

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
Naomi Horwitz  
U. S. Army, World War II

2004

OH  
517

OH  
517

**Horwitz, Naomi**, (1916- ), Oral History Interview, 2004

User copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 40 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 40 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

### **ABSTRACT**

Horwitz, a Milwaukee, Wis. native, discusses her stateside World War II service with both the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAACs) and the Women's Army Corps (WACs) as well as her service with the Reserves in Milwaukee. She talks about enlisting in the WAACs because she wanted to do something worthwhile and meaningful. Horwitz describes basic training at Fort Des Moines (Iowa) including the frigid December temperatures, challenges of training compared to civilian life, cleaning the base for a visit from Eleanor Roosevelt and Oliveta Culp Hobby, and a parade in honor of the visitors. Transferred to Fort Riley (Kansas), she comments on working for the Cavalry Replacement Training Center (CRTC), learning to ride a horse, and being in charge of gas rationing. Horwitz mentions seeing German prisoners of war at Camp Funston and the mean and sometimes cruel treatment of male soldiers to WAACs. She relates several humorous stories about her military experience and her most fighting experience when the German POWs saw her making a German flag for training purposes and she walked on it, as a result she had an armed guard for several weeks. She touches upon life as a Jewish soldier, joining several veterans organizations, and her Reserve service with the 452nd General Hospital.

### **Biographical Sketch**

Horwitz (1916- ) served from 1942 until discharged in 1946, she reenlisted in 1949 or 1950 and was honorably discharged at the rank of sergeant major Sergeant Major. She settled in Milwaukee after her military service.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2004.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2004.

Transcript edited by Abigail Miller, 2004.

## Interview Transcript

John: Okay, today is March 4, 2004, and this is John Driscoll, and I am with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Archives. And we are here with Naomi Horwitz, did I pronounce that right? In her apartment in Milwaukee. And Naomi is a veteran of World War II, of the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps and the Women's Army Corps. And thank you so much for agreeing to the interview. And why don't we start at the beginning with where and when were you born?

Naomi: Or why? [Laughs]

John: Or why?

Naomi: I was born here in Milwaukee in 1916. Don't bother figuring it out. I'll tell you. I'll be eighty-seven in May. And the better part of my existence has been spent in the--after getting out of the service, spent in the Reserves. I not only was in Reserves, but I also worked for the Reserves. And I was a unit technician, with the 961st Engineer Battalion. Here in Milwaukee.

John: Okay. Schooling? Growing up?

Naomi: I had one year of college. I went to Washington High School here in Milwaukee. And spent the rest of my life right here. My family was here. My mother and father here, and I had two older brothers. One also, my oldest brother, was drafted. And he got out as soon as the war was over. Fortunately, he wasn't hurt, or anything. And everything--we were lucky. We had a good war. We came out of it, we went into it all right and we came out the same way, both of us.

John: You said that you decided to join the WAAC. What, why did you decide to, do you know?

Naomi: Well, one reason, I guess I had some hidden patriotic feelings, but mostly, I was twenty-six years old. I wasn't just a kid like most of them that joined, being nineteen or twenty. But I was twenty-six years old, and I think I knew what I was doing. I really wanted to go, and I wasn't doing anything of any importance. I had a perfectly ordinary job that did not fulfill my desires, and I figured, well, I might as well try something that is just a little different, and maybe I can do something with it. And I am happy to say I stayed in it. After the war was over, I came home. My dad my dad got ill and I had to stay home with my mother. And I joined the Reserves, and I loved it. It was wonderful. I joined the 452nd General Hospital, which was a thousand bed hospital, at that time. It is now overseas. It's in Iraq. And they are combat support. They are spread all over the place. They are all the way from Korea to Afghanistan, in groups of two and three.

John: Where did you go in? Here in Milwaukee?

- Naomi: I enlisted here in Milwaukee, and then the only place they had at that time, in 1942, the only training was at Des Moines, Fort Des Moines.
- John: Okay.
- Naomi: Later on, in '43, they opened up Fort Devens, in Massachusetts, and Oglethorpe, in Florida, and then a couple of others along the way. But those three were the main ones.
- John: Okay. What was basic training like?
- Naomi: Not what I expected. It was nothing that we were led to believe. It was hard. It was nothing like our regular life. None of us had ever done any exercising the way that was. And don't forget, I went in in December, and it was cold. It was bitterly cold. In fact, Fort Des Moines was a cavalry post and we lived in the stables. They had refurbished them as much as possible.
- John: Now, I did an interview with a woman who was in the WAAC at Fort Des Moines and she told me she lived in the stables there. She was from Brownsville, Texas, right on the Rio Grande, and went to Fort Des Moines in December.
- Naomi: The only camp. The only women's camp.
- John: And then after basic training, where did you go?
- Naomi: Well, in basic, one thing that I remember very distinctly, it was bitterly cold. It must have been a hundred and twenty below. Des Moines was really as bad as Milwaukee at the worst. We had snow piled up as high as the windows and it wasn't a very large camp, and it had a regular headquarters building, and a small parade ground. And we were having guests, and had to clean up the place. Our guests happened to be Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt and Oveta Culp Hobby, who was the original commander of the WAACs and that's W-A-A-C. Well, we are a small group. We don't have that many. We only had one battalion at that time. No, we had two battalions at that time. And to walk around that—to parade around the parade ground, to make us look like we were a lot, we had to do it twice.
- John: Okay.
- Naomi: And while the big-wigs stood in the window and watched us, we froze our butts off! It was terrible. [laughter] And then as soon as we got through with that, we had to clean up. Now, the horse stables were painted yellow, and we had coal furnaces in the stables. There was a furnace at each end, and we had to shovel the coal and bring it in. Well, if you have ever shoveled coal on a yellow building, you will find out it doesn't stay yellow very long. But in as much as Mrs. Eleanor

Roosevelt was there, and I dearly loved her, we had to wash the yellow coal bins with alcohol, because it was too cold. Anything else would freeze.

John: Oh, wow.

Naomi: Those are my memories of basic training. Outside of that, it was all right. But it was the cold weather that was really bad.

John: And then where did you go after basic?

Naomi: Well, from basic training, we all went to some type of training. I went into administration, and we lived at the Savory Hotel in Des Moines. At that time, the Savory is no longer there, but the other one, the Plaza Hotel was there. And that is where we were quartered. But from there, after six weeks of administrative training, I was sent to Fort Riley, Kansas. Another horse post. But I mean really horses. They had two regiments of horses and donkeys, because they were training for the CBI [China-Burma-India- theater of operations]. And I don't have too many fond memories of Fort Riley proper, but I only was there about two weeks. I was sent to the CRTC [Cavalry Replacement Training Command]. Now, Fort Riley is not a big camp, but it is an important camp. There are several camps around it that have Fort Riley as the headquarters. There is Camp Woodside, which was the hospital unit there. Camp Funston which was the Italian—no, the German war prisoners, at Camp Funston. I was sent to the CRTC.

John: What was—

Naomi: Cavalry Replacement Training Center. We had a regiment of horses and a regiment of donkeys. And the donkeys were being trained for CBI, and the horses were being trained for whatever horses do. And they insisted we learn how to ride.

John: Oh, wow.

Naomi: Well, I am scared to death of horses. But we had to learn how to ride. So, one day the sergeant took us out. We had to get out to the stables. And they tell you that you have to get your horse ready. And I didn't know what to do. "Just drag his ear down and put the bit in his mouth." Well, for good, I didn't even reach pens. I was very short. I was barely five foot. I only got in because I had long hair and I piled it up real high on my head, and made the five foot, otherwise I'd never made it.

John: Yea.

Naomi: But that is what happened. "Pull his ear down." Oh, boy. Well, finally we got out to this circle where you just go around and around and around, riding the horse. And army horses are herd-bound. If one walks, the all walk. If one decided he wants to jump, they all jump.

John: Okay.

Naomi: Well, my little horse was walking along very nicely when the horse in front of us balked, and mine ran into him. And got up on his hind legs, which made me slide down his back end. And I did. I landed on the ground. And the sergeant says, "Get back up there! You'll be scared the rest of your life!" "That's right, Sarge. I'm going to be scared the rest of my life." And I was. And I am. Horses are not my favorite animal. [Laughter]

John: Okay.

Naomi: But we had that all the time.

John: How long were you there?

Naomi: I was there for the duration.

John: Oh, okay.

Naomi: I stayed there until '46.

John: Okay.

Naomi: I got out in '46.

John: Okay. So what type of work did you do there? Administrative? Office work?

Naomi: Yea. I was in S-4. The CRTTC, as I said earlier, was a replacement camp, and we were training, basic training, for the men that were going overseas. S-4 was the supply division, and I had charge of all real property. That is, anything that is connected to the ground was real property. Broken windows were my baby to replace. Drinking fountains that didn't have enough pressure. Clogged toilets. Whatever. All that had to come through my office to be repaired. I also had charge of gas rationing.

John: Oh.

Naomi: That was a deal.

John: Oh, yea. Sure.

Naomi: Only one person had the right to tell me to bring the gas ration coupons to him, and that was the general. We had General Strong, a very nice man, who incidentally, had a daughter there. She was a WAAC just like I was, and he didn't

treat her any differently, either. But General Strong had his gas coupons delivered. Anybody else had to pick them up. I do remember somebody coming into my office one day for gas coupons, and my mother had been mailing me the *Journal* every day. And I don't know how many people listening to this will remember the *Journal* used to have a peach sheet. That was their sports section. It was peach. And it was known as "the peach." And of course we always had the green sheet. And I had the green sheet and the peach laying on my desk when this young man walked in, came over and he said, "Can I make out an application for gas tickets? Oh my gosh! You got a green sheet!" I said, "Want to look at it?" He said, "Yea. Where are you from?" You know, the old story. "I'm from Milwaukee. Where are you from?" It turned out that we went to school together, graduated from Washington High School at home. And after the war we became very good friends. His wife was down there with him. It was a nice set-up. I saved the paper for him every day. That was a great time.

John: Yea. What else was going on at Fort Riley? Was that just it, the cavalry training?

Naomi: We had quite a large contingent of German prisoners.

John: Okay.

Naomi: In as much as I had charge of gas rationing, and I didn't drive, at least I told them I didn't drive, I had a Jeep and driver assigned to me. And every day I would have to report to Fort Riley proper, to the head of the rationing division who straightened out my accounts, you know, how much gas I let out and who I have it to. Anyhow, Fort Riley was about maybe a mile and a half distant from the edge of CRTC to the edge of Riley. But there was all land in between. Now, I understand, its all built up with apartments. But at that time it was just bare land. And one day we were driving down the area, going to Riley proper, and the prisoners from Camp Funston were building a cemetery for the prisoners. And my driver let out a holler. By that time I had made sergeant. And he said, "Sarge, I think I see my brother out there!" Well, that was quite an earth-shaking event. So I said, "Just a minute, let's find out something about it." So I went over to the guards on duty and I said, "What are the chances of somebody speaking to one of the prisoners?" He says, "Not a chance in the world." I said, "Well, what can we do to make an appointment?" I said, "My driver thinks he saw his brother." He said, "Oh, my gosh." And believe it or not, M Ps [Military Police] do have a heart. He allowed the man to come and call him out. And it was his brother.

John: How remarkable.

Naomi: He and his father had come over here to America when he was only two.

John: Okay.

- Naomi: And the father was working to send for the rest of the family, and the brother who by that time was in his teens had been captured and brought here to America. The mother never did get here. But they did allow him to see his brother.
- John: That is great.
- Naomi: And at the prisoner of war camp, he was allowed to go in and visit with him on a Sunday. But that was earth-shaking, it was heart-rending. To realize they had as much heart-ache as we had at that time.
- John: That's true.
- Naomi: The only way he recognized his brother, after all he was only two when he left, he only recognized him from pictures that they had been sending back and forth.
- John: That is remarkable. I was a kid during World War II, and we lived in Marion, Ohio. And they had a big arsenal there. They did K-rations. And it was all run by Germans, all the workers. It wasn't run by them. All the workers were German. They had thousands of prisoners there. They'd take them for a ride on Sunday, in trucks around the city. And about every fifth truck they'd have a machine gun on it. But they didn't need the machine gun. These guys didn't want to go back to Germany.
- Naomi: No.
- John: Then, you got out in '46? Before we got on the tape, you said that you had thought about staying in?
- Naomi: I had hoped to. I wanted to stay in but they said they were going to discontinue women, and that we should all go home and get a job and do what we were supposed to do. So, being one of the first in, I was also one of the first out. And I came home, and got a job, and as I said, my father got ill.
- John: But you did stay in the Reserve.
- Naomi: I enlisted in the Reserve in 19-- '49 or '50. I got out in '46. And I enlisted in the Reserve in '49 or '50. I forgot which. And I enlisted in the 452nd General Hospital. And the commander, actually, when I signed up, I signed up in a civil government company, which was really very boring. I went to the meetings. Did not enjoy it. And after a meeting, four or five months had passed, I decided that is not for me, and I was going to quit. And we were on Buffalo Street at that time, in very old rickety buildings. And I got in the elevator going down, and in the elevator I ran into a very close friend who was a compatriot of my oldest brother. Who also had been in the Army. And these two, my brother and this man that we met, used to study together. Both of them went to Marquette. He was a doctor, and



my brother was a lawyer. They studied together. He had been at our house quite a bit. Anyhow, his name was Dr. Weinschel, and he was the commanding officer of the 452nd General Hospital

John: Okay.

Naomi: And he said, "Naomi!" in the elevator, "what are you doing here?" I said, "Oh, I have been in the military government company, and I didn't like it. I quit." He said, "Oh, you didn't quit. You're going to join the hospital." He said, "I'll make you a corporal." I said, "But, I was a sergeant." He says, "Not in my army." And he made me a corporal, and I stayed there.

John: Okay.

Naomi: But, when I came out, in 1976, I was a sergeant major. So, it took me twenty years, but it was worth it.

John: You got them back. You got them back, and more.

Naomi: Oh, yea.

John: Several on the bottom. That's great. That's really great. Did you have the GI Bill, from your service? Did you ever use it?

Naomi: Only to go to MATC [Milwaukee Area Technical College].

John: Okay. Okay.

Naomi: I only used it for that.

John: Okay. And then what about vets organizations? Amvets?

Naomi: Name them, I got them.

John: You got them. Okay.

Naomi: What do I belong to? Women's Army Auxiliary. No, that is wrong. Women's Army Corps Veterans Organization.

John: Okay.

Naomi: Amvets, Post 60. Association of the United States Army. See, sergeant major.

John: Oh, wow.

- Naomi: What else have I got? Army Navy Union. JWV [Jewish War Veterans]. American Military Society.
- John: You do belong.
- Naomi: I'm not kidding. There are some more in here. United Women Vets. The Allied Veterans Council. Association of the U. S. Army. American Legion. See, I am coming to the United Women Vets. I am coming to it. Anyhow, there is some more of that. I'm very active down at the War Memorial and in the Veterans Board. I used to be more active in Madison on a couple of committees there when Ray Boland was Vets Secretary and I was at the opening of the museum which, I think, was '94. I think it was in '94.
- John: My first book came out in '95 and we had the opening of the book there, so it was before '95. I've known Rich Zeitlin for years. In fact, years ago I knew he was raising money to restore the battle flags and I had to go to Wausau to a company that made highway paint. They were a little short on some of the specs and I was having lunch with the man that owned it. I am going to shut this off for a moment. There.
- Naomi: I'll bet you didn't say four thousand.
- John: Okay. What about things like reunions and that? Of course, you were in the Reserve.
- Naomi: In the Reserve. Yea. We had our annual birthday dinners, things like that. Now, the 452nd General Hospital is no longer in existence, now combat support. But many of the people that were in there and have retired, same as I have many years ago, have formed an alumni association. And it is quite a nice outfit. We meet at the home of Colonel Bowman, who was the head of our dental division, and he has us over to his house. And there is usually about twenty-five or thirty of us that show up. And it's a great group. Great group. We stick together pretty close.
- John: That's great.
- Naomi: We have a lot of nurses that were with us. That come to the meetings. It's pretty much of a fun group now. It wasn't then. It was all business then. At one time we had received three in a row the leading Reserve unit in the country.
- John: Wow.
- Naomi: And we were might proud of that. Yea.
- John: A young woman going into the United States Army. You said the soldiers didn't like you.

Naomi: No, they didn't.

John: How was that?

Naomi: Well, I remember when I first got to Fort Riley proper, I was assigned to the stockade. To the office in the stockade. And of course I was in uniform. And I was a lowly private. And I was scared to death. And these stockade men were big, burly, rough, gruff. And one of them was kind of nice to me, and for some reason or other, I don't know why, he said to me, "Would you like to look around and see what is doing out around here, and what we have?" And I said, "Yes, I sure would, if someone could help me." And he said, "Come on, I'll take you around and let you know what is going on? Want to go down to the dogs?" I said, "Me, I'm a dog person from way back. Had dogs all my life. I'd love to see the dogs." So we got down there. There were two soldiers, two of the men, guards on duty. And they brought out two dogs on leashes. German shepherds. Beautiful animals. And he said, "Take them for a run." Well, we had a hill there, from the stockade there is a hill going down. It was all gravel. And I started to just lop along with the dogs when one of the guards let out a whistle. And apparently it was the right sound because the dogs turned tail, turned me around, pulled me into the gravel, and then the dog dragged me. And that was my introduction to the stockade. And that is how I knew, stay away from those men.

John: Yea.

Naomi: They were not nice to us. And I found that out the hard way. But later on as we became more accustomed to our jobs and as they became more accustomed, they found out that we could do something worth while.

John: Sure.

Naomi: I did have one very interesting time. Being in charge of real property, I also had the job of making the combat flags that flew over the German village that was the firing point for the basic training there. And they would go up there and fire. And I would make the flags that flew with the swastika on them and everything else. And we had a contingent of German prisoners digging a trench around the S-4 building to drain off the water and the rain, and the camp was just full of rain. And here I was on the floor laying out this red material with the swastika in the middle, and I am pinning this swastika down. I had a beautiful sewing machine to work on. And these men were looking in the window. And me walking all over their flag. Now, I don't know if – you want to turn that off for a second? – never realizing they were watching me from the window. For the next three weeks while those men were parading around there, I had to be on guard. I had to have, our barracks was right behind the S-4 building and it was only across the road from my barracks to the building, and yet they had to come and pick me up in the

morning, guard me across the street, guard me into the building. Same thing at lunch. I was never alone for three weeks. I couldn't go anywhere because they saw me laying on the floor and walking all over their flag.

John: Wow.

Naomi: Maybe I don't blame them, but I think I do.

John: Sure.

Naomi: I never got over that. Never got over that.

John: What, as you look back, of course, you made a career out of the Army, but as you look back at your time in World War II, how do you feel about that now?

Naomi: Very proud.

John: Very proud. You should be.

Naomi: Very proud. Very happy about it.

John: Yea. Yea.

Naomi: I'll tell you a little story about the museum. When the museum opened, the Madison museum, they had this machine in there, this computer, where you could go and punch in somebody's name and out would come this little story on the man. Well, that very first day, I was in there looking at what's going on, and an elderly man came in with a little boy. The little boy must have been about eight or nine, at the most. And the older man said, "Let's punch in Grandpa's name and see what happens. Grandpa was in the Civil War." That was this older man's father. He was in the Civil War. So they punched in Grandpa's name, and the man let out a shriek, and said, "Now we know why we moved to Montana." Because the name came out and said 'deserter.'

**[End of Side A of Tape 1.]**

That was quite a highlight. I went over and talked to him for a while.

John: [Offer of a snack.] No, honest. I'm fighting weight. I've taken off forty pounds.

Naomi: Not a carb diet?

John: No. Fats, sweets, alcohol and exercise. I just, I don't, I'll eat what I want but I just don't chase after fats. If I have a choice between grilled chicken and a hamburger, I'll have grilled chicken.

Naomi: I don't even eat red meat any more. I just did away with meat. Not for any reason, because I just quit little by little and now chicken and fish.

John: And then, too, my hand was paralyzed. I couldn't do anything with my right hand.

Naomi: Except hold a glass.

John: A beer can. And I just cut that out, and I try to do a couple miles every morning.

Naomi: That is good. That is the thing that does it.

John: You know the nice thing about that? It also gives me forty minutes to think. All by myself.

Naomi: Yea. That is wonderful.

John: Okay. Anything else that you want to put on here before we wrap up?

Naomi: I don't think so. All the pictures I had, I just turned them over last two months ago to Gayle.

John: Oh, great.

Naomi: So they are down there.

John: Good.

Naomi: I had pictures there of a wedding we had, one of our girls and one of the men got married. Got the wedding, at the bar. You can imagine.

John: Yea.

Naomi: Someplace I've got my NCO [non-commissioned officer] card for the NCO club. I've got it laying around some place. And I don't have much of anything else. I turned everything over to Gayle. All the pictures and everything like that. I might have one. They sent me a card when I got sick just now, and if that isn't a picture of my kitty. Isn't that wonderful? This I bought. Did you ever read *Chicken Soup for Your Veteran Soul*?

Diane: No, and I know it's out there.

Naomi: Well, I read several of the *Chicken Soup* books, and they are pretty boring by the time you get to a lot of them, but not this one. And if you want to read it, I'll let you.

- John: Let me get this: *Chicken Soup for the Veterans Soul; Stories to Stir the Pride and Honor the Courage of Our Veterans*.
- Naomi: I started reading that and I couldn't put it down. I read it all night.
- John: Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hanson, Sidney R. Scagter, by Health Communications, Inc., Deerfield Beach, Florida, 2000. I'll get that on the tape. As I am saying, this is a remarkable story. Steven Ambrose, the writer, he just passed away.
- Naomi: I know who he is. I am sorry he passed away.
- John: He was a very good friend.
- Naomi: Oh, really?
- John: Yea.
- Naomi: Ken Setting [?] was a very good friend of his.
- John: Okay.
- Naomi: Do you know Ken?
- John: No.
- Naomi: Ken was CVSO [?] here until June, and then he got sick and had to quit.
- John: But he was talking to a bunch of World War II vets, men and women, and most of them, he was praising them. And most of them were just saying, "I didn't do anything in the Second World War." And he said, "Would all you vets stand up?" And a couple women and these guys stood up. And he said, "You were giants! You went off and saved the world." And that's true. That's what he said, and I think that is the way it was. And everybody did their own little piece, you know. I interviewed a guy, and his whole war service was spent as a finance officer in Indianapolis. And he was saying, "I never went overseas, I didn't do this." And then he stopped and said, "But, you know, if it hadn't been for us, that wouldn't have been paid for." And I said, "You know, now see, that was an important job. It really was." So, every one of these stories is very good and important and precious.
- Naomi: Have you seen, or heard, or talked to Paul Bialk [?]. He is very active down in Madison, in the various committees down there. And he is very active up here. Now, Paul, when he came out of, he was in the Marines. And when he came out

of the Marines, he became a corrections officer at the House of Corrections. The only place he was in the whole war was in a house of corrections in New York some place. He never was anyplace else, and he was only in for a year.

John: But he was part of it.

Naomi: He was young then.

John: How does he spell his name?

Naomi: B-i-a-l-k. Paul Bialk. And his number at his house.

John: No, I'll get it. I just want to be sure I get his name right on here. Well, listen, here's what I'll do. I am going to shut this off.

**]End of Interview.]**