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Capture Living History: Meet Phyllis Gervais, Army Nurse

By Carl Kelly

Part 10 of a continuing series.

Phyllis Gervais was a student nurse when Pearl Harbor was attacked. She had worked the night shift and had gone to bed that morning, so she heard the news much later that day. "I was numb. I don't remember even having a reaction," she said.

Then, other members of her nursing class decided to join the Army. "I don't think at that point I thought about joining the service. But later, I decided if there was going to be a war I was going to be in it." Eventually, her entire class decided to enlist after graduation.

Gervais noted that she was underweight, "I only weighed 99 pounds," and was initially rejected. She tried to gain weight and kept going back every week. "Finally in June of 1943, God love my mother, she made me eat two sandwiches, two milk shakes, and two bananas before I went in. I don't know why I didn't think of that before. I was like this." She showed with her arms the size she felt. "The doctor said, 'You're 125 pounds. You're in.'"

She was made a lieutenant. Remembering her first response, "Here I am a brand new, wet behind the ears graduate and I was put in charge of whole unit. I looked down the row and said, 'I can't do it.' The major said, 'You're a lieutenant. You will do it.'"

She did. "I shipped out to England in July and then in November we shipped out to North Africa."

First stop, Casablanca. They were put in a horse barn where they laid their sleeping bags down on the hay in the stalls. They woke up next morning covered with flea bites.

That story triggered another sleeping bag memory. "We had a lot of rats around the latrine. I went to the latrine one night and I left my zipper open on my bag. When I got back in I zipped up my bag and didn't know a rat had gotten into the bag. I couldn't get the zipper down. I woke up my whole camp. They took a bayonet and cut me out of the bag. I was fortunate the rat didn't bite me."

Gervais discussed daily life as an Army nurse. "We washed in our helmet, then we changed the water and we washed our clothes in our helmet. We had latrines, but they were wooden boxes with a hole in them. In North Africa we had to have a guard with us at the latrine, because one of our nurses had been on the latrine late at night and was attacked and killed. From then on we had to call a guard."

She hated the food. "We had K Rations when we traveled, waxed boxes, a cracker, some cheese, and two packages of lemonade powder. When we were on duty we had C Rations, which were cans of corned beef hash, bean soup, Spam. I used to think I'd never eat Spam again."



Phyllis Gervais didn't really think about becoming an Army Nurse when war was declared after Pearl Harbor. Later she decided that if there was going to be a war she was going to be in it. Later still she made a career of Army nursing.

She paused, then added, "And powdered eggs." The nurses all missed real eggs and traded nylons for fresh eggs when they could find them. They cooked their fresh eggs every way but scrambled. Scrambled was the only way powdered eggs could be fixed.

"Sometimes I'd be an operating room nurse. Sometimes I'd be surgical nurse. Sometimes I'd be doing triage," she commented. The situation was such that she learned things she'd never have learned in a state-side hospital.

"I would be doing 1st scrub. The doctor would say, 'Move into my place. Suture this person while I move to the next table.' Because I'd been there I knew exactly what he wanted done. The doctor would be at the next table.

"I never really thought about it. When you're in the thick of it you just know how to do something. Within days it's almost like you've always done it. I think what it taught me was nothing is difficult."

Nursing in the Army during a war is tough, she noted. "I became tired. I became exhausted. I never became disgruntled. I never wanted to go home. I liked being where I was. You have to remember I wasn't in the trenches. I wasn't fighting the enemy. They were a few miles away."

Late in the war she was moved into Europe. She remembered, "When Paris was liberated they gave us a week off. There were GIs swarming all over Paris. The French loved us. We stayed at the best hotels free. We danced all night, drank champagne. This was after three years without leave, so we really celebrated."

After the end of WW II, Phyllis Gervais made Army nursing her career.

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