Interview with Isabelle Cook [Undated]

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My name is Isabelle Cook and I'm a World War II veteran. I was a young graduate in New York City and just had graduated from Mount Sinai Hospital School of Nursing when war was declared in Europe and pretty soon we were in the thick of it. And the Army asked Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City to form a thousand-bed hospital for overseas service. They asked for volunteers and since I was a young -- unattached young lady, I felt that it was my duty to join the Army and to go to help soldiers overseas when they needed care.

I didn't tell my family. I had my -- I had a mother that was a widow with five children and I didn't tell her. I didn't ask her permission, I just signed right up. And then waited impatient -- impatiently for them to call me for the Service. Finally, in September of 1942, I got the call, proceed immediately to Camp Rucker, Alabama... And we had our basic training there and you could imagine civilians undergoing this basic training when we marched and had backpacks and everything else and all the soldiers in the camp lined up to see the nurses marching by and mismarching, most of the time.

But we made it through basic training. It was about six months. And then we got the orders to go overseas. And we ended back up in New York at the port of embarkation and we stayed there, processed, we were given all the clothes that we needed for overseas service.

We were given permission to actually go home for one day to see the family. Mother was in shock when she knew that I was going overseas, but I had to make her understand that I felt it was my duty to be part of the Army. My brother was drafted and he was in the Army at the time. He went to Officer's Training School and he became an officer. He went -- we went on a troop ship that was SS Louis Pasteur. Originally, it was a French Army overseas for a luxury liner and they converted it into a troop ship and it was manned by British soldiers to transport American troops. Since it was a very fast ship, we just zigzagged right across the Atlantic. We didn't go in a convoy. We didn't know what our final destination -- we didn't know our final destination. This is in May 5th, 1943, but we ended up in Casablanca [Morocco in northern Africa].

We spent about three months in Casablanca because of the fact that the Germans were still fighting in Tunisia and our hospital, the thousand-bed general hospital was supposed to be set up in Mateur. That was just outside of Tunis. When the Germans were defeated in North Africa, then we got our orders to proceed to Mateur in Tunisia [west of Libya and Egypt]. I was one of the ten nurses that was chosen to go on the advance party. We traveled 1500 miles across country, across North Africa in a two and a half-ton truck, an open truck and the heat was -- in May was unbearable. But we managed to go across. We slept in pup tents at night. We had the K-rations for food, but one night we actually spent in the -- the French Foreign Legion. We spent one night with them and we got a real hot meal and a bed to sleep in which was just wonderful.

And we -- one night, we were able to go to a -- they had a portable shower unit for the soldiers, for the combat soldiers, and they stopped the soldiers from going in to allow the ten nurses to take a shower, which was wonderful after two days being on the road.

We finally arrived in Mateur. It had been bombed out and people were living in caves. And I asked the charge nurse, what was my duties as one of the ten people for setting up the hospital in -- in Mateur and she said you'll be the housekeeper. Here I am about 22 years old, never took care of a house in my life and suddenly I'm the housekeeper. She said you'll be in charge of the laundry and the housekeeping duties. Well, I thought I don't know anything about it, but like Scarlett O'Hara [from the book *Gone with the Wind*], I'll worry about it when the time comes. But she said well, you can probably get the townspeople to do the laundry. Well, there was no town. It had all been bombed out and people were living in caves. So we took over the French Army barracks that were used as a hospital by the Germans.

In fact, there was still German prisoners -- well, they were German soldiers that were so severely wounded they could not be evacuated. They left one German doctor to care for them. So they immediately became prisoners of war. So we took care of them. There were German signs all over the place. Well, the rest of our -- our unit arrived about several days later. They had had a terrible experience going cross-country in a -- in cattle cars and even one of our nurses had died as a result of heat -- the heat was so terrible.

Well, we set up our entire hospital in about eight days, 800 tons of equipment, generators, we had our own portable generators and the whole hospital was set up and the nurses and the nursing personnel had tents. There were five of us in each tent and outside latrines [bathrooms] and outside wash stations and things like that. The heat -- the -- we were getting the winds, the "taraka" winds from the Sahara Desert and living in the tents, it was pretty bad. But we were taking care of the casualties from Sicily, Italy. The Sicilian campaign had started and within about five days after we set up the hospital, we started receiving patients.

They were evacuated by air and we acted as an evacuation hospital instead of a general hospital which takes care of the more severely wounded and those that needed to stay much longer. But we received about 2,000 patients. And as a result, we had to open another thousand-bed hospital on -- in the field in tents and those that were convalescent moved into the tent area and the more seriously injured were in the building. We all did double shifts because we had to care for all these patients. And the heat was so unbearable and for the patients in the tents that they -- we did have Italian prisoners of war and they set it up so that they there was -- they put an extra top over the tent and then run cold water over it in order for -- to get it cool. This we -- we stayed in North Africa for one year and we took care of about 5,000 patients during that time.

Bob Hope came to entertain the troops, came to see troops, "This Is the Army," all the shows came. Of course, our social life was wonderful. With a hundred nurses and about a hundred thousand soldiers -- men in the area, we had a wonderful social life. The question was would the Air Force fly us to a dance nearby or the Signal Corps would give us the little meals that they used for their wire for a bedside table for the tents. We had about six nurses that married doctors from the outfit and they set up individual tents for each married couple and that was called Honeymoon Lane. And it was wonderful.