

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Theresa M. Dischler Brown
Sergeant, Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, WWII
1995

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Brown, Theresa M. Dischler, (1919-). Oral History Interview, 1995.
User Copy: 1 sound cassette (37 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono
Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (37 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract

Brown, a Plain, Wisconsin native, discusses her World War II service with the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), and later work with the war industry. She tells of joining the WAAC with a friend, basic training at Fort Des Moines (Iowa), Motor Corps training at Hotel Champlain (Iowa), and the types of women who joined the WAACs. She mentions her role at Tent City (Florida), daily life and military duties at the camp, and perceptions of the WAACs. Brown also touches upon her duties as a supply sergeant at Bohling Field (Washington D. C.). She reports interesting antidotes of relationships between WAACs and soldiers, and writing letters to soldiers. She chose to leave the WAACs when they became the Women's Army Corps, and comments on her reasons, and her post-WAAC service in Detroit (Michigan) transporting military vehicles.

Biographical Sketch

Brown (b. September 27, 1918) served with the 24th Company, 3rd Regiment of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, and quickly moved up the ranks, achieving the rank of Sergeant.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells.

Transcribed by Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs staff, 1998.

Transcription checked and corrected by David S. DeHorse, December 22, 2001.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

- Mark: Today's date is September 13, 1995. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum doing an oral history interview this afternoon with Mrs. Theresa Brown, born Dischler of Plain, Wisconsin. A veteran of the Women's Army Corps in World War II.
- Brown: Women's Army Auxiliary Corps.
- Mark: Auxiliary Corps? We will explore that a little later.
- Mark: Good afternoon. Thank you for coming in.
- Brown: Well, good afternoon to you.
- Mark: I suppose we should start by you telling me a little bit about where you were born and raised, and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.
- Brown: Well, I was born and raised in Plain, Wisconsin on September 27, 1918. It was in a little village there was only about 300 population.
- Mark: What is it now? It can't be too much bigger now?
- Brown: I don't know for sure, but I think its about 700 or 800 in that vicinity it isn't much bigger than that. It had just one main street; it had businesses on both sides of the street. It had a street that was going east and west and going south it went up a hill and that is where Saint Luke's Catholic Church and school were at. Where I attended grade school. What can I say Highway 23 runs right through it, if you know where Spring Green is, Plain is 7 miles north of there.
- Mark: Was it affected by the depression much? And were you?
- Brown: I wasn't home during the depression and I don't think I should tell you where I was!
- Mark: I won't ask you to divulge anything you don't want to. So in 1941 Pearl Harbor was attacked, do you recall the incident?
- Brown: Yes, I was on my way home from work; at that time I was working in Milwaukee, Wisconsin at the Triangle Restaurant. I heard it on the way home from work. Before that time, how I got interested in the service was, they started in July, I think 1941 the WAAC--and my girl friend and I worked at this place down in Milwaukee. She was a waitress and I was cashier and we

decided to go to school in the daytime and work in the evening, nights. We were the night shifts. So that's what we did, our plan was to go to California to work in the shipyards, which never materialized because I couldn't get my birth certificate. I don't know how I should say this, but out of a clear blue sky we started hitch hiking. She had a sister living out in Idaho, and that was our goal to begin with once we decided to hitch hike although we didn't plan it that way. We hitch hiked from April the 28th till September what was it--when we joined the service. While we were hitch hiking Pearl Harbor happened in December and we were doing this hitch hiking in 42 from April to September or October. What can I say from there on? One weekend we went to Spokane Washington while we were in Idaho and we got information about the WAACs. We decided that we needed to do something for our country after the war started. So we went up there and found this information and they signed us up and told us it would be at least two weeks before we would be interviewed or anything else. So we decided to go hitch hiking some more, we went to California. Our two weeks were up and we decided we better go to the recruiting office there in San Francisco, which we did. Of course they gave us all the interviews and the shots and what you call it's--the physical examinations and what have you. This was on September 24, 1942. October 2 we had the intellectual and physical tests and on the 14th we were sworn in. So it was not until October the 22nd that I got my orders for Fort Des Moines. My girl friend had got hers the day before I did.

Mark: Did she go to Des Moines as well?

Brown: She went to Des Moines as well, but she got there a day ahead of me. We were never in the same class together; we were in different companies. So we took our basic there in Fort Des Moines.

Mark: What did this basic consist of? Now if I think Army basic training I think of firing guns and marching and those sorts of things.

Brown: Our basic training consisted mostly in marching and drills and that type of thing there were no guns involved but we did have gas mask training. KP, naturally, and I think everything else that the boys had.

Mark: Now, I went to basic training forty years after that in the air force. I remember a lot of screaming and yelling, four letter words and that sort of thing. But I don't get that impression speaking other WAAC's that, that was the case.

Brown: No, we didn't have that kind, although they were strict with us and they made us tow the line. What else can I say, you know--I went through basic then, it was I think three weeks in October. After basic was over with my girl friend and I both were in the Motor Corps training. So we moved to Hotel Champlain in down town Des Moines, that was from November 23 to January

15. There we learned how to check over the motors of the vehicles. They were mostly what they call weapons carriers at that time. We had quite an extensive study about the car itself of what could go wrong with this and that. We even went out on maneuvers at night driving in formation of course, with a convoy. I graduated from there on January the 15th, so on January the 29th I was sent to Florida as cadre.

Mark: Now, this is your first duty station?

Brown: Yes, right.

Mark: Now, that your training was all done this was your first station?

Brown: Yes, right. I wanted to stay in Motor Corp, but of course I didn't get it and I wanted to go over seas and I didn't get it, so what could I do but go where they told me to go. So I went down to Florida, and we started in Tent City. I don't remember how many tents there were, but there was about between 8 and 12 people in one tent with bunk beds. Well, we weren't in there too long and they sent us out to what they call the Contonement area, which was in the boon docks. Further out and still, was Daytona Beach and they had just opened that area up. One of the things I remember real well, was the fact that we didn't have mattresses on our cots we just had an army blanket at the bottom and then covered up with an army blanket at the top, we did have pillows. Our latrine was two or three blocks away, they were open and open stalls for showers you know things like that.

Mark: A fairly sparse existence it sounds like.

Brown: At that time, but I felt sorry for the girls that used to come down from up north. They were going to Florida and going to spend the winter there you know. They didn't bring any winter clothes or heavy clothes it was all shorts and stuff. It took a long time for us to get clothes for them. But they were a good group of kids.

Mark: I was going to ask what type of women joined the WAAC's at this time?

Brown: I would say it was more or less they were girls that were looking for what shall I say excitement or something different out of the ordinary, which is what the WAAC's were. I think I was looking for the same thing, something different, variety is the spice of life you know. I certainly have had it!

Mark: What sort of backgrounds did they come from? Were they fairly middle class, were they poor, and was it a good mix?

Brown: Most of them I would say were middle class, there was a few rich girls and there were some of the other ones too. But you know considering how many

there was they seemed to get along very well after the first or second day. We had a lot of activities available in what they call the Orderly Room they called it, where you could go and meet the people.

Mark: Is this in Des Moines or Florida?

Brown: This is in Florida. We spent a lot of time in that room writing letters or listening, or talking to people, playing cards, doing jig saw puzzles. One thing I did an awful lot of especially in Florida, I played the accordion. I had brought that with me and we would go out behind the barracks at night and a bunch of the girls we would sing and I would play. We had a great time many a night, whether that is good or bad I don't know, but I enjoyed it and I think they did too. The girls did not know me by my regular name I was Sergeant Squeaky to everybody. If you asked for Sergeant Squeaky, they knew whom they were talking about if you asked for my regular name and nobody knew who I was.

Mark: It sounds like it was a fairly informal?

Brown: Yes, it differently was. We did have to follow orders and we did have to go and do what they told us to do when they told us to do it and how. As Cadre there, I did a lot of training and marching well, they were getting their basic training. I even substituted as the Mail order Clerk, also my memory is slipping--what do you call it where you issue the clothes?

Mark: I don't know what that was called either and I should know.

Brown: What was it called it was called something?

Mark: It was called Quarter master or something.

Brown: No, it had a different name for the women, oh Supply Sergeant that is what it was. Now, I was never a PFC, I made Corporal on March 9th and on March the 24th I became a Sergeant or a leader is what they called it at that time.

Mark: How did you rise so fast in the ranks?

Brown: Well, I was new I mean the whole WAAC were new, they had only started in July and this was in September they had to pick up somebody from the file and rank to be in charge.

Mark: I suppose. In terms of the military what were your duties there?

Brown: In Florida I was Cadre, which my duties were to take care of the girls and teach them how to march and the basics. When I went to Bohling Field, Washington DC, I was made the Supply Sargent that was my big duty, to

issue clothes and to take care of it when they changed there sheets and stuff. To give them new clothes for old clothes anything that had to do with supplies.

Mark: I see.

Brown: I spent a lot of time at the Pentagon Building back in those days, where a lot of the supplies came from back in those days and that's were we took the laundry.

Mark: Did you get off the post much? You mentioned the activities that you did on post; did you get on into Washington?

Brown: Oh yes, you could get your over night passes or you could get three day passes for going down into Washington DC and Bohling. The Master Sergeant or the First Sergeant and I were very good friends and we did a lot of things together. She had the--we would go and take a jeep and go into Baltimore or go some place and spend the weekend. But she took me along mainly to drive her, she always went out and got drunk and I had to see that she got back home. That is the reason she took me with her. But it also got me into the NCO and the noncom clubs and what have you. Of course I still did a lot of traveling in Florida going to see Saint Augustine and Miami on weekends and that type of thing. I always have loved to travel anyway.

Mark: You had done that before.

Brown: I still hitch hiked most of the when I was in the service even.

Mark: Now, the military is largely male, back in those days women in uniform were a rarity.

Brown: We were more a novelty.

Mark: Did you encounter any sort of hostility or shock, humorous things?

Brown: None what so ever, as far as hostile or bad no matter where I went I always had a boyfriend or two. They never lasted that long, because I wasn't there that long either. But it was nothing, especially the military navy sailors, marines they would go for WAAC's I think or for us in uniform. It was no problem at all to get dates.

Mark: What about military authority? Sergeant Squeaky told private, so and so to do something did they do it?

Brown: She would have to do it.

Mark: What if it was a male?

Brown: We weren't.

Mark: You weren't part of the regular military?

Brown: No, no we weren't part of the male, the women were by themselves. Now one thing that discouraged me and got me to the point that I got out, is when they changed over you know to the Women's Army Corps, was the fact that in Bohling Field our Lieutenant was one of these people that you had to look up to. She figured she was up on a pedestal, you couldn't get to talk to her or get anywhere with her that's why I got in with the First Sergeant. She was able to go and talk to her and that is really one of the reasons why I got out. The other reason was because I wanted to go over seas and didn't get it. If she would have been different and they had asked me to go to OCS school just before I decided to get out. But I said, "No, if that is the kind of leaders they bring forth I don't want no part of it." So I didn't go to OCS school.

Mark: In fact you left the service all together?

Brown: Yes.

Mark: When they changed over to--

Brown: When they changed over to the regular WAC instead of the WAAC, is when I got out. You had that choice at that time.

Mark: I see.

Brown: My girlfriend was in over four years, the one I went in with. But she was transferred back to California and Colorado in that area, we really didn't spend that much time together.

Mark: So, when they did change to regular army, your decision to leave had nothing to do with not wanting to enter the military proper necessarily?

Brown: Oh no. No, I would have gladly have stayed on except of--one of my mottos is try anything once and I had tried and I was not getting what I wanted out of it. So I went out and tried something different, which I did do.

Mark: So you left the service then in 1943.

Brown: Right.

Mark: What did you do afterwards? Did you continue to work for the war efforts in someway?

- Brown: Well, from there I went home for a while. Then I went to Detroit and I got a job with Commercial Carriers as a driver of army vehicles of all kinds. We took them to any place east of the Mississippi, those army vehicles included, jeeps and buses, 15 passengers and 45 passengers. What do you call them-- for taking people for the hospital? Ambulances, any type that they had.
- Mark: It sounds like interesting work.
- Brown: It was, it was.
- Mark: You got to travel a bit.
- Brown: I got to travel and we did do a lot of traveling in convoys but not always.
- Mark: Now, this is not exactly "Rosy the Riveter," but you were a woman working in industry at the time.
- Brown: For the service, yeah I was really, yeah.
- Mark: Where you employed by the military itself or by the company?
- Brown: By the company.
- Mark: Now, were there other women drivers or where you--
- Brown: Oh yeah, there was men and women drivers and commercial carriers. We got three cents a mile, for driving these vehicles back in 43.
- Mark: I suspect it paid a lot better than the WAAC did?
- Brown: Well yeah it did. It started at \$21.00 a month is what I started out with.
- Mark: So it sounds like that was interesting work. As the war went on, were there more vehicles to deliver? I'm trying to get a handle on war production and how it might have affected you?
- Brown: Well there was always work to be done. Very seldom did I go to the office and not have a vehicle to take out. It did happen once; I caused a strike for one day. We belonged to the teamsters union, you had to belong and of course seniority was supposed to be good. But this one, day there was only one vehicle that needed to be taken out and I wanted it of course. But they gave it to another boy or guy who didn't have the seniority that I did. So I put up a stink and called the teamsters union and they shut the place down for one day. You just never knew what I was going to do?

- Mark: I guess not. So you drove for Gees, 2 years about? I assume till the war ended?
- Brown: No, no I didn't. From there and well here is where another long story comes in. On one of these trips, I took a 15-passenger bus down to South Carolina, Charleston South Carolina. One that trip I broke every rule that the company had. First of all I took the vehicle home over night, and then the next day I wore shorts instead of pants and what have you. Then I picked up every hitchhiker I saw on the way. At one time I had I think it was nine, but they were all military boys going home on a pass or a referral or what have you. The last guy that got off was he lived in West Virginia and he invited me into his home, he wanted me to meet his folks and what have you. I did do that, so--that night I took the vehicle and we went to town and spent the night on the town and stayed over night. The next morning his mother fixed me a lunch and I was on my way. From then on we started corresponding and what have you, then about a month later I had another trip down to Atlanta Georgia. I went by way of West Virginia and stopped in again to see him, which was fine and which was great. The same thing happened, but I didn't break any rules that time. I don't remember what kind of a vehicle I had, I think it was just a weapons carrier possibly. From then on we corresponded and finally we decided we were going to get married. He was transferred; he had a whole month's vacation that's why I was able to see him the second time. Then he was transferred to Wisconsin, Fort--there above Baraboo?
- Mark: Fort McCoy.
- Brown: Fort McCoy he was transferred there, and so I had a sister living in Baraboo at the time and I decided I would come to Baraboo and we would get married and that was going to be it. Well, I made the trip; I hitch hiked to Baraboo. The next day I called Fort McCoy he had been shipped out the day before.
- Mark: Overseas?
- Brown: Overseas. Which was the beginning of the end. So what do I do now, you know that type of thing. Well which was great, after that I went back to Detroit and drove for a little while longer and then I decided that I had had enough of that. So I went to Arizona and got a job with Railway Express in Phoenix. I worked the trains, loading and unloading and of course a lot of troop trains came through there at the time. I would always be out there talking to the boys trying to get excitement because I knew what they were going through in the service. Always one out of the bunch would ask for my name and address and I would give it to him, the next thing you knew I had letters from 10 or 15 of them you know.
- Mark: Boys will be boys.

Brown: Boys will be boys, but I made up my mind and answered every letter that I ever got. And there were lots of them! Because when I decided to leave home the last time, I had a bushel basket full of letters and I went and burned them all, which was the wrong thing to do I guess?

Mark: I would say?

Brown: Yeah, but at that time I didn't want to have them laying around, that's why I did that.

Mark: So when the war ended where were you? Where you out west at this time?

Brown: No from there, I came back to Illinois, I was working in Chicago at the time when the World War ended, August the 14, 1945. I was in Chicago working for a doctor, as a secretary. I remember that afternoon. I was on a bus going home, I think it was in the afternoon when I heard about it. The people all of us must have heard about it at the same time. The people went crazy! There was a lot of screaming and hollering and kissing and hugging, it was just something that you had to see in order to appreciate.

Mark: I'm sure. So with the war over as a working woman did things change for you at all? Did you stay in the work force, were you able to stay in?

Brown: Oh yes, I have worked all my life, all my life. Even after I got married and had kids. I worked at that time; I went from good to bad to worse. We were in a tavern, we owned a tavern, and I worked one shift and my husband worked another shift, so we were always there for the children. You know there was always somebody, even after that when we moved to Florida, back in 1965, 66. We moved to Florida and we had three kids, my oldest son and then I had twins a boy and a girl, so we had two boys and a girl. Even in Florida I worked nights and my husband worked days, so that somebody would be around for the kids all the time. In Florida I worked for American Bakery, for four or five years and then I became a night auditor at one of the big motels. I started out at Howard Johnsons and then I ended up at Hyatt House, and I worked there for 7 and a half years, I think it was. Then of course my husband died in 86 and I decided to leave Florida. I wanted to get as far away from Florida as I could, so I went to Alaska for nine months.

Mark: That's about as far away as you can get?

Brown: That is as far as I could get from Florida. From then on I did volunteer work, although up there I worked as the secretary to the principal of the school and I drove the school bus. With the volunteer work I worked for the radio and I got my FCC license and I had my own program for awhile.

Mark: You have managed to stay busy! No question about that!

- Brown: I have got to be kept busy or other wise I will go insane.
- Mark: Oh, I understand that. After the war employment was not a problem for you?
- Brown: No. Even though I've worked in seventeen different states, I never had a problem getting a job. I did mostly office work, any type of office work.
- Mark: Now, in terms of other sort of post war adjustments: for example; a lot of GI's came home and used the GI Bill, being in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps I don't imagine you were eligible for those sort of benefits?
- Brown: No, I wasn't in long enough, you see I wasn't in the regular WAC, I was only in the WAAC and those privileges were not for us, so therefore I couldn't take advantage even if I had wanted to.
- Mark: Home loan provisions and all those sorts of things, you were not eligible for benefits.
- Brown: No. I could not even keep my insurance that we had in the service.
- Mark: In terms of veteran's organizations did you join any?
- Brown: No, I really haven't joined any of them, because I never thought of it I guess. They weren't available where I was at most of the time either, so I did not take advantage of that. I did join the Moose Club one time.
- Mark: Not exactly a veteran's sort of thing?
- Brown: No it isn't.
- Mark: Do you stay in contact with some of the people?
- Brown: No, I did for quite awhile and all of the sudden I don't know what happened they quite writing so I never got involved if they had reunions or what have you nobody has contacted me. I have been moved around so much, but I did try to write to several of them. I got their addresses from that book you got and I never got a reply, I tried. I had this one girl, her name was Helen Doebroski when I was in Bohling Field and we corresponded for two or three years and then all the sudden that was the end of that. Why, I don't remember, I don't think it was my fault I'm sure I answered because that is one of the things I always did was to answer the letters.
- Mark: Those are my standard questions, it didn't take too long.
- Brown: I also gave you a lot of stuff that you weren't interested in probably too.

Mark: Oh no, it was all very interesting. Is there anything else you would like to add? Is there anything I missed or glossed over or?

Brown: Well, not really I guess. We did KP down in Florida we had what you call fire duty which we would have two hour shifts all night long. Two persons and we would call back and forth and we would have to walk all night and what have you. I thought it was kind of interesting. One of the nights I was on we had a fire some lumber was burning and that was quite an experience in itself. What to do how to you know. We did a lot of things in Bohling Field I also got to go to the Bob Hope Show one time. No that was in Fort Des Moines at the hotel there Hotel Chamberlain. We got to see that show; another thing I did was I signed up for the Major Bows talent contest. It was a program that he had where you could do different things like singing, dancing or playing the accordion. I signed up with him and had an interview, but he didn't accept me I wasn't good enough I guess.

Mark: Or maybe the accordion didn't fit in?

Brown: But at least I tried that too! I think I have covered everything; I did go over it kind of fast.

Mark: No, it was fine. I appreciate you coming in.

[End of interview]