

Interview with Vivian Hunter

Mark Hoeksema

It is March 2, 2009, and I am at the residence of Mrs. Vivian Hunter in Edgerton, Minnesota.

MHH: Mrs. Hunter, where and when were you born?

VH: I was born in Philadelphia, PA, May 31, 1921.

MHH: Who were your parents and what can you tell me about the circumstances of your early life—your family, your religious affiliation, anything that you can tell me about your early life?

VH: My parents were Melinda and Foster Row (spelled *Row* and it rhymes with *Cow*). I was one of six children, in the middle. I had an older brother and sister, and a set of twins 16-months younger than I was, and a little sister that came later.

We were members of the Evangelical Church, which was really an offshoot from the Methodist Church, because they would not let them preach in the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect in their services. That originally was why the Evangelicals and some of the United Brethren left the Methodist church (at least that's what I've been told). By the time I was born, they were not using the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect, but there were quite a few people in the church I attended who were Pennsylvania Dutch people. And part of my background is that, too. My mother's background is almost completely German and part of my father's is. But it's not all pure either way. In fact, my maternal grandmother's maiden name was Saul. So I figure somewhere along the lines there's some Israel in the history (laughter).

MHH: Tell me about your childhood and your growing-up.

VH: Grade school and Junior High—we went to public school—grade school and junior high were very close to where I lived. Junior High was within a half a block of my house, and the grade school was a block and a half down the street from where I lived. Then I went to Overbrook High School, which was about a mile from where I lived—walked both ways for four years. I graduated from there. Then I went into nursing at the oldest hospital in the United States, which is the Pennsylvania Hospital—not the University of Pennsylvania but the Pennsylvania Hospital, formed by Dr. Benjamin Rush. Benjamin Franklin had some hand in the whole thing too. It first opened in 1752, so it was an old hospital when I went there.

MHH: And did you undergo further schooling or training?

VH: No, I just took my boards and got my RN. A year later, I went into the US Army.

MHH: You did?!

VH: Yes, in 1944.

MHH: May I ask what prompted that?

VH: Well, all the time that I was in nurses' training, my siblings were supporting my mother. When I was in training, you didn't have any side jobs. We were not even allowed to babysit. We had to concentrate on our nursing program. And we had real strict rules—we had to be in by 10:00 every night. And if you were going to stay out later than that, you had to have permission to do that, and that was only till midnight. And then once a week or once every two weeks, you could have a weekend where you could go home for Saturday and Sunday. But then you had to work Saturday afternoon, if you had a weekend, because you had to work a half day on Sunday—either morning or afternoon.

To help support my mother, I did private duty, which was seven days a week, 12 hours a day, for \$49.00 a week. That didn't leave me much money for myself to help mother and pay my car fare and my laundry and that kind of thing. The army offered a good bit more money than that, plus taking care of all my physical needs—providing housing and all of that. In addition, they told me when I enlisted that you don't go overseas unless you volunteer. But then they didn't tell me that volunteering is waking up from night duty and finding your name on the list (chuckle).

MHH: Did that happen to you?

VH: Yes, yes it did. I enlisted in the summer of '44 and in October of '44 I was slated to go overseas.

MHH: Really!

VH: Yes.

MHH: And did you go?

VH: I went. I had a leave to go home. Everybody in the armed forces, if they were going overseas, got an opportunity for one pre-overseas leave. So I did that. Then I went back to (that was in Fort Meade) Stanten, Virginia. That was where I went after my basic training. I was there for awhile and then transferred to Longview, Washington. We left there on New Year's Eve, one minute after midnight, because a law had been passed that the WAVES could not go overseas until January 1, 1945. They went on the same troop ship that we did.

We were kind of organized in Longview, Washington as a unit—the 233rd General Hospital. Then we went to Hawaii for our pre-combat training. We were there from January to May. Then early in May we sailed for Okinawa on the USS Beckham. The war didn't go as quickly as Washington had planned, so about halfway there, we made a side-track to a bunch of islands that were called Mogmog and Ulysses, and we sat there for many weeks. During that time I met the man who became my husband. The night before we got off the ship in Okinawa, he said to me (we were sitting on the fantail looking at the beautiful Pacific moon), "How would you like to be tied up with me for the rest of your life?"

MHH: So he proposed to you on the fantail of the ship as you were headed for Okinawa. A bit unusual.

VH: Very unusual. He, of course, had no ring in his pocket, so I gave him a friendship ring that I was wearing (it belonged to another nurse that I knew from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania).

MHH: I assume you accepted his proposal.

VH: I accepted his proposal.

MHH: And when you got to Okinawa, what happened? Okinawa had been captured by the United States at that time.

VH: Yes, but it wasn't really secure yet. They were not ready for us. They had no barracks for us to sleep in. They quickly rigged some twenty-man tents and a bunch of cots. They had no shower facilities or bathroom facilities or anything like that. We shared with the enlisted men on certain hours of the day. They really were not ready for us. In fact, there were air raids. Many nights we had to get out of our tents and head for what they called the air raid shelter, which was really those tombs which the Japanese caught in the hills. We didn't have any casualties from our unit, but occasionally we would get a soldier or a Marine when we first got there. They did build barracks for us then and our own bathing facilities and stuff. But it took a little time.

MHH: And what was your work there? Did they bring in wounded from other locations?

VH: Yes. Then the war ended in August of that year, so we were there just a couple months before the armistice. What our major thing was, they would bring prisoners that had been in prisons of war in Japan. And they were the most pathetic creatures you've ever seen in your life.

MHH: In what way?

VH: They were nothing but skin stretched over bones. They had been fed for months on nothing but the water that the Japanese boiled their own rice in. I had to go outside the tent and collect myself when they brought me the first load. I could hardly handle it.

MHH: Wow! What an experience!

VH: And then my husband's ship came in (about three times, I think, while we were there), while they were still transporting troops. And then he would always get the opportunity to come ashore.

The last time that I remember his coming to Okinawa was in October. And he came ashore. The captain also (I think he was married, but anyway) dated one of the other girls in our outfit, or he sometimes escorted the major who was our chief nurse to the officers' clubs. And so he let Chips [*VH's future husband*] have his military jeep to come and see me on the base. And my chief nurse was just as generous. She would find somebody to take my place if I happened to be on duty, or she would let him sit in my tent and talk to me while I was working. That was the last time, I thought. He had said they were going to be there for two or three days. He didn't know exactly how long he'd see me the next afternoon. A typhoon arrived that night. They had taken to sea because that's the best place for a ship when typhoons hit. So, that was an experience, because we were still in tents, and it was quite a problem to keep the tent

(there were three of us—two corpsmen and I). We took turns pounding in the tent stakes to hold it down. One of us would go around and as soon as we came in, one of the other ones would go out. You took off your wet clothes and the other guy would dry your clothes over a stove so you could have dry clothes to put on when your turn came up in another hour. And we did that through the night.

MHH: I forgot to ask you this gentleman's name.

VH: That I was going to marry?

MHH: Yes.

VH: He was Chester Edward Hunter. At the time that I knew him, he was a warrant officer, CW01. Then shortly after the first of November, he wrote me a letter saying that I was no longer two ranks ahead of him because he had been promoted to chief warrant officer on November 1. So I wrote back and told him, I'm still two steps ahead. I became first lieutenant on the first of November (laughter!).

MHH: Where did things go from there?

VH: Well, by December we were no longer really useful. We were just taking care of some that got shot inadvertently in their own outfit, or an occasional sniper that was still in the jungle. So they made arrangements to just stay in the hospital and bring us back. At that time, I had viral pneumonia and I was in the hospital. The doctor didn't really want me to take (in the winter time) that long boat ride to (oh, the Navy will kill me) to San Francisco, so he made arrangements for me to fly out. I flew out somewhere close to the end of December. The plane ride at that time took about four days. We stopped one night in Guam, and they almost left me there because they forgot that I was in the hospital overnight (laughter). They were about to take off and somebody remembered, "Hey, we don't have the nurse." They had to come back to the hospital and pick me up. We were in Honolulu one night, and then I really felt like was back in the States—sheets on the bed and all that. I got back to San Francisco on the 31st of December. I had always wanted to see the Golden Gate Bridge, but I didn't want to see it from the back window of an ambulance that took me from the airport to the hospital that I went to. We got back on a Sunday night, and the next Saturday we were married.

MHH: Your husband-to-be...

VH: He was on leave. He was taking all the leave he had, and he had eleven days left, hoping I was going to get back in time before he had to go back in. So we arranged with the Army chaplain to marry us in the Army chapel of that hospital, just about a week after I got back. I had a day off to go find a dress and a pair of shoes and all that stuff.

MHH: So you did not really know your husband for a very long period of time

VH: Seven weeks that we were on that ship. That was our courtship when we got married—all in the Lord's hands.

MHH: But you were convinced

VH: Oh, yeah. He was the one.

MHH: If you will, tell me a little bit about him. What was his background? What did you have in common?

VH: I can't even say what we had in common except our love for each other, because basically he was raised on the farm here and there. His parents were not religious at all. His father had had a bad experience with a minister. His father (would have been Chip's grandfather) had used a lot of energy, time, and money to help build the Methodist church in Napa, California. That's where my husband was born. Then he became ill and the minister never came to see him. So the whole family just gave up on anything religious at all.

So he was not churched. He had never been taken to church. He went to Sunday School with some friends in the Presbyterian church in Napa when he was a boy. Just because his friends went, he went too. That was his only connection with a church. But when we were on board ship, I went to the chapel services. He had never attended before, but he did attend with me. He knew that if we got married the church was going to be a big part of my life, though what I knew as church then is certainly not what I know as church now.

MHH: He was accepting of that?

VH: He was. Then, the Navy sent him to Astoria, Oregon eleven days after we were married, and the Army sent me to Fort Dix, New Jersey.

MHH: So now you're separated.

VH: Again.

MHH: Again.

VH: But I only enlisted for the duration of the war, so they didn't want me anymore. They sent me to Fort Dix to be mustered out. They sent me back on a train, from San Francisco to New Jersey. We went through a tunnel near Denver. It was a coal-burning steam engine, and all that coal smoke came back into the car. I could hardly breathe. In fact, I was in pretty bad shape. Somebody was saying, I think we'd better leave her in the hospital in Denver. I hid in the bathroom until we pulled out of the station (laughter). They didn't look very hard.

MHH: You were determined to get to New Jersey.

VH: To get out of the army. That was my aim in life, was to get out of the army. I do not recommend for any Christian person to go into the military. If the country needs to be defended and the government calls him to serve, I feel they should go. That's their duty. But I do not recommend that any Christian voluntarily go into the service. I was raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I took my training on the south edge of Philadelphia, which is close to the slums, if you want to call them that. I thought I'd seen

everything in the emergency room when I was in training. I saw a whole lot of immorality when I was in the army. I could hardly stand it.

MHH: In what sense do you mean that?

VH: Nobody has any respect for the truth. They had no respect for each other. Immorality is wild. Of course in this day and age, it's just about as wild any place you go. People live together without marriage. They try it all out first and see if it's going to work. But I was not used to that, even though I had been brought up and gone to public schools. I still feel that it beats the military—it's no place for a Christian.

MHH: And that's your reason?

VH: And that's my reason. As far as possible, I never missed a chapel service. But you can't help but get caught up in it, you know. Even when we on Hawaii, about the only thing we did for entertainment was go to the Officers' Club. When you did that, you were bending your elbow all night, or you were exposed to that kind of thing. Dancing was the only thing known for entertainment or movies. And all the time that I was in the service, I never really met a chaplain who tried to make it any better for those of us who wanted it better. Even when we went to Okinawa and I was engaged to Chips, my roommate tried to get me to go out with other people because she said, "He's probably doing the same thing. Nobody sits around in this day and age, you know." But that was not the way I felt about it.

MHH: So you're definitely speaking from a lot of personal experience.

VH: Yes, I am.

MHH: I can tell that. So now you're in New Jersey. What happened next?

To be continued...

Originally Published in:

Vol 77 No 5 May 2018