



Mary Sellers Gray

United States Army

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Elizabeth Searles

THIS INTERVIEW IS NOT EDITED FOR CONTENT, LANGUAGE OR HISTORICAL ACCURACY

Elizabeth Searles: Tell me about growing up and what the town was like, and take me up to Pearl Harbor.

Mary Sellers Gray: I was from Richfield, Utah. It's a tiny town now about 120 miles or so from here. It takes 2 hours to get down there now.

Elizabeth Searles: Did people in Richfield think anything of the war in Europe before?

Mary Sellers Gray: Well, I left before the war. It was a small town. We had very few people other than Mormons there. There was a Catholic and Protestant church, and that was all. The kids all went to school together and we didn't know expect. I use to watch the Catholic boy do the cross when we'd say prayers in the school, and we'd always watch him. He turned out to be doctor and he comes to all of our reunions. We had our last one in Richfield in '91, sixty years later, and that's a long time.

Elizabeth Searles: So you moved away from Richfield?

Mary Sellers Gray: I moved away from Richfield and I went to Salt Lake and worked for a family to earn my nurses uniform for the County Hospital. It was down on 2100 South and State Street at the time. I've got pictures of that too the old hospital. But anyway I couldn't get into any other school because we had special schooling in Richfield .. they wouldn't accept something called oral English. What a time I had there! Being a student nurse, they treated us like idiots and here we were taking care of people that were dying and we were running the hospital. All they had were supervisors that weren't student nurses and it was really hard.

Elizabeth Searles: Do you remember where you were when you heard that Pearl Harbor was bombed?

Mary Sellers Gray: I was in nursing school. I went in that September and Pearl Harbor happened in December. We had a Japanese girl in our class and we thought immediately

that she was the enemy, so we gave her a bad time for awhile until we realized she was just as much American as we were. And we had a University teacher up at the University of Utah that was ambidextrous for one thing. He could have drawn any of the manuals for anatomy. Anyway, after Pearl Harbor, he came in and said, "Well I'm glad I'm Irish" because he would have been in trouble. I could remember these things if I'd thought about them for a while. But he was a good doctor and he said to me one day, "Why don't you help the other students with your anatomy?" because he could draw ambidextrous and make everything look really good. He could have been a professional. And I said no because I wouldn't go up to one of my students and say I'm smarter than you are so I'm going to help you. It just wasn't in the cards and I didn't know how to do it. So I said, "No, I won't help them." But I got an A in anatomy because of him for the things he could do so well.

Elizabeth Searles: So you were in downtown Salt Lake. Do you remember soldiers from Kearns?

Mary Sellers Gray: Oh yes! Our streets were filled with the soldiers. Kearns, you know, was a big airbase where they came from all of the different schools in the country. They got their crews for the big bombers out at Kearns. They had a big air base out there. We went out there one time with my roommate at the time. We drove out there. It was nighttime and my daughter teaches school out there now. It has totally changed. I said, "Where is the big air base and where is this and that?" And it's all gone of course. Kearns isn't even on the map anymore.

Elizabeth Searles: What was Kearns like?

Mary Sellers Gray: Well like I say, we drove out only at night time and I don't remember to much about it.

Elizabeth Searles: Did they have dances?

Mary Sellers Gray: Most of men came into Salt Lake to the dances and the clubs and the different things anyway. We just knew dozens of them from pilots to bombardiers to gunners and it was just a lot of fun. During the war we were so young we didn't know what it was like until I actually got into the Army. At Bushnell I had the same type of training.

Elizabeth Searles: So when did you get up to Bushnell? Not many people know about Bushnell.

Mary Sellers Gray: Bushnell was a big Army hospital. I mean big! It was totally enclosed and you had to have a pass to get through the guard. They had everything there. They had theatres. They had PX. I don't think I ever left except to go down to Salt Lake with a doctor I knew. He used to like to drive to Salt Lake real often. Bushnell was a fabulous place.

Elizabeth Searles: Where was it located?

Mary Sellers Gray: In Brigham City. Why? I don't have any idea, but it was huge. There were barracks types, you know, big long runways and halls and everything. My first duty there were six of us that went as student nurses up to Bushnell and we were called cadet nurses. I was assigned to a skin ward to begin with and they didn't know how to treat anybody because they were all they called it jungle rot, and I was telling him about this one man that came in that was an obstetrician/gynecologist. What he was doing in the South Pacific, I don't know, but he came in and he had this rot on his hands and he said, "Know one will ever ever come and let me do anything to them" you know as a patient, and they didn't know how to treat it. They had tried everything. We had men that went out on leave to their homes with Jensen Violet. If you've ever seen that, it's a deep purple and they shave off their heads and put it on their heads, or it was on their bodies, whatever. It was horrible and they would go around and go into the town. Bushnell was a fantastic place.

Elizabeth Searles: You tell of storiesY you're in the amputee ward.

Mary Sellers Gray: They had a lot of amputees there, just wards and wards of them. I was assigned to one and the men were shot fromY shot through the foot some of them lost both there legs and arms, and there was one they didn't tell me about. Usually we had a nurses meeting before so we knew what we were facing, what was wrong with them, so we knew how to handle that. They just called me up and said you're wanted on ward so and so. I went up there and they just gave me a list of the patients and they didn't tell me about it. I walked into this one room and the guy said, "Who the hell are you looking at?" He didn't have any arms or legs and he was only 18 years old and he'd lied about his age to get in the service. He'd been hit by a Japanese flame-thrower and it burned off his arms and his legs. Well, I had a little trouble. I had to go out of the room to compose myself for a while. I finally went in and was able to take care of him, but I wished he could die because he'd never be able to feel anybody or touch anybody. The prosthetics they had were good, but not anything like they are today. But it was horrible. Years later I was in a hospital and something came up about this patient. I just sobbed and cried for so long that everybody in the ward heard me and came down and said, what is wrong with her? But it was the first time I'd really talked to anybody about it.

Elizabeth Searles: Did you get to know him at all? Did he get to trust you?

Mary Sellers Gray: No. I was just there for that day. But I had kind of forgotten it and you just see so much you kind of get immune to it. I'll never forget him. NeverY as long as I live I will never forget that young man!

Elizabeth Searles: You knew another young manY a Japanese man?

Mary Sellers Gray: Yes, I've got a picture of him. He was so cute. He lived in Pagosa Springs, Colorado. His name was Ralph Yamaguchi and he was sent to the European Theatre because he was Japanese and the whole country was down on the Japanese at that time. They even had blackouts on the West Coast and everything. He had lost one arm

and the opposite leg so he couldn't use crutches or a wheelchair or anything on his own, so I used to take him to the movies and I'd have to take him on the gurney because he could only lie down. I've known several people who went through that area just see if Ralph Yamaguchi was still there. We got to be such good friends and he told me about his life, and as a nurse a lot of people tell you, even Officers I took care of I never took care of a General but I took care of several General's aides and they were just like little boys around the nurses. They'd tell you their troubles and you were kind of a surrogate mom for any age.

Elizabeth Searles: Did any of them you hear about people falling in love with the people there?

Mary Sellers Gray: Yes we had several of the nurses who married paraplegics and we had several nurses that married people who were quite ill. Apparently they were OK. I haven't heard about them since what happened to them.

Elizabeth Searles: How did patients get to Bushnell? Did they come from all parts of the country?

Mary Sellers Gray: Well, Bushnell, was a big Army Hospital and they came there because they had no hospitals at all to take care of that many wounded people that they had in WWII. Bushnell was built and why it was built in Brigham City, I have no idea, but we had patients from all of the Western States there. Some of them were, like I said, very badly injured and some of them were not so bad. But it was kind of hard because the amputees would go to town quite often. They'd leave the hospital and go to town and they'd come back and take out their frustration and anger on each other. You would have somebody beating somebody up with crutches and others on their shoulders because they didn't have any legs. They just took out their frustration in different ways and they thought no girl would ever look at them. They were young. I remember this Jimmy Pelasio who lived in the barrios in Los Angeles and he said, "No one will ever ever look at me again. Girls will never look at me again." So I flirted with him a lot and told him

he was handsome, which he was. I said, "Oh you'll be fine. They'll get you a prosthetic before you go and you'll be fine." He just lost one leg. Then there was another patient that was from the same area. He would never talk to anybody. If I gave him a bath or do anything, I'd try to talk to him and he'd just ignore me. He was really mean and gruffy to everybody. He had no social skills whatsoever and he went down to have Y oh I'd give him a bath and try to talk to him, and everything, and he'd just say something. He wouldn't even talk to me. And then he had to go to surgery and have his stump revised. We got him right back from surgery, and so I went down to take care of him just out of the operating room, and he reached out and held my hand and he said, "I'm so glad you're here!" I just stood there and bawled. I just cried and he said, "I'm so glad you're here!" So I knew I'd touched him even though he never talked to me. And when he got out of the anesthetic he never talked to me again, but I knew I had reached him on some level.

Elizabeth Searles: Did people have their family come?

Mary Sellers Gray: Oh that was so hard Y so many of them were very young and never married. Others had their wives who would come, and some of them were so horribly disfigured. I remember one especially. The wife came to see him and they hadn't been married very young. He went overseas and he was hit through the neck and it severed his spinal chord so he was totally paralyzed and she couldn't handle it at all. She left him and know one blamed her, you know. He'd never be able to take care of himself at all. I could just go on and on and tell you about the different patients that we had and how they handled everything. I gave Jimmy Pelosio a picture of me that I had taken for something or other and he had it on his stand, and I said, "Whenever you get down just look at the picture and know you'll be fine with any girls because they'll like you! They won't hold it against you because you lost your leg." But it was hard to convince him.

Elizabeth Searles: Did you ever hear from him again?

Mary Sellers Gray: No. I never gave any of them my address or anything. I never got on that level, you know. You kind of kept your distance from them. Bushnell was a

fantastic place. It was huge, just huge. They had every kind of patient you'd want you know or ever think about. Like I said this jungle rotY they didn't know how to treat it. That was my first assignment and that doctor. Did I tell you?

Elizabeth Searles: You told us about that. Is Bushnell still there?

Mary Sellers Gray: Yes. For a long time after the war it was an Indian school and they'd bring Indians from all over and help them out and have schools there for them. In fact I worked for, what was it, where we'd have Indians come from the reservations and live with people so they could learn. I hadn't worked for awhile so we had to draw blood on them because who knows what they had from the reservations, I couldn't hit the veins and I was really devastated about that most of the time. Someone made fun of me. I don't remember who it was, came by and said, "Oh you can't even hit the vein." And I had the kind of a temperament that with something I can't do, I'd show them I could do it. So I missed one after that. Those little Indian kids would never speak to you. They were veryY they'd hold out their arm and they were scared to death and you knew it. You needed to draw their blood for tests for syphilis or whatever and anyway I've had a lot of experience as a nurse. Back to , and some of them were shot through the neck and it was the only visible sign they were completely paralyzed. They had their hands and their whole bodies in traction and they did different things to try and get them to be able to function again. Now days they have better things. War is still hell.

Elizabeth Searles: So when you were at Bushnell you were in the Army then?

Mary Sellers Gray: No, I wasY they called us cadet nurses. We had a different uniform but we did the same thing that we did in our training hospital. There were six of us that went from out of school. I don't know how many students they had up there that were cadet nurses because they never had enough nurses to take care of the patientsCnever! They don't today. They say they need 2 million registered nurses today. I've seen an ad on the television. But they've never paid them anything and they've never had the respect except from the patients that knew them. Some of those put us down too.

Elizabeth Searles: But you ended up as an Army nurse?

Mary Sellers Gray: Yes. The war was on. Like I said we were in school for just two or three months when Pearl Harbor was bombed and I always wanted to go into the service and take care of people. I had no idea what it was like.

Elizabeth Searles: Were you shocked?

Mary Sellers Gray: Yes. I'm grateful I didn't go overseas. I don't think that I could have taken it. One of my roommates went to Okinawa and took care of the patients. The mud was so deep that they'd fall off of the boards from their tent or they'd slip into the latrine. They had to get help to get out of the mud. It was that thick. They even took care of patients in between the beds where there were boards that they walked on because it was so muddy in Okinawa. One of my very good friends went there and she came home sick.

Elizabeth Searles: Did she get over it?

Mary Sellers Gray: Well, I hope so. She was my best friend for years. She was my roommate for a while.

Elizabeth Searles: How did people feel about FDR?

Mary Sellers Gray: I had an aunt that used to think so much about FDR that she used to pray in front of him. I was a Republican. My parents were both Republicans and so FDR was kind of a foreign person to me. I've heard things about how they played games with people that got us into the war in the Pacific. He was in on the bombing of Pearl Harbor. He knew about it before it happened. I don't know but these are just rumors you hear about.

Elizabeth Searles: Do you remember VJ Day?

Mary Sellers Gray: Oh yes.

Elizabeth Searles: Where were you?

Mary Sellers Gray: I was home on leave and my parents were going to California and we heard the war had ended and we went to Los Angeles to celebrate with everybody. We couldn't get near the city. It wasY the streets were just filled with people and there were six of usY my brother and his wife. Anyway, I was with a former patient I'd had. We couldn't even get near the center of Los Angeles. It was justY everyone was going crazy, shooting off fireworks and all of the sky was lit up and everything. It was just a fantastic thing.

Elizabeth Searles: Lots of hugging and kissing?

Mary Sellers Gray: Ohhhh, lots and lots. Everybody was hugging and kissing everybody. War is not a pleasant thing. We've got soldiers all over the world today and I'm not exactly happy when I hear about wounded because I know what they're going through, even though things are a lot better now than they were. They still leave behind wives and children and come home shot to hell. It's not easy being a nurse. It wasn't easy then. It isn't easy now. But Bushnell was a fantastic place. It was brand new and we had prisoners of war there who were ill. They were in locked wards and I was assigned to go visit them. The Japanese prisoners were practically in fetal positions and they were scared to death. They were a long ways from home and they were so young. They were very injured, that's why they were in the hospital. Otherwise they'd be in a POW camp some place.

Elizabeth Searles: You treated some of them?

Mary Sellers Gray: Oh yes. We had to treat their wounds and of course they couldn't talk to us and we couldn't talk to them because they only spoke Japanese. I felt sorry for

them, you know. They were so young and we had a whole group of men at the hospital that were there just temporarily. They were in the hospital because they were wounded. Some were from Italy, and good-looking men.

Elizabeth Searles: The Italians were good looking?

Mary Sellers Gray: Oh, I use to walk up and down when they were in standing order and I'd say, "Oh you're the best looking thing I've ever seen. Oh you're so cute. Oh you're such a doll." They didn't have any idea what I was saying. But they were injured and that's why there were in the hospital.

Elizabeth Searles: What were the Germans like?

Mary Sellers Gray: Well they were various thingsY that's why they weren't in POW camps. They were in the hospital because they were injured.