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May Macdonald Horton oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, April 29, 2009

May Macdonald Horton (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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[Transcriber's note: The Interviewee's personal information has been removed, at the request of the Interviewer. This omission is indicated with ellipses.]

May Macdonald Horton: Oh, hello!

Michael Hirsh: How are you?

MMH: I am fine, thank you. I was expecting your call; your wife was talking to me for a few moments yesterday or the day before.

MH: Right.

MMH: Yes.

MH: I wondered if I could ask you a few questions about your time with the 120th Evac [120th Evacuation Hospital]?

MMH: Oh, yes, that will be fine.

MH: Okay. I'm turning a recorder on.

MMH: All right.

MH: Would you spell your name for me?

MMH: My last name is—I went by Macdonald. I was May, M-a-y, Macdonald, M-a-c-d-o-n-a-l-d all run together, small letters. My last name now, my married name for fifty-three years, is Horton, H-o-r-t-o-n.

MH: And your address, please?

MMH: ... and you have my phone number ...

MH: What's your date of birth?

MMH: It's April 20, 1915.

MH: Oh, happy birthday.

MMH: Ninety-four the other day.

MH: Tell me, where did you grow up?

MMH: I grew up in California. Actually, I was born in Montana. My mother and father were Scottish, so they came over from Scotland. They had a relationship in the family, because both their grandmothers were sisters, so they knew each other very well over there through the years. My father wanted to come to America to become a citizen, which he did in 1913, in another short period of time after he had been here and become a homesteader, which was common at that time there in Montana. I don't know the reason for Montana, because I had never asked them why they chose Montana.

But anyway, when they got to Montana—he got to Montana—and he had himself established with a big homestead there of 10,000 acres and cattle and sheep, he wrote to my mother, not his wife yet, and asked her to come over here and be his bride and come to America and live with him. So, she arrived, and then in 1915 I was born. The winters were very severe, so they tried to move from there to get to a warmer climate after the sheep and everything—in the cold winters, they just were dying off, and his bronchitis was so bad that they moved to warmer climates and tried Washington State—it didn't work out, because it was colder there—and then went on into California. Why they chose Pomona I don't know; maybe he knew somebody in business or anything. My father was a rancher, actually, in Inverness, Scotland. My mother was in the nursing field in Killin, Perthshire, Scotland.

MH: Where did you go to nursing school?

MMH: I went to nursing school in Santa Barbara at the Cottage Hospital, and I attended a school that was there present at the time, the Knapp College of Nursing, K-n-a-p-p; it was called the College of Nursing. It was in a big dormitory, which was across the street from the emergency room in Santa Barbara, California.

MH: And what made you decide to go in the army?

MMH: What made me decide?

MH: Mm-hm.

MMH: Well, I'll tell you. I had gone through school, gotten my education, went on to nursing school, did my post-graduate work, and was living in Pasadena by this time, in California. The reason I went to Pasadena was that they had an opening for me in the administration department of the hospital on a floor, a big medical surgical floor, because I had been there for my post-graduate work. I came back at their invitation to take over a big floor there that was—I could be on the staff there. This was about in 1939.

I was there at the hospital and was getting along very well, and was thinking of going into med school, pre-med. Until one day—this was in probably 1940, or maybe later 1940. I received a letter from the Red Cross saying that they were establishing a hospital for the military and that I had been assigned to Camp Callan, California. I was to be having my tour of duty as an officer in the Army Nurse Corps.

MH: You mean they drafted you, or you volunteered?

MMH: It was a matter of I was in the Red Cross and they needed nurses.

MH: Oh! Okay.

MMH: And so, that's how I got into the fact that I was—well, I guess I really volunteered, because I knew the world was in kind of an uprest at the time in 1940. So, anyway, I did get the letter saying I was an officer in the army. So, I arrived at Camp Callan, and that was near San Diego and La Jolla at the intersection there, which is now Torrey Pines Golf Course. The hospital no longer exists. But I was there in the beginning of the war in May of 1941.

MH: And you got assigned to the 120th Evac when they were organizing?

MMH: It was a matter of a period of time there. And no, it wasn't there that I was assigned there. I'll go maybe a little quicker here. I was at Camp Callan in the operating rooms. I went from there to Port McArthur, which is in the [South] Bay of Los Angeles area: Long Beach and so forth. I was there, and I also was in charge of all the operating rooms. From there, I went to Camp Cooke—that is up further in northern California—and it was a matter of, at that point in time—it has changed to the Vandenberg Air Force Base; maybe you would remember it by that.

MH: Right.

MMH: Camp Cooke was my stop. At that time is where they were beginning to send out notices for units that were going to be sent overseas. So, one day, a letter came, and it was a matter of I had been assigned to the 120th Evacuation Hospital and I would be leaving San Diego and—no, I beg your pardon. I didn't leave San Diego; I left Camp Cooke area.

MH: Right.

MMH: And then we went to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, where we started our hospital.

MH: And your job with the 120th was what?

MMH: Administration. I was one of the chief nurses. Artie May Ussery was the head chief. She was a regular army lady: very, very wonderful and very nice. There were 40 nurses, 40 doctors, and 250 enlisted men in our unit. They chose me as the one that would be in charge of the operating rooms, and the other chief nurse was in charge of the patients.

MH: And your rank at the time was what?

MMH: I was a second lieutenant.

MH: Okay.

MMH: And the interesting part about this, when you mentioned a rank: there was not—after all we had gone through and the war was over, it was a matter of there was not one promotion made to any of the nurses in that unit. Which I thought was pretty difficult to swallow, because I know that there were some of the people that were doing way beyond their duty.

MH: So, you stayed as a second lieutenant the whole time?

MMH: Mm-hm. No, I beg your pardon. I was a first lieutenant, but I never got my captaincy, as I wanted. However, I could have gotten the captaincy at the end of the war, if I was to go on in the regular army. I had a choice to make: go on in the regular army, and that would have been a promotion; the other thing was I had the option of going back and being a civilian. I chose the civilian. And the reason I did: I did not feel fair, after my mother had been helping at the hospitals in Pasadena—and she was a widow from the time she was forty-nine. I lost my father when I was—I was an only child, and I lost my father when I was fifteen. She had done a wonderful job through the war, helping and everything, and I would have been not able to have gone on in the army and leave her again.

So, I came home to Pasadena, and from there I got a very fine position with the hospital there where I'd done my post-graduate work: the Huntington Hospital, Collis P. and Howard Huntington Hospital. I was there as head of their social service department. It wasn't exactly a nursing job, but it was—it was putting out monies to help people to pay their bills.

MH: Right.

MMH: I was the one that had to make those decisions. So then, after a couple years, I found a very nice gentleman that I married, and we moved north, nearer San Francisco. My husband was a colonel in the army, and he kept that up until he was not able to go out in the field with the enlisted men anymore; he had arthritis so bad. So, okay?

MH: Now, let's talk about going to Buchenwald.

MMH: Oh, okay. When I had my orders to go overseas, the six of us were in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. We set up our hospital. We went to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, where we were going to be leaving the dock there. We were assigned to the *Queen Elizabeth*, which had been stripped, and it was one of the ships that had all the military on it. And there were—let's see, I'm trying to think. Anyway, the morning we left, I remember particularly that I went—we weren't supposed to be out on the decks, but I saw one of the officers there at one of the doors, and I said, "Can I just take a look out and see the Statue of Liberty?" and he said, "Yes, you can." So, anyway, I did see that while I was just sailing out. We landed in Greenock, Scotland near midnight on the 22nd of December. And I'm trying to think of the year.

MH: That would have been forty-four [1944], I assume.

MMH: I think it—yes, it was. It wasn't such a long—I was in the army about five years, but I'm trying to figure out how that was so late. Well, I was in the different hospitals, of course.

But anyway, we landed in Greenock, Scotland. We boarded a train that took us down—or wherever down is—to Tenby, Wales, where the enlisted men also had their big hotel and where the nurses had a hotel, right on the coast there. We were there and were getting our things together to go across the Channel, which we did. We went across the Channel and landed in Le Havre, France. And from Le Havre, France, which had been almost

demolished with the war and the bombs, we got into trucks. They were divided: there were twenty nurses in one truck and twenty in the other. The assumption was that if one truck got through and the other didn't, well, we could still set up the hospital.

So, from there our hospital moved. We stopped at different places and got into—heading up into Germany and heading for, I would say, Berlin. About the point where we could hear the guns going off in Berlin, General [George S.] Patton's army had decided, or they had orders, to stop there and head towards the Czechoslovakia area, principally Weimar, Germany, which was the home of the SS troops and all the things there that were necessary to take care of the political prisoners that were in Buchenwald concentration camp.

The day before we arrived, there was a unit of the military, American military, that had their tanks, and they broke down the gates at the Buchenwald and all the people were released, many of them dying. But I have pictures, wonderful pictures here that I took. I say "wonderful" because they are not to be ever repeated again as far as what's going on there. A lot of people don't believe that ever happened. Well, I have the proof of it. Okay?

MH: Yeah. Your unit was in Frankfurt when you got the call to go to Buchenwald. I was told you were at a racetrack.

MMH: Oh, yes, that was along the way. Frankfurt, yes.

MH: Tell me what you recall about your first sight of Buchenwald.

MMH: My first sight at Buchenwald?

MH: Yeah.

MMH: We did not go in, the nurses. We arrived at the SS troops' headquarters, which was outside of Weimar, and also a distance, short distance, from Buchenwald. We were, probably the next morning, were getting organized and everything. The enlisted men were allowed to go in, because it was perfectly horrible. The first sight that I saw of Buchenwald was going up a hill, up from a walk with some of my friends. We were walking along and there were people on the side of the road, and one man came over to

me and said, “Thank you,” and he bent down and kissed my boot. Which it was kind of an emotional thing, because I said, “Well, we’re happy that we’re here to help you.”

So, anyway, Buchenwald had a wonderful entrance to it. It was very—it was just a great big front to it, a façade that was there. And I cannot remember all the details, because it’s kind of hard to remember all that. But I do know that in a very short couple of days, the nurses were assigned to be taking all these people that were in these rooms in these shelves; they were maybe four deep and eight foot shelves of wood that these people were sleeping in. And most of them—and their potties were out in the area, and they were just holes in the ground, so there was a great deal of odor that was very bad. And then, all these people, not having had any healthcare, were in bad shape. Also, the dying were put onto trucks before they were sent over to the crematories. And I have those pictures.

MH: I’ll ask about the pictures in a minute. But how did you deal with seeing that sort of thing?

MMH: You know, as I was—at my age now, I would look at it a great deal differently. But at the time, I had a job to do, and we got organized to do that job. The things that I remember were the fact that the officers and the enlisted men were just a wonderful unit that had always worked together, and there were never any hitches. The tents were up; the stoves were put in the middle of the tents, so we were comfortable and so forth.

It was a matter, also, that they had a big dry goods store in Cham, Germany, where we finally ended, in a great big auditorium that was set up for cots. As the people from that terrible situation that were able were brought over, they were de-loused and showered and given some clothing. And those details I just can’t go [into], because I can’t remember exactly all about that. But I do know that the room was filled with cots, and I would say there were hundreds of cots.

MH: Was there a point at Buchenwald where the commanding officer of your unit sent the female nurses away, saying—

MMH: Yes, he did. He said it was too bad, and that’s when we moved on to this big auditorium. Colonel [William E.] Williams: he sent us on. And it was one period of time, back, if we go back, that Colonel Williams—you know, there was not supposed to be at any time just the red crosses to indicate that we were a hospital. There were planes that went over would have liked to have gotten down to us, but they didn’t because of that. But Colonel Williams had also ordered that each one of our men out on the field at night

would have a .45 on them. This is good, because at one time there were—some Germans had gotten through somehow, and they were about ready to throw it into our areas. So, the guns did come in handy.

But he did feel as you were saying. He did feel it was too terrible for the nurses to have to go into. I know it was bad for the enlisted men, and I never heard anybody ever really say anything, 'cause I guess I wasn't in the areas where I'd be hearing the enlisted men particularly talking about it. But the unit was a whole, and it was done beautifully and it all worked smoothly. You know, I'm sure there were glitches, but that is true in life.

MH: Aside from the man who you said kissed your boot, were there other interactions with the survivors?

MMH: Oh, they were mingling. They were mingling amongst all of the staff. I have some pictures of the military in their uniforms walking amongst these people, and during the time that it got cleaned up to the point where General [Dwight D.] Eisenhower came with dignitaries. I never saw him, but that was just the way it was. I'm sure some of the men probably saw him. It was written up in *Time* magazine, and it was the only time that my mother would have ever been able to know where I was; that's what I found out later. But anyway, that's how she found out where I was located.

MH: I see. You have pictures of the American nurses and the medical people with the survivors?

MMH: I have some pictures of that. And I was going to say to you—I'm going to be giving a little talk at our Episcopal church here, because somebody heard that I had an interesting 1945 experience. So, as soon as that's over—do I have your address? And I would be happy to send them to you.

MH: I'd really appreciate that. I mean, I'll copy them and then send them back to you.

MMH: Yes. Okay.

MH: Because there may be one or two that are different than the pictures that a lot of people have seen of the camps.

MMH: I have lots of interesting—have you the letters that some of our men wrote? How much do you have of the things? I have quite a number of things that I could send to you.

MH: Okay. I mean, I have quite a bit. I've interviewed a number of soldiers who were at Buchenwald.

MMH: Okay.

MH: From the—I talked to—do you know Warren Priest?

MMH: I know the name.

MH: Yeah. I've talked to—

MMH: And I have been in touch with him years ago, because they used to have, and still are having, reunions. I went to the fiftieth reunion, and there's been a lot of changes, because so many—I don't think there's any doctors living anymore. When you get to be ninety-four, there's an awful lot of people gone.

MH: Right.

MMH: And I'm sure that there was an age difference between some of the enlisted men, and I'm sure there would be a few left. Milt Silva was one of them.

MH: Right, I've talked to Milt.

MMH: Now, Milt's a wonderful contact.

MH: I've talked to Leonard Herzmark.¹

¹Prist, Silva, and Herzmark were also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOIs for their interviews are C65-00109, C65-00127, and C65-00058, respectively.

MMH: Yes, I know him well. He's in Arizona, I believe.

MH: Right. I've talked to—I guess you called her Willie? Rosella Willits [Lane].

MMH: Oh, yes. Did you talk to her?

MH: I talked to her the other day.

MMH: Oh, you did?

MH: Yes.

MMH: Whereabouts is she?

MH: She's in San Clemente.

MMH: San Clemente?

MH: Yes.

MMH: Oh, how interesting. I'd be glad if, when you return the papers that I'll send to you and the pictures, maybe then you could just give me her address.

MH: I'd be happy to do that.

MMH: Now, your address—I talked to your wife, Karen, and I do have your—of course, I have your phone number.

MH: Right.

MMH: What is your address?

MH: My address is ...

MMH: Yes, right. I've got it.

MH: Okay.

MMH: All right. I will send this, and it'll probably be after this week.

MH: Okay.

MMH: Is there anything else you'd like to know?

MH: How do you get—do you drive?

MMH: I was driving until my little car—my husband, Sam, was an invalid for ten years before he died. He had had some strokes, and he wasn't able to sit up in the bed, even. Being a nurse, of course, I kept him at home and did all the nursing till he died. That was a period of time that I just didn't get into any of the reunions or any of that kind of thing. And you asked me a question?

MH: I asked you if you drove, because I was going to say if you wanted to send it by Federal Express, I could—you know—

MMH: Well, that's a possibility, yes. I could maybe do that. They have that here, yes. Whatever works out. But it would come to you with the mail, wouldn't it?

MH: Yeah, it'll come to me with the mail.

MMH: Okay. Well, I'll get it ready, and I'll just send it on.

MH: Okay. Just make sure you put it in something so the photos don't get bent and that sort of thing.

MMH: I will. I'll see to that. I have those bubbled big sheets, those big brown envelopes

MH: Okay.

MMH: And I'll take care of it that way.

MH: And mark it "Photos—do not bend."

MMH: Is there anything else you'd like to know?

MH: Not right now.

MMH: Now, tell me about you. Are you—is this something that you have decided recently?

MH: No, I've actually been working on this for a year and a half.

MMH: Okay.

MH: I've interviewed about 150 veterans, five nurses, and the rest—most of the rest were soldiers who liberated camps starting with Ohrdruf on April 4, 1945 and going all the way through Mauthausen just before V-E Day.

MMH: Oh, for goodness sakes.

MH: The book is gonna be published by the Bantam-Dell division of Random House.

MMH: And when do you expect that?

MH: It'll be next March, just before Holocaust—

MMH: Next March?

MH: Just before Holocaust Remembrance Day.

MMH: Oh, isn't that interesting?

MH: So.

MMH: Yes. Well, I'll tell you, you can put me on the list, and I will send you a check as soon as you mail it to me.

MH: No, you'll get a book.

MMH: (laughs)

MH: Don't worry about it. Okay?

MMH: Okay.

MH: All right. Well, I really look forward to seeing the pictures, and I'll call you when I get them, 'cause I'm sure I'll have questions.

MMH: You ever go to the reunions?

MH: I had gone—when I was researching the book, I had gone to—I went to the 42nd [Infantry] Division reunion and I went to the 80th [Infantry] Division reunion and I went to the 69th [Infantry] Division reunion. But most of the interviews I did were over the phone.

MMH: I see. Well, that's good—that's a good way to do it, you know.

MH: Yeah.

MMH: That's great.

MH: So, I—

MMH: Were you part of the 120th?

MH: No, no.

MMH: That's what I was gathering.

MH: I'm a little younger. I'm sixty-six.

MMH: I see.

MH: I was an army combat correspondent in Vietnam. I was with the 25th [Infantry] Division.

MMH: Oh, is that right? Well, you know—can I just tell you that I was so lucky. One time when I was at Tenby, we were given a week off, and I went up to London and went back into Glasgow, Scotland, where I had an aunt and an uncle. And the night I arrived, it was black out, of course, and it was about eleven at night; how I got there that late I'll never know. But, anyway, I was alone and it was dark, and I looked over and I saw a truck: an army truck, which just looked like heaven to me at that moment. And the person that was in it was a correspondent. I can't remember his name now; I have it written

somewhere but I don't know it right now. But that was wonderful. Well, that's an interesting thing you're doing, and I'll be happy to help you if I can anymore.

MH: I sure appreciate it. Thank you very, very much.

MMH: Okay, and say hello to—

MH: You want me to just give you Willie's phone number?

MMH: Oh, you could. That would be fine. I'll just have a piece of paper here ready in about one minute to turn the page here. Okay.

MH: ...

MMH: Okay, I've got it. And that's her phone number?

MH: That's her phone number.

MMH: Okay, fine.

MH: Okay.

MMH: That's good. Thank you.

MH: Take care. Bye-bye.

MMH: All right. Bye-bye.

End of interview