and I said "Got an afternoon off. Lets go out into Sutton". We went out to the High Street. We didn't know what to do to celebrate. We went into a tea shop and had eclairs. It was the first time we'd seen them during the war. Ooh!

P: Did people make as much fuss about VJ Day?

J: I think they did. There were lots of people rushing up to town and crowding outside Buckingham Palace, all that sort of thing. I didn't have a lot of time to do that.

P: All the fuss is being made at the moment about VE Day. Yet every time I talk to a group of older people they say "Well, the person I cared about was still far away".

J: We got all excited about people coming back from Europe but then they sort of forgot about the others a little bit.

P: What about your own family?

J: I had a sister. We were all right. I was in Dulwich one day and I met another nurse coming down the stairs. She said "Have you been home recently?" I said "No. I'm going home some time this week". She said "You haven't got one". I said "Pardon?". Now her sister used to work with my sister so she knew where I lived. So I said "What do you mean?" She said "They're all alright, but you've been bombed." So I went to the matron's office and said "Could I have a bit of time off?" "Oh yes" she said, and let me have a bit of time off. I got home and the house had gone. But they were all right. They'd all been in the Anderson shelter. We had some friends that lived in the next road and they put them up for a little while. Then they found an empty flat, not very far away. I suppose people had moved out and they found an empty flat there until war was over and we got back into a house again.

P: How was that organised?

J: We had to wait until the whole lot were rebuilt, of course. I can't remember how they organised it, but they were back, I know. I was still resident then, right up until - when did my father die? - 67. Then I went home to look after my mother. I always say to people "I was inside for 25 years!" Let them make of that what they will! 67 was the first time I became non-resident.

P: It's very interesting. Thankyou very much.

END OF INTERVIEW WITH JOAN PIPER. transcr4.doc

