

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT
Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Mary Del Monte

Conducted by Don Burque

April 21, 2008

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Good afternoon. This interview is being conducted on April 21st, 2008, with Mrs. Mary Del Monte, and her maiden name is Streidl. The interview is being conducted in Evergreen Park, IL. Mrs. Del Monte was born on August 12, 1917, in Menominee, Michigan. She was in the service: She was a registered dietitian, and then married after the service, and became a dietitian again. Mary learned about our Veteran's History Project through Barbara Boyer, and Mary's own daughter, Linda. Barbara is an employee at the Indian Prairie Library, and she is here with us today to share. Mrs. Mary Del Monte has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project; and this is her story.

Entering the Military

Mary, I'd like to begin with what your life was like before you entered the service?

Yes, I finished college; I was at St. Catherine's. And only three were internships available at that time to become a dietitian, and I had been able to qualify for an internship. I got a St. Louis University Medical Center internship. It was a busy, busy, busy year but I had learned SO much that year, it was like unbelievable. You were allowed to go to postmortems that had anything to do with the stomach, or something to do with the brain. They'd call a postmortem and anybody could come. And we learned a lot that way, and making rounds with the doctors. And we were civilians – you probably know we were civilians – but we were all commissioned at the same time on March 16 ...what was the date? ...

And that was when you were commissioned into the service? Was this the Army branch of the service?

Yes.

The Women's Air Corps?

The reason, I got the papers to fill out for the Army, and they immediately called me and said they needed me right away. So I left St. Mary's Hospital. I left there and went straight down to St. Louis. And I was just a registered dietitian at the time, and then we worked as dietitians, of course. And then we were all commissioned at the same time.

What made you decide to go into the military?

Well, for one thing, the money was great. And because I knew a lot of people down in St. Louis area, and I loved it there. I knew so many of the people, and we worked hard. We did have to get up at five every morning. We also had to take care of our mess, because we'd go to the medical school. For three hours in the afternoon we'd have to clean up the supper dishes and so forth. It was a long 12-hour day it was.

Were you commissioned there at St. Louis?

We were all commissioned. Eighty of us were commissioned on the same day -- physical therapists, dietitians.

What made you decide to go into the dietitian aspect of things?

Because all my life, my best friend and I were gonna be dietitians. We also were gonna get the darkest suntan in the summer, living on Green Bay, which we did. But our skin suffered for that; which has nothing to do with this.

Duty Assignment

So you were commissioned, there were eighty of you commissioned, and this was at St. Louis?

This was in the Army.

And whereabouts were you?

At Fort Leonard Wood.

And so you were stationed there at Ft. Leonard Wood for, how long would you say?

Five years.

So the whole time during the war you were stationed there.

Yes. But I was made a First Lieutenant, and then I was made a Captain. That was because they had dietitian manager who went to Washington. And so I had the whole; all the duties. I was always interested in the clinical aspects of everything. She was more of the materials needed to function on the stoves, and she took care of things like that – the baked goods. We didn't have any trouble at all. We had good bakers. And everybody worked together. There were black and white; it was wonderful. Then when we got the prisoners; we treated our prisoners very very well. It was in the New York Times and a couple of the papers, about how well we treated the prisoners.

Can you tell us about that – the prisoners?

The prisoners were very polite towards us. The German prisoners were absolutely wonderful; the Italian prisoners, too. They did their work. They would tell what they liked. We would try to feed them. And it was at the time when our prisoners were being treated so meanly, wherever they were. And, in fact Carl invited all the prisoners to come to our medical meetings. He was very good to them, and they were very good to us. They behaved very very well while they were prisoners. We had so much to do. We had to visit every mess hall. We had to see that everything was done right. And it was important, because once we all took off and we went swimming. We got back, and the patients were sick – a lot of patients, not all of them. But we immediately saw what happened. The one dietitian that was on was busy with other things, and she wasn't noticing that the bread pudding was bubbling. And when you see bread pudding bubbling, you know there's some sort of infection in it. And they were vomiting and disfunctioning. But the generals always want to know why; and the doctors, too: Why is a

dietitian important? But, it was very important for cleanliness and having the food edible and good. And the cooks were having some fun. The cooks had some cod fish rolls one day. They were advertising they had the best cod fish rolls north of Alabama. And they weren't really cod fish. There was some cod fish in them, but it was a kind of a fun type thing that we had going. And we had entire mess halls to make sure were running right. The detachment mess, of course – and that was bad – it was only for black people. It was still segregated at that time. Once in a while a really light black guy would go through that line and it was questioned; he had to show that he really was black. But there was no fighting back then, or arguing. I didn't see any. Or attacking girls and stuff like that, like now. Sickening, isn't it?

So, you were there for five years. Did you get to go home very often to Michigan?

I went home twice on Christmas. Dotty had a car. Not too many people had cars at that time. But she lived near Green Bay, so four of us would drive home. It wasn't that far, really.

Did you hear from your family very often while you were there at Fort Leonard Wood?

Oh, yes. My brother was on a ship up on Attu. His ship was smashed right down the middle and they lost a lot of men. My sister was in Kansas City, Air Corps, and I was at Fort Leonard Wood. And when my brother Bill was old enough he went into the Korean conflict, but we all came out of it pretty much okay. And yet, when over on Christmas Eve that time, she wrote such sad letters. Probably torpedoes were after them all the time. Then when she got there, she had to lie in some basement in Italy where there were some dead soldiers. She and Rita Cole from the air trip had a rough time. But then things tapered off and she liked it. Well, I'll tell you, the women, they could have twenty dates a night if they could squeeze them in because there were three thousand men and eighty-nine women.

This is at Ft. Leonard Wood?

Yeah. Until we got a lot more staff too, because they built that hospital so fast! I still remember before the screen windows and screen doors how the flies would bother us. But they built it good, and they were going strong, and they had many meetings with very, very important people, of course, because in the center of the United States you're not going to have submarines, you're not going to have everything else you have on the water. I remember, I think there were 400 generals there for meetings and they always came to talk to the dietitians, too, and congratulate us on our good department.

What was your daily life like once you were there for like, say, the first year or starting the second year?

Well I became the head dietitian so I had to watch costs a little bit more. I had to watch absolutely no rations. Rationed foods were given, but if they were unrationed they weren't. One time Colonel said, "Don't you dare tell anybody those prisoners like bananas! I get twenty thousand letters from mothers who said they can't get bananas for their children." So I never said that again. They were very good about our continuing education. So we went to all the conventions. We couldn't all go, we would take turns.

How many people did you have under you -- you said you were head dietitian? How many reported to you?

Well, we all had mess officers that we worked with. Our cooks and bakers were wonderful. They were from Lebanon and towns around there. They were so good, they, too, were from the area. They used a lot of people from the area. And they weren't commissioned in any way. Well, I shouldn't say that. The mess officers were usually commissioned officers. And we had one little cook about that big, Knorr, but he was the only one that used to drink our vanilla. And he fell in one of the soup kettles and we got him out – the soup wasn't too hot yet. So, there were funny things that happened too.

Did he fall in after drinking the Vanilla, which has alcohol content in it?

Yes, that was the only thing we had trouble with was vanilla. They'd steal the vanilla, a case of vanilla, and go out to the cave to have a good old time, I guess. I don't know. I was never in on it – vanilla parties. Officers – we always had someone who was above us. He always seemed pleased with what the dietitians were doing. I think they did a good job and they did things that some people wouldn't even think about. When we had no lemonade and there wasn't enough vitamin C in the menu for the day, they would get lemon crystal candies. And they would make them take lemon candies because they had 500mg of vitamin C. And they would see that the diets were balanced. There were always fresh fruits and at least two ounces of meat or eggs. I think they ate very well.

Was this the prisoners who ate well, or everybody in general?

Everybody I think ate well.

What did the prisoners have? What were their meals like?

We would give ... I wrote too, and said they wanted sauerkraut, and since there were German prisoners we added sauerkraut. And the Italians wanted pasta and stuff like that. But they would cook things in unusual ways. We had wonderful coleslaw that went with a fish dish, and when they got the coleslaw they would always cook it. That's the way they did it in Germany, I guess. But we let them kind of do their own thing. They never revolted against anything, and they were pleasant. And they would act silly, too – "Here comes the chief; here she comes," saluting.

Did you have interpreters to enable you – do you speak any of the languages, or did you have interpreters to speak German to you and vice versa?

Well, some Italians spoke only Italian, but we had an Italian man working for us, too. We kind of got what they said. They called everything "lemonade," though, for some reason. We'd make big pitchers of juices: apple juice, orange juice, and others. "Oh we get lemonade today, hooray..." Anything that was poured into a pitcher was lemonade. It was funny.

What were your living conditions? Did you share barracks with some of the other women?

We had a guard at every door. But I was a really lucky one. And we had single rooms too. But my room was right across the streets from the officers' club, and the dental officers lived on this side and the medical officers on this side. Well, when the officers' club closed at eleven they'd all come strolling out going back to their quarters and every one of them would say, "Goodnight Mary" (chuckles). I never heard so many men saying goodnight to me before! It was kind of funny. And I knew half of these doctors. They came from St. Thomas (college); I was from St. Catherine's, and I knew a lot of them—dated many of them down there, too. It was a fun time for me. Except it was a sad, sad time, too, because every Monday morning on the bulletin board would be men killed in action. Oh, that would just bring tears to my eyes. Joe Kirschner was our finance officer. He said, "I'm going over I'm going to get those guys," but the very next day he was trying to save another soldier and he was killed. And there his first name was on there.

Were these all soldiers that were at Ft. Leonard Wood who were killed?

Yes. Fort Leonard Wood soldiers would be listed and there would be fourteen to sixteen dead. It was sad. And then we used to – the officers of the day – would make the rounds at night. And they always wanted a woman with them for some reason. And we'd go around and we'd have to make sure the doctor had written the cause of death and so forth on the name tags. And we, the dietitians, helped. PT's helped to tie the record on the big toe of the dead person. It was sad. That was very sad. But I made such good forever friends. Most of them have died now. We were twelve of us that would do things together.

What did you do in your off time when you weren't on duty? Did you live in a local town?

We went dancing in the cave. They had a cave. They opened this wonderful cave. It was huge – wonderful dance floor, wonderful music and jukeboxes and that's what people did. And there was a movie theatre that was very good. It was like twenty-five cents.

And what year was this, Mary, about 1941, 1942?

Let's see... '35 I finished college. '36 is when I went to Fort Leonard Wood.

So, actually even before the war, 1936, before the war actually...

It was all before the war, yeah. And then, oh boy, I'll never forget when the war was declared because everybody was ... the field hospitals – everybody was shipping out right away. Everything had to be fast, fast, fast.

What year did the prisoners enter the picture? When did the German and Italian prisoners come in and show up at Ft. Leonard Wood?

I don't know now exactly how they... They were gone when I left there and I don't know... They must have been transferred then to Germany and Italy. But for some reason, I don't remember when.

Was that before the war that they came, before we got into the war, that the prisoners were there or after we got into the war?

They were there after we got into the war. But, they weren't there when I left, I don't think. I wonder if it would help at all if I would look at these... This they gave at our ADA conventions but they were in (indistinct), and they were so nice, and I lost all of them. I only have a couple of them. I'm trying to think now... They were transferred out to their companies again, and it must have been right after the war was over. They were perfect gentlemen. It was amazing.

Were they officers or enlisted men, or both?

Two were doctors and then Colonel invited them to all of our medical programs. He wanted continuing education for everybody. They were let go, I wasn't there when it all happened. It was close to when I was going to be leaving.

What were your meals like? I know you were responsible for preparing meals for the prisoners as well as personnel on the base, but what did you and your group of nurses have to eat?

Well we had all the foods of course, and the best of everything. And I used to trade with the engineers at the officers' club, if they had something they weren't going to eat. We could trade. They watched costs a lot. We had to check the beef always, and the chickens and all that stuff. I didn't know anything much about it, but the mess officers did. I'd agree with them because I wasn't real sure about it.

So, you were a lieutenant first and then became captain?

Yes, about two weeks – no, two months before I retired. They had, in Washington, they had big pictures – card books, big ones. I don't know what happened to those. Maybe someone has got them.

So there was never any talk about going over seas or anything like that; you knew you...

Oh, no. You never knew when you going to go over.

So there was a chance that you might have gone.

I asked to go overseas with the 177th, and he says, Colonel says, "No! You're doing a good job here, and we need you here! Don't even talk about it anymore."

If you had gone overseas, where would you have wound up? Where would you have gone?

You'd usually go with a unit. We trained eight units. This girl here is no longer with us. And you'd get to liking the units and how they were run, and you'd ask to go but, you couldn't go if you were in a position that they needed you. I worked overtime, too. I wasn't afraid to work, I'll

tell ya. If I get rid of my backache I might get back to working and cleaning this house and doing all these things (Don laughing).

When you were there, Mary, was there any physical activity? Did you have a softball? Did you play softball?

I stood out in the field in softball.

Did the nurses have any kind of physical activity?

Well we went to movies. We went dancing at the cave. Well some of them played tennis. Yeah. There wasn't much time though to play tennis.

So you had pretty much a full day all day long.

I had to see the diagnosis everyday and make sure everything was right. And sanitation was a big, big thing. And then we had to check weight of waste, too. If they didn't like something they would put it in this certain bucket and we would have to report that there was waste of food and don't serve it again. Then we had to go out – a lot of different units were there, and we had to go out to teach cooking principles.

Who did you teach?

Soldiers.

Soldiers?

Soldiers.

But those soldiers would take what you taught them out into the field out into combat or Europe or? What you taught them. Where did they take that with them? That knowledge?

Well, they should have taken it back to their units. I'm sure they did. They didn't have too many complaints. They were a happy lot. And that's why I think we were a happy lot.

With 89 women and 3,000 men there must have been some great experiences. Can you think of any stories regarding some of your nurses under your command?

Oh Margaret Murray – that's in the book (*From Home Sister To Second Lieutenant*, by Patricia A.M. Hodges, copyright 2007, pp 167-168) too – we went to St. Catherine's together and majored in chemistry. We were friends forever, you know, and she finally came down to be with me. Which she got, she got somehow. But in her case she got orders to go with the worst overseas unit and they were going from Italy to India. That was something she didn't look forward to. But she got it at 6:00 at night and we were gonna have our Christmas Eve party and she had to get packed and she wrote her last will and testament and she gave me her fur coat and

her typewriter. And we were laughing about it and all that, but she said later, “I was practically in tears, too, because I was leaving and I didn’t know what was gonna happen.” But she said – it was actually in her Obituary three weeks ago -- she said “it was the best time I’ve ever had in my life.” She loved it. She got hooked up with Rita Cole, a friend of mine from here, and they stayed friends forever. Then Rita died, now Murray died. It so strange that she died still talking to her and she said, “Mary, I’m dying in two weeks.” And I said, “Why?” She said, “I have liver failure.” And I said our Marge. And I had had a pie burning in the kitchen and I. And we didn’t talk more about it and then I got two weeks later I got a letter from her daughter “Margaret died a peaceful death of liver failure.” And she with a bad back, too, but she had to take the Tylenol every 8 hours – which is what they have me doing – I’m wondering if I am going to get liver failure. Well it’s about time. I gotta get something. I know I’m not going to be here forever. I wanna go to heaven one of these days. (chuckles)

And she was with you at Ft. Leonard Wood? You had known her that long?

She came down to Ft. Leonard Wood. She wanted to be with the group, you know. But she was a fun person.

Did you stay in touch with your family via letters and all that while you were there?

Oh yeah.

Were the letters censored at all? Did you write what you wanted to or were there letters into you censored?

No, they were just free letters. We didn’t pay. I have one – I saved the card because it from four of the guys that I dated at times and they said ... oh, it was a picture of four dietitians. They said, “We know a dietician that could be a lot better model than this one.” And they signed it, ‘Joe Red Eye, Tommy. I’m wondering now if my mother could send it free – I’m wondering now if the people could send it free to service people.

Discharge and Return to Civilian Life

I’m not sure. I’m not sure if people could send it to you free. I don’t know. So did you stay in touch, Mary, with a lot of the women that you knew?

All of them. We met at Nancy Cassidy’s – her cottage, three or four times. One came with her dad to have dinner with us; he was 100 at the time. And she took him to come dancing with us. Her picture is in the book (*From Home Sister To Second Lieutenant, loc.cit.*), too. She did a lot of work with the dieticians.

When your time was up were you discharged over there at Ft. Leonard Wood? Is that when the war was over pretty much? Like 1945 or 1946?

We had to go to the ... didn’t you have to go to your main – Tom had to go to some funny place to get discharged.

But you were discharged right there at Ft. Leonard Wood? And then you went home after that? What did you do after you were discharged?

I worked for a couple of weeks. I was getting married at the time.

Well that brings up a question – How did you meet your husband?

I worked with him for five years. And he was strong. And the first time he saw me he said “I love you and I’m gonna marry you.” I said “Oh you are? That’s a funny one.” (others laughing)

Barbara: Well he was right!

He stuck with me 63 years.

That’s great. So you met him there. When did you get married? Right after you left Ft. Leonard Wood, did you get married after that? And then how did you get to Chicago?

We were married in Ft. Lewis, Washington with our best friends. We were married together at Fort Lewis, Washington.

Where was he from? Where was your husband from?

He was from Chicago.

So that’s the reason you came back here. You married him and you came back here after the service.

I wasn’t planning on marrying him, but we were worked together for five years, and of course Joe and Eileen were getting married. And he said, “Let’s get married.” It was supposed to be a double wedding so we could be together.

And do you remember what year that was?

1944.

Then you moved back to Chicago. Did you start a family shortly thereafter? Or did you start working or...

We started a family; two boys, two girls. And after the kids were in college, except Johnny, our youngest, was in high school yet. But they had been calling me. The doctors I knew around St. Louis area, now they were at Mercy and University of Chicago, and they called me to come back to work. At the time with three in college; and another one who would be starting college, it sounded like a good thing. I’m glad I did go back. I worked then until I was 72. Any time somebody was having a baby and would take six weeks leave, I would take over for them. So I had a really good life.

(Tape turns over; there may be some missing conversation here.)

But we had no bathtubs – no way to take baths. What they made were these giant oil cans, and we would stand under the scaffolds and get a shower that way. When we first went there, there was nobody. We had one patient and the next day we had 2,000! We had to bake 600 pies at night.

So when you came back here, you stayed in touch with a lot of the women you met.

Not all of them. But they came here or we went there – quite a few of them. But so many died. Last year -- we had a club, 24. We used to call it “The Babysitters’ Club.” And last year 21 of them died. But, see they’re all near 90 now. And that’s what’s going to happen.

Did you join any organizations – formal organizations?

ADA – American Dietetic Association. You had to be a member years ago. But I was a member all the time. And I went to the conventions. And I spoke once, was on the radio, in Pittsburgh, it was a long talk; one long talk here in Chicago on channel 7.

Lasting Impressions

Did your military experiences affect your thinking afterwards? How did you feel about serving in the military? Was it a positive experience for you?

I think it was.

Some things that you learned from it – any of the things you want to share with us that you learned from the military?

I learned a lot from the military and from my internship in St. Louis. My internship in St. Louis really was wonderful because the doctors there would notify us when there was a surgery that a dietician would be really interested in – like colonoscopy type things, cancer of the bowel and different things like that. You could see what was happening and why.

Do you still see some of the women now?

I see one of them – Joan Duffy. She has macular degeneration of her eyes. She married an officer and they had one boy. She just moved to be closer to her son – she never married and had children again. And Maria who I talked to about every week. But she died. I miss her. The day she died she sent me that cane. She said, “I don’t want you to walk without a cane.” You tip over so easily when you’re old! I can’t go anywhere, and I was always going, going, going. Oh, and the pictures they took of the four of us who were forever friends. And they took pictures – this one is of some dieticians who were at Ft. Leonard Wood. But they all died.

Is there anything else, Mary, that you want to share about your experiences?

I'll probably think of a thousand things after you're gone!

Barbara, is there anything you wanted to add, or questions or anything?

Barbara: You know, I've heard all these stories -- well many stories -- from Linda (daughter) and from you over the years. And I always remember -- I was telling Don, actually -- that Mr. Del Monte wasn't an officer.

He was a non-commissioned officer.

And you weren't supposed to be fraternizing with him?

After war was declared and every unit went overseas they didn't say that anymore.

I just always remember that.

I dated only officers for a long, long time. But I saw too many divorces, too.

Don: Anything else you wanted to share with us, Mary? Any other stories?

Oh, I'm not the sharpest this morning.

You've done a great job. If there's nothing else, we can go off record.

We've been with Mary Del Monte, Evergreen Park, Illinois. Mary, we thank you very much for sharing your experiences and your story with us. It will be invaluable, and I know people will want to read about your experiences and how you lived them, and everything that you've accomplished with your life. I think you're just a delight and I liked hearing the stories, and I'm glad you had this opportunity to share these stories with people.

Did you ever know a Frank Carey? He wrote a lot of these articles.

Don: About World War II and about veterans?

Barbara: From the newspaper.

Don: I did not know him.

From the New York Times, I think.

If that's all, we're going to go off record. Thank you very much, Mary, for your story.

You're welcome!