

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
MILDRED H. BELTMANN
WAVE, U.S. Navy, World War II.

1996

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Beltmann, Mildred H. (1922-) Oral History Interview, 1996.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 55 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 55 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract

Mildred H. Beltmann, a Milwaukee (Wisconsin) native, discusses her service in the U.S. Navy as a WAVE stateside during World War II. She enlisted in the Navy in September of 1943 because she favored the naval uniform and liked the recruiting officers. She understood that she would not be sent overseas. Beltmann talks about being assigned to the banking field because of her prior experience at M&I bank. She speaks about basic training at Hunter College (New York) which consisted of marching, identification of naval vessels and aircraft, and very stringent inspections of her living quarters. She mentions being chosen as the section leader of the drill team for Job's Daughters. Beltmann tells of being so tired from basic training that she didn't go see Frank Sinatra when he came to the college. She mentions some of the practical jokes that the women would play on each other and one in which she found herself the subject of a short-sheeted bed after saying goodbye to her fiance. Her first duty station was at the Naval Reserve Armory in Chicago (Illinois). She describes her duties at the Armory which primarily involved issuing checks to authorities who were apprehending sailors that had gone AWOL. Beltmann tells about using the bus to get back and forth between her home and the armory. She elaborates on the opinions that the career men held of the women in the Navy. She chats about fraternization between officers and the WAVES. Beltmann mentions what the women did for entertainment during their leisure time. She makes mention of her husband's experience as a P.O.W. and speaks about how they corresponded. Fortunately her husband returned alive and Beltmann recalls their reunion in the train station and their marriage in July of 1945 followed by their discharge in October. Beltmann and her husband went back to their respective jobs; she to M&I Bank and her husband, to Pabst brewery. The interview concludes with mention of her involvement in WAVES National

Biographical Sketch

Beltmann served as a WAVE stateside during WWII, assigned to a Naval Reserve Armory in Chicago (Illinois). She was discharged in October 1945 where upon she returned to work with M&I Bank.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1996

Transcribed by Alis Fox, Wisconsin Court Reporter, 2004.

Transcription edited by Damon R. Bach & John McNally, 2005.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Today's date is September the 5th, 1996. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview this morning with Mrs. Mildred Beltmann, a veteran of the WAVES in World War II.

Van Ells: Good morning, and thanks for taking some time out of your day.

Beltmann: M'-hum. Good morning to you.

Van Ells: Why don't we start by having you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Beltmann: M'-hum. Well, I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in--on July 3rd, 1922; and I went to school in Milwaukee, Rufus King High School, the day the school opened; and after graduation--it was during the depression years--I was lucky to find a job at the Marshall & Ilsley Bank in Milwaukee--at that time they just had two offices, the main office on North Water Street--at \$55 a month. That was my salary. And after working there for a while I had a girlfriend, and we both decided we would like to join one branch of the military because the war was going on shortly after Pearl Harbor--

Van Ells: Right.

Beltmann: --and became quite involved. The whole community, the whole country was very well organized and united to win this war. So we after some discussion and thoughtful thinking about this, we decided on the Navy, and that was in September of 1943. And so that was it. I was engaged to my future husband at the time, and he did not have any objections. He was in the Army.

Van Ells: I was going to ask about the objection some people might have had because it wasn't necessary for women to go into the service like it was for men.

Beltmann: No. It was all voluntary.

Van Ells: Yeah. As you mentioned, your fiancé or boyfriend, whatever he happened to have been at the time, was he in the service already by this time?

Beltmann: Yes. He enlisted also right after Pearl Harbor and to get this thing over with. And we were very proud of the fact that he enlisted, I enlisted, and then later after we were married and had a son he also enlisted in the Vietnam War.

Van Ells: So he had no objections. How about your folks?

Beltmann: No.

Van Ells: They might have been a little more old-fashioned about women in the service

because--

Beltmann: I know. Some people said, "Oh, that's going to be the end of her. Oh, the morals in the military are terrible." But it is like water. You find your own level. You associate with the people that are of the same background as you are, the same morals.

And I remember the records-- And these girls lived at home. They didn't go out and get an apartment when they got out of high school.

And we were discussing it, my mother and father and I, and I was telling them my girlfriend and I were thinking about joining this one branch of the military, and my mother, who was a very domineering, bossy person--and, incidentally, she is still living; she will be 97 in two weeks--she says, "Oh, you'll never do that," and I kind of got up on my haunches and I said, "Look, Mother, if I want to do this, I'm going to do it," and I did.

And at that time, the bank, Marshall & Ilsley Bank, gave me a month's pay--they were very proud of me-- which at that time I was up to \$85 a month.

So that's how I enlisted, and I've never regretted it. It wasn't easy. There were a lot of problems, and we weren't accepted by everybody, the old salts who had been in the Navy for years and years and were career men, but it was an education you cannot get from books.

And I heartily recommend this to young people today, do this. The advantages are there. Not only are you serving your country, but you get an education you cannot get in college or at some of these other places. You can't get it from books. You have to get it on-the-job experience, which is what I value.

Van Ells: I want to expand upon some of these things a little more, but I had one more question about your enlistment, and that was why the Navy? And all the other services had women's auxiliaries. You chose this one in particular. Was there-- I mean, was there a particular reason you picked the Navy?

Beltmann: Well, we felt the requirements were more steep for the Navy than they were for the Army. Marines, of course, were even worse. I think their qualifications were much higher. But I guess we just kind of liked the Navy uniform, and also we liked the recruiting officers that we had talked to, and I think this is what did it. Up until the day we were sworn in we didn't know if we were going to be in the Coast Guard or the Navy. The uniforms were identical.

But we decided on the Navy, and so we thought that that would be the best place for us to serve, and we knew we wouldn't have to go overseas. We would not be serving on a ship or submarines. We enlisted to release men for sea duty, not to take their place.

Van Ells: Right. Did you have an expectation of what sort of job you might do, or did that sort of thing even matter to you?

Beltmann: Well, they give you quite a few tests to see what your qualifications are, what your experiences-- what your school experiences were and where you were working at the time you enlisted. Because I was working in the bank and had cash-handling experience and working with checks and operating an IBM proof machine, I guess they felt that's where I should go.

So after my boot training and my specialized training at Indiana University in Bloomington I was storekeeper, first class--third class I should say, third class, and I was in the banking field. I was working with payroll checks, typing payroll checks for the shore patrolmen who were riding the trains, and I assisted on paydays. The men were paid in cash in those days, and I guess that's--that was my niche, and I enjoyed it.

Van Ells: Well, I want to talk about your basic training a little bit. I went off to basic training myself about 40 years after you did. I'm sure some things were the same and some things were very, very different. Why don't you just walk me through your induction process. You had to go from Milwaukee to Great Lakes or something?

Beltmann: Hunter College, New York, where I received my boot training.

Van Ells: You received your boot training there?

Beltmann: Uh-huh, at Hunter College.

Van Ells: And that consisted of what?

Beltmann: Well, it was very rigorous, a lot of marching, shots, physicals, basic training of identification of airplanes, ships, learning the different rates of the Navy, Army, Marines, some of the history of the Navy, lots of testing and more marching. I remember when I was there Frank Sinatra was in his heyday. He was just becoming very popular, where the girls were all swooning and so forth, and he paid a visit to the college for us to go and see him. I was so beat, so tired. Some of the other gals and I decided to stay back in the barracks, which were dorms, and we washed our hair and wrote letters. We didn't even go to see Frank Sinatra; that's how tired we were.

Van Ells: And now in terms of military discipline, a lot of, you know, yes, ma'am, no, ma'am, yes, sir. I suppose one question to ask would be did you have male instructors or female?

Beltmann: Unh, no. We basically had females. The classes we took were given by civilians--

Van Ells: Right.

Beltmann: --employees, and I don't know if this was on the college or if these were government employees. I really don't know. We never got that. But, oh, yes, very strict chain of command, just like all of the other services, and very stringent inspections of our quarters. Everything had to be just so, the beds and the bunks I should say. And because I was so tall I always got the upper bunk.

Van Ells: A lot of the characteristics of basic training for some of the men anyway was the salty language, shall we say, the use of Navy terminology. Was that the case with the women as well?

Beltmann: Oh, yeah: topside, head, below, square. Uh-huh. Oh, yes. Uh-huh. Oh, yes. I still find myself using some of those terms.

Van Ells: And this basic training lasted how long?

Beltmann: Oh, it was sort of a crash course because we were in the middle of the war.

Van Ells: Right.

Beltmann: I really-- Oh, probably eight or nine weeks. I'm just guessing at that.

Van Ells: And then I think you mentioned you went to Indiana University?

Beltmann: Yes. After boot camp, like I say, we were given many, many tests to see who qualified to go on to additional training. Those that didn't qualify were given a seaman first class ratings. Those of us who went on to specialized school, some of our girls went to Milledgeville, Georgia; some went to Iowa; and I was sent to Indiana University.

And that was very strict training there, very strict. We had the shore patrolmen on duty, you know, to enter the college there. Some of the plumbing had to be changed because we were housed in men's dormitories. So they had to do a lot of plumbing work there to take care of us female people. And it was very, very strict, very rugged.

We didn't have any time off. One weekend I know they took us by bus over to Camp Attibury, which is an Army camp, and we had a dance and refreshments and so forth there, and then of course we came back by bus. We had no liberties off base, you know. We could-- Maybe weekends I think we could go into town and have a little time to ourselves. But we had a ship store on the base there, and we could go there and buy soft drinks and things and stationery supplies, books, and whatnot. And took pictures, lots of pictures, and more marching.

Because of my experience as a Job's Daughter--I was on the drill team for Job's Daughters--I was nominated and I was the section leader for our group, in charge, received my orders from a lieutenant, telling me where to take the group, you know, at different times. Sometimes it was for impromptu inspections, and other times it was to go to some gathering for everybody, and others it was just back and forth to different class buildings.

Van Ells: And how long did you spend at Indiana University?

Beltmann: Well, basic training was in September and October. We were there for Christmas; and I know my boyfriend, my fiancé, did come down to visit before he was sent overseas; and the commanding officer, the Navy officer in charge, allowed me to stay up a little extra time. We had to be in bed at certain times, you know. It was very strict, and we had maybe ten or 15 minutes extra to say good-bye in the lounge there at the university.

This is rather a humorous thing. After we said our good-byes-- I didn't know when and if I would ever see him again. As it was, he was reported missing in action later and became a prisoner of war. But, anyway, when I got back up to my room there where I was billeted with three other WAVES--I had the top bunk--the girls had decided they were going to play a trick on me. And, of course, you had to keep silent, you know, after lights out and all of that. So you had to be quiet. Well, I crawl into my bunk, and the girls had short-sheeted my bed. I couldn't get down between the sheets because they had short-sheeted it, and I--"What's going on here?" And they were all giggling. You know, they knew. They thought this was a big joke, you know, to play on me.

So that was one of the humorous elements. We were a very close group and made some very nice friendships; but that was kind of, you know, funny.

Van Ells: Uh-huh. So, after you left Indiana University, I would imagine you had some leave somewhere?

Beltmann: Yes. Then I could come home, and we could request places we would like to be sent, and about this time I was getting rather homesick. So I requested Great Lakes and other Midwestern areas, and luckily I was assigned to the US Naval Reserve Armory in Chicago, Illinois.

Van Ells: Now, where is that exactly?

Beltmann: Right in the Loop, right at the foot of Randolph Street right on the lake.

Van Ells: Is that the Navy Pier by chance?

Beltmann: No, no, no, no, no. This is south of Navy Pier.

Van Ells: I see.

Beltmann: I believe it has been torn down. It was a beautiful building. It was, like I say, a Navy Reserve building, and it was a place where men were--came back from sea duty, reassigned to new ships or other bases, and then they went back to sea. And it was also the headquarters of the Ninth Naval District Shore Patrol; and I was sort of attached to that with my naval receiving station--

Van Ells: I see.

Beltmann: --duties. And these guys were really salty, and some of the language-- They had a little bit of a place downstairs where we could buy sandwiches and whatnot. And, of course, the language was really rugged, but—

Van Ells: A little shocking for you I take it?

Beltmann: Not really.

Van Ells: Oh.

Beltmann: I don't think they were words I hadn't heard before but still not used to hearing them in everyday conversation.

Van Ells: Or with quite that volume perhaps?

Beltmann: Yeah. But it was, like I say, an experience; and I still keep in touch with some of the ship's company men that I became friends with.

I know this one man, he was a big, tall guy, he was a storekeeper also, he was engaged to a gal in Strawberry Point, Iowa, and he knew I was engaged to my husband, and I said, "I've heard so much about State Street, lower State Street, and I'd sure like to go down." "Oh, Mildred," he said, "Don't go down there alone. I'll take you down some night when we both are off duty." So he did. And, of course--I don't know if you know about lower State Street--it's the red light district. It was in those days, in 19-- What year was that?

Van Ells: Probably '44 by this time.

Beltmann: '43-'44, probably 1944. And it was-- He was looking out for me because he wouldn't want his girlfriend to go down there alone; and I felt very secure because he was a tall guy, you know, and built real well; and I still keep in touch with him, by mail of course, and his wife.

Van Ells: Why don't you just describe a typical day at work in Chicago during World War II?

Beltmann: Okay. Well, because we were one of the first WAVES that were assigned in

Chicago there were no what they would call barracks, so we were given subsistence and quarters allowance, which meant we could live off base. They didn't want to house us on the base with all these men. For one thing, they needed all the space. Their bunks I guess were three high because there were so many, many, many coming back from sea duty, you know, and going back out again for reassignment.

We, about four or five of us WAVES, pooled our resources and rented a nice apartment just off of the outer drive, and that was kind of nice. I had a cleaning lady there, and we could eat our meals at the different servicemen's organizations. Chicago is very good to service people. So we could eat there. There was a Catholic one, a Chicago one. There was a Lutheran one. Then there was a USO [United Service Organization].

And we would take the bus, the city bus, back and forth from our apartment down to the Loop where we were working; and that didn't last real long because I guess the Navy decided it would be better to billet us in regular barracks. So, consequently, they took over a huge mansion down in the Loop area on Lake--Lake Drive I believe it was, and I was lucky enough to be put in the old Palmer House mansion just off of Belmont on the outer drive, and we were in that. It was beautiful woodwork, and there were I think four of us to a room, and we had bathrooms in each different room. Many were for guest rooms. The wood I remember in those, in that house, was just beautiful, beautiful; and it was all security. We had people on duty in the entranceway so that nobody could come in, and they did serve us meals there, breakfast and supper. At noon we could eat down at the base. You know, we could--we would buy our lunch.

Van Ells: Right.

Beltmann: And one night when I had the duty a drunk came to the front door and rapped and he wanted to come in. Well, we wouldn't let him in, of course, and had to call the police, but it was really something. We had our regular shifts that we had to serve just like the men do, you know, when they are in service.

And we would take the bus, the city bus, back and forth to work, and then some days if we were a little bit late getting out of the barracks there we would hitchhike down on the outer drive. Can you imagine anybody doing that now?

Van Ells: Not today, no.

Beltmann: No. And we would get rides down to the Loop there, and then we would have to walk across the bridge on Randolph. Sometimes these drivers would be going down that way anyway, and then they would leave us off there right at the--right near the armory. So, it was an experience; and I think now all the things that I let myself in for, I wonder how I could have done it, but there wasn't the crime and the drugs--

Van Ells: Right.

Beltmann: --that there is now.

Van Ells: Uh-huh. Now, in terms of every day at the office, what were your tasks and—

Beltmann: Well, the disbursing officer was in charge. He was a lieutenant, and under him was the chief, Morfew(??). He was the chief-- Oh, I don't know if he was--whether he was the chief petty officer, but he was in the storekeeping end of it. And I was-- My duties were to write-- See, when a small-town sheriff or policeman or constable would pick up any servicemen that were drunk or whatever and they were AWOL, he'd apprehend them and keep them under lock and key and turn them over to us because we had a big brig there on the base because it was the shore patrol headquarters, and then a reward would be paid to these different constables and detectives and police, and sheriffs. And if a man was up to 30 days AWOL it would be called a straggler and he would get \$25 reward, and if he was over 30 days he would be considered a deserter and then he would he get \$50 reward.

Well, part of my job was to issue these checks to these different constables, police officers and then try to locate the pay accounts of these men, and that would be charged against their pay. That would come out of their pay. So then I'd have to type up all of these charges to send to the last known station of these men so it could be taken off of their pay. I also wonder how many of them ever got to where they were supposed to so the government would be reimbursed.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: That was before computers, and it all had to be done by typewriter.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: Government checks. And then Lieutenant Maller(??) would have to sign them all and they'd go out. And I would have to, like I say, assist on payday.

One of the humorous things about this was I would type the checks for the men who were riding the train, checking the IDs of all service people, not just Navy but Army and Marines as well, to make sure they had proper I.D., weren't AWOL, for travel. Well, technically Milwaukee was about 90 miles from Chicago.

Van Ells: Right.

Beltmann: Technically I was only supposed to go 75 miles away. And I used to tease these guys. I'd say, "Look"-- If I didn't have the proper papers to go the 90 miles, I'd say, "Look, if you give me any trouble, you don't get your check next month." So the

guys would come through the train, you know, sort of wink at me. And, of course, they knew where I worked and they knew where I lived.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: So that was another humorous element. No way would I ever be able to withhold their pay, but it was just a--sort of a threat.

Van Ells: Yeah. Now, was there a lot of business in that area?

Beltmann: Oh, yes.

Van Ells: I mean a lot of missing soldiers, sailors, and that sort of thing.

Beltmann: No, we didn't know about that. You mean the AWOL?

Van Ells: Yeah. You know, this isn't normally the thing you think of World War II soldiers.

Beltmann: No. Once they came back from sea duty they wouldn't be so apt to go because they were all getting leave to go home.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: I really don't know. I never heard any discussion about that. We wouldn't have gotten that information. That would have been more with the shore patrol itself—

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: --that would have gotten word if anybody had disappeared, you know, and didn't show up to go back out to sea or reassigned to whatever station, umm, the government felt they needed; and if they had any health problems I suppose they wouldn't send them back out.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: I don't know what determined that. And, of course, they would have what they call-- See, we had corpsmen in our--that reported. We had several corpsmen who assisted in the medical field. We had storekeepers. I think there were about seven of us storekeepers reported; several yeomen, which are more like secretaries, you know, more of the typing of letters and so forth; and, of course, they had the small stores, which is where the men would get uniforms that the government allotted to them, and some of our storekeeper WAVES--that was one branch of the storekeeping rating--to work there. But they reported--

In six months that commanding officer was requesting more WAVES. We made

our point. We did a good job, and it was kind of a backwards slap on the back, you know.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: He didn't really come out and say you are doing a good job, girls or ladies. That was nice. We really kind of thought that was wonderful.

One night when I was on duty-- We had to serve up the switchboard also for calls coming in.

Van Ells: Right.

Beltmann: And, of course, somebody would always take us across the bridge in one of the government vehicles so we didn't have to walk that long walk over the Randolph Street bridge into the Loop to get a bus.

One night when I was on duty-- Now, you know where the wardroom is? The wardroom is a place where the commissioned officers party and drink--

Van Ells: No, I didn't know that.

Beltmann: --and tell stories. Well, it's on ships too, but this was right on the base at the armory. He was drunk, and he started to swear at me, and I was very composed. And that was where you had to push the plugs, you know, in the wall of the switchboard. After all, this was 53 years or so ago. And I report-- We had a WAVE officer on duty, and I reported it to her, about what had happened. I didn't think that was right because I said I knew he had been drinking but that was no excuse, and so she took care of it, and the next day he apologized to me. So, that was kind of nice. At least there was some respect for us as women.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: We weren't equal. I didn't want to be equal. Why should we step down—

Van Ells: Uh-huh.

Beltmann: --to be equal, no way. I felt we were shown the respect. There was never any--any off-color remarks made in the office as I was working there, and then I don't remember any of the other WAVES ever complaining about it. Oh, some of them would go out with some of the officers, which they shouldn't have done because we were all noncommissioned.

Van Ells: Yeah. It's fraternization.

Beltmann: Yeah, yeah. You are not supposed to do it, but it was being done. But I had my

boyfriend. I had my fiancé. We were going to get married, and we did get married, and we would have been married 51 years, but he died two years ago.

Van Ells: Uh-huh. I was going to ask you actually about the Navy and women in the Navy because you did mention that some of the guys didn't take well to it.

Beltmann: Well, the commanding officer because he was what they call an "old salt." He was a career man.

Van Ells: Right.

Beltmann: And they resented women in the Navy. We were some of the pioneers. We weren't the first ones, but we were part of the first ones.

Van Ells: Right.

Beltmann: And because, as I said, they didn't even have any arrangements for us to stay.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: We had to stay off base, you know, in an apartment.

Umm, well, one event comes to my mind when Bureau of Personnel in Washington requested volunteers to go overseas for ship's company. This one guy, he had really good duty there. He was living in Chicago. His wife was in Chicago. And he said, "Oh," he said, "Friedrich"--that was my maiden name--"Oh, I think this would be something you should think about," going overseas; and I said-- This kind of ticked me off, you know. Some of them didn't take to us too well, but--

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: --we were good enough now to volunteer to go overseas so they could stay there in a nice, cushy, stateside assignment.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: And I said, "Now, look, Roach(??)," and I said, umm, "I enlisted to release men for sea duty, not to take your places." I said, "This is where I'm going to stay unless the government decides to send me someplace else."

Then it kind of surfaced, you know. Then we were good enough to volunteer. Of course, women weren't going overseas anyways except for nurses and corpsmen. There was a definite need for them.

But with all these healthy, able-bodied men on shore, I felt being overseas, being

on the ships and whatever is not the place if you want to win a war. I know my husband said when he was in the Battle of the Bulge, you know, when he was missing in action, he said he was so glad there were no women with them because he said, "Whose neck do you save, yours or theirs?"

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: Some of the women kind of fall apart, you know, when they are serving under pressure. It's been proven in the police, firemen jobs in civilian lives. So I feel very strongly it should be completely voluntary and not to go overseas, maybe in training, airplanes, link(??) training, so forth, fine, but not to actually be in battle.

I just-- That turns me off.

Van Ells: We pretty much covered your work environment. After work-- I mean, I assume this is a typical 9:00 to 5:00 type of office job that you did.

Beltmann: Sometimes it would be later. If we had the duty, we would have to stay later, you know; and we were entitled to certain leave too.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: But it was all subject to approval of all the chain of command.

Van Ells: Right. But you had some free time in Chicago?

Beltmann: Oh, yes. Yes, most every evening.

Van Ells: I am sort of interested in wartime Chicago and what sort of things you do to amuse yourself and entertain yourself.

Beltmann: Well, of course, as I said, the service--the servicemen places, you know, that they had service centers where we could get free tickets for WAVES and for movies, and they had bowling alleys and square dancing at these stations, at these service centers, and lots of food. We could go there and eat, and I went out and with other men and had some nice seats and mostly sightseeing and meet other Navy people. I went to a commissioning, one of the LSTs [Landing Ship Tanks]. This man was stationed on that.

And I'd go home weekends

[End of Side A, Tape 1]

when I could. That was always nice, and then I would go out with all my girlfriends. You know, there weren't very many men around. The only ones that were around were the 4-F'ers, the ones that were exempt if they were teachers or

in the police field.

But I was very true to my husband. He wrote me a lot of letters. I wrote him a lot of letters, and then as the war-- When he was missing in action, since we weren't married his mother got the telegram.

Van Ells: Right.

Beltmann: And she reported it to my parents and then to the minister, and then my sister wrote me a lengthy letter about this and I shouldn't worry because she was sure everything would turn out all right, and I kind of fell apart. And, of course, the chief, Chief Morfew, my boss, the one right above, he-- "Oh," he said, "this is war. People are getting killed all the time. You got to-- You know, this is to be expected." He didn't have much sympathy, but some of the other people were very, very sympathetic to me and tried to boost my morale a bit.

Well, then later his mother got another telegram that he was reported a prisoner of war, and then later after May he was--she got another letter saying he was released back to his duty group, you know.

So, no, there was a lot going on in Chicago. There was a lot of sights to see, the museums and Buckingham Fountain and the Loop down there and, oh, so much to do. But I was very fortunate.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: We weren't stuck out in the country someplace like Fort Riley, Kansas, would be for the Army.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: And I wouldn't have wanted to be on the coast, east coast, because Navy people weren't too welcome there. They'd have signs on the grass "No dogs or sailors," and that wasn't very nice.

But our country was united, which it wasn't after that in the Vietnam War and some of these other scimmages, but they were not declared war. Now we find ourselves in something else again. We wonder how this is going to end. Is it going to be a declared war, or is it going to be another one of these deals where the Jane Fondas can get out and do whatever they want without any repercussions?

Van Ells: I wanted to ask about your husband a little bit more.

Beltmann: Sure.

Van Ells: Now, he was in the infantry?

- Beltmann: No. He was in the Ninth Armored Division.
- Van Ells: Oh, I see.
- Beltmann: Um-hum.
- Van Ells: Okay. Officer or enlisted?
- Beltmann: Enlisted.
- Van Ells: In terms of staying in contact with him, it sounds like you exchanged quite a few letters—
- Beltmann: Yes.
- Van Ells: --and were able to stay in contact fairly well.
- Beltmann: Well, not--not as a prisoner.
- Van Ells: Well, not as a prisoner but before that.
- Beltmann: But then he was in the states here. He was in California for a while, and he was at Camp Grand, Illinois, and he--sometimes he would write me two and three letters a day and number them. That's when I was still working before I entered the Navy; and he would send them to the bank, to Marshall & Ilsley Bank, and the boys there that took care of the mail, they would get a big kick out of it. In fact, once they even opened some of the letters, which really ticked me off. It got to the point that my husband-- He knew shorthand. He had studied shorthand when he went to school, and I knew shorthand. So when we got to some personal things we would write that in shorthand. Oh, that would-- especially my mother. I would bring the letters home, you know. Sometimes he'd send them home, and she used to snoop through my personal belongings in my room, and she couldn't read those. That was funny too.
- Van Ells: Did he talk much about the Army and the war?
- Beltmann: Oh, yes, and a couple of times things were cut out of his letters when he was overseas.
- Van Ells: I see.
- Beltmann: Yeah. The censors would go through everything.
- Van Ells: What did he have to say about the Army and the war in general?

Beltmann: Well, he could hardly wait to get back home, the usual sweetheart type things.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: We got to get this war over with and so everybody could have a decent life afterwards, and he never regretted enlisting. I never got that. I have a big box of letters. I must have several hundred letters in there I saved, down in the basement, kind of musty; and I often wonder if my kids would ever want to look through them and compile some kind of a story about it, but they are all too busy these days--

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: --scraping out a living.

But, anyway, he danced. He taught dancing lessons for a while when he was at Riverside, California; and he enjoyed life. He would ride the trains for a while, and then--taking people back and forth, you know, to different places, umm, that had been in trouble. And one night he came home--this is before I was in the Navy--and surprised us at our home on 12th Street in Milwaukee. So, yeah, I got a lot of memories.

Van Ells: So, we have already discussed when he was captured, but when he got released I am interested to know how you learned of that and your reaction.

Beltmann: Well, I didn't really know until his mother got the telegram; but, of course, it was on the news. And the news-- In those days there wasn't TV, and you would see what news there was at the movies.

But he talked about it a lot. See, he was in camp with mostly airmen. Somehow he got lumped in there. I guess things were kind of in a mess over there with the Germans.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: And they just put them all together, and he was I think one of the very few Armored Division men in with all these Air Force people.

Van Ells: Yeah. That's very unusual for the German prison system.

Beltmann: Yeah. And he talked many times about his experiences and how one night, I think it was Christmas Eve in 1944, as the war was sort of winding down, umm, the allies bombed their camp, not knowing that there were Americans and allied prisoners down below, and many, many were killed. He was lucky.

He talked a lot about how they were transported from town to town as they had to

retreat as the allies were gaining. They would just put a bucket down. They were in trains, boxcars, and the Germans would just put a bucket down there for them to use periodically as a toilet, and very little water. They would have to scrape the frost from the sides of the boxcars. This was winter, very cold. One night he said they were all lumped together in there and then the next morning there were several dead. The man next to him was dead. And people would look in at them at the different towns as the trains went through and look at them like they were animals down there from the circus train. They weren't really abused, but they didn't get much food.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: They would give them hot tea to drink, and he would use it for shaving, and everything--their sleeping quarters were all full of lice.

And he was injured. He got the Purple Heart, and they put him in a German hospital for a while, Lozerod(??) I think they called it, and, boy, it was bad. But the real sufferers in this war were the ones that were prisoners of the Japanese.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: Mayor Norquist's father, Ernest, was a close friend of ours, and he survived the Bataan Death March; and he wrote a book, Our Paradise, telling about his experience.

Van Ells: Right.

Beltmann: How cruel they were. He said there were some good guards but the majority were terrible. They treated them brutally.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: But so Clarence was-- I mean if you have to be a prisoner of war, he was more fortunate to be a prisoner of the Germans. But the Germans were very cruel to their own people. Everybody was not in favor of Hitler. There were a lot of people, a lot of German people, that were opposed to Hitler; and when they'd find them and apprehend them, they would really give it to them, abuse the women, torture them, and so forth. So, the Germans were not--not very--not very nice to their own people.

Van Ells: So he was released in May?

Beltmann: Yeah.

Van Ells: And you were married--

Beltmann: In July.

Van Ells: Why don't you just describe that story to me? It sounds like it is kind of interesting.

Beltmann: Well, he contacted me by telegram that he was coming home, and we made arrangements to meet at one of the train stations in Chicago. In fact, I've got several newspaper articles about it. If you would like, I could send them to you.

Van Ells: I would be curious to see them, sure.

Beltmann: And he got there early, and I was standing-- I mean, this is all service people at this train station in Chicago, and he came up from behind me and twirled me around, and I was all ready to sock him with my purse or--I didn't know. And, well, that was very special. I don't know how many people around us noticed this, but, like I say, it was very common because there were all Navy/Army people in the station. Everybody was going someplace or coming from someplace.

And then we made arrangements to get married. Now, this was-- They softened him up a bit before they sent him home. He came home in June, and we made arrangements for the wedding. My sister took care of most of the plans. We had a nice church wedding, but we had-- We couldn't get the church on a Saturday. There were so many boys coming home and having weddings. So we were able to get married on a Sunday.

We were both in the service yet, of course, and we couldn't go-- We didn't have a car. We went to the Dells, took the train to the Dells, and that was our honeymoon. And then I wired for an extension on my leave and got it.

Then the government was sending all these boys, not only the POWs but other Army personnel, to Florida for an R and R--

Van Ells: Right.

Beltmann: --to rest and recuperate and show their appreciation for what they had been doing. They were all going through the phases of the war. My commanding officer--here it shows again--he would not let me go. This is for the wives too. And his excuse was--now, I didn't talk to him; this went through chain of command; my real(??) officer went to him and talked to him--because we weren't married before he went overseas they weren't going to allow me to go with him.

Well, I wasn't a very feisty person in those days. I respected the chain of command, respect for authority, so I shut up; but now I think I would have wired my representative or my senator and said, look, please do something for me so I can go down and have a real nice honeymoon at government's expense. But that hurt.

So my husband was down there. We were able to rent a small apartment in Chicago. When he came back he had a lot of leave time yet, solo time I should say, from the Army; and he would stand in line at the store to buy the meat and to fix the food for our supper when I'd come home from the base, and he would have supper for me. We had one of those old Murphy beds, you know, that you pull down from the wall, and it was a dirty place, bugs all over the place. I didn't like that.

Then we were married in July, and-- It was after we were married when he was doing this. And then we were both discharged in October of '45, he from the Army. We were within a few days apart. I was discharged from Great Lakes, and he was-- I don't know if he was at Sheridan or Porchen(??) or Camp Grand. I don't know where. Or maybe it was even Menure(??), Camp Crowder. But, anyway, then we came home. He went back to his job at Pabst. I went back to my job at Marshall & Ilsley. I am sorry now that I did not go on to school, take advantage of the GI Bill of Rights, GI Bill I should say, by going on to school, and he regretted it too, but we were both--wanted to get on with our lives—

Van Ells: Right.

Beltmann: --get married and settle down and have a family.

Van Ells: Yeah. Now, in terms of getting your jobs back after the war, there were a lot of other Veterans going back into the economy at the same time. Did you have any difficulty getting those jobs back, or was it just as easy as going in and saying I'm back and--

Beltmann: No. I had no problem at all. They were just glad I was back. And got my job back, and he got his back at Pabst. And his seniority continued while he was in the service; and, of course, he was in the union, you know.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: And I wasn't unionized, but--where I worked, and there were only two of us girls that went into service from the bank. One gal, Shirley Mack, went into the Army and I to the Navy. And my picture was in the paper with a little plug for Marshall & Ilsley, and that was kind of--I got that too someplace. But, no, no problem at all.

Van Ells: And in terms of making readjustments back into society, you know, after the Vietnam War there has been a lot of attention paid to sort of the psychological tolls of war. Now, in your case there probably wasn't too much of an adjustment to make--

Beltmann: No.

- Van Ells: --back into civilian life; but in terms of your husband, he had a rather grueling experience. Did he have any trouble getting back in the swing of things so to speak?
- Beltmann: Well, I'll tell you, the Veterans Administration down here in Milwaukee, they have a fantastic support group for the POWs and the spouses. Do you know many of these men are still having flashbacks and problems—
- Van Ells: Yeah. I happen to know that, yeah.
- Beltmann: --health problems? And Dr. Bernstein, Larry Bernstein--I don't know if you have ever heard of him—
- Van Ells: No.
- Beltmann: --he has been doing a fantastic job with the POWs. And it doesn't come a couple weeks or a couple months or a couple of years. One of our women tells about her husband. She is afraid to sleep with him. He gets so violent when he is sleeping. He is back in prison camp, and they would beat them and abuse them, and seeing their buddies die, suffer so, and having limbs blown off. This still comes back to these men—
- Van Ells: Yeah.
- Beltmann: --not just POWs but others who were in the heart of action--
- Van Ells: Right.
- Beltmann: --on the battlefield. It is something that-- Well, see, I wasn't married before, so it was just the normal adjustment of getting to be living with a man.
- Van Ells: Right.
- Beltmann: But we lived with my parents for several months, from October until that next spring, because housing was very hard to get.
- Van Ells: Right.
- Beltmann: And we couldn't find a place to rent, and we didn't even have any children. So, we bought a small income property, three rooms up and five rooms down, and we were going to live upstairs in the three rooms. And we interviewed people that had ads in the paper, veterans with one child. We interviewed them like you would interview someone for a job.
- Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: And we--

Van Ells: And there were lots of applicants I would imagine.

Beltmann: Yeah. We had-- We just answered the ads in the paper, and we made appointments for them to come to my mother's home where we were living and talk to them about it; and we, my husband and I, both decided on this one family. They were-- He was a Navy veteran, and they had one child, and they got to rent the lower part of this house that we bought.

So that was kind of nice. It was the only way we could find a place to live, and it was only \$6,000.

Van Ells: Now, out of curiosity, did you or your husband use a GI loan to buy this--

Beltmann: No.

Van Ells: --or did you just finance it by yourself?

Beltmann: No. I was working at the bank. I was back at the bank, and I think a GI loan would have been four percent, and we--because I was an employee of the bank it was three percent until I quit, after I became pregnant and quit. In those days girls didn't stay until five minutes before the baby was born. You know, you left when you started to show, and then our mortgage went up to four percent.

No, we didn't apply for a GI loan. I guess we couldn't do it anymore now because I think the time has lapsed. It is just for more recent veterans. But, no, uh-uh. We started out at that place, and then after we had our baby then we moved to a nicer neighborhood and a nicer home and continued to go uphill. So we are out here now in the Holy Hill area.

But, yeah, it was an adjustment. It wasn't very pleasant living at home with Mother and Dad. We paid board, and my husband used to complain, "I've got only one pork chop. I only had one pork chop tonight," because she'd just buy one for each, you know. And it kind of was--it was rough, but that's the way it is. You had to put up with those things.

Van Ells: Yeah. Now, in terms of-- I've just got one last area that I want to cover. It involves veterans' organizations and reunions and that sort of thing.

Beltmann: Uh-huh.

Van Ells: After the war, in the first few years after the war, did you or your husband join like the American Legion, VFW, or anything like that?

Beltmann: He didn't right away, and it wasn't until quite a few years later we realized that

there was a POW organization. Then we became very active in that.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: And the POWs are very unique. They are the only veterans' organization that allow the women to be actual members with voting privileges and able to hold office, not an auxiliary like they have in the other veterans' groups.

Van Ells: Right.

Beltmann: As a veteran myself, I could have joined any of the other: the legion, VFW, and all those. But they didn't look upon women too good in those days. Now they accept them with no problem.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: But I am very active in the WAVES National. I don't know if you have ever heard about it.

Van Ells: Yeah, I have.

Beltmann: Yes. We have a very active group here in Milwaukee, and I was in when that was organized maybe about ten or 12 years ago, and we meet every other month. And that's the only thing I belong to, that, the WAVES National, and the POWs. They are very good to me. I'm still active in both chapters, the chapter in West Bend, which my husband formed about 11 or 12 years ago, called it the North Kettle Morraine Chapter, which Mr. Norquist is a member and more of the men from the Oshkosh, Appleton, West Bend area. It is kind of far for them to come all the way into Milwaukee. And Berlin is the Barbwire Chapter.

After he died the chapter voted to change the name to the Clarence Beltmann Chapter, which was to me a very great honor. To my knowledge there are no other chapters named after a person, living or dead. So, that was kind of nice.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: But other than that, no, those are the only two groups that I'm active in.

I go to all the parades and things and, you know, display my patriotism. I've done a lot of work with the school board out here, getting them to say the Pledge of Allegiance before they have their school board meetings. That met with some resistance. Now the children say the Pledge of Allegiance every day at school instead of just once a week as the State requires. I was able to get the school board in Germantown--I went to talk to them and to Merten(??) at North Lake, talked to them about having them say the Pledge of Allegiance before they start their school board meetings. Both approved it immediately. It was only the Richfield School

out here where I live that gave me any trouble. But it's done, and I feel I have accomplished something to instill some patriotism in some of the people out here.

Van Ells: Those are all the standard questions that I have. Is there anything you would like to add, anything you think we've skipped over or glossed over or you want to go back and cover?

Beltmann: Well, I heartily recommend any of these young people getting out of high school, if they don't know what they want to do with their lives, go into the military. It's a wonderful education. The benefits are beautiful for anybody that decides to make it a career, especially for women. I think they are becoming more and more prominent and getting more and more publicity.

But then I hear things about this--maybe-- Oh, what was the name of that?

Van Ells: Oh, the Tailhook thing?

Beltmann: Yeah, where these women were harassed, you know.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: I couldn't believe that. I couldn't believe it because we didn't experience anything like that in the days that I was in service. I don't know if it was going on at some of the bigger bases, but that's unfortunate that something like that happened, and sometimes I wonder if maybe the women might not have encouraged this, you know. We'll never know the whole story about that.

But I would like to see my granddaughters go into the service until they know what they want to do with their lives. If they don't want to go on to college, go into something like this and see what's going on in the world. You get to travel and meet friends, and you are helping your country. I don't mean to be a flag waver, but I guess that's what I am.

Van Ells: You don't need to apologize here.

Okay. Well, I thank you for taking some time. It is just about an hour here.

Beltmann: Oh, you are so welcome. I was looking forward to speaking with you.

Van Ells: Yeah.

Beltmann: And I have met Mr. Bowen. He was very instrumental in getting me a new ribbon for my husband's POW metal. I had thrown it away. I didn't know what it was, and I was cleaning house in his room, and later I realized after I found the metal the ribbon was gone, that little bar. And I wrote to Washington. I wrote to all kinds of places, Department of the Army, never got any action. And Ernie Norquist was at

our meeting, and Mr. Bowen spoke to the Kettle Moraine Chapter of POWs some time ago, and he took down the information and wrote it down, and I had that ribbon in no time. He really has his contacts, and he knew who to talk to.

Van Ells: Well, that's good.

Beltmann: And I really appreciate that. If you get to talk to him, tell him, you know, you spoke with me.

Van Ells: I'll do that actually.

Beltmann: I don't know if he'll remember me.

Van Ells: Oh, you'd be surprised. He's a sharp guy, as you well know.

Beltmann: Oh, that museum is fantastic.

Van Ells: Oh, I'm glad you think so.

Beltmann: I did find an error in the women's--the Navy uniform and called it to the attention of whoever was on duty.

Van Ells: Was it fixed? You haven't been back.

Beltmann: Oh, I'm sure it was fixed. No, I haven't been back there. I was just there the one time.

Van Ells: I see.

Beltmann: But I know Mr. Bowen when he saw this frame that I have my husband's metals and my metals and a picture of the two of us in uniform before he went overseas, he said, "Well, gee, if you don't have any plans for that in the future," he says, "it would be nice to donate that picture to the museum." And I'm thinking about it. I really would like to have it stay in the family, but nobody seems to be that interested, but I'm thinking about it. And maybe-- I don't know if they need any more uniforms. I still have my uniforms, my overcoat, and my whites and my seersuckers and the blues.

Van Ells: Yeah. Sounds interesting actually.

Beltmann: Should think about that.

Van Ells: Yeah.

[End of Interview, Side B, Tape 1]