
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: What type of patients did you take care of at the 20th General Hospital?

BG HAYS: Well, during the first summer they were mainly malaria patients. As I would say you probably know, Ledo, Assam was one of the worst, if not the worst, malaria districts in the whole world. So, most of our staff suffered from malaria and, of course, there were hundreds of patients with malaria. But, during the second year, we were also very busy with combat casualties coming over from Burma -- the famous General Merrill's Marauders. They presented many medical problems to the physicians. I can definitely recall how the patients would come to us in the operating room in need of emergency surgery, full of caked mud, and how it would have to be scrapped off their bodies prior to surgery. Also many were filled with lice, not only in the hair on their head but in the pubic area. Sometimes we just didn't have time to clean them. We had to operate on them immediately. I can vividly remember the many amputations of extremities due to gas gangrene. That, of course, couldn't be treated in those days. There was no chamber in which to put the patient, and it was just very heart-rendering. I know that I, as a 22-23 year old girl, was very upset because of the many amputations but, of course, there was nothing else that could be done. We had a tremendous group of physicians. After all, the physicians were the best from the University of Pennsylvania Hospital, and our nurses were well-prepared. We had a fair amount of equipment and supplies. I'm certain the European Theater, had much better medical supplies and equipment than we had. And, as history has proven, the whole theater was sadly neglected. But, as I said, we did the very best we could. Another problem was typhus. We had ward upon ward of patients with the diagnosis of typhus. At that time, the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research was beginning its study of immunization against typhus. Later the research came to fruition, but it was too late to save all those many patients who had been desperately ill with typhus. But, as far as illnesses of the staff, it seemed that most everyone had bacillary or amoebic dysentery, dengue fever or malaria. Some were very ill. Some suffered for years with after-effects. When one lives in the jungle, one can expect to become ill from exotic diseases and that, of course, is what happened to our hospital staff. In addition to caring for soldiers and officers stationed in Burma or India, we gave care to the Chinese. The Chinese were our allies, and so many wards in one section of the hospital were devoted to Chinese patients. That section had its own operating room, laboratory, etc. It was difficult to take care of the Chinese. My experience with them in the operating room was different from giving care to them on the wards. I remember the surgeons opening their abdomens and finding tape worms, etc. We had to carefully disinfect or clean all equipment, rooms, etc., after use. If a Chinese soldier had only a plaster cast applied, one had to watch him

because he would take anything within his grasp. I can remember missing scalpels and instruments, and upon searching, would find them hidden underneath his sheet or in his slippers. The nurses who took care of these patients on the wards used to tell stories about how they couldn't keep them in bed. They'd get out of bed, leave the hospital, go down to the little village, and come back with a live chicken, or whatever they could find in the village. So, in addition to the medical problems, we also had cultural problems. As to our hospital, only the operating room, laboratory, and x-ray buildings had cement floors. The remainder of the hospital had mud floors. Of course, the heavy rains would pour seven-eight inches of water in 24 hours during the monsoon season. You can imagine the mud problems. Each building was made of bamboo and our roofs were palm fronds, so when it rained water came through the roofs. Doors, except to the operating room, and the laboratory, and x-ray buildings, were weaved bamboo with no closures. It was quite an experience when a sacred cow or a jackal would run through a ward or the nurses' quarters.

INTERVIEWER: General Hays, you mentioned some of the problems of living conditions there. Could you expand on what the living quarters were like and some of the problems you had?

BG HAYS: Our living quarters were quite similar to the ward units. Now, you may not know what a basha is, but it's a building that's made of bamboo and, as I mentioned, the roof was made from palm fronds. Our nurses' quarters had mud floors -- dry at times -- just the same as the wards. Each building had four swinging doors through which anything could enter. It might be a jackal at night, or a cow during the day because the cow was a sacred animal. At one time I wrote a letter home to my mother about how I was awakened by two cows at my bedside. I don't know if that's true, but I'm sure it was or I wouldn't have told my mother. But, it was an experience. There were three nurses' quarters, I think, for 120 of us, so that meant that approximately 40 people lived very, very close together, sleeping on rope beds which referred to earlier. We had no issued bedside table. What we could take -- I won't say steal -- but what crates we could take from the mess hall or medical supply would be used for a bedside table. Our clothes, of course, would hang on a rope by our beds and we would iron them by sleeping on them at night. It was rather rough living. I remember that during the first few weeks everyone had diarrhea and, of course, we didn't have toilets. We just had holes in the ground. And then, when we finally did get those little "johns," one would have to be very, very careful of the leeches, particularly at night time, when our kerosene lamps gave very little light. Leeches were very hard to pull out of one's skin so we'd always have to carry matches with us so we could burn them out. On balance, we didn't really have too much, but still we were in it together. We were serving our country and no one ever complained. What did we do on our off-duty time? There was one British club about two miles from our place near a tea plantation, and about once a week or so my girlfriend and I would go there to a dance. The pilots would come from all over the jungle, as far as 50 miles. They would travel by jeep through the jungle seeing lions or other wild animals -- I'm not exaggerating -- and visit with us for a couple of hours. That was one of two places to which we could go. Another was the home of a Scot who lived next to that club. He took a liking to my roommate and me. We would go up to his place once a month and spend the night. Of course, with his 31 servants we were just spoiled to death. So, we knew what living in style could be like in that part of the world but we, of course, didn't experience it very often. Walking back one day in the mud -- my girlfriend and I were wearing rubber boots up to or

above the knee --we found it very difficult to move one foot in front of the other. We would fall periodically. I therefore had two hunks of mud on the rear of my trousers, and, as I walked along with the sun pouring down, they caked. Someone passed by in a jeep it was General Merrill of Merrill's Marauders. He laughed and asked us if we wanted a lift, and then gave us a lift back to our Unit. I thought that was an absolutely tremendous experience -- a second lieutenant being in the presence of a general officer! The only other recreation we had was in a building that was set aside for us to gather at night time, for- those who weren't working, of course, to play bridge. I learned how to play bridge and played most nights. As a matter of fact, I haven't played since, and that's probably why. I just had too much of bridge. We finally had a "victrola" given to us but we had only a few British records and, of course, we had no radios. Living in the basha wasn't easy. Insect control was a tremendous problem, especially mosquitoes and flying roaches. I can remember one time when washing in my helmet, and that's how we washed in the first year or so, I looked down and I saw a mouse or a rat in the bottom of the water. I can't remember which one, and that is the truth. Later on we got better living arrangements. New bashas were built for- us with cement floors and only two nurses were assigned to each small room. I can remember going to the basha one afternoon and finding a huge snake wound around my mosquito netting. We were more or less used to seeing snakes. We used to jump into the trenches when it was necessary, and since they were generally filled with water, we never knew whether there was going to be a snake in the trench. I can remember one time, when I was hospitalized, a cobra was underneath my bed. Since the ward was designated for nurses, there was a guard nearby on patrol who shot it. When one lives in the jungle, one can expect that sort of thing, even though the immediate area was cleared. However, we had a great many things to be thankful for. Orchids and poinsettias were plentiful just outside our basha; coconuts dropped down from the trees and we drank the milk and ate the coconuts; and gardenia trees, not bushes, were close by with odors noticeable for miles. So the jungle had great beauty. I can remember my mother telling me that I would write home and talk about how we had much to be thankful for, how we were surviving, how we were somehow being watched over, and how we thanked God that we had each day to live.

INTERVIEWER: Besides the coconuts that you ate, what other type food did you have?

BG HAYS: Not much. We had C rations. We ate in the same type of basha as the other buildings. For a table, we had wooden planks placed over horses and we sat on long benches. We had spam morning, noon and night -- cooked every way possible. I remember the first Christmas we were there. We had mutton. It was air dropped. But, we didn't get much but C rations almost the entire time we were there. We wouldn't eat the oleo or chocolate in the mess hall so we could take it home with us. When we would get enough saved up, we would make fudge. Our bearer -- that was our servant -- would bring non-granulated sugar and nuts to us from the village on palm leaves. Then we would take a big #10 can from the mess hall to use as a stove and make fudge. Of course, that made us quite popular with everyone. I have many, many stories to tell of the days that I spent on the Ledo Road.