

Nurse

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1921, did field work. She drove tractor and shocked grain. She pitched bundles, cleaned the chicken house and milked cows beginning at the age of 6. "It was just a part of the life to survive," she said.

From a young age Helen had been told to help others. When the twins were born in 1925, Johanna was in the hospital for three months. She had terrible rheumatoid arthritis. The older three children stayed with other family. Helen stayed with her Uncle August while the two older girls lived with the neighbors, the Rasmussens. (They had a niece visiting from Norway; one of the older girls learned to speak Norwegian before English.)

Her sister, Doris, need to have her tonsils removed. Someone needed to be with her so it was Helen who cared for her. Incidentally, they removed Helen's perfectly good tonsils, too. They promised her an ice cream cone! She watched the nurses as she stayed at the hospital. Helen later returned to the Yankton Hospital after Ruth, her next oldest Sister, broke her leg while swinging. Ruth stayed at the hospital for one month and had a half-body cast for three months. Helen visited her all day on Saturdays. "I loved that hospital."

The same comments pop up again and again from those people who lived during the 1930s. When asked, "Were times tough?" the answer was "Sure, but we didn't know any different." If a family farm had just enough livestock – milk and beef cows, pigs and chickens – and a good garden, then they could survive the Depression, even with poor crops. The same was true for the Kiepkas. Edward partnered with his Brother August, and they raised grain and livestock. Mother – and it was always a mother – had a large garden, and the girls helped too. They hauled water in milk cans from the cattle tank and poured it over the furrows. And times were tough. Helen recalls the wind blowing soil from Nebraska and Kansas into the road ditches, which were filled up to road level. At night, when the windows were open to keep the home cooler, the dirt would blow onto their sheets and into their mouths. "We made the best of it."

Clearly, children of today are fortunate. Helen recalled that it was a treat to go to Yankton on Saturday to purchase a few groceries. Uncle August and Aunt Millie came too. Each girl was given a nickel! She was "August's pet" because she had stayed with him as a baby and she might receive a quarter. The girls pooled their money and purchased a malt from Heitgen's Pharmacy. "They were like Wendy's!" As a child, she and her sisters laid on the lawn and watched the stars. Even though they wished upon those stars, "It seemed like we had everything that we needed."

If the Kiepkas were fortunate, then perhaps it was due to their frugality. Helen showed me a picture of her home. It was much larger than those I had seen from that era. It had two upstairs areas, running water, a furnace, an Artesian well, and a Delco electric plant. When asked about the Wall Street crash in 1929, Helen told of her father's desire to keep cash. Her father went to the bank to make a large, final payment. The banker suggested he not pay it off and make monthly payments. Henry refused and paid it off. He always paid cash. Shortly thereafter, that bank, and many others, closed. "We would have lost everything"

if he had not kept cash, she said.

The Kiepkas valued education. Edward had attended school "through the fourth book," while Johanna reached into the "fifth book." Ed enjoyed reading books and the local paper. He was very good in mathematics. All six girls, however, attended the one-room, Pleasant Valley elementary school. They each attended Volin High School; Helen graduated in 1939.

She immediately enrolled in Sacred Heart for nurse's training. According to her, "The best school in the United States." She is clear. Nursing in 1940 was caregiving and nothing more. They made people feel comfortable. They didn't administer medicines, which is obvious since there were no medicines to administer. (Grandpa Kiepkas passed away Oct. 3, 1940.)

PEARL HARBOR

On Dec. 5, 1941, Helen had tremendous pain and was taken to Sacred Heart Hospital where her appendix was removed.

Dec. 7 was a Sunday. Her parents had attended church and then visited her. After they returned home, she was listening to a symphony on the radio when a special announcement was made: Pearl Harbor had been attacked.

When asked what her first thoughts were, she immediately replied, "I'm signing up to go to the service!" (This was not the answer I had expected. More on that later.)

ENLISTMENT

She became a nurse. Obviously, she had cared for people and enjoyed it, and she was an independent-minded farm girl. But why join the military?

Helen's mother always said, "You don't talk politics or religion."

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, she discussed Germany's Hitler, especially his fanatical training of young people. Germany was making a lot of noise and the Kiepkas just happened to be of German descent. At that time in America, your ethnic descent made a difference. The Czechs lived in the west of Yankton County. Norwegians dominated the Mission Hill area. If you were not of Norwegian descent, then you lived west of Mission Hill. Helen ticked off names – the Mormans and the Medecks – of Catholic families of German descent. The Kiepkas were the only German family who lived amongst the Norwegians. ("We were the black headed Germans," she said.) In the Volin High School annual, she was referred to as the dark complected, brown-eyed girl. In hindsight, she laughs at all the blond hair, blue-eyed Germans she saw in Europe.

"We lived amongst the Norwegians, who thought that the Germans started every war there was, as far as they were concerned," she said.

Her father had been drafted, but the war ended before he left. She didn't have any brothers. She enlisted to make a family statement.

"I needed to support my dad as part of supporting our country. Make it right for my Dad. It wasn't his fault he didn't go," she said. And so she enlisted.

Helen completed her nurses training in May 1942. As she was taking her state boards, she met a Red Cross nurse. The war was under way and she was told of the great need for nurses. On Nov. 7, 1942, Helen enlisted in the Army.

Why the Army? As a child, she saw her mother and aunt repulsed with fear if they were near water. The Jim River was to the west of their home, but her

family was not swimmers. Helen didn't know how to swim. She had heard, "If you couldn't swim, they threw you overboard until you swim."

Enlistment was in Yankton, and within a few days, she took a train to Camp Crowder, Missouri.

CAMP CROWDER

Trains were not new to Helen. She had previously ridden the Galloping Goose, the 5 p.m. daily train from Yankton to Sioux Falls. As she and all nurses were officers, she rode in a Pullman car from Omaha onward. Upon her arrival, at 10-11 p.m., she was shown to her room. Her roommate was Violet Rahn's Sister. The barracks were new and wooden. The men were separated. She reported to the chief nurse the next morning and was told the rules. She was given a physical exam and then told to get her uniform, which woolen and blue. During warmer weather they received OD's – olive drabs.

There was no special training. It was just immediate work for 12-hour shifts every day.

"That's nothing. We worked 12 hours days in training," she said.

The hours were reduced to eight hours per day when the cadet nurses arrived. She received 70 cents per hour. She knew that she had made a transition as she ate her first holiday meal, Thanksgiving dinner, at the camp.

There was not a lot of work. Most of the men she saw were trying to avoid military service. Times were different. Many men had never previously worn shoes. She recalled taking care of a man who had a guard by his bed because he had gone AWOL. He was given papers to review, but he couldn't read. She read them to him. He needed to sign them, but he couldn't write. He placed his "X" and she signed his name. "I've learned my first lesson," she thought. At that point, she vowed that she would never fall in love while in the service because all of the men looked glamorous in their uniforms, but they may not be so glamorous out of uniform.

Deep sadness struck her. Her best friend, her next oldest sister, Ruth, passed away on April 15, 1943. She was 23. The standard treatment for pneumonia at that time was fluids and rest. It wasn't enough. Helen took a bus back to Mission Hill for the funeral.

FORT JACKSON

For three months, during the hot summer of 1943, Helen was at Fort Jackson located in Columbia, South Carolina. She arrived in July. This is where the 56th General Hospital was formed. Many were drawn from John's Hopkins University. About 1,000 people made up the Hospital, including doctors and nurses. There were no female doctors. Columbia was hot, as Helen described it. Take a shower. Get out. You need a shower again. There was no air conditioning, just like back in South Dakota. "We didn't know any different," she said.

She received a few passes to visit Columbia and saw the specter of segregation. "I thought it was terrible," she said. As white women walked down the sidewalk, all blacks would have to walk on the street. "They had different bathrooms, fountains. Awful."

She had been taught, "Don't forget they are no better than you are! You are no better than they are." Her Uncle August was friends with the Blakey family back in Yankton. Perhaps the way in which she, as a German descendent, had been treated made her think twice.

CAMP SHANKS

The 56th General Hospital was scheduled to ship out to North Africa. They didn't: Evidently, someone with some pull didn't like that assignment. As a result, the unit was sent to Camp Shanks located in Orange-town, New York. Unfortunately, they were billeted in a psychiatric hospital. This type of hospital was nearly medieval. There were screams throughout the night, although she said she got used to it. "I'm for the underdog," she said.

They were soon shipped out to Fort Devens located near Ayer and Shirley, Massachusetts, while they waited for a change of orders. She got to see Boston. "I wanted to go back. Quaint streets and narrow sidewalks."

Although it seemed long, they began their Atlantic crossing on the RMS Mauretania on Oct. 9, 1943. The water was not rough. "You could have walked on it," she said. She was never seasick. There were supposed to be two people per room, but they shoved six in there. "We didn't know any different. ... If you made a complaint, you heard back 'this is the war,'" she recalled.

TO ENGLAND

She arrived at Liverpool on Oct. 18, 1943. She didn't see much of it, however. It was dark and they shipped out almost immediately. (Later, while on leave, she returned; she loved the old buildings.) They shipped out to Malvern, England, although the stay was as brief. They were housed in Quonset huts, eight within each. Blackout was strictly enforced. Each entrance had a "squiggle" turn in order to keep light inward. The trucks that transported them only operated in the dark with dime-size slits on the headlights.

They were again assigned to a psychiatric hospital and the commander wanted a medical surgical hospital so they were sent onward to Tyntesfield Estate located in Bristol, England, arriving on Feb. 4, 1944. Again, blackout was imposed. Helen said it was so dark that you did not know if you met a person. You could only hear the click of their heels. She attended the theater and watched old movies, such as "Arsenic and Old Lace." They did not care for soldiers; it was exclusively civilians. She worked as a night supervisor.

STAGING AREA

Slowly but surely, the 56th General Hospital moved toward the English Channel.

Helen had no idea what they were doing. "People at home knew more than we did," she said. They were moving from staging area to staging area. Over and over again, they would pack it all up and move.

On D-Day in June, she was in a staging area. It was quite an "uproar" on that day.

"Finally!" she declared. She was quite excited. Eventually, she found out that Gen. Dwight Eisenhower was simply moving units like her's around to confuse the Germans on where they were going to attack. She sat in her fatigues amidst acres and acres of pup tents with nothing to do but talk and play cards. There were no radios.

The move was so slow that leaves were still given. She went to London. "I would love to have gone back. Beautiful country," she said.

When she was there she stayed in a small home overseen by a "little lady." She vividly recalls her yelling "Wake up! We have to go to the air raid cellar!" More buzz bombs were on the way. Buzz bombs refer to V-1 flying bombs fired from the French and Dutch coasts (beginning in mid-June 1944) into England to terrorize. Helen saw lots of damage. In fact, the Hospital's motor pool and laundry areas were hit by buzz bombs.

TO FRANCE

Helen climbed aboard a troop ship on July 17, 1944. There were no problems. She received a few Dramamine, which may have calmed her. It was still "excitement." They landed at La Havre, France, and soon found out that they were not to have crossed at that time. They had no orders.

After sitting around for a time, they were assigned to an area five miles down the road. They marched to the area, which was just a pasture with a few surviving cows. They established their perimeter, dug their foxholes and put up their put tents. In the middle of the camp was placed a large muesette bag filled with water used for drinking canteens. There was another which they poured into their helmets to wash their faces. There were only sponge baths. Right next to it was a large ping pong table. At least it was exercise – anything to keep them moving. In the interim, her unit went on detached service to the 2nd Evacuation Hospital.

Medical facilities were located in combat zones and they included evacuation or surgical hospitals and clearings. Adjacent and to the

rear of the combat zone was the communications zone where the general hospital, station hospital and field hospitals were located.

An "evacuation hospital" was mobile and it received patients from clearing stations. Their job was to gather evacuees in such numbers that they could be jointly moved out. They sorted casualties, assisted those who returned to the lines, and initiated treatment for those to be removed to general hospitals.

A "general hospital" provided definitive medical and surgical treatments to all cases. Once located, it usually remained in the same location. They received their patients from evacuation hospitals by way of train, ambulance or plane. They performed the most difficult procedures and had the most equipment. Between 1943-1945, the military trained 189 general hospitals, 74 field hospitals and 61 station hospitals.

2ND EVAC HOSPITAL

The 2nd Evac Hospital was four miles behind the front lines in France. "As they moved farther, and didn't hear bombing anymore, then we would venture away a little," she said.

As they cleared more areas, she did have some interaction with locals. They were there for six weeks, but she had no idea where. They ate nothing more than C-rations. When asked about the potent drink Calvados, she replied, "Heavens yes! You don't taste the second drink!" Furthermore, she lost her prized bandage scissors that had been given to her at the time of her graduation from nursing school.

56TH GENERAL HOSPITAL IN FRANCE

At some point, she was sent back to 56th General Hospital, which was open by then. The hospital only saw military personnel. She didn't know the location, but she recalls that they lived in a big tent. At some point, she saw both Eisenhower and Gen. Omar Bradley. She had advance notice that they were coming. Both were in a Jeep driving nearby.

On Oct. 9, 1944, the hospital relocated to Liege, Belgium. Along the way, she noticed that there was nothing left of the little towns. Parents and their children were walking along the road and carrying all of their worldly goods on shoulders or on carts. They appeared to be wandering.

56TH GENERAL TO LIEGE, BELGIUM

Christmas Eve Day 1944 was memorable. The Battle

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