
VOICES OF THE PAST

BG ANNA MAE HAYS ORAL HISTORY

WORLD WAR II

1983

The following excerpt is from the oral history of Brigadier General Anna Mae Hays, collected for the US Army Senior Officer Oral History Program in 1983. Interview conducted by Col. Amelia J. Carson. The complete oral history is housed as part of the Anna Mae Hays collection at the US Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, PA.

INTERVIEWER: General Hays, what motivated you to join the Army Nurse Corps?

BG HAYS: Well, I would think there were several reasons. First of all, I joined during World War II. As you know, the war was declared on 7 December 1941, and from that time until I joined in May of 1942, the papers were full of stories about individuals serving their country. And, with my being a nurse, I too wanted to serve my country. It so happened there was a US Army Reserve Hospital Unit which was affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, known as the 20th General Hospital. And this unit could not fill its complement because it would practically strip the hospital of all of its nurses. A Unit physician was assigned to visit the larger communities surrounding Philadelphia to find operating room nurses who might be interested in joining the Unit. He asked only the first and second honor students of the graduating class of each hospital. Three nurses from our hospital eventually joined the Unit. I think that recruiting played a dominate role as to why I entered the Army in early 1942. But, I am certain that I would have become an Army nurse. I wanted to serve my country.

INTERVIEWER: What was your family's attitude toward your joining the Army?

BG HAYS: Well, as I said before, my father was no longer living. My mother, I'm sure, was as patriotic as any other mother but she didn't want to see her children leave home. However, my brother joined the Marines and I joined the Army. I'm sure she was very proud. I can remember when I got back home from overseas that she was displaying her 2-star flag at the window, which showed that she had two children serving their country. When look back at it now, though, I just didn't realize at the time that I left home so soon after my father's death. It seemed a much longer period of time. My mother had one other child, my sister, who was in senior high school. But, one didn't think about being selfish in those days. It was to give and do what you could for your country. And, I'm sure that's the way she looked upon it. It's hard to recall exactly what happened over 40 years ago. I remember going to the police station and taking my oath of office. Police station doesn't sound quite right but it was probably one of the few places where someone could administer the oath. Within a week I received several letters from the Commander of the University of Pennsylvania Hospital unit and I went on active duty. However, I was enrolled from the time that I was graduated from nursing school until I went on active duty in the First Reserve of the American Red Cross Nursing Service. That was the vehicle through which nurses were recruited for the Army. I entered a specific Unit because of the University of Pennsylvania's request.

INTERVIEWER: When you joined in 1942, how long was your initial obligation?

BG HAYS: Well, it was for the duration of the war and six months thereafter, at least that was my understanding. I had no idea how long that would be at the time.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any basic training before you started your military duties?

BG HAYS: Oh, of course not. In those times The Surgeon General and the Army Medical Department did not think that it was essential for the Army nurse to have basic training. It was thought that Army nurses had the same duties in a military hospital as in a civilian hospital. It was certainly an erroneous assumption. However, we worked in the station hospital in the mornings, and then met in the afternoon to learn how to march, salute, wear gas masks, etc. I know that I passed some sort of a proficiency test in putting on my gas mask, nothing more than that. I'm not sure that any of us offered a good salute and few marched in step. As I'd had a lot of experience marching in school bands, I was always disgusted with most of the other girls in my Unit because they couldn't keep in step. So, we spent a few hours each day in what one might think of as basic training, and then had a gay social life in the evenings.