

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
ANNETTE HOWARDS  
Corporal, USMC, WWII  
1995

OH  
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**Howards, Annette M. Nierenberg**, (1923- ). Oral History Interview, 1995.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (65 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (65 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

### Abstract

Howards, a Bronx, New York native, discusses her World War II service in the Women's Marine Corps with the Air Base Group 2, and her experiences as a woman veteran in Wisconsin. Howards talks about her decision to enlist and her family's disapproval of that decision. Entering the service in 1944, Howards experienced WWII civilian life in New York; she comments on black outs, war bonds, and rationing. She details basic training at Camp Lejune (North Carolina) comparing it to men's training, and touches upon being the only Jewish woman at Camp Lejune. Stationed in the tool room at Camp Elliott (California) she relates social activities, treatment of women Marines, and dating on base. She touches upon caring for tools at El Toro (California), following the war from base, and marrying a Marine. Howards discusses her post-war experiences as a newly wed including the difficulties finding housing and shortages of household goods. Howards did not use any veterans' benefits, and through this discussion provides an in depth look at the problems and isolation facing women veterans. In the late 1980s she joined the Women Marine Association and the Marine Corps League and speaks at length about those organizations and the increased recognition of women veterans.

### Biographical Sketch

Howards (1923- ) entered the Women Marines Corps in 1944. She served during World War II as a member of Air Base Group 2. After the war she settled in Wisconsin, and is active in veterans' organizations.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells.

Transcribed by Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs staff, 1997.

Transcription edited by David S. DeHorse and Abigail Miller, 2001-2002.

## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Today's date is January 19, 1995. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum doing an oral history interview with Annette Howards, a veteran of the Women Marines in World War II.

Mark: Good afternoon. How are you doing?

Howards: Good afternoon, doing fine, thank you.

Mark: We could start out by talking about what you were doing before the war, perhaps you could tell me a little bit about where you were born and about your upbringing and these kinds of things.

Howards: I was born in the Bronx, December 30, 1923. All my schooling was in the Bronx and then we moved to Long Island when I graduated high school. I held several positions and then I went to work for Army civil service in Newark, NJ.

Mark: Do you recall what time that was? Was it before or after Pearl Harbor?

Howards: This was after Pearl Harbor. I graduated high school in 1941 and I had several jobs in Jamaica and then there were a lot of positions opening up in Defense and my friend and I decided we were going to go to one of the Defense jobs. We went to Spary Gyroscope that was the one that we went to and knew that we were qualified, but we had heard, unfortunately, that they were anti-Semitic and with our names we would be disqualified immediately and so we looked around and took a civil service job in Newark, NJ. That was akin to living here in Madison and working in Chicago and we did that for a year and a half.

Mark: That seems like a long distance.

Howards: It was. I got up at 5:00 to be to work at 8:00. When they started opening the ranks to women, I decided I wanted to enlist and partly it was because of patriotic and adventure and just a different change in my life. I knew I didn't want to enlist in the Women's Army Corps because they were training too close to home, as was the Navy. They were taking their basic at Hunter College, which was just a stone's through from where I lived and when the Marine Corps came out in February of 1943, I looked at their poster and I knew that was it for me. No question in my mind. I decided I was going to enlist in the Marine Corps--in fact my friend and I were going to enlist in the Marine Corps. She came over to my house and spent the weekend and got homesick and that was it. So, I was going to go by myself. My family was not thrilled.

Mark: What were their reservations?

Howards: Well, nice girls just don't enlist. Period. You just don't do that.

Mark: Even in such a grave war emergency such as this?

Howards: No. Especially because I'm Jewish they had this thing that you graduate high school, you get married and raise a family and that's it. You just don't do things like that. To go off where you're outnumbered 100 to 1 by the men. Women that enlisted did not have a nice reputation unfortunately. People were ready to believe the worst.

Mark: Up until that point that is.

Howards: Right, they just didn't know. You saw very little on newsreels about women in service. The only thing you would see is them doing basic marching but they never showed them actually doing work. So I enlisted in the Marine Corps. I went down, I passed the physical, I passed the written test and I was sworn in that day and told to go home and await my orders. This was in March and in May I got my orders to report to Camp Lejune, North Carolina. That's when it all started.

Mark: Let's backtrack a little bit. When the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred, you had graduated already and you were working at the time. Do you recall the incident? Do you remember having any implications for your own life?

Howards: I graduated in January of '41 and I remember we were at home listening to the radio and we heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor. At first we thought this is not so. It isn't true. I was too young to enlist at that time. My brother enlisted. He went to Fort Breckinridge and we just didn't believe it at first. Until all these reports started coming in and they didn't have television then so we relied on newsreels and we saw all this devastation in the movies. I remember they had all this drive on war bonds. You go to a movie and when the movie was over the house lights would come up and they would pass these cans around for donations at every movie and they would sell war bonds. They had stamps; they had people volunteered as wardens, air raid wardens. They had blackouts. This was all very unusual. My relatives lived in Brighton Beach, Coney Island. We went to visit them. All the lights facing the ocean were blacked out. It was just a very unusual sight. All lights were out. You had to have your windows covered. Black curtains on your windows. I remember they had an aurora borealis and we all wanted to go see what it looked like. We got out on the roof of our house to watch it and we were told to get inside fast. You are not supposed to be out during a blackout. So I remember that very vividly, that we couldn't watch this amazing sight.

Mark: There were submarine raiders up and down the coast.

Howards: We heard about it.

Mark: You never saw any such thing?

Howards: No. We heard just rumors of it, but we didn't think the big cities would be attacked or it didn't occur to us that anybody could get near California to attack California. It just wasn't something that your mind processed.

Mark: Had rationing taken effect by the time you went into the service?

Howards: I'm trying to think. Yes. Because I remember when I came home on furlough, the first thing my mother said was, "Go get the ration stamps." I remember that. Mostly gasoline was rationed a lot.

Mark: I get the impression it didn't impinge on your lifestyle or anything.

Howards: No. You just learned to cook differently and to bake differently. To be more economical, but I don't think we ever felt pinched.

Mark: I see, one other thing, did your family accept your decision to enlist or did it cause a family rift?

Howards: Yes. But they couldn't understand why I was going. I was very much a homebody and they couldn't understand why I would want to leave home. They tried to talk me out of it and I said, "No, I'm going and you just have to accept it. Period" I was old enough. I just turned 20 and that was that.

Mark: But you continued to speak?

Howards: Oh, absolutely. I wrote home, absolutely. My mother had to apologize and explain to all my relatives what I was doing because I was always the very quiet one. They just couldn't imagine, all of them, I was the one who was going.

Mark: OK. I'm ready to hear about boot camp. Perhaps you could describe your trip to Camp Lejune and your greeting when you got there and things like that.

Howards: We had to take a train from Grand Central Station. I had never been on a train. I was given an upper berth, which scared me no end. I was afraid I was going to fall out. So I just sat up most of the night. Going to Camp Lejune--once we got there it seemed like everybody was yelling at us--to get in line, to move fast. They took us to a barracks, we were given numbers, we could pick out our own bunkmate and I was in a barrack that held at least 100 women and it was a cultural shock to begin with.

Mark: That was one of the questions I was going to ask. Can you elaborate on that?

Howards: I had been brought up--I shared a room with my sister and we never undressed in front of each other, but this was just the way we were brought up. We never left our

bedroom without wearing a bathrobe. We always had to have a bathrobe on and here suddenly I was in a room with 100 women that I had never met before and everybody is getting undressed in front of each other. There were 50 women taking showers at one time. Everybody is yelling at you, you are in a state of shock. You just do what you are told and you don't question anything. You were marched to and from and you had to do things by the whistle and if you did something wrong, your whole platoon was punished for it. I remember somebody did something wrong and she had us all lined up and she called us bucket heads. You can laugh now but that term was very derogatory and I just never had anybody talk to me that way, not even my mother. We went back and I sat on my bunk and cried. I can laugh now.

Mark: That's interesting because the Marines, the male Marines, are known for salty language shall we say. Did anyone use the four-letter type words in your basic training?

Howards: No, they never used what we call four-letter words, but we were called bucket heads and dumb bells and things like that.

Mark: That was shocking enough for you?

Howards: Right because I didn't do anything wrong, why are you yelling at me when I didn't do something wrong? But you learn very fast that what you do affects the person next to you so you're very careful. I learned to make beds, not bunks, we didn't have beds we had bunks, you learned to make your bunk up and you had to have two people had to do it because you hear about throwing a coin on a blanket and it's taunt? It's true, absolutely true. So we learned when we went to sleep at night to lay very quietly and try to not move in your bunk so that when you got up in the morning, you wouldn't have such a big mess to make. Now it all sounds ridiculous, but it was true. And you learned to lay your clothes out at night so in the morning all you had to do was just jump into them like a fireman lays out his things. So you all learned all these little things.

Mark: Did you find that these sorts of things were of use to you later? You mentioned teamwork for example.

Howards: A lot of it stays with you. I thought at first that brain washing was a very good term. Some years ago I would work for the Madison Schools and I volunteered to do lunch duty. Just the custodian was taking care of all the kids at lunch. This is a big lunch room, several hundred kids there eating lunch and I was carrying a tray to some youngster and it was quite noisy and the custodian was standing by me and all of a sudden he yells, "Freeze?" I absolutely froze just the way I was standing, I didn't budge. Then I thought, that's a throwback from basic training. I hadn't heard that word for forty some odd years, but when you heard it you absolutely froze in your tracks and that was his way of telling the kids to quiet down. Everybody quiet down, he just yells, "freeze." So things stay with you.

Mark: Now you, having grown up in New York, grew up in a fairly cosmopolitan area, but when you got to basic training were there any sort of regional cultural type--

Howards: Absolutely. It was a complete mixture. There were girls right off the farm. I remember that two bunks away from me, right off the farm, she had never been away from her home in all of her life. Like I said, this was a whole different experience for all of us.

Mark: Were there any sort of regional tensions?

Howards: No.

Mark: Occasionally, you hear about North - South kinds of things.

Howards: No, never, there was never any dissension. I never heard any derogatory remarks as to religion. On Sunday everybody went off to church and I sat there and read a book and my bunk mate thought this was really terrible and she asked me if I would like to go to Lutheran services with her. Rather than just sit in the bunk by myself, I went with her and I found it very interesting what the program could have been to any religion so I started going to Lutheran services. I didn't tell my mother! I started to go to Lutheran services and I felt very comfortable with that and I didn't have to be by myself anymore. There weren't enough Jewish girls to have a service. I think I was the only one there. I never met another one.

Mark: I don't recall any such thing when I was in basic training either.

Howards: In fact in the two years I was in the Marine Corps I think I only met two other Jewish girls and they were both from New York. That's the way it was.

Mark: What sort of training did you do in basic?

Howards: In basic? We had basically the same training as the men only that we didn't march with full pack. We weren't given any rifle practice. We were taken out to the rifle range and we were told how to fire a rifle but we never had to get a marksmanship. We were just there for the experience. We had the same thing as the men having to go through the tear gas; we went through that whole ritual just like the men did. We ran the obstacle course, the same as the men except we didn't have to jump off a high tower in full pack into water, like the men. But, we weren't trained for combat like the women today. We were just trained to replace men here in the States.

Mark: So it was a lot of military courtesy type of thing?

Howards: Absolutely. You have to learn your basic orders and you had to know that down to the period and comma and my greatest fear was that I would have to get guard duty

and somebody would come up to me and say, "What's General Order number 3" and I'd have to be able to say it right off the bat. All of this sounds very childish now but it was very serious then. Then when we were ready to graduate, we were given our choice of where we wanted to go, what schools we wanted to attend. I picked aviation because that sounded adventurous for one thing. I wanted to get as far away from the east coast as possible. It sounded something different and I picked radio school. I thought that would be interesting.

Mark: Why, by the way, did you want to get away from the east coast?

Howards: Because an eastern New Yorker thinks, "Here's New York and there's California and in between are mountains and Indians. That's how cosmopolitan we are. There is nothing in between New York and California except mountains and I wanted to see what's on the other side of that mountain.

Mark: Your training instructors, what are they called? Were they women or men?

Howards: Drill instructors. We had a man, but he was an American Indian and he was just as rough with us as he was with the men. If you fainted from heat, you got restricted because you were supposed to take salt tablets to offset that. You didn't dare go out without your sunglasses because the sun was so bright and you were drilled just as tough and as long as the men.

Mark: Did that earn him any respect or dislike or what?

Howards: I was familiar with drilling because when I went high school, I belonged to the Gun Hill Post, it was a veterans post and I belonged to the Color Guard so I had a little bit of marching experience. I knew my left from my right and I knew how to make hospital corners on my bed, which is something I learned in Girl Scout camp, so I felt I had one leg up on most of the people, and I enjoyed marching, so that was no chore to me, that was something I really enjoyed.

Mark: So you graduated and then you went to training somewhere.

Howards: No. They sent me right out to Camp Elliott.

Mark: Where's that?

Howards: Camp Elliott is in San Diego and that was a Naval base. There was just a group of Marines there and some of my friends went to school and I was pointed out and said, "We need somebody in the tool room and you're it." That's all they told me. They handed me a handbook and told me to study it and be ready to report the next day. That was it. I had no choice. You just did what you were told and you didn't question it. At least I was glad I wasn't stuck behind a typewriter. I didn't want to do any typing. I really wanted to do something worthwhile. They trucked us in an



open truck early in the morning. I remember that it was dark and dreary and they trucked us all the way into San Diego and we were to go to North Island which was just a little island off San Diego and we got into this big flat bottomed boat and they brought us over to the island and I was taken into this big airplane hangar and there was this tiny tool room and it was crammed with all sorts of tools.

Mark: And your duties were?

Howards: Were to make up the toolboxes, as they were needed, to order, and take care of all the tools that I didn't know anything about and I had to learn on the job.

Mark: So you were on North Island for how long?

Howards: I can't remember how long we were but it was supposed to be temporary until our base was ready at El Toro that was going to be our home base.

Mark: Which you eventually did go to.

Howards: Right. We were the first contingent of women on North Island and the men really didn't know how to react to us. Are you supposed to give somebody a leg-up on the plane if they need a hand? I think it just took that one-day for the men to realize that these are very qualified women who are Marines first and that's the way they treated them. They didn't treat them as women, just another Marine buddy.

Mark: So you felt that you were treated with respect from your military colleagues. The sexual thing wasn't a problem?

Howards: Absolutely, absolutely! We never heard of the word harassment. Never. We were just another Marine on the base. That's the way we were treated.

Mark: So this is an island off of San Diego.

Howards: Right. There was no way to get to it except by boat or ferry. What they call the "nickel-snatch" it was a ferry, now they have a bridge there connecting it to San Diego.

Mark: What I'm getting at is what sort of social activities did you have? Did you get into town much?

Howards: Yes. You had leave. You had to take the ferryboat, which they called the nickel snatcher into San Diego and there was lots to do. We didn't want for things to do. There were movies on the base; movies off base, there were plenty of USO places to go visit. Tickets were available to radio shows. We got tickets to Ken Murray's blackouts, which was the thing to see then.

Mark: In San Diego or Los Angeles?

Howards: I think that was in Los Angeles. There were USOs that you could eat at, so that saved you money for eating. The Women's Y was open to women veterans. We could bunk there for the night, so that it didn't put a crimp into our savings. We went to a lot of church dances, lots of churches sponsored square dancing, which I loved. So there was no lack of social activities. No lack at all.

Mark: How often were you able to get off the island?

Howards: Probably every other weekend we were getting a pass to get off. We had like a weekend pass. We could go in on Sunday, but I never lacked for any social activities.

Mark: What did you do actually on the island? Was there an NCO Club or an Enlisted Club or something like that?

Howards: No. We had what we called the slop shoot. Just a place where you could go and get an ice cream bar or sit down and have a coke. A couple of tables and chairs, but there wasn't any meeting place where we could go to congregate. Our barracks did have a room set aside like a big social hall that you could go and meet your date when he came to call for you. But, there was no meeting place that you could go to. When we got to El Toro, there was a big swimming pool and a handball court, but not at North Island.

Mark: You mentioned the subject of dating and more male/female relations. You mentioned before that this was something that people were afraid of with women soldiers or Marines or whatever the case might be, that this sort of thing might get out of hand.

Howards: Never. I never heard of any problems. When we went into town, we were never harassed by anybody. We felt safe, we felt comfortable. There always seemed to be a Marine around somewhere and we knew that if anybody came up to give us any problem, they would be right there. They kept one eye out for the women. Nobody hassles their women. Their Marines. So you always felt like you had a big brother somewhere around you. I never ran into any trouble with civilians. Maybe we were just lucky, but there was never any problem. We met dates at the USO. We would go there and we'd go like three women at a time. We made up that if one of us met somebody nice we would go home with them. Nobody would feel obligated to go back home as three. The young men we met were very nice. They were there just the same as we, just to square dance and just have fun. There was never any hanky panky. I don't say never, I never came across any hanky panky.

Mark: Someone may have some place.

Howards: Oh, I did have one experience when I went to Tijuana. I met my husband in the Marine Corps. He was stationed same as I. He was in the oxygen crew and some years back we were talking about our experiences and he said that he remembered this young fellow who was really very naive and he was going to Tijuana with another fellow. They both had dates and they were trying to wise him up- what to do, how to make out, fight--and I laughed because my friend and I (Phyllis Hooper) had been approached to go to Tijuana and help our two friends pick out souvenirs to send back home and as a reward, we would be treated to a steak dinner. They had meat rations, so being treated to a steak dinner was big time. So Phyllis and I agreed to go with them and we went to Tijuana, we helped them pick out souvenirs, I still have my little souvenir, they took us to dinner just like they said, they brought us back home, one of them was driving the car, and they stopped at Lookout Mountain or Make-out Mountain and Phyllis had a good time in the back seat and I just sat on my side and said, "I just came to help pick out souvenirs, that's it. Sorry." So he came home very disappointed and Bernie didn't know that I was McCullough's date, that was the fellow that they were trying to wise up so we had a big laugh about that. I guess I was just a hands off person.

Mark: So you met your husband

Howards: Yes. Bernie was on the oxygen crew.

Mark: On North Island.

Howards: Right.

Mark: Now he went overseas or something is that correct?

Howards: No. He was stationed stateside all the time he was here.

Mark: So when you went to El Toro

Howards: I didn't know him. He was from Milwaukee. He was just another Marine on base and for some reason or another, I always ignored him. I don't know why. Even to this day I don't know why. He had asked me for a date and I said I wasn't interested. I had something else to do or I said I wasn't going to the movie and there I was on the movie line with him two people back of me. It was just one of those funny things.

Mark: Lightning strikes. So you went to El Toro after a while.

Howards: Right. Our whole group, Air Base Group 2, known as ABG2, moved to El Toro, and I had thought that El Toro was built for our group. We were an assembly and repair group. They modified the planes when the rockets were put under the wings, they repair all the damaged planes that came in and about eight years ago, I met another

women Marine, Isabel Baldigo and found out that she was stationed at El Toro and I'd never met her. I said, "Where were you?" and she was and she was at the other end of the base and when I said I was from ABG2, she says "Well, pardon me, ABG2, they think this base was made for them!" I said, "You're right" This is the way we were. We were a self-contained unit and very proud of ourselves and nobody was better than us. This was the way we felt and this is the way I still feel. So Isabel and I tease each other about that.

Mark: Was this place any different than North Island?

Howards: Oh, yes. El Toro is a huge installation, just huge. Like I said, I didn't know there was anybody else on the base except us.

Mark: So you weren't near any cities necessarily.

Howards: It's Orange County. All orange trees, which are all gone now.

Mark: The activities on the base. You mentioned some of the things you were doing like repairing broken airplanes, I was wondering if you could just elaborate on that a little more. What was the main purpose of the base, was it a training base or

Howards: No. This was an assembly and repair base. All the planes that were damaged in combat were brought here for repair. That was our main job.

Mark: For you, you maintained the toolboxes that would be used to fix these planes?

Howards: Right. I had to take care of all the tools and order and make sure that everything was there that they needed for maintenance on the planes.

Mark: Did you get near the planes at all?

Howards: They were right in front of me. They were directly in front of me. I could see them and watch them and I was just fascinated with the Corsair because it had a different type of wing and, in fact, I have a collection of everything Corsair at my home. The F4U Corsairs.

Mark: Pappy Boyington's plane.

Howards: Yes. I have a beautiful photograph of it.

Mark: I remember being on garbage detail one time and getting to pick up all the garbage all around the air planes at this air show and that was about as close as I ever got to an airplane when I was in the Air Force. So I was wondering if you had a similar time.

Howards: No. It was a beautiful airplane. I went to visit my son in El Paso and he took me over to Mexico which is quite close by and there is a little aeronautical museum there and they had all these restored vintage World War II planes and they are still flying them. They take them out and fly them. There is this beautiful, beautiful restored Corsair there and we explained my love affair with Corsairs and the guide let us go behind the ropes and touch and feel the plane. Hands on it. Took pictures right next to the plane!

Mark: Did you follow the war much? The course of the war and how it was going?

Howards: Oh, absolutely! I had many friends who were in service overseas in the Army and we tried to keep track of where they were with Patton's 3rd Army. We tried to keep track of what was going on. I remember the day we heard that Roosevelt died, it was just unbelievable. We felt like who was going to take his place. There is nobody as capable as he. It was like the whole base went into mourning.

Mark: Well, he was probably the President as long as you could remember.

Howards: Right. But we followed the war closely to see what was happening. When they had VJ-Day, I was in New York at that time. I had gotten a leave because my friend was waiting to get out, he was waiting to be discharged from Patton's 3rd Army and we were at Coney Island celebrating VJ-Day and then it was just a matter of waiting, of going back to my base and awaiting to be discharged because you enlisted for the duration of the war and six months and my husband to be at the time got out before me. He got out at the end of November.

Mark: I was going to ask, had you been engaged by the time the war ended?

Howards: I had had an understanding with a young man back home when I went home on leave and when I came back to the base, I realized New York was not for me. This is where my heart is, here. Bernie and I became engaged at the end of Thanksgiving. We went out to dinner with another couple and--

Mark: 44", 45"?

Howards: This would be '45, November. We became engaged and he got out before I did. He got out at the end of November. He had more points than I did. You got out on the point system and he went back to Milwaukee and became a civilian and had to wait for me. I got out in April and that accounts for the box of letters that we wrote back and forth to each other. I got out in April and on April 28 we were married in New York. He flew to New York and we were married. Then we flew back to Milwaukee the next day and this April 28, we'll celebrate our 49th anniversary.

Mark: Congratulations! If you could describe your discharge process from the military. What sort of paperwork did you do, where did you go, how were you treated?

Howards: I think my mind is like a blank. I was reading some of my letters and evidently we moved from that barracks to another barracks because they were closing down a lot of the barracks. A lot of civilians were coming in to take our place. We weren't given the option of staying in service. We were simply told in effect, we don't need you anymore, go home.

Mark: How did you feel about that? Did you want to stay in the service?

Howards: Well, if I had not been engaged to be married, I would have wanted to stay because I really enjoyed what I was doing. But I was ready to be married and I wanted to get out fast. There were no ceremonies or anything, you were just told to come for your physical exam, you were given a complete physical exam, given your ticket home, and that was it. There were no bands waiting to send you off. You got your sea bag and dragged your sea bag with you and got on the train and went back home.

Mark: You went back to New York.

Howards: I went back to New York.

Mark: Got married. Is your husband Jewish by the way?

Howards: Yes! That was nothing we can laugh at. When Bernie and I were going out on the base, which consisted of walking around the base since neither of us had much money. He wanted to be serious and finally I said, "I would never marry out of my religion," out of respect for my mother, not that I was religious. He asked me what I was and I told him I was Jewish and he started to laugh. I took offense because I thought he was laughing at my religion. He said, "That's it. You have no more arguments. I'm Jewish." It was like two fireflies finding themselves. I couldn't believe it. That was the last argument I had.

Mark: Then you settled in Milwaukee. Late '46?

Howards: Right. April of '46.

Mark: What did your husband do?

Howards: Bernie worked as an auto salesman for Auto Acceptance and I remember at the time we had just one room in a private home. You couldn't find housing at the time.

Mark: I was going to ask about that sort of thing. You had trouble finding a place to live?

Howards: Oh, yes. He found a place just before we got married. He was able to rent this room. When I came back I got a job and we had this room for a couple of months. This is digressing a little bit, but he had a child from a previous marriage and he was given

custody of the child, so now we had to find a place for the three of us to live and through contacts, I don't know how, but they found a three-room apartment over a grocery, West Burleigh, that they were able to get for us. So now I had to go around and put my name on lists to get sheets. You couldn't buy linen. There was a waiting list for linens. A waiting list for everything. My new relatives were putting my name on all these lists for household things. She called me up one day and said, "I've got a rug for you." I didn't ask what color, and it turned out to be this awful maroon, but anyway, I had a rug on my floor. Everything was still in very short supply.

Mark: It seemed to cause troubles in trying to set up a brand new household. These were waiting lists that were created by the stores, I assume.

Howards: People were coming out of service and setting up housekeeping but there was a shortage of just about everything. Household materials.

Mark: Being part of the Department of Veterans Affairs, I'm interested in sort of benefit programs that were available to you and your husband. GI Bill for example.

Howards: Yes, but everything we heard was male oriented. There was never anything about women veterans. I came home, I put away my uniform and that was it. Nobody ever spoke, I never read anything of women veterans. I found out later that my friend Isabel, who was stationed at El Toro, went overseas to Hawaii. She was one of the few that went to Hawaii and was able to stay in. We were never given that option. I didn't know I had any Bill of Rights for women. I never heard of any more women veterans. I never read anything until about ten years ago, here in Madison there was a little article in the paper saying this was Women Veterans Week. That opened my eyes and they said they were having a talk at the Capitol; this Lieutenant was coming up from Chicago and was going to give a slide presentation so I talked Bernie into letting me go to the Capitol. He said he'd come down with me. We went down there and there were about 100 women in the room and the Lieutenant was showing women in service and then she went to change the tray of slides and they dropped to the floor. While she was getting this all rearranged, that gave us some time to talk to the other women there and most of the women seemed to be Army or Navy and so I asked if there were any Marines here. There were three Marines over in the corner and we fell on each other like lost sisters.

Mark: All World War II era.

Howards: Right. The first thing Betty Duff says to me, "Well, do you belong to the Women Marine Association?" Never heard of it. Never heard of it. She said there was a national and local chapter. So she signed me right up then and there. It's like finding a lost relative. I didn't know, I never heard of any such thing. This little group, this nucleus became very active and we bought jackets with our names on the back and the Women Marine logo emblazoned on it and we wore it whenever

possible and so someone would come up to me and say, "I'm a woman veteran, where did you get that jacket?" We gradually increased in number and we have a large chapter here in Madison. Some of the women are very outspoken and gradually we got to be acknowledged and they invited us, as women veterans, to put flags on the graves on Memorial Day, another association was developing, Women Marine Veterans and this included all the services not just the Marines. One of our very outspoken persons, Phyllis Kirk, she makes sure that we get into all these things that we get invited to, the parades. There's women veterans marching in the parades. Well we never did before. We were invited to go up to Crystal Lake, way up north, we found a women veteran up there and she invited us to stay over at her house and we marched in the parade and the Vietnam vets wanted us to march right in back on them--place of honor! People couldn't believe that there were women veterans from World War II. They had never seen them. Then we got invited to ceremonies at the Capitol and they were at the back of the program there was a poem there "What is a Veteran?" He is this, he is that, Phyllis will tell you, that got her hackles up, "No. It is not just "He" There are women also so now it's been changed to "They." We were invited to be color guards at the opening of the football season. So gradually, people are recognizing there are women veterans. The last time we appeared at the Capitol, we left the Capitol and we were walking down to the Vets Center for some refreshments and we were walking and we had on red blazers. We don't have a standard uniform but we try to dress similarly in that we wear red jackets and dark skirts and we do have a standard hat and this gentleman comes up to us and says, "Boy you ladies from the Salvation Army look good." There are still a lot of people who don't know that there are women veterans.

Mark: As women veterans how do you feel when you've been accepted by male veterans. You mentioned in the military, that you didn't have many problems, how did things change after the war?

Howards: Like I said, there just weren't any women veterans acknowledged. Things picked up here in Madison, a man started to form a Marine Corps League about four or five years ago and evidently somehow he had gotten our names as Marine veterans and from this year we learned that there were other chapters here from Vietnam vets who wanted to join the Marine Corps League. These are very active Marine veterans. They accepted us. They have what they call the stand down here and they enlisted our help. These are young--anybody under 52 is young--these are young men who accepted us as equals. They didn't look upon us as somebody's grandma. We were all in our 70's. But they accepted us and we were treated on a par with them, which made us feel wonderful. One of our women is in her 80's. She was an officer in World War II, served overseas in England during the Battle of Britain. She is very active. She was out there at 6:00 with us to help with the vets. They treat us with respect and that makes us feel good. We finally feel we're getting the acknowledgment that we deserve.



Mark: Between women of different eras, Korean War veterans for example. Are Vietnam era women in your organization?

Howards: Yes, I think there is one, but there is a different camaraderie between the women from World War II and the women today. I don't know if it's because they are all reserves and they go home, they don't live in barracks. Their life isn't regimented as ours was, but there is just the different camaraderie.

Mark: I'd like to get back to some of the immediately after the war type things. Your housing problems for example, how did you finally solve them?

Howards: Well, we lived in this little 3-room apartment until we were able to find a little bigger quarters and then we saved up enough money and we were able to get a little house in Racine on the GI Bill. But on my husband's GI Bill, not mine. I didn't know that I had a GI Bill of Rights.

Mark: You had no idea that you were eligible for these things?

Howards: Nope. I didn't know that I was eligible for any hospital care. When I did have to go, there was a time after my last child was born, I was very ill and I was sent to the VA Hospital and the room that I was in housed about six other women. The room was painted brown. The paint was peeling; they had no real accommodations for women. They had no bathroom facilities. There was a closet that was converted to a bathroom for eight women. They had no facilities for women. There was just nothing out there for women veterans, period.

Mark: Of course, you were not aware that you were eligible for the benefits anyways.

Howards: Nobody had ever told us that we were eligible for anything. You would think that when you were discharged, they would give you some literature telling you where to go if you need some help, but nothing. You were just sent home.

Mark: I'm trying to think of a couple of post-war problems that I hear about. Employment.

Howards: I didn't have any trouble getting a job.

Mark: How about your husband? I don't get the impression that you had any jobs.

Howards: Bernie when he first got out worked for a salvage company, immediately when he got out of service. From there he went back to his brother-in-law and sold shoes for a while, 'cause he was a shoe salesman and from there he went to Auto Acceptance, which was his main job. He was an auto salesman. He had no problem and I didn't have any problem. The first week I came to Milwaukee, I found a job as a bookkeeper so there was no problem there.

Mark: In your social circles, did you mostly deal with fellow veterans?

Howards: No. Bernie went back to his friends that he knew before he went into service and of course, I had to make all new friends. I didn't know anybody here. But nothing was ever mentioned about my being in service. If I wore a field jacket, "Oh, she got that when she was in service," period. There was never any questions asked, what I did or what my experiences were.

Mark: No interest.

Howards: No, there was no interest at all.

Mark: I think we've covered all the questions that I had.

Howards: I hope I've added something to it.

Mark: Do you have anything you'd like to add?

Howards: No. But I have a lot of nice memories of those two years. Those are two very important years. I remember standing on the dock at North Island and watching these big ships come in and watching what they used to call the sea planes and they used to call them Jetco, they would be sitting in the water one minute and they'd zoom off. It was all Jetco. They were not jet propelled. We didn't have that word yet. They just took off like a rocket. You'd see these big seaplanes just take off or these big flat tops come in. One of my friends asked me, they were trying to find out what we did at Christmastime. At Christmastime, I was on the base and I didn't have a pass so what a bunch of us did was to get candles and we went down dockside and we all sang Christmas carols to the sailors on the ships. That's what we did. I learned all the Christmas carols, all the hymns. I went to sunrise services, but it was all good experience.

Mark: Positive experience.

Howards: Oh, yes. Oh absolutely. We've tried to keep in touch after we got out of service, through Christmas cards and letters.

Mark: Did it go well?

Howards: Yes. I found a friend. Bernie and I never went to any of the reunions for our Air Base Group 2. I never knew there were any reunions. He never wanted to go. He'd say, "I won't know anybody there after all these years." We decided we were going to go to Nashville in 1987. I said that the only one I'd like to see is Mary Lee and Johnny McCoy and that was the couple that had Thanksgiving dinner with us when we became engaged and their name wasn't on the list of people that were going to be at this reunion and we went to the reunion and we were registering and across the

hall comes Johnny and Mary Lee. They decided at the last minute to come to the reunion, their first, so their name didn't appear on the list of people who were coming. It's like finding your long lost family. It was wonderful. And, I met another girl there, Lillian McEntee who was the buddy of the gal that worked with me in the tool room. When you saw one you always saw the other. So Lillian and I became very close and we're going to a reunion this summer in Corpus Christi, our Air Base Group 2. It's kind of dwindled down to a handful now, but we keep going. I go to Women Marine Association conventions now that I found out; the last one was held in Orlando last year. They come from as far away as Alaska. It's a wonderful experience. In 1996 our air base group is going to meet in San Antonio and then in 1998 we're going to meet in Las Vegas. This will be a first--we'll all be 80 by then. We want to enjoy ourselves while we're young! It's nice to meet people and reminisce. We don't live in the past, it's just nice to--and my kids, how do my kids feel about my being in service? They tease me a lot. My son used to say there used to be an expression, "Oh, your mother wears combat boots" And my son, "Yes, she sure did." So they laugh about it. We had a wonderful time in Nashville. We were home just a week and my husband had a very serious heart attack and then a major stroke and he's been in a nursing home ever since. But, if you mention Nashville to him, he remembers. My kids tease because when Bernie got out he was a Pfc. because he'd been busted so many times and I got out as a Corporal and if we argue I pull rank on him. We laugh about that. My youngest son was in the Marine Corps and another son was in the Army and did two tours in Vietnam.

Mark: Do you think their parents inspired them?

Howards: Well, you're going to laugh now, my youngest son's mother [she means mother-in-law] was a nurse in World War II, my daughter's mother-in-law was an Army nurse in World War II and of course I was in the Marine Corps, so we've got three mother-in-laws in three different services. Of course, mine is the best, you know! There's no question in my mind. If you go, you go with the best!

Mark: Ok, well thanks for stopping in.

Howards: You're welcome! Like I said it's just a lot of fun. I don't live in the past, but those were two nice years. My kids enjoy hearing about it and we've parceled out all our little medals and pins to the kids to they each have something to remember. Our ID bracelets and discharge papers, little things like that, that means something to the kids, it will anyway.

[End of Transcript]