



## **Ora Mae Sorenson Hyatt**

United States Army

2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant

Pacific Theater

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Eccles Broadcast Center, Salt Lake City, UT

Interviewer:  
Rick Randle

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

**Rick:** Where were you on December 7<sup>th</sup>?

**Ora:** I was in my 1<sup>st</sup> year of nurses training. I had started in September at the Salt Lake County General Hospital and at that time I had a goal, I wanted to be an airline stewardess that's why I went into nursing because that was the requirement at that time to be a stewardess.

**Rick:** What were your thoughts when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor?

**Ora:** I recall very vividly. I had an older sister who was a senior in nurses training and we lived in the nurses' home but she was on the top floor, you moved down a floor each year in training, I was on the top floor and she was down below. She came up to see if I was okay, that was such a frightening announcement we heard on the radio. President Roosevelt said that the United States was declaring war on Japan and immediately we thought about our friends who were in the army and who would be going to the Pacific to fight. As the weeks went on and they said nurses were needed to take care of the wounded soldiers I soon changed my goal and I wanted to be an army nurse and help take care of wounded soldiers instead of going to the airlines, I thought I could do that later after the war was over. But most of my friends, the young men I knew, had already volunteered for military service and I wanted to be able help, everyone wanted to help with the war effort when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. It was like they attacked the United States almost and we all wanted to do everything we could to help.

**Rick:** So you changed your mind just a few weeks after that attack and had to complete two more years?

**Ora:** I had 2 ½. I had only had about 4 months training by the time of Pearl Harbor. So I immediately was anxious. There was a USO in Salt Lake and the military service men would come here and the nurses, during our time off, would talk with them and go to the USO and get to know where they were going and where they had come from. We felt involved because we had that goal in mind to go to the army.

**Rick:** So when you graduated, did you just immediately sign up?

**Ora:** In fact, I had 3 months of service at Bushnell General Hospital; I volunteered to serve the last 3 months of my training at the army hospital up there. That just confirmed my desire to join the army nurse corps because of being able to help young men who had returned with a battle wound of some kind, and to talk with them, and they were so appreciative of the care that we gave them.

**Rick:** So the more you worked with those young men, the greater impetus you had to serve the country?

**Ora:** That's right. I had a classmate that had the same desire and so the two of us, just a couple of weeks after we finished our 3 years of training, we went up to Fort Douglas together and we filled out the application to join the army nurse corps. We went first to the Red Cross recruiter there and she signed us up with the right people and after we had joined the Red Cross then we went to the Colonel in charge of army nurses and they said we were the first two cadet nurses to become army lieutenants.

**Rick:** Did you have to go through basic training?

**Ora:** Yes we did, we went to Fort Lewis, Washington first for six weeks of training even though I had been to Bushnell and I knew somewhat the procedures the army hospitals used. We went to Madagin General Hospital at Fort Lewis and we learned to march and drill and we had a Sergeant that taught us how to salute and do all the things that the army requires.

**Rick:** When you finished did you start right out as a 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant?

**Ora:** That's right.

**Rick:** Because of your nurses training.

**Ora:** We were 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants when we left Fort Douglas, we had been sworn in.

**Rick:** Tell me about where you embarked to go overseas.

**Ora:** First we went to Fort Seal, Oklahoma for overseas training. We worked in an army hospital for about 4 or 5 months in the states and then when we got overseas orders we went to Fort Seal, Oklahoma and learned to off the side of a ship on a rope ladder about 3 stories high. We learned to crawl on our stomachs on a rope about a foot off the ground and we were told, the only information we should give if or when we were captured by the enemy was our name, rank, and serial number – that's all we should tell them. So then after we finished that training and got different uniforms we got fatigues and helmets and combat boots and went back up to Seattle, Washington and that's where our ship where we went onboard to leave for overseas. And we left there on the 7<sup>th</sup> of May in 1945. The war in the Pacific was really getting more attention because D-Day was about May the 8<sup>th</sup> I think.

**Rick:** So you were coming in at the tail end of the war in the Pacific, basically?

**Ora:** Yes, well Europe had been the main focus and when after D-Day the European war was just practically over, the battles had almost finished when we went to the Pacific. Other South Pacific battles had already been fought, Japan had control of the Philippines and Hiroshima was retaken by the United States. We weren't told where we were going when we left Seattle, but we all knew it would be the South Pacific because we were on the Pacific Coast.

**Rick:** Tell me about the ship and life on the ship going over.

**Ora:** There were 5,500 service men on this ship that we were on. There were 2 hospital units that I am sure were on there. Our unit was called the 376<sup>th</sup> Station Hospital and I don't know the other one, but there were a lot of troops and they were all service troops like the signal corps and the coast guard and they expected the battle to be over when we arrived; and then we would help with the clean up and getting the wounded off of the island. But when we got to Okinawa the battle hadn't progressed as fast as they had expected that was one of the worst battles in the

Pacific and there were more casualties than they ever expected. Instead of waiting for our hospital to get set up they asked for nurses who would go on detached surface immediately, and my classmate and I and two others volunteered because we wanted to start.

**Rick:** Did the ship go directly to Okinawa right from Seattle?

**Ora:** No, it was delayed. We stopped for 2 weeks at Aniwetok and Ulithi Atoll at the island Azores for another week. And then a convoy accompanied our ship the rest of the way into to the Harbor at Okinawa. So it took us a long time, in fact, we were onboard the ship for 57 days. When we landed on Okinawa they timed the arrival so it was at night and there were no lights anywhere. We went down over the side of the ship, the nurses all had fatigues and helmets and combat boots on, and we carried a zip bag with all our immediate needs in it. And we went down over the ship into a landing barge and then the landing barge took us to the beach and we got in a truck there, it was an open truck but there were no lights. And we drove across some rough dirt roads and we could hear the gunfire and see some shells exploding not far away.

**Rick:** When you were going down that boat and seeing these explosions, what were you thinking in your mind?

**Ora:** I thought, "*This is it.*"

**Rick:** Did you have any fear about where you were headed?

**Ora:** I don't remember being afraid, I wasn't alone; there was a group of 30 nurses together that got in that truck. We were apprehensive but I don't remember feeling afraid.

**Rick:** When exactly did you volunteer for the field hospital?

**Ora:** After we got to, this truck unloaded as we got to a place, they called it a bivouac area and it was a huge tent with cots and we filled our helmets with water and they told us where to go when we heard an air raid warning. We would grab our helmets and run to this nearby ravine and that

was our shelter or our cover. And after the next day there was nothing to do and we did get some mail that was waiting for us, but it was terrible to just sit with nothing to do and so when they asked for someone who would go on detached to service to help right away, I was anxious.

**Rick:** Were you aware that was going to take you up to or close to the front lines?

**Ora:** Yes, but I still wanted to go. We were part of a surgical team that the wounded would be brought in and we'd take care of their wounds, give them emergency care and prepare them for evacuation as soon as possible because they could be taken back from the front lines then to further treatment.

**Rick:** From this staging area until you got to your next assignment, how far was it and how long did it take to get up there?

**Ora:** We were at this first hospital for about 6 weeks I think and when we moved back to our own unit it was only about 5 miles farther inland, it was north of where we were.

**Rick:** So when you served at this field hospital they would bring the men that were wounded in at any hour of the day? So tell us in as much detail as you can about what it was like to be there.

**Ora:** Well we worked with doctors side-by-side. We worked 12 hour shifts and they did surgeries and they would clean out the wounds and we would give Penicillin, that was the wonder drug of that war and it was so useful, we'd give Penicillin to prevent infections and use a lot of bandages and clean up the wound as much as we could. Then they would be given pain medicine and made as comfortable as possible and then they would be taken by ambulance to another hospital.

**Rick:** When you're up that close to the front lines and you work a 12 hour shift, I imagine you try to sleep for 8 hours, was there anything to do in that 4 hours that you had free?

**Ora:** I don't remember. We would talk to others who were from other parts of the country who were working with us and we'd get to know them. We had an armed guard go with us at night when we worked the night shift because there were still snipers in the area and the armed guard would go with us as the nurses went between tents. One night there was a Japanese sniper that was discovered in the mess tent at the hospital, he was searching for food and the guard that was with me ran to join in the chase because he ran immediately and they almost caught him. But when he saw that he was going to be captured he had a hand grenade and he pulled the pin and blew himself to pieces rather than be captured.

**Rick:** I guess you could hear the shelling and a lot of firing from that forward position.

**Ora:** That's true. The nurse's tents where we stayed were about a block away from the hospital tents and it was in a stockade type of enclosure and we had an armed guard go with us from the hospital area to our nurse's quarters; because we weren't armed and they could protect us. They were very good to go with us wherever we went.

**Rick:** Many of us have all seen the movie South Pacific, how close did that resemble what you guys were going through?

**Ora:** That was very close to what we did. We had limited water supplies and if you remember the movie star that washed her hair, I think she was Nellie Forbush, and that's the way we washed our hair. We had a pail of water and we'd pour it over our hair. One time there was a PX that's part of the hospital facilities and they had toothpaste and shampoo and things like that, but one time they ran out of shampoo and I remember trying some shaving cream – it didn't work very well, it wasn't a good substitute on my hair for shampoo. But we could get some supplies, most of the things we needed, but it was just like camping you'd do without a lot of the comforts you'd have.

**Rick:** With that many service men around and so few women nurses, there were probably some incidences that stand out in your mind that occurred because of that situation.

**Ora:** Yes, there was onetime the chief nurse invited Elaine, my friend, and I to go with her to the airfield; she was taking nurse who had to go back to the states on account of health reasons. And we rode with her to the airfield and while she was filling out the papers we walked down the road a ways and I saw some bright colored flowers not far off the road, and I went over to pick one and as I was there I saw a convoy of US Army trucks were going by and the driver was fairly close and I waved to him, and he was so amazed to see an American girl just off the side of the road that he turned his head and didn't watch, he slowed down and the truck behind him also was distracted and saw me and didn't look and there was a chain reaction of about 4 collisions because I'm afraid I distracted the drivers.

**Rick:** How long did you stand up there at that field hospital?

**Ora:** About 6 weeks, I think, or 2 months.

**Rick:** Then you went back to the main hospital 5 miles further back?

**Ora:** Yes. The fighting was getting less and less all the time and everyone was wishing the war would end, we'd talk about when we were talking to the patients we'd get to know them a little bit and ask where they were from and they'd ask where we were from and we'd share what news we'd received in the letters we had. They were all guessing that the war was going to be over soon. We heard a rumor that General Doolittle was bombing Tokyo and then one of them said they had heard that President Truman was going to authorize the use of the atomic bombs and they were all saying the war's going to be over soon. Then one night we were watching an outdoor movie and it was on the side of a hill, we could see the harbor and the ships in the harbor and while we were watching the movie all of a sudden the ships were sending up flares and rockets and there were guns being fired and a lot of yelling and we heard them say, "*The war is over!*" Then the movie stopped and everyone just hugged each other and cried and laughed and shouted and we were just so excited and happy. We went back to our tents and started planning how it would be to go home and how soon we could leave. But the next day there were still patients to be taken care of so we went back to work. It was wonderful though to know that Japan had surrendered. Then the prisoners of war from other islands in the Pacific were released,

especially the ones in the Philippines, if you remember the survivors of the Bataan death march were shipped to Okinawa and we took care of prisoners of war then as our patients. That was a terrible sight to see when these prisoners, they were almost like skeletons and so weak and they had terrible infections that had to be treated before they could make that long trip home, and some of them couldn't even lift their hands to hold a spoon we had to feed them like babies. The tears would roll down their cheeks as they were so appreciative of the care that we gave them. We didn't think about going home really, when you feel like you're so needed and you can be so useful – that's what's rewarding.

**Rick:** Did you ever treat any Japanese casualties?

**Ora:** I don't remember any. We had other nationalities than the United States when we started getting these prisoners, I remember there were some that were Dutch that couldn't speak English they had been taken prisoner by the Japanese. What happened was our unit was sent to Japan as the occupational forces and we had seen a lot of casualties on Okinawa, in fact there was an American cemetery that had rows and rows of white crosses, and as far as you could see there were the markers or the white crosses of American casualties. I'm sure there were thousands of them

**Rick:** They still maintain that cemetery over there today I believe.

**Ora:** I haven't been back to Okinawa, but I saw an American cemetery in the Philippines and it's a beautiful spot and they do take very good care of it.

**Rick:** How long after the atomic bomb was dropped before they shipped you over to Japan?

**Ora:** We left for Japan on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October and I think they dropped the bomb at the end of August. So it was a month or 6 weeks. \*\* Break in tape\*\* We heard rumors that the Japanese were terribly cruel to the POW's and we hated the Japanese because of this. But we had no idea until we saw some of these who were our patients. We had no inkling of what it was like until we actually saw them. Then when our unit was sent to Japan with the army of occupation there

were some more POW's who had worked in the Japanese coalmines and they had received inhumane treatment, they hadn't been fed and they were like they were starved to death. Those who were patients in the hospital, I don't know what happened to all of them, but those we saw it just broke your heart to see what it was like. And they were so appreciative, these Dutch POW's would almost lick the trays, they were so hungry they wouldn't let a crumb go to waste.

**Rick:** I bet they were so happy to be back under American administration.

**Ora:** They were. It was wonderful to be able to help them, that's the satisfaction of being a nurse because of the patients' appreciation. We'd talk with them and get to know them and you hate to say goodbye to them but you're happy for them that they can go on and get home.

**Rick:** When the war was over in Okinawa, were you able to visit the cities?

**Ora:** We did. One afternoon we went to Naha, which was the capital city of Okinawa, and I don't think there were any buildings that were a complete building that were left standing. There was a lot of destruction because of the bombing and the fighting that had taken place on that island. We saw what it looked like before we left. When we arrived in Japan, the city of Tokyo and Yokihama – Tokyo was worse. There weren't any buildings that weren't at least partially destroyed and the people had all left, they went to the hills, they were afraid when they heard the American occupation forces were coming they wanted to get out of the city because they were afraid of how we would treat them and they took everything they could with them that they could carry. So the city was almost deserted, but there were a few people that stayed and were surprised. And then we couldn't speak their language but we could smile at them, but we really didn't want to make friends with the Japanese at that point.

**Rick:** They treated you with respect I guess.

**Ora:** They did but it was out of fear. We had a Japanese maid that took care of the nurses quarters and she was a sweet person and she would do anything she could to help us. The living quarters there were just some bamboo buildings. It was very cold when we got to Japan,

Okinawa had been like the tropics and in Japan we were freezing all the time. And we didn't have enough water, the water taps didn't work, we had to have water brought in cans to our quarters and the bathroom facilities, the toilets were a trench in the floor with the handle to hold onto – it was like a bar you could hold while you'd squat.

**Rick:** How long were you then in Tokyo after the war?

**Ora:** I think only about 6 weeks. Then I received my discharge papers. I didn't tell you about the typhoon that struck while we were on our way to Japan.

**Rick:** From Okinawa to Japan?

**Ora:** It was supposed to be a 3-day trip and we were in an LST, not a very big ship there were only about 380 onboard, but it has a flat end to it so that vehicles (tractors, tanks, etc.) could drive out onto the beach from the hold of the ship. So when this typhoon hit we were tossed around like it was a cork on the sea, everyone was seasick, the waves were like mountains and we'd tip from one side to the other and then forward and back and everyone was seasick. We were blown off our course and it took us 7 days instead of 3 to reach the harbor at Yokohama. But after we'd been there awhile at the hospital we had some time free to drive around, we'd get a jeep other staff members would obtain a jeep and take us around to see some of the countryside between Tokyo and Yokohama and that was interesting to see. But there was a lot of destruction. I went back to Japan about 30 years later with my husband and it was amazing, Tokyo had been rebuilt with steel and glass and with such a modern beautiful city, it was much nicer than what it was before the war I'm sure. Anyway, I'll tell you after I received my discharge; there were 3 nurses who were married that were in our unit and we were the first nurses to be sent home because we were married. We were able to fly home but they were military transports, they weren't like the passenger jets that fly now. It took us 4 days to fly home because we had to land on islands along the way and refuel and change planes. And as we approached the California coast it was night and we could tell that we were coming into San Francisco or near, there was the Golden Gate Bridge we could see it from the air. But then we saw along the coast spelled out in lights were the words, "*Welcome home, well done!*" and that was such a thrill; I'll never

forget what it meant to see those words and to know that this was America we were landing on. I had never appreciated the luxuries we have in America like I did after we arrived, to turn the tap and have a steady stream of water to have a hot shower and to be able to have fresh fruits and vegetables and fresh cold milk and all the American plumbing; it was just wonderful, I don't think I'll ever take it for granted again.

**Rick:** If you were to give a message to our younger generations who haven't experienced the war or some of them don't realize how significant that WWII was in changing all of our lives – what would you say to the young people of today?

**Ora:** Well, I think they should respect the flag because it's the emblem of our country and I think they should love this country because of the privilege it is to be an American and I would hope they would do everything they can to appreciate the land we live in and the freedoms we have and all the comforts and luxuries we enjoy. I hope they somehow, I wouldn't want them to have to go through a war in order to do that but maybe if they read about it they will understand what we have here.

**Rick:** Thank you very much it's been very inspiring. We appreciate you doing this Ora Mae, it was great.

**Rick:** When you went through training it would be impossible to train you to treat these wounded servicemen like you did and how long did it take you to where you felt comfortable doing it?

**Ora:** Well after three years of training you do get used; you help in surgery, you see open wounds and in emergency we have to service in all the parts at the hospital and I think you get used to it in a way because you have to keep your mind on what your responsibilities are and you can't get personally involved with each patient. But still there are some that you feel sympathy for and you; it's never that you're not affected by it but somehow you learn to act and to think what you can do to alleviate their pain and their suffering and that's what gives you comfort is you can do something about it, you can help.

**Rick:** Is there any other thing you can think of that you'd like to bring up?

**Ora:** Oh there are many things to tell but I can't think of other things right now. One thing that helped us was getting letters and being able to talk to these – our patients were young, they were close to our age and we would always ask them where they were from and they'd ask us. And one thing that helped was finding other members of the LDS church and we were able to attend church services when we were off duty on a Sunday afternoon and they would send a jeep for us and there were 4 of us in our hospital unit who were LDS – three nurses and whoever came for us would take us to the tent. It was just a large tent where we would hold LDS services and we were treated like members of the family and that was what was nice. (**Rick:** This was on Okinawa?) On Okinawa, yes and we looked forward to that, to go to those meetings. They would take our pictures because they were so happy to see a female and to talk with someone. And it was the same with our patients; they really respected the nurses and were very good to us.

**Rick:** When you were in that typhoon to go to the main island of Japan, did you think you might not make it? Did that scare you more than being in battle?

**Ora:** It did frighten us and we were so seasick, I don't think there was anyone on the ship that didn't get seasick. I remember going to the dining area when you felt like you were almost able to eat, you were hungry, and I had a person next to me that carried an emesis basin to the dining table with him. And the ship was tipping and the dishes would slide and they would slide that way and it was very, you couldn't eat much.

**Elizabeth:** Did anyone, while you were in Tokyo after the surrender, talk about the A-bombs at all in Nagasaki and Hiroshima?

**Ora:** We didn't. We didn't hear that. We knew it had happened but we really didn't hear any details. We didn't see newsreels or get newspapers. We had no way of getting the details.

**Rick:** Were you discharged as soon as you got back in the states or did you still serve for several months?

**Ora:** I was, I went to Ft. Sheridan Illinois for my discharge because I had married and changed my – my home address was that of my husbands and he lived near Chicago so Ft. Sheridan was where I had to go for my discharge and it just took 2 or 3 days. But it was not immediate, I went back to Utah and went home to Manti for Christmas and that was where, I think my discharge was affective December 15<sup>th</sup>. So I arrived in the states in November, right just about Thanksgiving time.

**Rick:** So it was about three weeks after you were discharged.