

Interviewee: Ruea Baum
Interviewers: Charlene L. Martin, Maureen Ryan Doyle
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Abstract: Bolton, MA resident, Ruea Baum, shared her memories of serving as a United States Army nurse in England and France during World War II from September 1944 to July 1946. She retired from the military as a 1st Lieutenant and recalls the German surrender and marching in the Eisenhower parade. She was born in 1921 and recently celebrated her 96th birthday.

The following is Ruea Baum's presentation at the Bolton Historical Society. She also shared photos and her Army uniform that she donated to the Society.

RB: I grew up on Sugar Road on a farm. My parents were quite a bit older. They didn't have children when they first married. Then they had two girls. My sister was two years older than I. We grew up there, we didn't have electricity on the farm until I was in the ninth grade. And I can remember the night when we walked home from school and we could see the barn just over the rise that all the lights were on. We had been to 4H at Mrs. Sawyer's and we both started running as fast as we could go because they had electricity at the house. Of course, we only had a lightbulb here, a lightbulb there, but we had electricity for the first time which was quite a big thing for us. We did have running water because we had the windmill and the windmill pumped the water into a cistern on the hill and from there the water ran down to the sink in the house and to the barn for the cattle.

It wasn't a large farm. And of course my father had daughters and so he always had hired hands. The two girls could do some of the farm work, but he never expected us girls to do a great deal because it wasn't women's work. He was brought up that women had certain work to do so we didn't have to do a lot. We helped with the hay and we could drive the horses. Both my sister and I could harness the team of horses, hitch them up, and drive them. But we didn't have a car so every place we went you either went horse and buggy or you walked. And I went to school in Bolton all the way through ninth grade and then to Hudson High School. Then I went to training at the Clinton Hospital in Clinton as a student nurse and graduated in 1943. And then I worked for two years at Martha's Vineyard Hospital on Martha's Vineyard as night supervisor. I decided that I wanted a job that I didn't work nights so I joined the army. I signed up and went in September 1944 and was sent over to Europe in December of the same year. And we went on the Queen Mary. We were scheduled to go to a hospital in the Eleutian Islands. They had just built a new hospital out there and our unit was a general hospital unit and we were scheduled to go out there, but the hospital burned. So instead they sent us to Europe and we left New York harbor on the thirteenth of December and we landed in Scotland on the twentieth of December.

We sailed on the Queen Mary which was wonderful really but wall to wall people. You couldn't walk anywhere without running into somebody. We had fourteen people in the drawing room of

a suite of rooms on the main floor. So you didn't have much space. We had—the bunks were three tier and I always took the top one because I didn't want anyone to be sick over me [laughs].

When I first entered the service we had basic training, the same as the men had. When they put us on the wards we had to get up at five o'clock in the morning and doing the basic exercises and so forth and then you went on duty at seven o'clock. You worked seven to seven with two hours off. You always had one afternoon a week and at the end of the month you had two days off. On night duty, if you worked nights you worked from seven pm to seven am with no time off. You were supposed to have a half hour for supper but you could never leave your ward because you didn't have time to really. We were sent overseas, like I said, in December. Went to Scotland, down across England, and then down to France where we were stationed at a general hospital in a small town about the size of Hudson [MA], I would say, in Chalons-sur-Marne, France on the Marne River. And it didn't make any difference what you had done in civilian life they would assign you to most anything in the army, but I discovered they found out I had done night supervisor for three years and all of a sudden I was on night duty [laughs]. And night duty was twelve-hour duty, no time off. You worked from seven am to seven pm and if there was any classes or anything you were supposed to go to you had to go during the day with no sleep. Just no time off for night nurses.

I think they figured we didn't work that hard, but instead of having two nurses on one floor there would be one nurse for all the floors and you had ninety patients on a floor. But we had our corpsmen and never underestimate the American G.I. They can do anything and they can find anything you need. Where they get it I have no idea, but they're terrific, just absolutely wonderful. They were always wonderful to the nurses. I can honestly say I was never afraid working in a building with four hundred patients and the corpsmen and being the only woman in the building. Never would I feel uncomfortable in any way. And I never had to make rounds alone. If I was going from one floor to another always there was someone with me. I didn't ask for it, they just did it. And if the corpsmen couldn't because they were busy they would wake one of the patients and they would do rounds with me. So you never had to be concerned with that.

I saw a lot of the world I never would have seen. And I met a lot of fascinating people in the service. I really can honestly say that it was a great experience and I was never concerned for my own safety in any way. We were working on the third floor of the building in Chalons-sur-Marne, France and the other girl who was working with me—we were working days—and the girl working with me, she was putting up a tray of medicines and I was putting up a tray full of medicines to take out to the patients and I said to her, "You're from Massachusetts aren't you?" And she said, "Yes, I am." I said, "Where did you live?" She lived down near Boston. And she asked where I lived in Massachusetts and I said, "A little town you probably never heard of, I live in Bolton." While we were talking about it, the German prisoner was very busy fixing the wood fire. We had a little pot belly stove in the wards for heat and the German prisoner was fixing the stove and he continued doing it while we worked. She continued putting up her medications and went out on the floor. And then he came over and said, "Excuse me miss, may I speak to you?" And I said, "Yes, of course." I thought maybe he had a headache and

wanted aspirin. He said, “You said you are from Bolton, Massachusetts?” And I said, “Yes.” And he said, “I was a prisoner of war in Bolton, Massachusetts in World War I.” Now there was a coincidence if ever there was one [laughs].

[About 280 prisoners from six passenger or merchant ships in Boston Harbor were detained in Bolton. They were seized on April 7, 1914 and they remained for the whole war.]

Imagine being over there and he knew Bolton. No one I worked with knew Bolton. I was in the general hospital unit which is the largest hospital unit in the army. It consisted of 90 nurses, 50 doctors, and about 500 enlisted men. And when we went into Chalons in France and we went across the way to Scotland first and then England, we were there at the time of the Battle of the Bulge. We were there just after the Battle of the Bulge and they were bringing them in—it was Christmas time—and they were bringing the men in from there. And then we went across into France and set up the hospital. We took over a school, a calvary school, in France and they made the stables into the hospital wards. The place I worked in was a four-story building and I had ninety patients on the floors. I was put on night duty again and again. I’d go off a month and then put back on again. But you had 90 patients on a floor and four floors and I’d be the only woman in the place. I never felt uncomfortable or unhappy about it at all. Everybody was just wonderful to us. We had stone steps going up between the floors—these were stone buildings—and they were always wet. The water ran down the walls and they were worn. These buildings had been there so long that they were worn from feet and they’d be filled with water always.

We were scheduled to go after the war ended, after the Germans surrendered—oh by the way, the day of the surrender I had been working nights so I, along with several others in our unit, were chosen to march in the parade in greens at General Eisenhower’s headquarters. We had the big fancy parade with dignitaries from all the countries and after the parade was over, one of the doctors in our unit said, “I want to see Eisenhower’s headquarters,” the little red schoolhouse that you perhaps have heard about where the surrender was signed by the Germans. So he asked where it was and a group of us went over to that building. When we got there, there was an American MP [Military Police] and a British guard standing at the door armed and one of the doctors asked if we could go in and see the place. Well, they didn’t know whether we could or not. Of course Eisenhower himself wasn’t there. He was in Berlin. And they said to go in and ask at the desk. So the doctor went in and pretty soon he came out. He spoke to the men at the door and he signaled to us to come in. We went in and went through the whole headquarters. It was a school building like any school building. It reminded me very much of the [??] school with the classrooms upstairs and we asked where the treaty had been signed and the man at the desk said, “We can’t tell you that.” But as we started up the stairs he called to us, “Make sure you see the Map Room and the Flag Room.” [laughs] So you knew it had to be one of those two, absolutely. We went up the stairs and went into the Flag Room. It was a classroom similar to the ones here and the flag of every one of the countries that was supporting the war on our side was around that room. I was amazed because I was, you know, I knew France and England and the United States, but those flags all the way around that room. And then when we went into the Map Room the whole length of the room was a table with a relief map of the entire European theater of operations. England and France and Germany and Russia and Italy and the

Mediterranean and North Africa and little tiny flags, about an inch high on a pin stuck into that map where every single unit of the Allied forces and the German forces told him exactly where every one of them was. So he could go in there—or any of the officers could go in there—and study the map and know where their units were and where they wanted to send them. I could have stayed there for a week looking at that. It had the bridges and the railroads—every single thing was on that map. As I said, you could have stayed there for a week and studied it. It was fascinating.

Of course being over there we never had anything like cola or anything like that. But we went to Eisenhower's dining hall and walked in and right at the front of this huge room was a Coca Cola machine [laughs]. This was May and it was hot and we had just been marching in a parade! No one offered or anything, we just took some! Didn't quite have nerve to have dinner there!

CLM: Did army nurses have ranks like the men did?

RB: Army nurses went in as 2nd Lieutenants and then you went up from there. So I was 1st Lieutenant when I was discharged, but you went in as a 2nd Lieutenant and I think they probably gave it to us so we would have the respect of the patients. And as I said, you worked hard, you worked long hours, but everybody was in the same boat. You weren't privileged. When we went down from Chalons-sur-Marne to Marseilles because we were supposed to go to the Pacific at the end of the war—you could opt to stay in Europe or to go to the Pacific and I opted to go to the Pacific because I don't know why but I did. So we went by train down the whole length of France and you'd go chug, chug, chug along at a not so rapid pace and pretty soon the train would stop and you'd chug, chug, chug again and a troop train would go by or a supply train would go by. And you'd sit there for two or three hours and the French people would come and there was a trainload of people so they'd bring fresh fruit and vegetables to sell. We'd have fresh onions and make onion sandwiches [laughs] and they'd have fresh French bread. They'd trade almost anything for a pack of cigarettes. Candy bars and cigarettes.

The woman who would do our laundry, wash our sheets, make our beds, clean our rooms, clean our uniforms, wash them and iron them, and she would get a pack of cigarettes and a candy bar. The cigarettes were for her husband and the candy bar was for her son and a bar of soap for her. And ten centimes for doing all that. A bar of soap was worth your life especially if you could get the brown soap that we used to have, the laundry soap. If you could get that it was worth your weight in gold to them because their ration was one cubic inch of soap per person per month in Europe. And when we finished eating, they'd always have the garbage pail outside of the mess hall, and when you went to clean out your mess kit you weren't supposed to leave any food. The French children would be standing around, they'd have their little sacks and scoop out all the bones or all the skin, you know, if you had chicken, they'd scoop them up and take it home. That was their food. And I remember the French girls who worked on our ward, they had no leather shoes. They had wooden-soled shoes, the soles were thick like an inch and a half to two inches thick. It must have been terrible to walk in. Mother sent me a new pair of loafers because mine were all worn out, all run down at the heels and the toes out of them. So she sent me a new pair of loafers so I put my old loafers in the wastebasket. Never gave it a thought. And the

French woman came into my room and held up these beat up shoes and asked, “Could I have them? Could I have them?” I said, “Well of course you can have them.” You would have thought I had given her a million dollars because they didn’t have the supplies or the food or the clothing or the transportation there. Everyone was on bicycles there or walking. You’d see the women go out in the morning with two or three small children and go out from the center of the town to the edges of the village and go back later in the day loaded with brush or sticks or anything they could pick up for firewood because they had nothing. They had nothing. They had been at war for a long time.

Q: Was the hospital close to any battles?

RB: Oh yes, we could always hear the bug guns at the hospital we were at. You could hear them very very well and machine gun fire, too. It was close enough for that where we were. And the bombers you could hear when you were going in the morning, when you were going on duty, when it was just getting to be daylight, you would hear the planes overhead circling. You would hear one plane and then pretty soon there would be two or three planes, then four or five planes, and you’d hear a big roar and then all of a sudden there was nothing and you knew they had gone in their formation to Germany, for a bombing run over Germany. And then at night you’d hear them come back one by one. But early in the morning it would be a whole squadron of them getting together.

MRD: How did you family feel about your decision to enter the service?

RB: They didn’t ever tell me. They never said a word. I think when I grew up, that I was kind of a spitfire [laughs] and not exactly behaved. But when I decided to go in I just told folks that I had signed up to serve in the army. Not a word was said about my not joining. [Side comment made about her family—the Wheelers—were all Quakers] My mother was forty years old when I was born but she was very liberal. I was a spitfire and I didn’t take much from anybody when I was little and not terribly well behaved from what I heard. When they sent me to the hospital and left me there my father said, “She’ll be home in a week” And my mother said, “Oh no, give her at least a month.” Because nurse’s training you were right there under everybody’s thumb. You didn’t have time off at all. If you worked seven to seven you got two hours off during the day. Plus you could have time to go to class or get your meals. But if you worked nights you worked from seven pm to seven am and you had to get up during the day to go to your classes and then go back to bed to sleep as much as you could. And you worked for thirty nights straight without any time off. You didn’t have any free time and you had to be in your room at quarter to ten and lights out at ten o’clock. And they were really strict. They came around and made rounds. Of course we used to pull the blankets up over us and sit there and study because you had to get your studying done. But it wasn’t an easy thing to do but everyone was in the same boat. So you didn’t mind.

Q: Were there any soldiers that stood out that you still remember? That maybe touched you or their story touched you?

RB: Yes, there were some that did. I think the ones that touched me the most in our building were the older ones who were going home perhaps amputees and they didn't know how they could go home and face their families. And I remember one man saying, "I can't go home after what I've done. I can't face it to go home." And we did have suicides. We tried to separate these men and give them the help that they needed, but a lot of them had seen so much and done things that they really couldn't face.

Q: Did you get into Belgium or Germany at all?

RB: No, I didn't into either one of them.

Q: The timeframe you mention is very similar to when my dad was there. He was also a noncombatant and he was a chaplain. He was with the medics in the frontlines. People call the guys with the guns heroes, but noncombatants are a world unto themselves. I always wondered what my father did to get a Bronze Star, but there are a lot of stories out there. I just want to thank you for doing what you did and all the other noncombatants. Did being a Quaker play into that?

RB: No, I don't think so. Quakers were pacifists and a lot of them were medics. And I think it was wonderful that chaplains, regardless of what their beliefs were, whether they were Catholic or Protestant or Jewish, they held services for everyone. Every week. The chaplain who was assigned to us was a Catholic but he always held services for the Jewish people, the boys, and for the Protestants. It made no difference. Absolutely none. When I was in England at Christmas time we went to the midnight service and I was dumbfounded because the English minister really brought down the Catholic church and he was praising how the Protestants were so much better than the Catholics. And I was sitting there with an open mouth. No one in the military service felt that way at all. It made no difference.

Q: What about your uniform? [on display and donated to Bolton Historical Society]

RB: Well, I can't get into it [laughs]. Does that tell you anything? It is a size 16 and I'm an 8. I was 98 pounds in 1944 when I went in so that tells you something [laughs].

Q: Tell about your helmet.

RB: I have my helmet. After we came home we had to turn in all the things they issued to us for instance mosquito netting which everybody had lost, your gas masks—none of us had that—and anything that we lost we had to pay for. We were officers so we had to pay for them. We had a wristwatch that we turned in, and a blanket, and a bedding roll, and canteens, and mess kits. All this we had to turn in and if you didn't turn them in you had to pay for them. Well, we went around the camp and turned everything in and I had turned my helmet in and I was walking out the door of the tent and the GI who had been collecting all these things threw them all in a pile in the middle of the tent. And my helmet rolled off, landed on my foot, and I looked down

and it said “Wheeler” and so I leaned over, picked it up, and carried it out. And my great grandchildren play with it [laughs]. Quite illegal! I don’t know what they did with all that.

Q: Did you go to the Pacific Theater?

RB: No. We were loaded on the ship and headed for the Pacific as far as we knew. As a matter of fact, the Japanese had surrendered the night before we got to Marseilles, when we were on the train. And when we got here, everybody was celebrating. We didn’t know anything about it. And then we were scheduled to go and they loaded us on the ship. We thought we were going through the Panama Canal and I had a cousin who worked there. I had written to my parents and said, “I might see Roland and Hattie.” We couldn’t tell them where we were going, but they knew Roland and Hattie lived in Panama so they knew where I was going. And as we started out of the harbor they announced on the ship that instead of going to Pearl Harbor we were going to Boston harbor. And we landed at the fish pier, next to the fish pier [laughs]. Smelled terrible but we didn’t care.

Q: What was it like when you came home? You were a world traveler with all these people and experiences.

RB: Oh, when we came home we were treated royally. We were not treated as they were when they came home from Vietnam. When the men came home from Vietnam it was a disgrace, an absolute disgrace to this country as far as I’m concerned the way they treated those people. Men didn’t go over there to fight because they wanted to, they had been drafted. But they couldn’t leave—my son was in the Navy—he couldn’t leave the ship in uniform because they were treated so terribly. They were really treated terribly. We were treated royally. I mean train fare was free. Half the time you went into a restaurant you didn’t have to pay for anything you ate. You were treated royally when you came home and they met us in Boston. My father and mother came down to see us right near the Cape. My father did learn to drive. When they first bought a car my father didn’t learn to drive. They had horses and my mother drove the car. He learned how to drive but he never liked to. When they went to Maine, mother drove.

CLM: Did you stay in nursing when you came home?

RB: Yes I did. I worked nursing homes for a good many years. That was after I was married, after the kids were in school. I did hospital nursing to begin with and after I had children I stayed home and took care of them when they were little. Then when they went to school I did public health work. Thoroughly enjoyed it.

Q: Did you ever go back to France?

RB: No but I would love to go back and see it to see how much has changed since I was there. But where we were at Chalons was very similar—I want to say it was a place about the size of Hudson. Reminded me a lot of Hudson. But the stores there didn’t really have anything to sell. The only way we could buy things is to get them at the PX [US Army military store—post

exchange]. The PX had everything. But to go out and buy something—I wanted to get something for Christmas presents for my folks from France, but you couldn't really find anything because they didn't have anything to sell. About the only thing you could buy in France was wine. And we did [laughs], not sure I should tell this—we had German prisoners as patients and we had lost some of them, some of them had died. I think there were four German prisoners they had to take to a morgue somewhere and I don't know how I happened to go along with them, but I did go with the ambulance driver. So they took the bodies away and when we came back they stopped at a winery. And we had a chance to go through the whole winery. To me it was absolutely fascinating because it was all underground. And they had rooms probably the size of this room, not as wide, but as long as this room, several of them. And over the top of the doorway to each room was a name of a city: San Francisco, Austin, Texas, London, England and the wine was put up specifically for that area. And the wine racks were on the walls and from the bottom to the top there were these little slots where there a bottle of wine in each one of them. And these women spent the whole day turning, quarter turning, every bottle all the way up and all the way down, all the way around the room. That's all they did all day long. Turning those bottles 45 degrees on an angle. That's all they did all day long. It was fascinating to see. Of course we all got samples [laughs]. Yes, we liberated the wine!

By the way, we were officers and gentlemen by an Act of Congress. Nurses were made officers and gentlemen by an Act of Congress when we went in. We went in as 2nd lieutenants and then you became a first lieutenant. But we were allotted—every officer was allotted a liquor allotment that came out of your pay, but you could get a half a bottle of Scotch or Irish whiskey or maybe a bottle of wine a month. And if you drank it that was fine, if not we usually gave it to the corpsmen if you didn't drink. But if you went anywhere you could not drink the water over there. If you drank any water at all it was heavily chlorinated so it didn't taste like water. But you could drink the wine if you wanted to. I didn't like wine so it didn't affect me too much. We gave it to the corpsmen who worked for us.