Irene (Schafer) Manitsas

Spouse of the late William Manitsas, Art Professor
William served Art Department from 1947-1983)



Army Nurses Corps
WWII

After enlisting in the Army Nurses Corps, I worked part time in Brockport's old hospital. In November 1944, I left for Atlantic City for basic training. We did bull work with big packs on our backs, learned how to climb ropes on the side of the ships and to clean guns. We worked in an Atlantic City hospital on a ward that had eighty amputee patients.

I completed basic training and in March of 1945, we were notified we were heading overseas. Our ship docked in LaHarve, France, and we were stationed in Rouen Military Base. It was called Camp Lucky Strike. Camps were named after cigarettes. The day we got off the ship in LaHarve was the same day President Roosevelt died. I still remember coming down the gangplank and seeing all the rubble and destruction. We were only 21 years old. We used to say, 'The only thing about the French houses is they had the cleanest windows with lace curtains.' There might be a pile of stones in front of their house, but they didn't clean those up.

We took care of young men who came out of German concentration camps. The men were emaciated. There were fifty to sixty patients in each tent. We had to take their temperature every day, and we only had three thermometers. The Red Cross supplied doughnuts, and the men would grab six or more at once. If they ate too much at one time, they'd get sick, so we had to keep a close eye on them. They had skin diseases, scabies, and hepatitis. It was devastating to see all this illness.

We worked from seven to seven during the day or seven to seven nights. We never sat down to eat. We stood up and placed our dish of food on a long plank. The food was terrible—K-rations that smelled like kerosene. We lived in tents and trucked through the mud in the rain. I remember how cold it was. To keep warm, we had sleeping bags and lined the bottom of our cots with newspapers— if we could find them. The nurses compound was fenced in. That was when the song, "Don't Fence Me In," was popular. One day, we were trucking through the mud and here comes a big limousine. We didn't know who it was, and we didn't salute. We didn't know Eisenhower was in the car. We got punished for not saluting by having our trip to Paris cut short. We were supposed to get a three-day pass to Paris. The train trip to get there took twelve hours. Everything was alphabetical, so I was close to the end. The first group went, and our group only had twenty-four hours in Paris in a hotel. We were in heaven because we could sleep between sheets and take baths instead of washing up from our helmet. After my discharge, I learned that the chief nurse who had been in our unit was sent to Colorado to

take care of Gen. Eisenhower when he had a heart attack.

My family was very patriotic, and my two brothers and I all served in the military. While I was in France, my brother, Don, who was stationed in Germany, came to visit me. Everyone I cared about was in the service. I was overseas from April till August. I was at that camp in Rouen until July and then went to Marseilles where we were training on tropical diseases. It was hot, and we wearing wool uniforms. From there, we were on our way to Iwo Jima, but we never got there. While we were aboard the ship in the middle of the ocean, the announcement came over the PA that the war was over. The bomb had been dropped. Our ship was diverted to Boston. We had a ten-day leave, and then we were sent to Camp Siebert in Alabama. I was stationed in Alabama for six to eight weeks and from there went to Vaughn General Military Hospital in Hines, Illinois. At Vaughn General, we took care of military men who'd had plastic surgery. Surgeons did skin grafts on burn patients and patients received rehabilitation. After working so hard, I developed phlebitis and was in the hospital for thirty days. In those days, you stayed in bed.

When I recuperated, I had a five-day leave and then went to work at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C. It was a general hospital, and they did everything. I found the work there to be very interesting. After Walter Reed, I was sent to Fort Dix to be discharged. We hadn't signed up for a particular time period. There was no specified ending time.

I was an Army nurse for twenty-six months.

[Irene's story was extracted from an interview and with her for the Brockport Community Museum and the full text of her interview and credits for the work can be found at: http://www.brockportcommunitymuseum.org/pdfs/interviews/]