

Interviewer: It's the 29th of May 2000 and I'm interviewing Mrs. Thelma Geiss who is a veteran of the women's army core. Do you recall when was it you that you went into the women's army core?

Geiss: March 13, 1945.

Interviewer: March 13, 1945. What enticed you to enlist what made you go?

Geiss: I always wanted to be a nurse and I heard on the radio then that they were recruiting medical aids and I wanted to do it.

Interviewer: Great and where were you living at this time?

Geiss: In Youngstown.

Interviewer: In Youngstown and where did you go to sign up right there in Youngstown?

Geiss: No Cleveland.

Interviewer: So you traveled to Cleveland by bus?

Geiss: Right

Interviewer: To an induction center?

Geiss: Yes

Interviewer: Okay and what happened in Cleveland what did they do?

Geiss: We were examined and we weren't told then whether we passed or not it was a couple of days later. Then we got our notice if you passed or failed and I passed. And it was about a week later that I was inducted.

Interviewer: And you got your orders and where did you report to for induction?

Geiss: Fort Oberthrope in Georgia.

Interviewer: Fort Oberthrope Georgia. Where in Georgia is that located? Several people have mentioned Fort Oberthrope and I'm not familiar with it.

Geiss: I don't know.

Interviewer: You don't remember?

Geiss: No

Interviewer: No one has, was it out in the boondocks of Georgia?

Geiss: It was out but we never got off of the base.

Interviewer: Okay so it was out there wasn't a big city nearby or anything like that?

Geiss: No

Interviewer: Because I'm not familiar with Fort Oberthrope. Okay well that's great. So when you arrived at Fort Oberthrope so you went from Cleveland to Fort Oberthrope by train?

Geiss: No I went from Youngstown.

Interviewer: From Youngstown by train

Geiss: My group left from Youngstown by train.

Interviewer: And how long of a journey was that?

Geiss: I don't remember.

Interviewer: Was it pretty comfortable conditions traveling down?

Geiss: Yes it was.

Interviewer: You don't have any recollection of discomfort?

Geiss: No

Interviewer: How were you treated I remember when I went to basic training things were a little rough. How were you treated when you arrived at Fort Oberthrope?

Geiss: It was pretty rough because you're all dressed up and you're walking in high heels and you're marching.

Interviewer: In the Georgia dust.

Geiss: Then I was assigned to a bed next to a real southern girl and she said do I really have to sleep beside this Yankee.

Interviewer: Really do I have to sleep beside this Yankee.

Geiss: And we were down at basic training for four weeks.

Interviewer: Okay tell me a little about basic training were they harsh I mean was there a lot of discipline?

Geiss: There was a lot of discipline.

Interviewer: Physical fitness?

Geiss: Right

Interviewer: Teach you to march?

Geiss: Right

Interviewer: What did you think of that?

Geiss: I didn't mind really.

Interviewer: You didn't mind you adapted fairly well?

Geiss: Right

Interviewer: This was in March?

Geiss: In March.

Interviewer: How warm was it in Georgia do you remember it being pretty warm compared to coming from Northern Ohio?

Geiss: Yeah it was warmer than what we had in Ohio.

Interviewer: First experience with the Deep South?

Geiss: Right

Interviewer: What did you think of the uniforms?

Geiss: I liked it.

Interviewer: Did they have you in fatigues or did they have you in dress?

Geiss: No we had skirts and tops.

Interviewer: Skirts and blouses.

Geiss: And then if for dress we would have jackets.

Interviewer: Now did they teach you things like they did teach you marching and drill and you did physical fitness I would assume calisthenics and they had you run to get you in shape. Did they also teach you military things like map reading?

Geiss: No

Interviewer: Weapons things like that any self-defense at all?

Geiss: No

Interviewer: So they taught you no self-defense.

Geiss: The only things we did work on was the gas masks.

Interviewer: Okay so you were taught how to defend yourself in a chemical

Geiss: With a gas mask.

Interviewer: In a chemical fight.

Geiss: And then we had two weeks of medical training.

Interviewer: And was that also at Fort Oberthrope?

Geiss: Right

Interviewer: And what did they teach you during this training?

Geiss: We had to learn to give shots and take blood pressures and how to treat a patient in bed and anything that you would learn in your basic nursing to begin with just an outline of it.

Interviewer: Right how to take care of the patients on the ward. Now after the six that was a total of six weeks and you left Fort Oberthrope.

Geiss: We went to Herman General Hospital in Longview Texas.

Interviewer: Herman General Hospital.

Geiss: And it wasn't a hospital like a regular hospital it was only a temporary hospital it was made out of barracks. It had one central hall the wings were out of barracks. And then when the war was over and everything was settled it was torn down.

Interviewer: How large of a complex was Herman Hospital? Do you recall how many beds hundreds, thousands?

Geiss: Well I know on our ward there were 20.

Interviewer: There were 20 men on your ward?

Geiss: Yeah and but I don't remember how many wards there were.

Interviewer: Now what were the men on your ward hospitalized were they were returnees from overseas?

Geiss: Yeah they were returned most of them from Guam and they had a disease that was called shistosomiasis.

Interviewer: It's called what?

Geiss: Shistosomiasis

Interviewer: Shistosomiasis I'm not familiar with it.

Geiss: It was a worm that was in the bowls and they had to be treated for that. And then toward the end we had two patients that was on the Bataan Death March.

Interviewer: Really

Geiss: Uh huh

Interviewer: Wow

Geiss: And they were just skin and bones.

Interviewer: Now the patients that you had from Guam that you said had shistosomiasis

Geiss: I think it was maybe it was Laity.

Interviewer: That's okay that's fine.

Geiss: I'm not sure.

Interviewer: From my research I've read that most of the men that served in the Pacific wound up with some type of parasitical infections and dieses. I guess that was a very major problem. These men that you had from Guam that had shistosomiasis what were their symptoms?

Geiss: They were thin they didn't eat too well and otherwise they were in pretty good shape.

Interviewer: And how were what was your treatment what was the regiment that you cared for them?

Geiss: It was just medication pill form.

Interviewer: Pill forms of medication. And then high protein you were feeding them pretty heavily?

Geiss: Well they would go to the mess hall they were ambulatory.

Interviewer: Oh they were all able to get up and move around?

Geiss: All except these last two that came in that were on the Bataan.

Interviewer: Now that you received them I'm sure after VJ-Day.

Geiss: Yes

Interviewer: Do you remember the feeling in the ward on VJ-Day?

Geiss: Well not exactly.

Interviewer: I was just wondering if there was celebration or a lot of whistling and happiness when the announcement was made.

Geiss: I know there was a lot of happiness but other than that there wasn't I think they were all just anxious to know that soon they could go home.

Interviewer: Sure

Geiss: And usually when they came into the hospitals in a short time that if they were well enough they were given a two weeks leave so they could go home and then come back and finish up their treatment.

Interviewer: That was good. So they had a lot of the boys had an opportunity to go home see their families and then report back in for their treatment.

Geiss: Uh huh

Interviewer: The boys that came in from Bataan do you recall that probably would have been the end of fall I would imagine sometime in October when they would have returned.

Geiss: I don't remember when they came in but it was toward the end of the time that everyone was going to be released. Because they weren't there too long and the one that was very sick his family came up and took him home for a short time and then brought him back and he was a little bit better. And then in a few weeks they released him and he went to the hospital he was from Fort Arthur. And they released him and he went into the hospital there.

Interviewer: Did you have an opportunity to talk with the boys who came back from Bataan?

Geiss: Yes

Interviewer: You spent a lot of time sitting with them and let them talk about the

Geiss: One of the horrible things they would talk about would be that they would fight over rats to eat. That I don't know I can't remember distinctly if they were given a bowl of rice every other day and they would see these rats and they would fight over who was going to get to kill them and eat them. That was bad.

Interviewer: Now some of the boys from Bataan were taken from Bataan and shipped to Japan as slave labors. I was wondering if perhaps these gentlemen mentioned that.

Geiss: No they were in prison.

Interviewer: So they stayed in the prison camp. They took quite a number of the prisoners out of the camp and sent them to Japan as slave labors by ship towards the end of the war. I was just curious if they had brought that up?

Geiss: No they didn't I didn't hear that.

Interviewer: Now how were your quarters and your accommodations?

Geiss: Real nice we were in the barracks and we worked 8 hour shifts. We would go in at 8 in the morning and work until 4 in the afternoon worked 4 to 12 and then 12 to 8.

Interviewer: So you rotated over different shifts?

Geiss: Uh huh

Interviewer: And your quarters were nice?

Geiss: They were nice.

Interviewer: How was the food?

Geiss: It was good.

Interviewer: Institutional?

Geiss: Right

Interviewer: That must have taken some getting used to for a young lady from Youngstown Ohio going to that type of environment. At the time it was defiantly not a traditional role for a woman to be in the military service. How did your parents feel about that?

Geiss: I was married at the time.

Interviewer: You were married how did your husband react?

Geiss: He was in Guam he was in Hawaii first he was in the Navy.

Interviewer: Okay

Geiss: And he was in Hawaii and when Guam was taken then he was shipped to Guam. And I knew he wasn't going to be home and he knew he wasn't going to be home until after the war was over so I went.

Interviewer: Did you ask him before hand?

Geiss: No

Interviewer: So you didn't ask beforehand. So you presented it to him after you had already enlisted.

Geiss: Right

Interviewer: And what was his reaction?

Geiss: Terrible.

Interviewer: He didn't like it at all?

Geiss: No he didn't like it.

Interviewer: How about your parents how did they feel?

Geiss: They were okay I was they were glad that I went in because they didn't have any sons they just had four daughters.

Interviewer: So they were proud that their daughter

Geiss: They were proud of me they put my star in the window.

Interviewer: Absolutely, how old were you when you enlisted?

Geiss: Twenty five

Interviewer: You were twenty five so you were no kid you weren't anybody's 18 year old foolish young lady.

Geiss: No

Interviewer: You must have given this a lot of serious thought before you went in. So you were an adult through the entire war.

Geiss: Right

Interviewer: How long had your husband been in service?

Geiss: He had been in about a year and a half.

Interviewer: We had gone in probably in 43.

Geiss: Uh huh

Interviewer: The naval build up so that left you at home by yourself. Were you living in your own apartment or were you living with your folks?

Geiss: No I was living with his mother.

Interviewer: You stayed with his mom when he left to go to war?

Geiss: Uh huh

Interviewer: And did he have any brothers that went also?

Geiss: No

Interviewer: So she had her son gone and your mom and dad had their baby girl gone. Very interesting very interesting. Do you happen to recall what you were doing when you heard about the Japanese invasion on Pearl Harbor?

Geiss: We were at a movie theatre and we just came home a group of us and it was broadcasted on the radio.

Interviewer: So you had just come home from the theatre?

Geiss: Yeah

Interviewer: This was on the 7th of December 1941. How did you feel what was your reaction?

Geiss: Terrible because we felt then that most of our husbands would be going.

Interviewer: You were scared naturally

Geiss: Right

Interviewer: Just fear of your family being shipped off to war?

Geiss: Yeah

Interviewer: Was there a sense in Youngstown how big of a community was Youngstown in the 40s was it a pretty good size town?

Geiss: Yes uh huh I really don't know.

Interviewer: I don't mean for specific numbers I mean would you call it

Geiss: It was a large town.

Interviewer: Large town was there a sense of unity of public spirit toward the war good or bad?

Geiss: I think so I think everyone felt that it was their duty the men if they were called they would go. And at that time during that war you could choose what branch of the service you wanted to go into.

Interviewer: Correct as long as you volunteered you could select your branch.

Geiss: No even when you got your card.

Interviewer: Oh even when they were drafted they were still allowing

Geiss: Even when they were drafted.

Interviewer: So your husband decided to go Navy?

Geiss: Go Navy uh huh.

Interviewer: Why did he choose the Navy?

Geiss: I don't know

Interviewer: I was just curious if ya'll ever talked about it.

Geiss: No I don't think so. He just decided when we even talked about it that he would go Navy.

Interviewer: He went in 43 now from the time the war started well we were actively involved starting in 1941 what type of work was your husband doing before he was drafted?

Geiss: In the steel mill.

Interviewer: In the steel mill?

Geiss: At US Steel

Interviewer: And that provided I mean the wartime demand for steel was extremely high so that provided I would assume a pretty good living for you folks.

Geiss: Uh huh

Interviewer: Before he went off. What were the shortages what couldn't you get to eat what couldn't you purchase that you normally liked to have?

Geiss: We had a ration card and gasoline was rationed.

Interviewer: Did you own an automobile at the time?

Geiss: Yes

Interviewer: Did you get a chance to drive it?

Geiss: Yes

Interviewer: A little bit.

Geiss: And coffee was rationed and I can't remember too many other things that you know really affected us.

Interviewer: So you don't have much individual recollection of personnel hardships caused by the war?

Geiss: No

Interviewer: There was always enough to eat.

Geiss: Right

Interviewer: And fuel enough to heat the house and gasoline for the car. I'm sure you had to be careful and use it only for necessities no Sunday drives in the country.

Geiss: Nope

Interviewer: How about tires? I know there was a tire shortage across the country at that time I just wondered if it affected you personally.

Geiss: No because we had just bought a new car.

Interviewer: How about the war did you continue to go you mentioned you came home from the theatre to hear the news about Pearl Harbor did you continue to go to the theatre throughout the war and see the news reels?

Geiss: No I didn't go well we probably did go to the theatre but I think we listened more to the radio.

Interviewer: Listened more to the radio and did President Roosevelt do a good job keeping you abreast of what was going on?

Geiss: Uh huh

Interviewer: Tell me how you felt about FDR talk about Roosevelt if you don't mind.

Geiss: Well I can remember when he died we were marching from the barracks and to another place at the where we were. We were marching and they announced over the loud speaker that he had died. I thought he was very good.

Interviewer: You had a lot of respect for him?

Geiss: Yes I did

Interviewer: Do you think most American's did?

Geiss: I don't know I would say in our time they did I don't know what it would be like if he were president in this time. But in our time I think most people had respect for him.

Interviewer: Think they believed in him?

Geiss: Yeah

Interviewer: Stood behind him?

Geiss: Yeah

Interviewer: Now at this time did you folks ever discuss international politics? Did you ever talk about Stalin or Hitler?

Geiss: No

Interviewer: Or any of the Japanese or German, Italian leaders Stalin the Russian leaders?

Geiss: Never

Interviewer: No, not big topics of discussion?

Geiss: No

Interviewer: Because I talked to some of the boys that were going overseas who couldn't wait to put a bullet between one of their eyes or you know get to the one of the islands and shoot their first Jap. And I was wondering if any of that trickled over to the lacks if you discussed it at all.

Geiss: No I don't think so.

Interviewer: Now you said you went in in March you were in until December?

Geiss: Uh huh

Interviewer: Were you released completely at that time?

Geiss: Yes we went to I was promoted to sergeant and I got to take we were going to Fort Sheraton in Chicago to be discharged. And I was in charge of the back ten wax and I was told at that time if I got to Fort Sheraton with two or three I would be fortunate that along the way if the train stopped why they would be getting off to go home. But eventually they would come into Fort Sheraton but I couldn't stop them. And when I got there I had three.

Interviewer: You got three so seven of them got off the train and went their own way?

Geiss: Right

Interviewer: Just couldn't wait to get home.

Geiss: No

Interviewer: And how was it for you when you got home?

Geiss: Wonderful, I got home and about five days later my husband got home.

Interviewer: That's wonderful so he got home very shortly he must have for out very shortly after you.

Geiss: Uh huh

Interviewer: Great now did he go back to the steel company or

Geiss: Yes

Interviewer: So his job was still

Geiss: Yeah they held their jobs.

Interviewer: Now you told me the time he left in 43 and you left in the beginning of 45 how did you all occupy your time, what did you do?

Geiss: I worked in a lamp factory in a while but I just and it was hard to ever sever yourself you know during the war. It was hard to quit a job. And I finally did and missed it.

Interviewer: How was mail during the war back and forth to your husband you know he's out with the navy moving from island to island how did the mail keep up?

Geiss: We didn't get it too often but we'd get these, what did they call them in those times? They would be photographed and you know just small papers.

Interviewer: Like little home town news release type things?

Geiss: No it was a small letter folded up I can't think of the name of it, I still have one. But every once in a while we would get them.

Interviewer: How long would a letter take say if he sent a letter to you? About how long would it take to get to you?

Geiss: I don't know

Interviewer: Quite a while?

Geiss: Yeah quite a while.

Interviewer: And the same thing from your letters to he?

Geiss: Right

Interviewer: Took some time so there wasn't any, no emails then no telephone calls.

Geiss: No

Interviewer: You just waited to hear from him and I'm sure he waited to hear from you also. Now when you were in the wax did let you send letters overseas for free? Did the military pay for the overseas letters for you to send to your husband? I know he got free mail to you.

Geiss: He got it free but I don't think I did. I really don't remember.

Interviewer: I'm just curious. I ask a lot of questions that seem probably not very important very trivial but for our research it is important because a lot of this knowledge has been lost.

Geiss: Right I have my discharge is on a disk at the court house.

Interviewer: Very good that's an important piece of paper and I did the same with mine. Any veteran when they get out should take their discharge and put it on file. Of course mine was on file at the court house that was sucked up by the tornado. I think I need to go to the county clerk and make sure they still have it. Did Lane take you by our court house?

Geiss: No

Interviewer: Our court house is no more and a lot of the records I'm afraid were destroyed. Now you took a train back to Fort Sheraton you were mustard out at Fort Sheraton.

Geiss: Uh huh

Interviewer: Do you happen to recall what the pay was what they paid you a month? Couldn't have been a great deal.

Geiss: I don't remember I think it was I just don't remember.

Interviewer: Now how did they send you home from Fort Sheraton train again?

Geiss: Train

Interviewer: You came back to Youngstown?

Geiss: Yes

Interviewer: And were you still in uniform when you went home?

Geiss: Uh huh

Interviewer: So you had

Geiss: That's all the clothes we had.

Interviewer: That's all you had you had to wear uniform all the time on duty or off during the war?

Geiss: Right we had a separate uniform that we wore when we worked on the ward.

Interviewer: Right

Geiss: It was just like a dress.

Interviewer: Like a nursing uniform.

Geiss: Yeah plain no caps or anything just a plain dress issued by them.

Interviewer: And how did your family react to seeing you come home in uniform?

Geiss: It was really great.

Interviewer: Was it, did you go straight to your parent's house mom and dad's?

Geiss: Well I got off in Salem and that's about 20 miles from Youngstown and then I saw my parents then I went to Youngstown because I wanted to be there when my husband came home.

Interviewer: So you had been notified that your husband was on his way home?

Geiss: Uh huh

Interviewer: By telegrams or

Geiss: It wasn't by letter but I don't remember how we did I don't remember how we were notified I really don't.

Interviewer: But you knew exactly when he was coming home?

Geiss: Uh huh

Interviewer: So you wanted to get to Youngstown and be there when your husband stepped off the train.

Geiss: Right

Interviewer: And how was that reunion?

Geiss: He came to the house in a taxi and it was wonderful.

Interviewer: Were you still in uniform?

Geiss: No

Interviewer: No you were in civilian clothing by then. Did you ever put your uniform on for him to see?

Geiss: No

Interviewer: Never did?

Geiss: No no

Interviewer: Did you show him pictures?

Geiss: Yes I had one real nice picture taken and he saw it but that was all.

Interviewer: That was it huh?

Geiss: That was all.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about?

Geiss: I can't think of anything. I do appreciate your time and I really appreciate your reflections.

Interviewer: Thank you I would like to let you know that if you ever have a need sometimes these interviews bring up some painful memories. And if that happens to be the case I can put you in touch with a veterans representative they have groups that get together and talk about these things. So if that does occur I do have that information to put you in touch with a veterans group in case this drug up something painful. But I think it brought up some happy memories too especially the reuniting back home with the husband. Thank you very much.