

ORAL MEMOIRS  
OF  
FRANCES “POLLIE” LUX

An interview conducted on

March 8, 2018

Interviewer: Chase Ellis

Angelo State University

West Texas Collection

“War Stories: West Texans and the Experience of War: World War I to the Present”

LEGAL STATUS: The oral memoirs of Frances Lux are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on March 8, 2018.

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ELLIS: Okay, this is March 8, 2018, and is the interview for the Vietnam experience. And so, what is your name?

LUX: My legal name is Frances Lux, but I like to be called Pollie Lux.

ELLIS: Okay, when were you born and where did you grow up?

LUX: I was born in Jonesboro, Arkansas and I went to school there. And after graduation from high school, then I went to Memphis, Tennessee and went to a nursing school.

ELLIS: Okay. Did moving to Memphis influence you in joining the war? Or is that just part of the schooling?

LUX: Let me tell you, when I was high school, our uh . . . it was a Catholic school. They had a hospital and I had a friend who talked me into being a nursing aid. And I enjoyed it. I worked two summers during the year, part time, and then it came time for career decisions. My friend wanted me to go to Memphis to take a nursing test, and I said, "I don't want to go. I don't want to be a nurse." So, anyway, I went with her just to be kind. I wanted to get married and have a bunch of kids because we come from a big family. Well, she failed. I passed. I'm a nurse and she had eight kids.

ELLIS: Oh, no. Wow! [Laughs] So, it changed everything. Wow, that's crazy.

LUX: I was close enough to home that I could get back and forth at different times, but yes, it was a different way of being away from a large family.

ELLIS: Okay, all right. Were . . . did you enlist or were you drafted?

LUX: No, after I finished nursing school, which was only a three-year . . . at that time. That was back in the '60s. And I had a couple of friends that wanted me to go with them into the Air Force, and I declined. And about the third year that I had . . . a friend that had been in the Air Force and had gone to school with me, she came back, and she said, "Pollie, I think you would really enjoy it." And then after the evening news . . . they were showing the Vietnam casualties come in on the choppers, and I thought, "You know what? I have a vocation that could really help out." And so, that's what really got me into going into the military. And, no . . . I volunteered and you had to sign up for a two-year commitment.

ELLIS: Okay. Do you remember what year that was?

LUX: Yes, I went in in October 1966, and my desire was to go to flight school. And a year later . . . I actually had been to two bases because one was closed down. Went to another base, they had me go to flight school and from there, I was assigned to a unit in the Philippines, which . . . let me explain. In the Vietnam War, we had three areas that we had nurses stationed. We all inter-flew. Our headquarters, which was fairly small, was in Hawaii. And uh we had a big group of nurses assigned to Yokota, Japan, and then I went to the Philippines. And we all inter-flew with each other.

ELLIS: Okay, I see. What did you think about the conflict going on during that time?

LUX: I really didn't think too much about the conflict. I was thinking it was really sad to see the young gentlemen coming back from out of there. I remember one that really affected me. And uh the first one that really affected me was when I was actually . . . when the aircrafts would come back. And sometimes, we would have ground nurses come in and we would give back rubs and freshen their beds and everything. And I looked at the name of this gentlemen and his name was Robert Jones. That's my brother's name. And that really affected me. Now, I will tell you, I have three brothers and all of them had knee problems and they were not allowed to serve.

ELLIS: Okay.

LUX: But that really bothered me. But the other one that really, really got to me was when we were doing some ground duty on . . . at the Philippines, and we had a gentleman who had lost both legs and one arm. And he asked me, "Where are we going?" And I said, "You are going to Hawaii and then . . . get back to the states." He said, "I can't. I can't. I've got to go to Japan because I have a girlfriend. She is an airline stewardess and she is going to be there."

ELLIS: Wow . . .

LUX: And I thought . . . you just don't know. He was just in such great denial.

ELLIS: Man! What was your training like? Did you receive any special training once you enlisted?

LUX: Uh actually, we only had to go . . . officers only had to go through about two or three weeks of officer training. And actually, the BOQs, the on-base quarters, that the officers would stay in were full, so I got to stay in a motel with a friend.

ELLIS: Oh, that's nice! [Both laugh]

LUX: And . . . yes, sure. We learned to march. We learned to salute. We learned respect and the different rules of how, uh when to salute and what all that is. But then we did have what they called a bivouac. And we had to go out and live in a tent, and we had to do a map quest at night, and uh . . . but it was sort of . . . it was enjoyable because everybody was in the same boat. We didn't know what we were doing. We were just finding out.

ELLIS: Right. So, Vietnam broke out and you saw all the young men coming back, and it affected you. Did that impact you in how you felt America was changing or do you feel like it still stood for . . . this fighting force?

LUX: Well, I always wondered where it was going to end, but I felt like we were doing our job. And I was doing a job to help the ones who were really what we called "the grunts" out in the fields. I will tell you that the way we got our patients were we flew in a very large aircraft

called a 141, and we would go into three different places . . . into Vietnam, and that was Tan Son Nhut, Cam Ranh Bay, and Saigon. And we were taking the patients who had already come in from the field and had been to surgery and were stable enough to fly a distance. Now, how did they get from the field? There was another group of nurses we called “in-country,” and they flew on 130s and they actually had to have guns. They had to fly in and get the troops. Of course, there were guards, but they would actually pick them up. And we always had men with us. We had . . . male attendants. So, you know, we would help, and we had them, and they would load it. They had to defend themselves and they had the worst job.

ELLIS: Wow. Were you able to talk to any of these nurses to hear their experiences?

LUX: Well, just one time I remember we had . . . actually, this was before Tet hit, and we had gone off base and there was a little group of nurses who got together, and one of the nurses just started crying one night. They said, “We need to ship you out tomorrow.” So, yes, they were very affected. I saw . . . when I was in Cam Ranh Bay and I just happened to walk by when they were off loading some of the men from the field, I actually saw one with his leg almost off.

ELLIS: Oh, wow.

LUX: So, that was very traumatic. Our patients had already been to surgery. They were sad stories, but you know, we were doing our job. I guess that’s the way nurses have to be.

ELLIS: Tough.

LUX: Yes. [Laughs]

ELLIS: All the time. You . . . we talked about a little bit of your experience and some others. Was there any time where you felt like you just wanted to go home, you just couldn’t do it no more? Did you find it very challenging? Or was the prior experience with nursing school helpful with the experience in Vietnam?

LUX: Well, nursing aided me in what I was doing and of course, flight nursing training helped me with what I was doing in that specific field of nursing. But, yes. One evening I had to do ground duty—I think this was the time I had my brother’s name—and I went . . . it was just about two or three weeks into this. I was still in training because we had somebody to work with us for a very short period. And I remember going to the BOQ and just crying and crying. I thought, “This can’t happen. You wanted this.” So, I went to the mirror and I talked to myself and straightened myself up. And after that, I decided that’s the way it was going to be, and I did okay. As a matter of fact, Tet hit during the time we were there, and . . . Do you remember what Tet was?

ELLIS: No ma’am.

LUX: Okay. The Viet Cong, or Vietnamese, overtook Saigon’s base. Now, when that happened, I had just gone back and I was doing ground duty at Saigon. And on Sunday night, we had a severely burned patient. We had to take him out immediately. So, there were two nurses and a

doctor, and one crew, and one aircraft, this big aircraft. And we went to Japan. On the way back to Saigon . . . it was a Tuesday evening, and they told us to get off the aircraft. And that was something new, and so, I'm like, "What's going on?" Well, when we got to Saigon, we found out that they had . . . the Viet Cong had overtook the base.

ELLIS: Oh, wow.

LUX: Yes, and they were still on red alert, so it was uh . . . of course . . . I guess I was young and dumb because I really wasn't upset. [Laughs] We ended up, the two nurses—myself and Misty, was her name—we had to sleep in the office on the flight line that night because they didn't have any quarters for females for us to stay in. The next day we got our quarters.

ELLIS: Wow.

LUX: But like I said, I think we were just dumb and young. [Laughs] And I just . . . I look back and I'm saying, "I guess we could have had trouble," but I wasn't thinking about that then.

ELLIS: Right. Would you say the memories you've recently said were your most vivid? If not, what is your most vivid memory that you just remember when you think back to this moment?

LUX: Well, those, of course, are the ones I think about. But it was such a rewarding feeling to me, to be able to do something for my country and for the injured men coming back. I really felt sorry because I married a guy who had been in Vietnam and when he came back, he was not welcomed as well. Now, I never experienced that, but I know a lot of people did. But uh I think about that, and then . . . I really enjoyed myself because I met people . . . I worked with nurses from all over the United States. As a matter of fact, I will tell you that fifty years later, this summer, one of the nurses that I met that I became very good friends with, we're going back to Hawaii to meet up again! We have been in contact for the last forty years, but we decided that . . . we used to go to Hawaii with the flight and enjoy ourselves, so we decided we were going to go back. And this summer will be fifty years.

ELLIS: Wow, that's amazing.

LUX: Yeah.

ELLIS: Now, you recently just said something about your husband. Can you explain that a little bit more, like, how you met? Did you happen to meet during the war?

LUX: No, actually, I had . . . when I got back to the United States . . . I spent two and a half years on flying status, and then when I got back, I went to one of the busiest hospitals called Wilford Hall, which was in Lackland, and we received a lot of those patients coming in. After that, I recruited nurses. I was a nurse at a recruiting station in Houston, Texas. And from there, I had my friend, the one I'm going to Hawaii with . . . she was stationed at the Air Force Academy, and so she said, "Why don't you try to get here?" And I said okay. Well, within two weeks, I met this guy who was just coming in from Germany, and uh my classmate that talked me in to coming in to the Air Force was stationed at the Air Force Academy, and we decided we

would go to Peterson Air Force Base. That is where I met Lou, my husband-to-be. He was from Ohio, and he was a personnel officer. And from there, we got married in a short time, about six months later, and then we were stationed in Alabama and Germany, and then our last station was here. And after I retired, I came back to school here at ASU and got my B.S. degree and taught in the nursing department for seventeen years. My husband . . . he got his masters as an M.B.A. and he was teaching at Howard College in business and computers. And he retired a year . . . well, two years after I did, but he had a brain tumor. Within two months, he was . . . He died six years ago.

ELLIS: I'm sorry to hear that.

LUX: Thank you.

ELLIS: Can you . . . You said that you never experienced any backlash after coming back from the war, but Lou did. Can you go into that a little bit, like, the experiences that he had?

LUX: I don't know that much, but he said that he had people spit at him and, you know, make very rude comments. It was terrible because as a military member, you do what you are told to do.

ELLIS: Right.

LUX: You're on duty twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. And so, we were just fulfilling what our mission was, and I'm sorry that the people here could not appreciate their freedom.

ELLIS: That's sad to hear.

LUX: Yes.

ELLIS: Could you go back to your time nursing? Could you talk about the technology that you used during that time?

LUX: As far as what? The military?

ELLIS: Yes ma'am.

LUX: Our . . . of course, it was not the technology we had here. If we had a patient that had to be suctioned out, we had an apparatus that we had to press or pump with our foot and suction. A lot of time it took two people. And our aircraft, we could stack four litters high, and so a lot of uh the patients who weren't as sick—or heavy, I should say—because we would go in and interview our patients before we made the load plan. And so, yeah, according to technology today . . . of course, technology today, I wouldn't be able to nurse. It's too technical now!

ELLIS: Right. How did the um . . . how did the service influence your family back home or your friends back home?

LUX: Actually, they really admired me for it. When I got back home, the chamber of commerce had asked me to come talk to them, and I was on leave at that time. And the nursing association really thought it was great that I was serving my country. I was welcomed and very much appreciated. My three brothers always said, “Yeah, she’s the sergeant, giving the orders around here.” And I said, “Yeah, but I’m serving your time!” since they didn’t go. [Both laugh]

ELLIS: How much news from home did you hear?

LUX: Uh I didn’t hear that much as far as from home. We have a newspaper and they still have it. I forgot the name of it, but it would keep us up to date about the news and everything. But I will tell you, the day that I hit Saigon, when I went back to Saigon, it was a Saturday morning and I didn’t have anything to do because I was waiting on the nurses for report. And I hadn’t written mom and dad for a while, so I just got a piece of paper from the . . . hand paper—yeah, handwrite—and took it and said, “War is hell. I’m back in Saigon.” [Both laugh] Well, guess what? The middle of the week is when Tet hit, so . . . [Laughs]

ELLIS: Oh, no. Wow!

LUX: Yeah! So, I’m sure they were worried. Maybe their prayers got me through it. I don’t know. [Both laugh]

ELLIS: Talk a little bit more about relations with the Vietnamese, if you had any.

LUX: Well, before Vietnam . . . Before Tet hit, we actually would go to an orphanage. And our people that were stationed in Vietnam, they had contacted, and they would take us nurses and we would go to the orphanage and help the people. While we were on the streets, we were told to be very cautious because even children would throw balloons and they were deadly. Our buses had screens on them wherever we were going. We were very cautious not to be out. And before Tet, I will have to say, we would go downtown and have some dinner, and everybody seemed to be very congenial with each other. After Tet, we no longer went away from the base.

ELLIS: Oh, wow. What was your first impression going into Vietnam? Or Saigon? Or the other two places you talked about? I don’t remember the two names. What were they again?

LUX: Saigon, Cam Ranh Bay, and Tan Son Nhut. I went to Cam Ranh Bay. I never went to Tan Son Nhut, but I went to Can Ranh Bay. And that was nice place because on Sunday afternoon, we took off and went to the beach and played volleyball. Now . . . that’s where we would see the others. We didn’t associate with them, but they were Koreans. They were helping us with the war. We couldn’t communicate because of our language, but yeah, that was sort of nice. Most of the time I had gone to Saigon, not because I had requested it, but because that’s where they needed me at the time. And after that, we were so busy because we were up at the early hours of the morning to give a report and get our patients loaded, and then we would have to come back after lunch and start interviewing our new patients to get . . . and everything had to be planned for the next day. It was a continuous work out when we were there.

ELLIS: It sounds like it.

LUX: Yes! [Laughs] I remember after we finally got . . . after I got back from that aircraft flight to Japan . . . we got back, and once we got back to work, we had so many patients we . . . the first couple of flights . . . the first one I remember going out and we said, “Get it in here by three o’clock so we can get it out.” And they didn’t get in until late because of problems, so they were loading with flashlights on the flight liner.

ELLIS: Wow.

LUX: And when they took off, they reported to us that they were receiving gun fire from the ground—from the Viet Cong, of course—trying to shoot our aircraft down.

ELLIS: That’s crazy.

LUX: Yes. [Laughs] Like I said, we must have been young and dumb . . .

ELLIS: How do you feel about the controversies that have come up because of the Vietnam War? What was the true, raw cause of being there? Was it strictly because of communists or what do you think?

LUX: Well, because there was the conflict, and I felt that we should have been there, and I feel that people who were criticizing us were not appreciative of . . . They did not know really what was going on. Because, you know, we have people in Washington, D.C. making big decisions and they know a heck of a lot more than we ever do. And for people to be judgmental and to treat us . . . because we were helping out, it was very disturbing. To have people be anti . . . I didn’t hit anybody in the face though! [Laughs]

ELLIS: That’s good!

LUX: Yeah.

ELLIS: So, you mentioned that there were a couple times when you were returning to Saigon that Tuesday night and learned that the Viet Cong overthrew . . . and, recently, you talked about how they were firing at your airplane. Did you experience any other type of gunfire or did you actually see any of the Viet Cong themselves?

LUX: No, I did not. The only time I saw a Viet Cong, he was a patient in the hospital and I had nothing to do with him. It was the ground nurse taking care of him, and that was the only time.

ELLIS: Do you know if he gave them any problems being treated?

LUX: No, not that I know of or ever heard of.

ELLIS: No, okay, that’s fine. You said you were able to go into town before the Viet Cong . . . and you were able to kind of chat with the locals. Did you get any of their viewpoints about the war?

LUX: No, no. We were sort of protected by the guys in the squadron.

ELLIS: Okay, okay.

LUX: Yeah.

ELLIS: I think that's it. I've asked you . . . Oh, there is more . . .

LUX: Oh. [Laughs]

ELLIS: No, that's it. Well, I could ask a few more questions, but I think we are done.

LUX: Okay.