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Interview: Jerry Caplan and Helen Hawley, World War II Veterans

September 18th, 2007 Jerry Caplan and Helen Hawley: Michele Skalicky talks with Jerry Caplan, who led a mostly African-American Battalion in the Battle of the Bulge and changed the prejudices Americans had toward African-American soldiers and with Helen Hawley, who served as a public health nurse with the U.S. Public Health Service during World War II.

The day was December 7, 1941 and Helen Hawley had been working for the United States Public Health Service for 7 months.

She says she'll always remember that time.

"It was shocking to think that our people over in Hawaii were being killed by the Japanese. I couldn't believe it."

Hawley lives in Marionville now in a house packed with memories and an impressive apron collection.

She's accomplished a lot in her life, which began 90 years ago in Blue Marsh in Berks County, Pennsylvania•it's now a lake.

After Hawley graduated from high school, she attended Simmons College on a scholarship and studied public health.

"Public health is one of the things that, instead of treating disease, you're trying to prevent disease. My hope has always been instead of losing a life because of a disease, we'd like to save a life because they didn't get it."

Her first job out of nursing school was with the Visiting Nurses Association in Wilmington, Delaware. While there, she met the director of the U.S. Public Health Service, Pearl McIver.

"We had a nice visit, and she gave me a little encouragement to consider U.S. Public Health Service. I was interested, applied and was accepted."

Hawley entered the U.s. Public Health Service in April of 1941, just 7 months before the start of WWII.

Her assignments was to work along with public health agencies in communities where there was military service.

After 2 months of training at the National Institute for Health in Washington D.C., she was sent to the city of Baltimore to work with their public health agency, and then to Annapolis, MD to get background in the military. She was then ready for her first assignment.

"And that was to send me to the state of Oklahoma to work with their health departments that were related to the military service."

Hawley was assigned directly to the health department in Lawton and worked directly with the military at Fort Sill. She went in as a civilian worker, but eventually was commissioned. Her title was nurse officer, reserve, which, she says, was comparable to a first lieutenant

Teaching parenting classes and working in schools with children of those in the military were just two of her many duties.

"If our military got into problems with venereal disease, then I had to follow up the context in the community."

According to Hawley, during the war, the small town of Lawton, OK swelled with military folks and their families. Housing was hard to find and some people were forced to live in their cars. Hawley says it was a challenge to try to bridge the gap between Lawton, OK and Fort Sill. One way that was done was thru the USO.

"Sometimes in communities where there's a military setting, communities may develop a stay in your own place instead of bothering me, but we had to overcome that because things were different at that point, and that's why I think the USO was a real answer because it did bring the community and the military together."

Hawley met her husband while working in Lawton. He was stationed at Fort Sill and was a mess sergeant in the school there.

"We met and were married before I got my commission. We couldn't have married if we hadn't have married before I got my commission. A sergeant and lieutenant were not permitted to marry at that point."

She and her husband had one daughter who passed away last October. She lost her husband 10 years ago they'd been married 54 years.

Hawley served in the U.S. Public Health Service until 1944. Her experience, she says, prepared her for the life she led afterwards. Hawley worked with the health department in Illinois, directed a public health nursing program in Decatur, Ill., got a degree in nursing education and taught nursing for 36 years. She hopes she's been able to make a difference.

"The number of nurses I taught in the schools of nursing, I can't remember the total number, but there were quite a few, so hopefully they are doing their thing. It's interesting, at this point I still hear from several of those students."

Hawley went back to school and got a masters degree in business administration when she was 54-years-old. The last 10 years of her career were spent working as a consultant for hospital management teams.

As she reflects on her time serving during WWII and compares that time to today, she says things were much different then.

"There are many, many people who wish this war had never been, but we never, ever had that feeling during World War II."

Hawley has learned a lot in her 90 years. Because of that, she could offer

some sage advice to those in charge of figuring out how to handle the situation in Iraq.

"If the diplomatic approach could just be used, it would be so much easier because, if people could just sit down and look at each other and talk about what their problem is, it's surprising what can be done."