

**Interviewee:** Errair, Dorothy  
**Interviewer:** Robin Sellers  
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**Sellers:** Okay, the tape is running. Let's start out by asking you if we have permission to tape record this.

**Errair:** You have my permission to tape record any of my stories [chuckles].

**Sellers:** Well, let's go then. Tell me a little bit about where you born and where you grew up.

**Errair:** I was born in Paterson, New Jersey, which is eighteen miles from New York City. My father was a veteran from World War I, and when he came home from France, the silk mills where he was employed had moved South, so he had to find a job, and he moved to Detroit. We followed within about a year, my mother and I. So I grew up ... all my schooling was in the Detroit suburbs. My nursing school that I went to after high school was still in the Detroit .... I was a senior student nurse at the time of Pearl Harbor. I graduated just about two months after that and I knew I was primed to go into service because ... well, I was young and it was on and I had read about this marvelous school being formed for air-evac nurses. Even though I had never been in an airplane, it struck my fancy. So I got my Irish up and away I went. We really had very intensive training. I first was stationed in Illinois. I put in my papers to say I'd be available after the first of the year - the papers came through dated 2nd of January.

**Sellers:** Now who did you put the papers into?

**Errair:** Into the (US Army) Air Corps. Well, it was the Army Air Corps. The Air Force hadn't been invented yet. So, then when I put in my papers I realized I'm just out of nurses training ....

**Sellers:** And this is '42? 1942?

**Errair:** Yes, this was in '42. So I took a course in industrial nursing, which was one of the few advanced things they had for nurses in those days. Being in Detroit, we had all the factories, so they had one real good school. I took that - it was about a four-month course.

**Sellers:** What's the difference between regular nursing and industrial nursing?

**Errair:** Always in the industries there's nothing planned - all emergencies. Somebody gets their head caught, their hand caught, you know, whatever.

**Sellers:** So you're trauma care?

**Errair:** All trauma. That was probably the first of the trauma teams that they had made, and it was because of so many factories in Detroit. So I finished that and stayed home for Christmas and left then on the first of January ... I was sworn in and left for a little air base in Illinois. I was there about three or four months and then got transferred to the air-evac school at Louisville, and there were ninety-some of us in the class. But they really did not know exactly what they were going to teach us because, remember, air evacuation had not been done. The planes were not pressurized, so they did not know how a wounded patient was going to be transported in the air. They gave us ... tried to give us ideas, but there was no definite "do this, do this, do this." When you're up there in the air, you certainly couldn't pick up a phone and call anyone. So you had a lot of young nurses, all eager beavers, and we were given a job to do. They didn't know what we could do, we didn't know what we could do, so we did it [laughs]. That's the way it was. But our chief nurse was very curious and every time we came back from a trip she would say, "What problems did you run into? How did you solve it?" She recorded all this and then mailed it back to the school so that the school in Louisville was being updated on actually what we were finding and how we were responding to these treatments. The powers to be originally designed a chest to be taken on each plane with each nurse. But we found the chest weighted ninety-five pounds, so that was one patient we would have to leave. We would go through that chest and pack our little bags that we had ... stick them in our pockets – things we would think we might need – before we left the ground. I don't know why, but I always had enough, or could make do until we got back on the ground.

**Sellers:** How did you find flying? You'd never been in a plane before - what did you think about it?

**Errair:** Oh, it was the most marvelous thing in the world [laughs]. It never worried me a bit.

**Sellers:** No air sickness?

**Errair:** No, no - not from that. I've been sick a few times from other things, but not from the air. The people were just ... oh, we just had such a great group.

**Sellers:** You did that for how long?

**Errair:** Well, the school lasted only two months and then we went overseas ... on a troop train. Just imagine traveling on a train and they had to have the windows open to get the air in. The train burned coal, so all the coal smoke came in the windows [chuckles], and by the time we traveled from Louisville to New Jersey, we all had dark complexions. Our pretty white shirts that we were wearing in our uniform were all dirty. Even your teeth felt dirty [laughs].

**Sellers:** How many of you went at one time?

**Errair:** There was twenty-five in a group. We had a chief nurse who was a 1st lieutenant and the rest of us were 2nd lieutenants. So you start at the bottom, you know, and .... We never got very far, though, but we had fun [laughs]. We were from all parts of the States. There was four from Michigan in our particular group, and I think that was the state that was represented the most, for some reason.

**Sellers:** Did you know where you were going?

**Errair:** No. We left from New York City ... well, from Jersey City Pier, and as we left ... the ship was a Caribbean cruise ship that had been converted to troop carrier. As we all passed the Statue of Liberty, we all looked at it and you didn't hear any noise on the ship at all. Everybody was looking at the Statue of Liberty ... first time I'd ever see it, and we were all saying a prayer that we could come back and climb her when we got back. That was something. Then the convoy was the largest convoy of that time, and I do not know how many ships was in it, but they were in rows. I think there was probably twelve or more rows and maybe twelve in each row. We were in the upper left-hand corner. We were the second row, the second ship. So one end of us could nothing but the ocean ahead. If you looked to the right or behind, all you could see is other ships in this big ocean. But see, the ship had to go ten minutes in one direction and change.

**Sellers:** Ah, you zigzagged.

**Errair:** Zigzagged all across the Atlantic. It was maybe two-thirds of the way over before they told us our ship was heading for Africa. We went through the Straits of Gibraltar. You know on the map it looks like this little slit? [laughs] You can't see across it! And obviously we were going through the Straits, you know, and ... where's the land, you know? You can't see any. Then we went past Algiers, and it was just kind of a blur in the distance, but there was a big ... we used to have air raid practices going across the ocean, but when we got to Algiers there was an air raid, right off the coast of Algiers. We did not get hit, but oddly enough, six weeks later that same ship had gone back to the States, picked up another load, came back, and was sunk. Lost all on board. And you know, I've never heard anything about that. But there was, I think, 10,000 of us on that ship. It was so packed.

**Sellers:** What were your living accommodations on the ship?

**Errair:** [laughs] You really want to know?

**Sellers:** Absolutely, especially after that laugh.

**Errair:** Okay [laughs]. We were in the gun crew cabin. That meant the alarm bells were in our room [laughs]. Any time they had to practice drills ....

**Sellers:** You all were the first to know.

**Errair:** We were the first to know. But there was sixteen of us. We had two sets of bunks, one post in the middle ... well, two posts, like one at each end of the bed, and a cot. There were four us, four deep. Then, the other four were attached on the other side of the bracket. Then there were two of those sets in there, so there was sixteen in the ... I think it was sixteen. Anyway, I was quick. I guess I was fast, I don't know, but I got on the top. We were not allowed to open the porthole because it might let light out. So in the daytime it was too hot to stay below, so we stayed on deck.

**Sellers:** They allowed you stay up on deck?

**Errair:** Oh yeah. It was one place you could actually get air. Some of the enlisted men were actually sleeping on the floor in the hall because it was so crowded. We were crowded, too, but ....

**Sellers:** What about your bathroom facilities? Did you have a private bath?

**Errair:** No, yeah, we had sixteen of us .... I don't know where the boys all went, because it was hard to ... we didn't get around too much because there was too many of us and you had to go up a certain way and down a certain way. You couldn't wander - you'd get lost for sure. But we had saltwater. When someone tried to wash their hair ... and we had only saltwater ... oh, it was like mud [laughs]. You tried to wash out your unders; they were stiff in the morning.

**Sellers:** Salt does wonders for things like that. What about your meals?

**Errair:** We ate twice a day. The officers at least got to sit down; the enlisted men didn't because there were so many of them. They had to stand up at these long, skinny tables they had. But the meals were decent, better than some of the chow we'd gotten at some of the Army bases. You know, we always managed [laughs]. But when we actually got overseas, we landed at Bizerte, which is just outside Tunis. Bizerte was just shelled ... there were just remnants of buildings standing in the city. They put us on LSDs, these landing crafts, and took us across the bay. There was kind of a forest there; no signs of people living there. Anyway, we all were in tents - we had a big tent for the twenty-five of us, and there were 10,000 troops around us [laughs]. Talk about percentages. The first night we were there, the Germans bombed us. I remember they said we were going to watch a movie. They had to put the movies on early because it reflected light. But they just started the movie and over came the bombers, so we ran back into the woods. A British officer from some group that happened to live there ... he called us, "Ladies, ladies." So there was three of us ... we were running but we didn't know where we running to. Anyway, he called us over, and the Germans had hollowed out a base of this tree and they had made seats in there (it was a good-sized tree). Anyway, the four of us all squeezed in there and I'll be darned if this British man had a bottle of wine [laughs]. So here we are, scared to death, bombs are dropping, and he said, "Well, here, have a drink." Well, what are you gonna do? So naturally, we had a drink of wine. Nobody was hurt, but it was very noisy.

**Sellers:** How long did you stay there?

**Errair:** Oh, we were just there a month and then we were transferred over to Sicily. The Germans evacuated Sicily the day we landed in North Africa because of the way the timing was going. Then somebody had to find us quarters, and then we moved over there. We lived in villas, so-called. We had one villa we had our mess hall in, and the officers were in one building and we were in two other buildings. The only furniture we had was our cots, mosquito netting and bed rolls. Our bags had our belongings in them. But I had a room that had a nice window and the entire wall was covered in mold because there was an outside staircase. The room hadn't been heated; I don't know how long the place had been empty. If you brushed it, the wall was like snow coming down, you know? But we just didn't go against it. We wanted hot water ... there was no place to take a shower. I bought a little gas kerosene burner and I ....

**Sellers:** Where did you buy it?

**Errair:** At the local store, hardware store. You had to use your hands and point to what you wanted. I forget now what I paid for it. They were glad to get our money. But anyway, then I got some kerosene, which was ... they had it available there. I was the only one of our particular little group that had any facilities and we would take ... I bought a pail. We'd put the pail of water ... get it hot, and every afternoon ... we always had to be in full dress for our evening meal. So we'd all come in and ... the only basin was a helmet which had no holes in it. You had a liner, which would be outside but didn't leak. So then we'd all stand around, our backs to each other, and share the hot water and take our shower. Then you didn't want to waste your soap, so that's when you washed clothes - in one bucket of water.

**Sellers:** Well, that's okay, because what was on your body had been on the clothes anyway.

**Errair:** So that's the way we did all the time we were in Sicily. We were there like six months and we had an awful lot of things happen to our particular outfit. In September, we moved to Sicily. In October, one of our planes ... no it was November, November. We got through September. We started air-evac-ing in late September. We had a month, or five weeks or so, we had been working. On November the 8th, one of the planes took off and it had ... I was supposed to go that morning, but at the last minute they scratched me - they didn't have a extra seat. So there were thirteen of our nurses and thirteen sergeants and the crew of a plane ... took off from Sicily and vanished. It was bad weather. Later on we found out that there was a very great book written about it by one of the girls and it's called the *Albanian Escape*. In fact, I'm looking at it right now. But that book was written many years later. Of the original thirteen nurses, there's only three still living, and I'm in touch with them, so we keep going. But we eventually found out that they had crash-landed in Albania. The radio went out, nobody was injured, and the Albanians greeted them as if they were the conquering army [laughs] ... thirteen women. But the book really tells a story and it's amazing. Remember, we were not trained to go in combat, so-called. But here you have these nurses who only had their overcoats and regular

clothes, one set of clothes. They might have a bag with a couple sets of underwear in it - that's all they had, and they were gone months. They moved around Albania because the Germans had occupied the town. Partisans were fighting a civil war and they were trying to sneak around. Some of the Albanians helped them and they would go from one town to the other. The people would hide them in their homes. My girlfriend told me later, she said a couple of places they had ... they slept on straw and during the night she said a chicken was walking across her face [laughs]. But she said one day they found an egg and they cooked it and split it six ways! And that was all the food they had that particular day. Those girls had a bad time. While they were over there, the rest of us (there was only twelve of us left) kept continuing flying every day to the front areas, pick up the wounded, bring them back. The British went to British hospitals. We made many trips back to Malta, which was where the big British hospital was. So we spent a lot of time flying over the Mediterranean, taking care of these newly wounded patients the best we could with whatever we had.

**Sellers:** What kind of injuries were you seeing?

**Errair:** Oh, shrapnel wounds, fractures, some psychotic where they just couldn't stand the bombing anymore and just the noise of the airplane would set them off. And we were limited in what we could give to them. We'd kind of strap them down only so we'd know they were going to stay in one place. We never carried enough ... well, we didn't need parachutes because we didn't go that high. But the life vests ... we never, I don't think once on any plane, did we ever have enough for everybody. So we prayed a lot.

**Sellers:** About how many wounded would you have in each planeload?

**Errair:** On some of the planes they had what they had called metal brackets. Those carry eighteen. If they had the strap brackets, which were four deep, we would carry twenty-four.

**Sellers:** So it was still enough that it kept you really busy administering to them.

**Errair:** Oh yes. We found early on that there were so many patients we would send our medic ... our sergeant that was supposed to be our partner ... we would give them the walking wounded and we would take the most severe cases because they had to be on stretchers. So they could carry more walking wounded on one plane, where we were limited to how many we could take. We didn't have an assistant, we did it by ourselves. But the boys were great because when they had problems they'd say, "You know, I had this happen. This is what I did - is that okay or should I have done better?" So we acted like teachers for these men.

**Sellers:** So they were willing and trying to learn?

**Errair:** Oh yes, they were the greatest bunch of boys ever. Some of them had never even been near a sick person before they took the original course.

**Sellers:** At least you were there because that's what you wanted to be doing.

**Errair:** Oh yeah. It was our choice to do that. If we did have them with us, we were teaching along the way: why we're doing this and what to look for and all this. So we were, you know, doing what comes naturally to us.

**Sellers:** Did you stay based in Sicily all this time?

**Errair:** Oh no. When the thirteen were missing, we were so short. We knew when they returned, because they had been in enemy territory (and they had one place they took pictures of them), so we knew the Germans had their pictures, so they would never be allowed to go back into that theater of war again. So our chief nurse put in for replacements. The replacements came right about Christmastime. Then in January, the missing girls came back for just a few days; we got to see them to know that they were all right. They had suffered malnutrition bad. They all had ... their bellies were all distended from that. Oh, they were just so happy to be back. So they went back to the States, and we were then busy breaking in thirteen new ones. In February, end of January, first part of February, coming home from a dance someplace nearby, the jeep crashed and one of the girls was killed outright. The other two of them were injured. A month later in February, they were being ... one of the girls had a fractured back, and she was in a body cast. She was leaving Sicily, the first leg of the journey back to Algiers and then to the bigger planes which would take them across the ocean. I was supposed to fly that day, and at the last minute, the chief nurse stuck a thermometer in my mouth and said, "You're grounded." I had to help this other girl, who was still in bed at the time ... help get her up and out and dressed. So she took my place. When she got out to the airport, another one of the girls flipped a coin with her to see who would take the one nurse in the body cast. This Betty, she won the toss. Half an hour after takeoff they hit a mountain and they were all killed. So we had three dead ... well, we had the thirteen missing, they came back, three deaths ... the first six months we were over there.

**Sellers:** What did that do to you?

**Errair:** You're very aware it could happen to any of us at any time and we still had to get the patients out. The patients came first. You knew it, but you didn't dwell on it. We knew that if we crashed, everything would be over in a minute. We knew we didn't ... the planes weren't equipped for ... they wouldn't float and we flew over water a lot. What you did is just kind of put it in the back of your mind and kept doing what you could do. But we all were aware of it at all times.

**Sellers:** Did you have any kind of memorial services or anything for the people who were killed?

**Errair:** We had a beautiful service in Sicily and the plane ... well, we had two trips because they were killed at two different times. The one trip ... when the first girl was killed we

had a service in the local theater. Then she was flown and the rest of us were all in the plane and we went down south ... it was about an hour away. Up on the side of the mountain was this beautiful American cemetery for all the wounded, and injured from the Sicilian invasion were buried there. It was so beautiful. Then, of course, a couple of weeks later we did the same thing again, burying the other three that were on that one. There was one of the sergeants and two nurses on the one plane. I can still remember it. When I talk about it, I'm still back there. That was very ... it was very hard to take, yet we knew they had done their best, they were doing their job when they were killed, and we would continue.

**Sellers:** Did you have any feelings of fate because you were supposed to be on the plane?

**Errair:** That's right. I carried that weight on my shoulder for years and years and years until after I retired from the local hospital. Oh, it must have been thirty years, anyway. I took up a course in creative writing and one of the stories I wrote was the story about Betty, which is the girl that I woke up to take my place. And after I did that I felt so much better, just like the weight had disappeared when I wrote the story.

**Sellers:** Had you told anybody about it or talked to anybody about it before that?

**Errair:** Oh, I mentioned it to my husband and my children were small ... nobody understood it, really. When they did read the story after I'd written it, they understood a little bit more. But unless you're there, nobody can, really.

**Sellers:** I've heard so many people say that - you can listen to it but you don't understand it; you can't feel it.

**Errair:** You can't. You haven't got the surroundings, the mood of ... now, we didn't get scared, we went on to carry on our job in spite of what was happening. So we did that. We did feel back when we were transferred from Sicily to Italy later on, right after Normandy invasion ... not sure now of the dates, but we didn't know about Normandy because, you know, there's no communication. It wasn't until the *Stars and Stripes* came out, which came out once a week, that we would get to know what's happening elsewhere. But we moved from Sicily to just outside Rome. We were busy moving to Rome when Normandy was in progress.

**Sellers:** What kind of facilities did you have for living in Rome?

**Errair:** Oh, we lived in a very beautiful apartment house that was five stories high, no electricity and no water [laughs].

**Sellers:** And no elevator either.

**Errair:** Oh, no. For example, my room happened to be on the third floor. Well, if you had to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, you walked down three flights of stairs,

went out in the backyard, climbed over a fence (which we had made wooden steps up and over) and out into this open field with a six-holer latrine. Then, of course, you'd always travel with your flashlight and we had guards at the doors and you'd feel so stupid in the middle of the night ... here's the guard standing with his rifle, you know? You had to go, what are you gonna do? But we survived.

**Sellers:** What was the status of Rome at the time?

**Errair:** Rome only had damage at the railroad yard.

**Sellers:** I know it was an off-limits city as far as bombing, supposedly.

**Errair:** The first three weeks we worked there, there was still German vehicles, damaged, at the wayside with bodies in them. It took them three weeks to get them all collected. We'd be driving in a open truck, in the back of the truck, you know, to the airport and we were right on ... where the Tiber river runs into the ... oh, I've forgotten the name of the sea that was right there, but it was the Mediterranean, anyway ... we had to go all the way into Rome by the Coliseum, come back on the other side because the Germans had blown all the bridges there. So every day we'd have to go in and pass ... the driver of our truck would holler, "Hold your nose!" and we went by these vehicles [laughs].

**Sellers:** Were you doing the same kind of flights from Rome?

**Errair:** Always the same flights. We flew up maybe in one plane to wherever the front was. We covered the British front and the American front. So British patients went to British hospitals. Our doctors that were stationed up near the front would organize it that way.

**Sellers:** What were the hospital facilities like that you were taking the patients to?

**Errair:** Only a few times did we even get near them. If it was British patients, the British ambulances would be waiting for us to unload. A couple of times I requested a doctor to meet the plane.

**Sellers:** So you were strictly airport to airport?

**Errair:** Airport to airport. The ambulances brought them to the airbase. But when I had somebody bad, I would call ahead or they would radio ahead to have a doctor at the field. So they would double check what I had been doing. I didn't have a death on the plane. I had some bad ones, but we keeping them going. Sometimes the only thing you had to do was talk to them, hold their hand, try to assure them, "You're going to get help." Sometimes the only thing I might do on the entire two hours would be talk. But you'd do what you had to do.

**Sellers:** Well, that would take certain skills on its own - just knowing what to say and how

to reassure them.

**Errair:** One day we talked high school football. On the plane there happened to be a group of Americans, and one of the patients, just after we took off, he hollered, "Hey nurse! What state you from?" I said, "Michigan." "What city?" "Detroit." "What high school?" I said, "Redford." He said, "I was from Cooley." You know how each high school has a certain one that's their rival? And here he was. So that started it; all the way back, the conversation was high school football. Now remember, I was twenty-three. Most of these kids are eighteen. I still remembered high school football. I played in the band, but [laughs] .... But you did what you had to do. You bandaged them, you watched them and you could see that sometimes they weren't conscious completely. We couldn't give IVs because the cabins weren't pressurized. So now you can do anything. I am very proud of the fact that we did it first; we proved it could be done and now air evacuation is the norm for all cities and all countries.

**Sellers:** I think that's the only good things that comes out of war - medical improvements have to happen so quickly. Antibiotics and all kinds of things that are created.

**Errair:** And at the time they're created, it's because there is a need. I don't know ... I have good memories and bad ones.

**Sellers:** You're at a level with this trauma care that's got to be stress producing and you're there most of the time. What did you do to unwind?

**Errair:** [laughs] Well, when I lived in Sicily, I was walking down one of the streets one day and I found a violin for sale for \$20. I used to play a violin, so I thought, okay. I bought my violin and I brought it home. No music; I didn't even have a piano to tune it or anything, so I played with it, and in the evenings when we were at our home base in Sicily ... you'd be there for a day or two, long enough to get your clothes all clean, ready to go again. But in the evenings our ... we called it the mess hall but it was the dining area, and it had more heat in it than the buildings we slept in. So we would kind of congregate in the evenings. That's where we would sit and write our letters and the leftover coffee from the day would always be in a pot on the back of the stove. So we would be drinking coffee laced with cognac because the coffee wasn't really that hot - see what I mean?

**Sellers:** And probably not that tasty anymore.

**Errair:** No, no [laughs]. But anyway, so I found out the more coffee and cognac I drank, the better I played [laughs].

**Sellers:** [laughs] Or so it sounded.

**Errair:** That's right. That's what everybody else told me - they didn't run away from me. But this is what you did - you had to make your own. We didn't have radios, we had no

communication with outside, we had our letters ... mail took maybe six weeks to get there. For example, they were V-mail, which is the one that came quickest. It was a little bitty one that had been miniaturized ... one sheet of paper miniaturized enough to go fast. My parents had sent me a V-mail, which they very seldom used, but they sent one to tell me my mother was going in the hospital to have some surgery. But it took six weeks for the letters to get there to tell me she had the surgery and another six weeks to find out she got home, see? But you managed.

**Sellers:** What about going out in Rome sightseeing? Did you have any opportunities?

**Errair:** Oh yes. Some of boys, the pilots or the group that we were with ... if they had a jeep when they were going into town for something, it would be piled full - as many as we could get in the jeep. If the trucks were going, well, we had even more. One time we went to see the Coliseum in the moonlight. The rumor had it that, "Oh, it is so romantic." Well, you know, we're young and as romantic as the rest of them, considering every time you'd meet a nice guy he goes and gets himself killed, but anyway, we managed. So I remember there was three couples going to the Coliseum in the moonlight. We got there and we had been dressed in skirts because the evening meal was full uniform and that was skirts. Oh, by the way, we were the first military women to be allowed to wear trousers. Because you couldn't get up the plane with a skirt on.

**Sellers:** Practicality overcomes tradition.

**Errair:** But our khaki uniforms, which was the dress uniforms, did not have pants with, so we had to wear skirts. So here you are, three nurses all jazzed up in their skirts and stuff and we go to the Coliseum. Well, the moonlight - it was beautiful and all that, but no one ever told us it was full of fleas. We were wearing skirts - well, you can guess where all the fleas went to! Up our skirts! Oh, it was terrible; we were a mess.

**Sellers:** Which brings another question - how were your bathing facilities?

**Errair:** In Rome it was no better. We had no water. We hauled water up and we always took the sponge baths. Well, now, when we working out of Naples, about the time Vesuvius was erupting, we were doing a lot of evacuating and the air base is right on the slopes of Mt. Vesuvius. The ash was flowing all the time and it smelled like rotten eggs all the time. But the hotel we stayed at in town had a shower. It was a group shower ... not group ..well, three or four could go in the same one. One day I'd been on Vesuvius, on the slopes there, all day. My hair was ... oh, it was just grimy. So couldn't wait to get in there and take a shower. Got my head all full of soap and the water went off until the next day [laughs]. Oh dear. So, my hair was getting pretty ... right now it's short, but then it was pretty long. There was no barbers, you know. We all started with short hair, but hair grows. So I managed to get out of the shower and dried off as best I could and went upstairs, and luckily one of the girls had a canteen of water. It got some of the soap out of my hair.

**Sellers:** Oh wow. You'd have been happy for saltwater even at the point.

**Errair:** Oh, no. Not saltwater - that would be even worse than soap. That dries stiff. But you know, we always found something to laugh about. I think laughter would get you through, no matter what. I had an R and R on the Isle of Capri, just about that time. I was sitting on Capri when Vesuvius blew and I was able to watch it. I remember there was no television in those days, but when you see these big screen televisions, that reminds me of sitting on Capri and watching Vesuvius. You could still smell it, so that part wasn't good. It's amazing how well you remember it. When I talk about it, I can almost even smell it again, you know [laughs]. Capri is beautiful. It's the only place over there that I've ever thought I would like to go back to see.

**Sellers:** But you've never gone back over?

**Errair:** Never gone back, no. We saw destruction, total, in every place we went. Who'd want to ... I wouldn't recognize anything, you know? I saw Monte Casino ... the town was just gone.

**Sellers:** You weren't based at Monte Casino, you just went passed it?

**Errair:** No, we went there to pick up wounded from the front, you know. Our planes ... the C-47 lands on a shorter runway than most of the other ones, so that's why they were used. Then, in those days, nobody did a lot of flying. You didn't have runways built. The Army built many runways. In Italy, especially in the springtime there, it's a lot of rain and you have lots of mud - the thickest and gooiest mud I've ever seen in my life. They had to drop these big steel mats so the planes could land on. But if you happened to step off the mat, you went down to mid-calf in mud [laughs].

**Sellers:** After Rome, where? And how long in Rome?

**Errair:** It was about six months in Sicily and ... you know, flying up to Italy, back; Africa, back; Malta, back - you know, always in the air. We saw a lot of the Mediterranean, believe me. Then we were in Rome for six months (we moved to Rome at Normandy time), and between Christmas and New Year's, 1944, we moved to Sienna, which is south of Florence, because the lines moved. The hospitals moved. When the hospitals were moved, some of them were moved to the Rome area, then we would go north and pick up the wounded and come bring them back to Rome. We were still making occasional trips back to Algiers because the big planes couldn't land on some of our runways. So we had to carry our patients to Algiers so the big transports could come in there and get them.

**Sellers:** Okay, you kept moving, D-Day has happened, so we're into, what, almost the fall of '44?

**Errair:** Well, Anzio was before ....

**Sellers:** D-Day.

**Errair:** Before D-Day. That was the worst casualties I ever saw in my life were the ones I picked up at Anzio. We couldn't fly in there until they just about got the Germans out. The most intense and most physical injuries I ever saw in my life (and I hope to never see that many again) were the young men that I took out of Anzio. I don't know how much publicity has ever been given to the Japanese-America group, but it was very strange to have a whole planeload of Japanese-looking people when I knew I was in Italy. But this group of young fellows ... their homes were taken away from them, their families' businesses were taken away, and they were all in concentration camps in the United States.

**Sellers:** These are the American Nisei?

**Errair:** American people, but they were Japanese descent. The people on the West Coast were worried about them being the enemy. We know it wasn't true, but the young men, when they got to be eighteen, they all joined the service.

**Sellers:** So they were giving their lives over in Italy for the Americans.

**Errair:** The point is, when I talked to a lot of them, they could not get mail from home so they did not know what was happening at home. They were trained as a fighting unit and they were vicious, vicious fighters because their homes had been destroyed. Now most of us, we knew our home was going to be home. We would get letters from our families. But these boys couldn't. It was heartbreaking, and they were so young ... oh, massive injuries. In fact, I must tell you about this. Years later, Tom Brokaw wrote his book ....

End Side A

**Sellers:** Okay, you had written a letter ....

**Errair:** Yeah, I wrote five letters, actually, after I read the book. One to Tom Brokaw for writing the book. I wrote to ... who was the one who went for vice-president? Bob Dole. He was injured in one of the 10th Mountain. Well, we evacuated the 10th Mountain troops. So I wrote ... I said I could have been one of the nurses ... either I or some of my buddies was the ones that brought him out after he had injured his arm. Then I wrote to his other senator from Hawaii, Inouye. But anyway, he wrote back ... could I read this letter?

**Sellers:** Oh, certainly.

**Errair:** Okay, this was written September the 9th, 1999. From him, and this is to me. He says, "Thank you for taking the time to write to me. I was touched by your memories of my dear

friends, the memories of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. I'm glad you wrote me because it gives me the opportunity to thank you for your service as a flight nurse. Although our paths may not have crossed literally, I have a connection through my buddies whom you cared for and your fellow nurses you cared for me. The road to rehabilitation was extremely difficult for me [he had lost a whole arm] and for thousands of other injured soldiers. The first few days were especially trying. With encouragement from the nurses, I survived. The nurses provided more than medical care for my physical ailments. They treated my spirit, and gently but willfully nursed me back to emotional and mental wholeness." Isn't that nice?

**Sellers:** Yes.

**Errair:** He did that so many years later.

**Sellers:** And every bit of it is heartfelt, too. That's not politics because you can't vote for him.

**Errair:** I can't even read it without getting tears in my eyes.

**Sellers:** Oh, I know - I can hear them in your voice [laughs].

**Errair:** [laughs] But he was something very, very special. He represented all of those young men; they were so young and so badly, badly injured. I couldn't help myself. I had to write and I was so thankful that he answered. But anyway, we were at Anzio. I got my list here. We were up in northern ... in Sienna, which is up near Florence, when Mussolini was killed. Then we were still living there on May the 10th when ... we call it VE-Day ... when bells went off and the whistles rang and everybody was aware that the war was over in Italy. Our whole side ... and all we could think of was no more wounded.

**Sellers:** Was that actually the case?

**Errair:** That was then, because the front line was gone. There were accidents; we had a few accidents happen where we had to fly in from Mozambique, but it wasn't the pressure of always everyday picking up the wounded, you know. That was a powerful thing, too.

**Sellers:** Now, what kind of celebrating did they do?

**Errair:** We had a ... in the local soccer field they had there in Italy, we had just kind of a picnic and a ball game and things like that. I remember somebody baked up some pumpkin seeds. They were passed around [laughs]. We couldn't have popcorn but we had pumpkin seeds. It was very friendly. From then on, it was ... the days seemed to go so long because we just had to wait for transportation. They didn't fly us back; we had to wait for a ship. So from May from August, when we finally got on board the ship to head back to the States, we had to find something to do and that was the worst part of it. We knew there was so much work other

places and we didn't have any. We had this local dispensary we worked in, a few things like that.

**Sellers:** So you didn't actually go on to the hospitals and help out or anything like that?

**Errair:** Well, we had dispensaries where we would help out in. Hospitals ... we didn't always have the transportation to get to the hospitals. And of course, they didn't have as many ... they had the same amount of nurses that took care of the crowds. When the crowds weren't coming in, they had an abundance of nurses.

**Sellers:** Was there ever any question in your mind or any indication that they might be sending your unit to the Pacific like they did ....

**Errair:** Definitely. We knew when we left Italy we were to come home for thirty days and then go on to the Pacific because we had experience. On board ... we were coming back across the ocean when the atom bombs were dropped. We, as one voice, said, "What is an atom bomb?" We had never heard of it. So whoever ran the ship ... the skipper, he did some research and got some stuff and they would tell us when they found any information. So we had an idea what was going on. We just knew that ... we were hoping then that the Pacific war would not claim us. We figured, well, maybe things will stop over there. On my thirty-day leave is when the Japanese surrendered. In fact, I was in New York City visiting a friend the day the Japanese announced the surrender. We were driving Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn when all the bells and the whistles and the hoots and hollers came. We went to a restaurant and this fellow I was with, I'd known overseas, and he said if I called him when I got back we'd go out for a lobster dinner. Well, I'd never had lobster so, you know, you try anything. Anyway, he had come home before I did. So we were driving down there and we were the only people in uniform at this big restaurant. Everybody had to come and stop and talk to us, you know. I ended up in Times Square that night, the ones you see with pictures of the sailor kissing the nurse in uniform? Well, I was there. I wasn't with a sailor, I was with an airman, and I wasn't in a white uniform [laughs].

**Sellers:** And you weren't in the picture.

**Errair:** No [laughs]. But I was there. That was just amazing - that massive crowd of people. Everybody was so happy it was over. I still kept thinking, no more wounded. It was just like a wheel that kept going in my head. But that was a great experience. I was just so glad to be there and to see New York City in one piece and say a prayer that the destruction would never hit here.

**Sellers:** Well, how long did it take you to get ... did you go back to Michigan?

**Errair:** Yeah, I was ... well, I went on my thirty-day leave to Michigan. Then after my thirty days, I was to report back to Ft. Dix, New Jersey. I chose Ft. Dix because that's how my

father (he was discharged) had gone for World War I. He just got a big kick out of that. I got my discharge and then I went back to Detroit and I started back in hospitals and eventually got back in the operating room and I stayed in the operating room for years and years. I got married in 1948, had six children. We left Michigan in 1967, to come down to Florida because of my husband's health. I continued working in the operating room in Leesburg and then in Eustis until I retired in 1988.

**Sellers:** What kind of overall effect do you think your wartime experience has had on your return to real life?

**Errair:** I respond. If there's an emergency, even in the operating room ... the emergencies, I would call the shots only because I had a loud voice and I had learned to go on my own instincts. If there's a problem, you fix it.

**Sellers:** You didn't have to time to worry if it was the right thing to do.

**Errair:** No, and you don't stop and ask too many questions you just do it. I found that after something like this I would say, "Well, you know, I didn't want to step on anybody's toes or anything." They said, "That's what you do best." No one ever objected to my yelling or calling attention to this or that. It gave me that sense and I find I still respond.

**Sellers:** I bet you were the coolest mom with a kid emergency around.

**Errair:** Oh, I taught them all first aid. They had certain things they had to do before I even looked at it. Of course, out of the corner of my eye, I'm always checking to see how much blood loss .... [laughs].

**Sellers:** Oh, yes - that comes with motherhood whether you're a nurse or not.

**Errair:** But you know, my own children - they have never really realized what I had gotten into in some of the adventures I had. But my oldest daughter lately has gone with me to some of my reunions. Right now, I am the national president of the Flight Nurse Association.

**Sellers:** And what does that do?

**Errair:** Well, keeps in touch with the ones that are still left. Our numbers are decreasing rapidly. I only got to be president only because the numbers are getting fewer all the time, you know [laughs]. I can't get a big head over it. But we do try to keep in touch.

**Sellers:** Do you have reunions?

**Errair:** Oh yeah. We're going to have a reunion this September in Chicago. Last year our group joined with the Air Force Nurses, because we were Air Corps, so that is before the Air

Force was formed. So we are considered the ... we're the antiques, of course. But anyway, our two groups joined last fall in Reno, Nevada, reunion. That was in November. We received a very nice welcome and they just can't wait to hear all our stories. And of course, they keep me ... you know, I just go on for hours like this.

**Sellers:** Well you're certainly capable of working without any prodding, I can tell you that [laughs].

**Errair:** [laughs] But the point is, if I don't tell my stories, who will?

**Sellers:** Exactly - you're the only one who was there that saw them all.

**Errair:** I was there, I was part of it. I don't resent any of it. The bad parts, I usually don't talk about. For example, I was in a bombing raid while our nurses were still missing on the 2nd of December. They were missing on the 8th of November. The 2nd of December there was a bombing raid in Italy that wiped out ... I don't know how many ships were destroyed in the harbor. They were setting up the Fifteenth Air Force. One of the German bombs went down the smokestack of this freighter and a huge freighter disintegrated.

**Sellers:** Yes, I've heard about that.

**Errair:** And mustard gas was spilled all over that area. I was two blocks from the harbor. And I do not go to fireworks because the sight is beautiful but the sound just breaks me up.

**Sellers:** You view the TV and watch the televised celebration?

**Errair:** I don't go and my children don't understand that - "Oh, but mom, you've got to go to fireworks - it's the fourth of July."

**Sellers:** Not everybody likes big booms.

**Errair:** Not me. When the real ones have bombed near you, you see the results of the damage done. You don't want to remember it.

**Sellers:** I'm a firm believer that the reason our sports are so vicious right now is because the boys don't have war to play.

**Errair:** Yeah. It's like cowboys and Indians when I was little. Then, of course, there would be war games. I remember my boys ... somebody gave them a set of guns holsters and they were shooting each other. I'd come out and I'd say, "Wait a minute, now. You shot him - you got take that bullet out and take care of him." So then, it gave them another facet to the game. Then they'd pick ... one of my boys, I watched him dig with his finger in to take out the imaginary bullet and put it back in the gun. The imaginary bullet went back in the gun so he

could shoot him again.

But I taught them all first aid and I was very serious about it. They all learned. They've managed quite well. As they had their own families, they'd call and check with me occasionally.

**Sellers:** That's what moms are for. Okay, let's wrap this up, then as far as the taping. Can you think of anything else you want to put on the tape right now? You can always add to it when you get the transcript if you want to.

**Errair:** Okay. There's a lot of funny things and a lot of serious things. Most of the time, I don't talk about the serious things. But it has to be mentioned at times and we, as nurse, were constantly aware of the tragic loss of limb and sometimes loss of sight. We had a lot of facial injuries that left these people unable to speak. We would never see them to know whether they were able to be reconstructed or not. That side of war is just hell. We never can ... I never can get away completely from the awful things that I did see.

**Sellers:** Did you have a problem with that? Any kind post-traumatic stress when you got back?

**Errair:** No, I think I was just able to channel it in the right areas. But years later, I would see trauma again ... part of me would always remember what I had been. If, when I saw it in the hospital area ... we had something we could do. We could fix it; we could do something. During the war sometimes it was that awful feeling of, if I can just keep him alive to get him to where somebody can fix it. I'm sure I've always remembered it, but not too change what I'm doing. I still laugh about the funny things. Like, for example, one of the flight nurses were known as being very buxom. We weren't. We had pockets inside our jacket and we had it stuffed with toilet paper because you never knew when you were going to find a place to go. You always have to go and the toilet paper we brought with us. So, the humor is really what kept us going. And when we get together at our reunions, there were three of us from the old days - the one that wrote the book and another one that flew with me all the time. We were all together in Reno and had our picture taken together. The memories ... and when we do see these people you just want to hang on to them because it's so great. But, my stories ... I've got them written. My daughter ... I showed her the other day ... she was hear a month ago ...and I got a drawer full. I keep writing in one story, like the time my neighbor in Michigan gave me a package of four o'clock seeds because he raised four o'clock seeds (it's a flower - it opens at four o'clock). I planted those seeds in North Africa, from the lower part of Italy to the top and that place should be lousy with them for now [laughs]. I don't know if they ever came up [laughs].

**Sellers:** But if they did, they're all over.

**Errair:** Yeah, and it's a very beautiful plant. So some place, somebody's got some ... they're taking care of them, they don't know where they came from.

**Sellers:** You should put a notice in the newspaper up there - “Anybody who has these....”

**Errair:** Well, anyone I’ve ever known that’s gone back, I said, “Look around. I’ve planted them on Capri, I’ve planted all up and down Italy.” Every place we were, I put a few seeds in the ground.

End

Addendum:

*Disaster at Bari* by Glenn B. Infield

*Albanian Escape* by Agnes Jensen Mangerich