

WORLD WAR II-KOREAN WAR MEMORIES PROJECT

**GIFT OF
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Date Received: 14 March 2002

Date Acknowledged: 14 March 2002

GIFT: Her World War II memoir, relating her experiences as a WAC, 1944-1945.

The following will tell some of the story of my one and a half years in the WAC. Of course, much has been forgotten over the years but I thought that this might prove interesting in the years to come for our children and grandchildren. To quote Charles Dickens in "The Tale of Two Cities" it was "The Worst of Times and the Best of Times", but it was a start of a new life for many of us and we became much more aware of the world around us. Certainly it was a terrible time for many people around the world and those who fought in World War II. However, it made the world smaller for many of us.

It was in April 1944 that a WAC Recruiter came to my High School to try and interest girls in the Army, although most were too young at the time, but I wasn't as I was working in the High School office as secretary to the Principal and would be 21 in May.

I had already made up my mind to leave Lancaster (my home town) in Wisconsin and this seemed a good opportunity to get out from under the domineering influence of my step-mother who hadn't made my sister and my life's too happy in the time she had been in our lives after marrying my Dad after our Mother died. Anyway, I filled out the form and set my new life in motion. A few days later I got an order to report to Milwaukee to be examined physically and also intelligence tests were to be given. Strangely, my step-mother didn't object too much as she probably thought I would fail the tests.

My Dad helped me carry my suitcase to the depot the day I was to go and I rode a long train ride into Milwaukee. I was so inexperienced in traveling but somehow I found the right place. We were given a very thorough examination on everything and after it was completed we were told to wait in a large room. There were quite a few girls from all over Wisconsin and we were told we could smoke if we wanted to while waiting. I was one of the few who didn't smoke. After quite a while, a Captain came in and read the names of the girls who did not pass. There were some tears as those who failed heard their names. They left the room and we were told that the rest of us had passed. We were told to stand and put our hands over our hearts while we were inducted into the Army of the United States.

We were sent home for two weeks and told to report back to Milwaukee to a certain hotel and from there we would leave for Ft. Oglethorpe, Georgia for our training. I was thrilled but had misgivings about leaving my sister and my Dad, but felt that my sister would soon leave too. She was taking over my job at the High School in the meantime. Since it was War time my step-mother didn't say too much about my leaving and assumed I would soon be back.

At the end of two weeks, my folks drove me to Madison, Wisconsin and I caught a train from there.

Arriving in Milwaukee later that day I got off the train with my suitcase in my hand and started walking toward what I thought was the center of the city and it must have been that the station was located near the heart of the city for I found my hotel that I was assigned to without too much trouble for someone who knew little about the city. I had been to Milwaukee several times to visit my grandparents but never on my own. I felt lucky to have found the hotel. I was directed to a certain floor where I found other girls who were going into the Service at the same time as me. Most of them were older than me but we were all looking forward to a new adventure. We were all assigned bunks in a large room for that one night and we were to leave for Ft. Oglethorpe, Georgia the next morning. At supper time we were taken to a nearby restaurant to eat. Then we were told we were free for the rest of the evening. Some of the girls suggested that we take in a movie and so we did. I felt so free after being told where and when I could go that I felt I could fly around that theater. The next morning we were taken to the Station and there boarded our train. We were on our way.

I became friendly with a nice girl and was looking forward to being with her during our trip but she became ill with appendicitis and was taken off the train to a Hospital and I never saw her again. When the train arrived in Chattanooga, Tenn., we were loaded onto the back of Army trucks to continue our journey to the base in Georgia. At the Base we jumped down from the truck and marched to our quarters.

There were other Wacs there a ways into their training and as we marched by, yelled at us "You'll be sorry". It was all in fun, of course. Ft. Oglethorpe was an old army base that had been used during World War I when they had horses to train so you could see that it was quite different from other posts. As a Calvary post things were set up different and the center field where we were to practice and have Physical training was surrounded by large houses that had housed earlier men who learned to use the Calvary training. Many of the buildings had been used as stables but now had other uses. My bunk was upstairs in one of these houses in a very large room with a lot of bunks for the girls. Next door was a prison for men army personnel, and we were instructed never to walk anywhere near that building. German POW'S were kept in another part of the camp. We were issued uniforms that day, given numerous shots and thus began our training. We marched everywhere and it was hot as you can imagine it would be in the summer in Georgia. We learned to salute officers and obey orders. We all had certain duties that we had to do besides the regular training, such as K.P. (that is working in the kitchen) and Latrine duty (that is cleaning the bathrooms) and sometimes it seemed silly to be picking up cigarettes and other small trash from the ground but we did it without question. We attended many classes and had regular P.T. (Physical Training).

One thing I'll always remember was learning to go through a building filled with some sort of gas and having to put our gas masks on while in there and continuing out the other side.

We had P.T. training every day and I enjoyed it a lot but some of the older women became very sore and spent some uncomfortable times because they were not used to that much exercise. I guess my youth saved me plus the fact that I had always been active. I think all of us got a little homesick at the beginning but most of us soon adjusted although some didn't and wanted to go home but once in you were in to stay. My best friend was a girl from Oklahoma but I became friends with most of the girls, and you come to be quite close under those circumstances. I got K.P. duty just once while at this camp and I didn't mind it at all. I scraped carrots and peeled potatoes and helped scrub the area down after meals. We had good food to eat and I especially remember the chocolate drink we had at every meal and the peanut butter and orange marmalade that we staples at every meal too. Whatever you took to eat as you went through the serving line you had to eat. There wasn't to be any food wasted. Once I took Kale thinking it was spinach and I didn't like it so put it in a napkin and put it in my pocket and threw it away after I got out where I could get rid of it. I was afraid the kitchen personnel would notice the bulge in my pocket but they didn't.

After a hard day of drilling, attending classes, etc., we were glad to rest in the evening. We weren't allowed off the Post, so we would go get an Orange Crush and just talk. There was always a lot of kidding around, and one girl especially would play on her guitar and sing. Her favorite song was "Gee Mom, I want to go home." We retired early and were up early for roll call. One job I didn't like was scrubbing the barracks floor. It was hard work on our knees with a scrubbing brush. All this was part of the discipline.

After six weeks of intensive training we graduated with a big parade and had our pictures taken. We were allowed to choose the Military Post that we wanted to be assigned to if we were needed at those particular posts. I chose Ft. Meade, Maryland, because of it's proximity to Washington, D.C. and Baltimore. New York wasn't far away either and I thought I could visit these places. Most of the girls and women wanted to be Air-Wac's and were sent to Air fieldss where pilots were training. I lost my best friend here too as she went to a field in Michigan and I never saw her again.

The night before we were all to leave for our chosen sites, the girls did all kinds of things such as short-sheeting our Sargent's bed and playing other tricks on those who had been over us. It was all in fun and nobody got mad. It was part oof graduating and becoming a real WAC.

The next morning we left with duffel bags on our various trains. Only four girls were going to Ft. Meade with me. The train went north and no doubt passed places where I would later live in civilian life.

We arrived in Baltimore, Md. and took a camp bus out to Ft. Meade, the place that we had chosen while we were in Georgia. It was a large camp and we were taken to the WAC detachment barracks where we walked up the road lugging our belongings. Girls that were already there shouted a welcome and we checked in at the office, and were assigned our barracks building. The barracks were identical to the men's with double bunks. I got a top bunk and stored my things away. In the Army everything has its place and it had better be in it. We had by this time gotten used to inspections that were often held and we knew all had to be in order.

I had no idea what I would be doing but was sent to the 2nd Regiment to work in the headquarters office. There were just four other girls, including me, in the office at that time. I was assigned to a nice Sargent Edwards who set me doing some book work at first but it wasn't enough to keep me busy and gradually I was typing, running off copies on the Memeograph, going on errands in an army jeep, checking lists of men going overseas and just about anything that needed doing. The men in the office were only too glad to turn over some of their duties to me. The men who were assigned there were limited personnel with various things wrong with them that kept them from being sent overseas. Some had already been in the War overseas and been sent back because of injuries and given limited duty. One of the men in the office had a glass eye, another a club foot and age was against some of them. The Sargent over me had been in the South Pacific and contracted Yellow Fever which recurred often and sent him to the Base Hospital. All in all they were a fine bunch of men whom I came to care about. Never were we girls insulted in any way and we were treated with respect. Of course, when we passed a bunch of trainees out drilling we were often whistled at, but we took it in good nature. We didn't know then anything about harrasement. We took it as a compliment.

The 2nd Regiment and the Barracks I was in became my home. and living close with those girls, we all became good friends. In fact, the first time I went home on furlough, I was anxious to get back. I felt more at home now at Ft. Meade than I did in Wisconsin.

I wanted to see as much of the country around Ft. Meade that I could and often several of us girls went into Washington, D.C. where we saw every landmark there was to see and became very familiar with Washington. We even went to the little house that Lincoln was taken to after being shot and where he died. We tried going to Baltimore but didn't find it as interesting so chose Washington for our trips to town. Sometimes a bunch of us would hike into Laurel, Md., a small town nearby and back.

We did these things on Sundays as that was the only time we had the time. Another girl from Wisconsin and I went to New York on a three day pass in November, 1944, and I remember it as being a nice place to visit. While walking down the street in New York, an older man stopped in front of us and saluted. It was very touching. We stayed at a large mansion just off Fifth Avenue that was a place where women in the Military could stay free. We had a nice room and a convenient place from which to do our sight-seeing. In those three days we did everything that we had time for. We walked up all the steps at the Statue of Liberty as far as we could go. We also went to what they called "The Bowery" and "Chinatown." We bought a little something at Saks, 5th Avenue just so we could say that we shopped there. Of course, we went to Rockefeller Center and saw a movie as well as the Rockettes. We also watched people skate on the ice rink. We bought waffles to eat on Times Square as at that time they were popular. My companion wanted to go to "The Met" (which has since been torn down) and so we bought standing room to see an opera. Not exactly my idea of fun but went along with her. A couple seeing us standing gave up their seats for us. We even went to a night club just to see what it was like, but the scantily dressed women scared us away. We also went to the Empire State Building and St. Patrick's cathedral, and so had a very full and interesting trip.

Another trip I made was with another girl to North Andover, Mass. We rode a train and had to sit on our suitcases all the way as the train was so crowded. Her mother had fixed all kinds of good things for us to eat and took us to see the cotton mill where she worked. It was quite mountainous around this town and very pretty. I wasn't expecting mountains in Massachusetts. I got the feeling that the mother was very unhappy that her daughter had joined the WAC'S but still she did her best to entertain us.

My best friend at Ft. Meade was from Staunton, Va. and she took me to visit her parents. They were wonderful and just couldn't do enough for us. As I hadn't been anywhere in Virginia at that time they took us on a trip to Richmond to sightsee, and another day we went to Natural Bridge, where we ate at the old hotel that has since burned down. In Staunton we went to all places of interest and I'll never forget how nice they were to me. They at that time had already lost a son in the War.

My work at Ft. Meade became pretty routine but I enjoyed the comradeship that I had with the girls in the barracks and with the people I worked with. At Christmas, I went back to Wisconsin on a train to Dubuque, Iowa where my folks picked me up for the ride to Lancaster. Being with civilians again who didn't understand the war was a change and I was glad to get back to my barracks where the girls had put up a little Christmas tree.

Our train headed west through Iowa, Nebraska, Wyoming, Idaho, and on to Oregon. In Portland, Oregon we were marched to a nice restaurant to eat. It was in a large hotel with fancy napkins, tablecloths, etc. We weren't used to such finery after eating in messhalls in Camp. Soon we were loaded into trucks and taken to our new camp, Camp Adair. It hadn't been in use for some time and much needed to be done there before we could call it home. I hadn't been able to see my new boy-friend for sometime now as we had become separated during this time. I had learned, however, that he had been wounded at Cassino, Italy after serving in North Africa and Italy and had been sent home for limited duty. He had many interesting stories to tell about the War having experienced it first hand.

The barracks at Camp Adair were much the same but we didn't have double bunks as we seemed to have more room for single beds. Everyone was busy getting the new camp in shape. My boy-friend had been promoted to Supply Sargent in the company and his place of work was just across the road from the Regimental office. I continued doing what I had been doing at Ft. Meade. We had been sent out there as the War with Japan hadn't ended yet as it had with Germany, and it was thought that we were needed more on the West Coast. However, after the Atom bombs were dropped the war with Japan ended quickly. While in Oregon, my boy-friend and I got to know each other much better and to find that we really cared about each other. He was issued two bicycles (as we still had no car) to explore the countryside. There were mountains around there and we could see Mt. Hood in the distance. The nearest mountain to us was called Coffin Mountain as it was shaped like a long coffin. We often hiked up there and explored the surrounding countryside. The weather in Oregon at that time of year was always foggy in the mornings but by noon the sun would come out and it would be very nice.

In the early part of September Herman was called to Kansas because his sister who was there with her husband was very ill. Her husband was stationed at an Air Base at Great Bend, Kansas. We both missed each other very much while he was gone and when he came back we realized we loved each other and decided to get married. I wrote home and told my step-mother I was getting married and that didn't set too well with her. She wrote a very nasty, mean letter back but we just tore it up and went on with our plans. We didn't want a big wedding and anyway that was impossible in the Army. A friend of ours and his wife agreed to stand up with us. The day before we rushed around getting ready. I was supposed to have a blood test, examination, etc. but the Army doctor just took the form and signed it. On Saturday by the time we got to the Clerk's office for our license the place was closed. So the men threw rocks at the windows and got them to give us our Marriage license, and then we had to locate the minister's home that had agreed to marry us. Once there we had a nice ceremony in the parsonage. This

was in Corvallis, Oregon. We rented a little apartment in a smaller town closer to Camp called Monmouth. The couple who stood up for us at our wedding lived there too so we were assured a ride into Camp although sometimes we depended on the good will of others. For our honeymoon we went to Lake Oswego where we rented a canoe and paddled around the lake. We also did some sightseeing in Salem (the Capitol of the state) and one day some friends took us to lunch in Eugene, another town near by. I wish now that we had had a car to drive and explore the beautiful Willamette Valley and had gone to the Pacific Ocean as we weren't far from it, but with no transportation of our own it was hard to get around. All our friends at camp were happy for us and even the General of our Regiment congratulated us. Soon after our marriage I had to have a cyst on my lower eye lid removed and we were kidded that Herman had socked me in the eye already.

It wasn't long after we were married that they decided to close the Camp as the War had ended. Many of the girls were discharged while we were in Oregon. Most didn't want to leave as they enjoyed the life.

The girls who worked in the offices were to be sent back to Camp Pickett, Va. and so we packed up again for the move back East. However, Herman would have to remain longer at Camp Adair to help close the Camp down. As a result we were to be separated again for about two weeks. The trip back came on a more Northern route through Montana, North Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Kentucky and on into Virginia. Coming through Montana it was snowing and very pretty although it was only the end of October. We arrived in November in Virginia and our new Camp. There were fewer girls now and we were issued rooms with two to a room. Some of my friends had been discharged and things were different. I worked in a different type of office and felt it wouldn't be long now before we were all discharged. I looked forward to Herman coming to our new Camp and it wasn't long before I realized I was pregnant so I had a lot to tell him when he got back to Camp Pickett. I was soon discharged and we rented a room in a large house in Blacksburg, Va. a few miles from Camp. When it became apparent that he would soon be discharged at Ft. Meade, Md., I went to a former Wac's home in Leesburg, Va. to wait for him. This girl was a good friend and was now married and expecting a baby too. She and her husband had been good to me while we both were in the Wac's. Several times they had taken me to lunch with them in Baltimore, Md. Anyway, they turned the house over to me while I waited for Herman to get his discharge. The night he was to come in on the Bus, I waited for him until the drug-store man saw me and told me to come in and wait in his store as it was snowing some outside. At the time Leesburg didn't have a Bus Station. Herman got there late at night and we spent one night there before boarding a bus to Chatham, Va. It

was cold on the Bus, as it was early December and had been snowing. Arriving early on a Sunday, there was no one about except for a Deputy Sheriff who offered to give us a ride to Herman's folks' home at Callands, Va.

When we got there his folks were still in bed and we woke them up. It was the beginning of a new life for me in Virginia and the start of a new family.

It would have been hard had I not had a wonderful, caring husband who has been with me always for over 50 years now.

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