

Interviewee: Brassell, Stephanie W.
Interviewer: Robin Sellers
Date of interview: November 4, 2003
Category: World War II
Status: Open
Tape location: Box #47

Sellers: Mrs. Brassell, are you aware that we're recording this interview?

Brassell: I am.

Sellers: Do we have your permission to do so?

Brassell: You do.

Sellers: Why don't you start out by telling me a little bit about where you were born and where you grew up, and then let's get into your military service that way.

Brassell: I was born in Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh, a small town called _____[?]. When I was five years old, we moved to a coal mining town, so I'm a coal miner's daughter. The coal mining town was about eleven miles from where I was born.

Sellers: And what was it's name?

Brassell: The name of the town was Renton, Pennsylvania.

Sellers: And how long did you live in Renton?

Brassell: I lived in Renton until 1941, until March when I went into the military after the war. Then I went in nurses' training in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; I trained as a nurse.

Sellers: When did you go into nurses' training?

Brassell: I went there from '37, and graduated October, 1940. West Penn Hospital, Pittsburgh.

Sellers: When you were in high school, was there any talk among your fellow students or the families in your area about the coming war?

Brassell: No, but when I was hired as a operating room nurse after I graduated, our chief of surgery came around and was recruiting nurses and doctors for a unit they were forming from that hospital. Many general hospitals formed 1,000-bed units, and West Penn was the 58th

General Hospital. I told him to go ahead and put my name down, because I was hired as an operating room nurse at West Penn. That was before 1941, before Pearl Harbor, before December. So I said, "Okay, put it down," and didn't think anything of it. That war was over there in Europe, and it didn't bother us. We were in our early twenties, and things like that ... we weren't so conscious of war because they could never reach us. We were so far away, they could go ahead and fight over there. Didn't bother us.

Sellers: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Brassell: Yes, I had two sisters and two brothers.

Sellers: Were the brothers of an age that might have been affected by the war?

Brassell: One brother was on the hospital ship *Hope* and one was on the *Shangri-la*, the first aircraft carrier that went out to the Pacific. When the fighters were hitting Tokyo, no one knew how they could reach Tokyo from the States. So they named the ship that my brother was on the *Shangri-la*; that's how that ship got its name. He was a parachute rigger on that ship. I have a sister that was a WAC – you know what they were. And then my youngest sister went in after the war and was stationed here at Tyndall Air Force base here in Panama City. She wasn't in the military; she was a cadet nurse but the war ended. The cadet nurse was a program that the government put on because we were short of nurses. They were getting ready to draft nurses. They paid all their tuition, but they had to sign up that they were going to work for the government. But the war ended – the bomb took care of that.

Sellers: Between the time that you got signed up for the 58th General Hospital and Pearl Harbor and then your actually being on active duty, tell me about that.

Brassell: Well, I was real happy at West Penn. I was going to work there the rest of my life because I had a job that I liked. I was a scrub nurse for a neurosurgeon, and we didn't have that many brain surgeons then. In 1941, people came from Ohio and the states around there and I was scrubbing for Dr. Stuart Rowe, and he was the best one in that area for that. I think we were the only hospital in Pittsburgh that had brain surgery at that time, you know, way back then. And that's at the same time when women had babies they stayed in the hospital nine days; you didn't get out of bed. But when they were paying their bills ... they died while they were paying their bills because they had a blood clot that formed in their legs and then they had phlebitis and died. But we didn't know things like that; we go way, way back.

Sellers: So when Pearl Harbor came along ...?

Brassell: When Pearl Harbor came along, it was a Sunday around noon. I was on call and Carnegie Illinois Steel had ... people worked there, in Duquesne, on Sundays, you know, the workmen. They had a patient that had his arm caught in the machines, and he had to have the arm amputated. So we were amputating that arm when one of the other doctors was making

rounds, and he stood at that door and he said, “We are at war!” Can you imagine how we felt? The doctor and his assistant, and I was the scrub nurse, and then we had a circulating nurse. We knew we had a hospital that was formed, but things don’t happen overnight. So that was December 7, 1941. And then March, I went in, 1942, and my girlfriend and I – she worked in the operating room, too. We had our forms filled out to go into the military, but we were both happy at our work so we didn’t want to do it. So one day she was scolded for something and she said, “I think I’m going to drop my form.” I said, “Well, you go ahead and drop yours” – because I didn’t get scolded today. One day we both got scolded the same day, and that was on a Thursday, and we dropped our forms into the post office, and on Monday we had our assignments. We were sent to Edgewood Arsenal, Maryland. So that was the furthest I’d ever been away from home, from Pittsburgh to Maryland. We went by train.

Sellers: Tell me a bit about your training was in Maryland.

Brassell: We were there in temporary quarters. You know, they’d built the temporary quarters. We were only there three weeks – three of us reported on that day. In three weeks time ... they needed nurses in Columbus, Mississippi. They were opening up a flight school there and they had a hospital there, a temporary barracks, where you could see between the boards ... when you were in your beds, you know, you could see each other. You could put letters between. Because everything was done quickly. So they wanted three volunteers. So my real close friend, Josephine, and _____ [??], the other girl, she said, “I’ll go with you.” They needed three. And one of the girls from another unit put her name down. And boy, we were on our way down South so fast it made our heads swim. We knew nothing about the South. The commanding officer of Edgewood Arsenal was a colonel, and he knew a little bit about the South. So we said, “What’s it like down there?” And he said, “Oh, you know, they don’t rush down there like we do up here in Pennsylvania.” Because up here everybody’s rushing because they want to save five minutes. And what do they do after they rush? They sit down. And he said the Southerners don’t have to sit down because they’re not rushing and knocking each other down. So that’s all I knew about the South when I got here. Nothing else.

Sellers: What’s the first thing you learned on your own about the South?

Brassell: Oh, I loved it; I fell in love with it. I was stationed in Columbus, Mississippi, and the Mississippi State College for Women was not far from Columbus. They would have graduations -- our boys that flew on those planes – they graduated once a month, the cadets did – this is during the wartime. And they would have a dance. And they would bus those girls in for the dances for these young boys. They were only ... some of them were nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two year old pilots. And they were graduating and then they were going to combat. Some of them went on to learn to fly bigger planes, you know, the bombers. But these were little nines and tens that they were learning, having to learn to fly. Oh, we just loved that because we would entertain them, the few nurses that were there. And we got to go to those dances, too. So that was our entertainment, once a month for the graduations.

Sellers: What were your uniforms like? Were they nursing uniforms?

Brassell: We had brown and white seersucker dresses and brown shoes and brown caps. We wore caps at that time. But let me tell you, when I was at West Penn I started out at \$50 a month as a graduate nurse. But we were making \$5 more than the nurses that worked on the wards. And by the time I left there in fifteen months, my salary went up to \$90 and I was just elated to make that much money. This was really, really bad times. \$90 a month. So that when we went into the military ... and then, incidentally, on each paycheck that we had ... and when we got a raise we were asked not to discuss it with the other nurses. We were not supposed to tell them what we made. But making \$90 a month, then I said well, we'll go into the military. We went into the military for \$70 a month. But they furnished us all our uniforms and our housing and our meals. That was clear money, \$70. And we were 2nd lieutenants but we had the relative rank of 2nd lieutenants; the male 2nd lieutenants were making \$125 a month. But we had to be satisfied with \$70 because we got everything and we had relative rank. So they had to pass a bill to give us the regular rank later, and then we went on the same salary as the male, the same scale. So we took a cut in pay, but we were all excited because we were in the military and we wanted to do everything we could.

Sellers: Were you able to get off base other than just for the dances, or were you restricted?

Brassell: No, we weren't restricted. We were allowed to get off base. But we had a chief nurse there that came in about a couple weeks after we were there and she was a 1st lieutenant – we were 2nd – and her hometown was in Chipley, Georgia. So her accent was Southern, real Southern. And she had a little car that had a gearshift on the wheel, and she would allow us to drive that car to go downtown. Downtown was about ten miles. But we knew everybody downtown. We knew the banker. It was such a small town. And when we reported there, there was no chief nurse, there was nobody there and we went to that hotel, and the man at the hotel says, "Well, you can stay at my home; we have an extra bedroom, my wife and I." This was an elderly man. Then they sent an ambulance for us the next morning. That's how friendly they were. And this couple gave us breakfast. Literally, I just fell in love with all the Southerners down there. They couldn't have been nicer. I loved the South. I was there eighteen months in Columbus. We were there eighteen months, but we were getting so restless because we wanted to go overseas. But the 58th General Hospital hadn't activated yet; it was just on paper.

Sellers: What were your duties while you were in Mississippi?

Brassell: I was in the operating room; I was the operating supervisor of this little hospital. We had one ward just for venereal diseases, and then we had a medical ward and a surgical ward. So three of us were down there and there were three wards open. So the commanding officer said, "Each one of you girls take a ward." And then I took the operating room. But until they could get another nurse, there was an enlisted man running the ward on the venereal diseases.

Sellers: So your duties were still scrub nurse?

Brassell: Oh, yes. Because we scrubbed for the doctors more than the enlisted men did. But then later on it transferred the other way when ... when we ran the operating room, the enlisted men helped the doctors more than the nurses. We circulated.

So we were there eighteen months and I was getting real restless for two reasons ... I wanted to go overseas. I thought they needed me. You know, those people were getting killed over there and I wasn't over there to help them. So I needed to be there. And then the army was getting a flight nurses school in Kentucky, and I applied for it. I said that way I'll get over there faster than waiting for the 58th General to activate. So I applied. But I got this beautiful letter back and I cried my eyes out. It says "this girl has every qualification to be a student nurse for flying but we cannot accept her because she belongs to the 58th General Hospital," and they wouldn't release me. They weren't going to release me to go flying because they needed me in the 58th General. So that made sense. Everything works out for the best. I talked to a couple of other nurses, and they went.

So that was the army, see. Then later the Air Force ... we didn't have an Air Force. See, that's when I was at Columbus Army airbase, and there was planes there because we did not have an army until 1947, and this is '43 that I'm down there – '42 and '43 that I'm down at Columbus.

Sellers: But we had an Air Corps that was Army.

Brassell: Army Air Corps, yes. Columbus Army Air Corps. So that's how it was named. And that's why they had ... the school was under the army – flight school was under the army. Those nurses were army nurses. So later on when the Air Force came in, then they had the Air Force ... and that one was in Texas, the big one.

Sellers: Tell me about when the 58th gets geared up and moving.

Brassell: Finally we get a notice that the 58th is going to go to Livingston, Louisiana, Camp Livingston. And we were all going to meet there eighteen months after I was in Columbus. So we met there, and that's where I met Pearl Tyner. See, she was not a West Penn graduate; she was a graduate from Tallahassee, I think. She was the dietician. So we had 108 women in our outfit, fifty doctors, and 500 enlisted men. That's what it comprised of. That's a big, big, big team. And that's where we all met, and we had to do close order drill down there and learn all about what's going to happen overseas. So we activated there, then they took us by train to Fort Devins, up there in Massachusetts, where we waited for our ship to come in to take us to England. We were on our way to England.

This is October, '43, because I was eighteen months over there. So we all went to England and we erected a hospital there in a sheep pasture. It was a sheep pasture, and they put up Quonset huts and they had a 1,000 bed hospital on a hill there of England. And incidentally, I love England, too, really and deeply – although it rains every day. So that's where we formed our first hospital. I felt like I was needed there.

Then because one of the nurses ... I don't know where she graduated ... she became the

operating supervisor of that 1,000 bed hospital because she was ten years older than I was, and I was her assistant then, at the general hospital in England.

Sellers: But your duties were still as a nurse?

Brassell: Oh, yes, still an operating room nurse. I was in the operating room.

Sellers: When did you start getting casualties, and how bad were the casualties? Tell me a bit about the boys that came in there.

Brassell: Well, we didn't have as many casualties until after D-day. Of course, they were boys that were in the foxholes, living in foxholes and all kind of arms, legs After D-day, we formed ... D-day was in June, and we didn't go over to France until September. See, it's a 1,000 bed hospital – we had to wait. But we had just small casualties. We weren't too busy in England because see, it wasn't full-fledged war yet, you know. We're just waiting; we spent most of our time waiting. And incidentally, while we weren't working in the hospital and we were waiting, we were drilling, drilling, and drilling, and going to classes and close order drill.

Sellers: What kind of classes?

Brassell: Oh, they teach you how to put on masks, and medical, and doctors would give us lectures. And close order drill hikes. We would hike about five - ten miles. And also we had many, many alarms. When we had those alarms sounding so many times, it meant you must go outside when it was a certain number of alarms. We had to leave our quarters, and we lived in England in Quonset huts, six to a hut. And a pot-bellied stove in the middle to keep us warm. We had a coal pile in the middle of where the nurses lived – we had several huts with six in a hut. We had to go carry our own coal, we had to make our own fires. That was all done by the nurses. We took turns. Then later we learned how to stoke a fire so you wouldn't have to start it from scratch the next morning if your name was on the roster. We learned all those things. I was fortunate enough to be friends with a girl whose brother worked for the post office. You know, you couldn't get a package from home unless you requested it. Then your mother had to show that request slip at the post office. And she said to her twin brother, "Don't worry about any requests. The people are poor over here; you send me what you think we're going to need." And my friend that attended school with me in Turtle Creek High School when I was in high school ... and her mother took her back to England because she was English. She didn't want to go back but she had to. She lived in Wales, and we went to visit her in Wales. And her little child didn't have any pajamas and clothes. And Edith slept in her husband's pajamas because he was in the military and they issued him pajamas. So we all had duffle bags and we all carried bricks in our duffle bags. You probably know what we did with the bricks.

Sellers: No.

Brassell: We heated them on our stove because we didn't have heat. Then we wrapped

them up in anything flannel and put them in our beds – and we had warm beds. So that’s how we warmed our beds. And when we visited my friend Edith, that’s how they did, they warmed their beds. So that’s when Peggy said, “I’m going to write that brother of mine and have her send me ...” he could send pajamas, size nine, and underwear and all. And he would send her packages, see. Then she would send one to Cardiff, Wales, to Edith’s little boy. So that was real nice.

Sellers: You need to tell me about going across the Channel.

Brassell: When we were going from Devins to England, that was a frightful voyage. We went on the *Vulcania*, an Italian ship. We had to dodge those German submarines. And I’m telling you, when we dodged submarines, dishes were flying all over the place, you know, from the kitchen and operating room. We had an operating room on that ship.

Sellers: This was going across the Atlantic to England?

Brassell: Oh, yes. That was real frightful. So the next morning I asked the major – I’ll never forget him – his name was Spencer. I said, “What in the world was going on last night?” And he said, “the wolf pack was after us.” But our ship outran the submarines, so we weren’t hit. Oh, that was the dangerous part of the trip.

Sellers: How long did it take you to get to England?

Brassell: I can’t remember – I think a couple of days. We were real crowded in the rooms. They doubled up ... it was ship that they used for vacationing but we had, I think, four or six people in each cabin, and three tiers from the bottom up. So we had that journey, and we were glad to get to England.

Sellers: Going across the Channel, it didn’t take you nearly that long to France. What kind of ship did you go in for that trip?

Brassell: I can’t remember the name of it, but it was a pretty large ship. Then we went down on those things that you see in the paper where the side goes down ...

Sellers: The LSMs.

Brassell: Yes. We got off of them that way. We landed at Omaha Beach and landed at night but it wasn’t until September. We went to a place called Ste. Mer Eglise. That was a pretty hefty battleground there. Then while we were there, we had set up tents – a tent hospital. Nearly all of them were tent hospitals after that. And the latrines, the parts where our toilets were, they had ten seats there. I was one of these who couldn’t go unless I had privacy, so I would wait ... if there were nine other people in there, I would wait till they went out. Then I said, “Well, now I can go ahead and go.” But I waited so long I learned to do what the other girls were d – get in there and get over your privacy – because you never had it alone. And the same way with our

showers – we had showers that we took on certain days and the men took them on certain days. We didn't all take showers the same day.

When we were there waiting at that place ... we weren't working, we were just settled there, waiting. They had neurosurgical teams, orthopedic teams, plain surgical teams, maxillofacial surgery teams ... and I went on an orthopedic team – two doctors and an enlisted man and myself. We went closer to the front lines – and you've seen M*A*S*H – we were working in tents like M*A*S*H.

Sellers: How close to the front lines were you?

Brassell: Pretty close. I don't know exactly – about twenty-five or thirty miles.

Sellers: Could you hear the guns?

Brassell: Sure. Then you'd go down to the latrine and then you'd hear the sirens, and you're frozen on the toilet there because you can't move. But my enlisted man – I think he was eighteen or nineteen – when he walked into the tent and saw the patients ... there were ten patients in the operating room tent ... and our team was getting ready to work and he's getting ready to pass out. So I slapped him – I had to. I slapped him right across the face and I said, "Stop it!" And he came to and I said, "There's work to do here." I didn't have a problem with him after that. We all had to bite our lower lips and go. And then we started at eight o'clock at night to work, and we worked till we were finished the next morning. And many times we weren't finished till ten or eleven. You couldn't leave your patient on the table because it's eight o'clock in the morning. They were twelve-hour shifts, but you worked twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. There was no days off then – you just worked.

Sellers: If you worked a shift that went through the night, did you have somebody to take your place for a couple of hours so you could grab some sleep?

Brassell: No, you didn't get any couple of hours. You had a tent there that was full of people that were rotating. The prisoners would come because they had our enlisted men carry the prisoners, and the prisoners had to be litter bearers, too. If the prisoners were able to walk, they had to carry the patients.

Sellers: Did the prisoners speak English or did you have to learn some German?

Brassell: No, most of them spoke English, but the ones that didn't, there was somebody there to interpret. And we had a ward just for prisoners – a prison ward. I didn't work on that ward. But I went to get some coffee – see, we only had a break for coffee. We didn't eat or anything, we just had coffee and cookies – there were cookies there. But we didn't go to a mess hall to eat or anything because we just worked.

Sellers: They didn't bring food to you?

Brassell: No. We didn't eat on that shift – just a snack and coffee – lots of coffee. That coffee pot went all day and all night. Well, there stands a young prisoner about seventeen or eighteen years old, he looked to me, and I had a brother that age that was at home in high school, a senior in high school. He didn't speak English, and I said to one of the boys that was in there who spoke German, "Ask him how old he is." And he asked him, and he was nineteen. He told this soldier of ours that he had a brother that was killed and that he had a baby ... no, he said he had a baby at home that he hadn't seen. And I said, "Oh, poor thing." Well, that was the wrong thing to say, because one of the sergeants in there said, "Poor thing, nothing!" And he cursed him and he said, "That SOB ought to be dead! I lost my brother yesterday." And so I learned ... we medics had to keep quiet. We were there to get these people well. And see, they had to get them back to _____[?]. And another thing we had to worry about, who the prisoners carried when they were litter bearers. If they carried somebody who was mentally upset, they would see that uniform and they'd want to kill him. They'd want to kill the litter bearer. So we had to be real careful that that wouldn't happen. So we learned; it was hard, but we learned.

Sellers: How long were you in France?

Brassell: In France, well, we were there and then we had our own hospital.

Sellers: Where?

Brassell: I can't think of the name of the town. I don't have that on these papers of mine. Then we were already ... the war was going real good. I went back to my unit, the war was going real good, and we went to a place near Nancy. All our letters were read, and everybody had a sister or cousin named "Nancy." The town was near Nancy. France was a beautiful place, beautiful.

Sellers: And how long were you there?

Brassell: We were there until we came home. That was in ... the war ended in '45, but we were scheduled to go to Japan. See, when the war ended we were all going to Japan because the war was really going to be bad there. They expected lots of casualties, thousands and thousands. Then came the bomb.

Sellers: Where were you when they dropped the bomb?

Brassell: We were still in France.

Sellers: How did you learn about it?

Brassell: We learned about it through the chief of our hospital ... let us know that they dropped the bomb. But when I was in France, I had my appendix removed – in my own hospital. They sent me to a place to recoup – thirty days. I was on a train, and the conductor says, "Your

president is dead.” That was Roosevelt. That’s how I found out our president was dead – I was on that train going to

Sellers: What did you think about that? Did you have confidence in Truman?

Brassell: Oh, yes. I was in Walter Reed when Truman was there and he lived in the Blair House, and the Cubans took a couple of shots at him. I scrubbed for Truman’s doctor when I was in Walter Reed. I was stationed at Walter Reed after I got back. I can’t remember the doctor’s name. He was a general; he was always on time. If he was scheduled for seven o’clock, he made that incision at seven o’clock. Everybody had to be there. He walked Truman every day; every day he took a walk with Truman. He was in kind of a hurry on this one particular day, and I said to his doctor, “Do you have any idea ...” I knew he was going somewhere with Truman. I said, “Do you have any idea where you all are going?” Of course it was a top secret; he was going to one of the islands to fire MacArthur. So he wasn’t going to tell me that. I found out later when they went.

I was in Walter Reed twice during this time after I got back home, once to take a course in operating technique and management, because after the war every nurse had to do that that worked in the operating room. I didn’t want to go but I had to. And while I was there, I said I’ll go to the office ... all these nurses that were stationed there working in offices were lieutenant colonels and colonels. But you didn’t talk to them – you talked to their secretaries. I said, “I would like to transfer to the Air Force, because I wanted to go to flight school.” And that’s all I said, and I forgot about it. I went back to Fort Benning, because when I asked to go to the Air Force, they wouldn’t take me. They said the army’s ... let the Air Force get its own. You know, the Air Force is there, I’m asking for a transfer, and they said, “No. The Air Force can get its own nurses; we’re not going to let you go.” So then I cried again. But I went back and forgot all about it. And lo and behold, I get these orders from ... the chief nurse came and says, “You’re going to South Carolina.” And I said, “I am?” And she said, “Yes, you’re being transferred to Sumter, South Carolina.” I thought it was Fort Sumter and it wasn’t, it was Shaw Air Force base. So that’s when I went to Shaw Air Force base and stayed there till I went to flight school, got my wings.

Sellers: When did you come back after the war?

Brassell: I came back after the war ... it was in ‘46. And I went to Fort Dix. And that’s where I stayed at Fort Dix, New Jersey, worked in the operating room, worked for a real mean doctor. He was the chief surgeon, the orthopedic. And that’s where we did a lot of surgery. You know, orthopedic surgery – all these limbs, you know, arms and legs. I wanted to go to Japan for the occupation, and I asked the chief nurse there, I said, “Would you let me go to Japan if I put in?” And she said, “If you’ll do me a favor.” And she said, “This colonel’s just going to stay here six months. Would you still stay and scrub for him until ... and then I’ll let you go.” And she kept her word. Nobody wanted to work with him, you know. He was one of these who threw instruments around and cursed. They were afraid of him. And I did that. So we went to Japan for the occupation, and that’s when I was stationed in Kyoto, Japan. We didn’t touch

Kyoto. They had a treaty or something that they would not touch ... that's a cultural and religious center. It was just beautiful, just beautiful, Kyoto was. I just loved it there, and that's when my father died and I had to go home and get my mother ... move her south, and we went to Pensacola, because I love the South. We were going to leave that cold Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I finally had my wings, got to go to flight school, got my wings, and then I was at Shaw Air Force base and they wouldn't let me go to ... I had to go somewhere to fly, and I can't fly out of Shaw. After I had my wings, the chief nurse left there, so I was acting chief nurse till they could get somebody. I said, "If you wait long enough, I'm going to be too old to fly." Because there was a limit on it – after thirty-five. So they had a party and the Major _____[??] came down, and she was in charge; she was from Virginia. And while we were at that party, I said, "Boy, I would love to be able to fly at Brookley." I said, "My home is at Pensacola, but Brookley is the closest Air Force base in Mobile." And that's all I said to her at the party, and I got transferred to Brookley. That's where I met my Southern husband, from Montgomery, Alabama. That's why I cried when I didn't get all my other assignments – if I didn't go to flight school and become a flight nurse and transferred, I would never have met him because he was a historian and he was stationed there at Brookley – the first civilian I ever dated.

Sellers: So he was not in the service?

Brassell: Never been in the service, but he was civil service. So we were married at the Brookley chapel.

Sellers: How long after you met him were you married?

Brassell: Sixteen months – almost two years. We've been married fifty years last September. He's a retired historian.

Sellers: Your career has been absolutely fascinating.

Brassell: I haven't stopped.

End