

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

ANNA MAE ROBERTSON

6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion, Women's Army Corps, WWII

2014

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Robertson, Anna M., (1924-), Oral History Interview, 2014.

Approximate length: 1 hour

Contact WVM Research Center for access to the original recording.

Summary:

In this oral history interview Anna Mae Robertson discusses her service in the U.S. Army, Women's Army Corps (WAC). A member of the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion Robertson was a mail sorter and a hospital aide. The 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion was the only all-female unit deployed overseas in World War II and the first female African-American unit in the Army.

Robertson grew up in Osceola, Arkansas. She and her brother were raised by their mother. The family subsisted on wages obtained sharecropping. She recalls cutting the spinach crop. Her mother died and she states that with no one to take care of them her brother joined the Navy and she joined the Army enlisting on March 12, 1943. She was ordered to report to Des Moines, Iowa, and thence sent to Breckenridge, Kentucky.

She states that her training consisted of the duties of a nurse's aide. She made beds, gave baths, and took temperatures. She recollects firing coal furnaces on cold Kentucky days. From Kentucky she went to Shanks, New York, for processing for overseas. Shanks was the largest point of embarkation for the European and North African theaters during World War II. Robertson shipped out in early February 1945 on SS *Il de France*. She remembers standing on deck, all assembled in formation, and tall waves soaking her. The ship was rerouted due to German U-boat activity.

She and the rest of her unit disembarked in Glasgow, Scotland, on February 12, 1945, and took a train to Birmingham, England. Robertson states that although there was segregation by gender and race, she did not have any feelings about it at the time. She speaks about working in a school in Birmingham, the cold, and the dim light resulting from the blacked-out windows. Robertson's unit, the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion, was tasked with expediting a years-long backlog of mail, sorting and distributing mail to service people. It was labor essential to soldier morale. Her unit finished ahead of schedule dispatching the mail backlog and moved on to Rouen, France, again completing the task early. Robertson also utilized her earlier training and worked as a nurse's aide in a hospital.

In early 1946, the 6888th was shipped back to the United States. The 6888th reentered the country without fanfare or other reception. Robertson went to Detroit, Michigan, to live with her aunt. Her attendance at a soldier friend's wedding in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, led to Anna's taking up residency in that city. She remembers the uncertainty of employment for the returning veterans. She recalls working in a fish factory, herring smell clinging to her clothes, and eliciting stares on the bus ride home from work. She found work as a nurse's aide at the Woods Veterans Hospital in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In 1948 she married a World War II veteran. Her husband worked for

the Milwaukee Road railroad. She worked at Milwaukee County Hospital before becoming a full-time homemaker and caring for a household that included eight children.

Robertson states that she enjoyed being in the Women's Army Corps. She feels her Army experience provided her with a home and with the opportunity to travel to different places. Without serving in the Army she would never have been on a ship. Crossing the ocean made her feel like a different person. Her granddaughters are carrying forth her nursing legacy.

Biographical Sketch:

Anna Mae Robertson grew up in Osceola, Arkansas. She enlisted in the Women's Army Corps in 1943. A member of the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion she was stationed in the European theatre of World War II. Her unit returned to the U.S. in early 1946. Robertson worked in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, as a nurse's aide and a homemaker. In 2009 the services of the 6888th were recognized at services in Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C. and Robertson, who had been overlooked in 2009, finally received her medals in 2014.

Archivist's notes:

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. It is strongly suggested that researchers directly engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript.

Interviewed by Ellen Brooks, 2014.
Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, 2020.
Reviewed by Jeff Javid, 2020.
Abstract written by Jeff Javid, 2020.

Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of OH1898.Robertson_access]

Brooks: Today is Wednesday March 5, 2014. This is an interview with Anna Robertson who served with the Women's Army Corps 6888th Central Postal Battalion during World War II. Mrs. Rob—this interview is being conducted at Mrs. Robertson's home in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and the interviewer is Ellen Brooks. And Mrs. Robertson, today is your birthday, correct?

Robertson: Yes, it is.

Brooks: Great. So you were born today, and you're not quite sure about the year? It was either 1922 or '24. Is that correct?

Robertson: Twenty-four.

Brooks: Twenty-four. Okay. 1924. So can you tell me a little bit about your early life and your childhood?

Robertson: Well, I had one brother. It was just two of us. I had one brother, and my mother died, so that's when I left to go into the Women's Army Corps.

Brooks: Okay. And where did you grow up?

Robertson: Osceola, Arkansas.

Brooks: Okay. And what was that like? What — I've never been to Arkansas. What was that like?

Robertson: [Laughs] I think it's a small town. It's just not very large. That's the factories and all kind of crops and things.

Brooks: And what kind of things did you like to do when you were little? Did you go to school? (Phone ringing) That's okay. We'll pause it really quick.

Robertson: I had to cut spinach to buy my Easter shoes and my Easter things that I got for Easter. We would cut spinach. They had crops—spinach crops.

Brooks: Okay, you cut spinach crops.

Robertson: Uh-huh.

Brooks: Okay, and was that you and your brother and your family?

Robertson: Yes.

Brooks: All right. And did you do anything for fun? Did you have any hobbies?

Robertson: No. We just went to church. We didn't do much of anything else.

Brooks: So what do you remember most about your childhood?

Robertson: Talking about when I was in Arkansas?

Brooks: Mm-hmm. Yeah. What do you remember most? What are some memories that really stand out to you? You were saying you had to walk a long distance?

Robertson: Yeah. And then I did some babysitting for some of the neighbors in the neighborhood, and sometimes I'd be over for her for lunch at her house, and then sometimes she'd come to me. I didn't live too far from where she lived. It was my house, and she would eat and have—she came back. Her dad was blind. He got hurt in the Army. And she would tell him about the kind of bread she ate at my house, at my mother's house.

Brooks: And what did your parents do?

Robertson: They did just about the same thing I do. Crops.

Brooks: So you all worked together?

Robertson: Yes.

Brooks: Okay. And was it—were you working on crops for somebody else? Or were they your crops?

Robertson: It was someone else's.

Brooks: Okay. Okay. So you'd be paid to work on their crops?

Robertson: Yes.

Brooks: Okay. Great. Okay. And then—and what were your parents like? What kind of people were they?

Robertson: Oh, I don't know my—my father wasn't with us. It was just my mother was raising the two kids.

Brooks: Okay. And then so what year was it that you entered the Women's Army Corps? Do you remember?

Robertson: What year was that?

F1: [Whispers] What is it, dear?

Robertson: When I went into the Army?

F1: I believe it was 1942.

Brooks: 1942?

Robertson: Oh, was it '42?

F1: Yes.

Robertson: I told you [??] that way back I don't remember some of that stuff.

Brooks: That's okay. Just —

Robertson: But I did remember my serial number that I had.

F1: She has her serial number.

Brooks: Yeah. And those exact details don't matter that much.

Robertson: Okay.

F1: One moment. Let's see. Serial number. Oh, I'm sorry. 1938.

Brooks: 1938.

F1: Yes.

Brooks: Okay.

Robertson: I'm so mixed up.

F1: Enlistment records, it says.

Brooks: Am I reading this right? 1938 to 1946? Okay.

F1: Sorry about that.

Brooks: No, that's okay.

Robertson: [Laughs]

Brooks: Okay. No, no problem. Okay, so 1938 to 1946. So can you tell me why you enlisted in the Women's Army Corps?

Robertson: My mother died, which just left the two of us, and we didn't have anyone to take care of us, so he went into the Navy, and I went into the Army.

Brooks: Okay. So your brother went into the Navy?

Robertson: Yes.

Brooks: And where did you enlist?

Robertson: Osceola.

Brooks: Okay.

Robertson: But they sent us to Little Rock, Arkansas to get our tests.

[00:05:00]

Brooks: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about that, about going to Little Rock?

Robertson: No.

Brooks: Do you remember?

Robertson: I don't remember.

F2: Was it exciting?

Robertson: No —

F2: Were you nervous?

Robertson: Was I nervous?

F2: Uh-huh.

Robertson: No. No. No. I was just wondering how was that going to do because they'd tell you how your health was, and if you didn't have good health, you wouldn't be going into the Army. But I really wasn't too worried about it, I don't think.

Brooks: So did you pass all your tests?

Robertson: Yes.

Brooks: And then what—after Little Rock, what was next?

Robertson: I came back home, and then they came and told me where to report to in Des Moines, Iowa.

Brooks: Okay. Okay, and then—so you went to Des Moines. Was that your first time that you'd ever been out of Arkansas?

Robertson: Yeah, I guess so. [Laughs]

Brooks: Yeah. So what did you—what were your first impressions when all this was happening? What were you thinking about?

Robertson: I don't know. I was just thinking, you know, how was—how was I going to do, and be with a lot of strangers, somebody that you didn't know. Because I had planned to go with another friend that I knew, but she didn't pass her tests because she had TB. And she couldn't go. So I was by myself. I didn't know anyone. [Laughs]

Brooks: So was it easy to make friends? Did you—

Robertson: It was. It was. I met my one friend that lives here in Milwaukee. Before I came for the wedding I met her in the Army.

Brooks: Great. And was that in Des Moines?

F1: Detroit. I mean—where did you—what state?

Robertson: It was in Breckenridge, Kentucky.

F1: Oh, Breckenridge, Kentucky.

Brooks: Okay. So you went from Des Moines to Breckenridge?

Robertson: Yes.

Brooks: Okay, so can you tell me a little bit about Breckenridge, about what you did there?

Robertson: Oh, let's say oh I can't think because [??] I worked in the hospitals, nurse's aides.

Brooks: Okay. So did they train you to do that?

Robertson: Yes, they did. We got training. We had training.

Brooks: And what was your training like? Can you tell me a little bit about what they had you do?

Robertson: Made beds, give baths, take temperatures.

Brooks: Did you like it?

Robertson: I liked it all right. It was—I liked it all right.

Brooks: Do you remember any of the people that trained you? Any of your officers?

Robertson: No.

Brooks: Nothing about them, about how you were treated, or their personalities, or anything?

F2: How were you treated as a female?

Robertson: They were nice. I never had any problems with any of them. Not any of them. My Major in my group that I was with the ladies, it was Major Adams. But I never had enough trouble with any of them.

Brooks: And were they mostly female officers that were training you?

Robertson: Yes.

Brooks: And what was that experience like, being a woman in the Army?

Robertson: [Laughs] I know.

F2: Did you feel any different, Grandma?

Robertson: Huh?

F2: Did you feel any different?

Robertson: By being in the Army? I feel like I was a different person after we had to sail across the ocean.

F2: Over to England, right?

Robertson: Yeah, I went into England.

Brooks: Right. So, but—do you have any other—do you remember anything else about your training? I just want to know about when you were getting ready to go over, what that was like, and how you were feeling.

Robertson: We had a lot of training because we had to carry our own luggage, or our own duffel bags we had. And now—but I guess it was fine. They always had everything all prepared for you and everything.

Brooks: So did you feel like you got very physically fit? Were you getting stronger?

Robertson: I hope so. [Laughs]

F2: Did you do basic training? You know how you see it on TV?

Robertson: We did have—we had all kinds of training. We had PT. Sure did.

Brooks: What was your favorite part of training?

Robertson: I don't know. I guess I liked it all. [Laughs]

Brooks: You liked it all, wow. Not a lot of people like basic training very much. That is different for you.

Robertson: Yeah.

Brooks: So when you entered the Women's Army Corps, was it integrated, or was it segregated?

[00:10:01]

Robertson: We were nothing but women at the part where I was.

Brooks: But race-wise, did they keep all of the black people separate from all the white people?

Robertson: Yeah, I think they did. I don't remember any white women being in our—

Brooks: In your unit?

Robertson: Mm-mm. I don't think so.

Brooks: Do you remember when you—how you were assigned to different tasks and the different units?

Robertson: You mean for work?

Brooks: Mm-hmm. How did they decide what you were going to do? Do you remember?

Robertson: We had a training period that you had to go to school, and they would teach you about what you was going to be doing.

Brooks: Okay. And so it was—you just kind of went wherever they told you to go?

Robertson: Yeah.

Brooks: And you had to do—and you were working in a hospital for a little while, right?

Robertson: Yeah.

Brooks: Okay. And then do you remember when you got the orders that you were going to go overseas?

Robertson: No. They didn't—I don't seem to remember that point I was, oh—

F1: I—let me see.

Brooks: I don't need to know, like the—

Robertson: Yeah. They probably sent us over after our basic training.

Brooks: Okay. So maybe we can back up a little bit. Do you remember Pearl Harbor, when the bombs hit Pearl Harbor? Do you remember where you were, and hearing about that?

Robertson: No. I don't remember where I was. [Laughs]

Brooks: But do you remember hearing about it?

Robertson: Yes. Yeah. But I couldn't remember whether I was in the States or whether I was overseas, or—because we traveled over the sea. We never had any problems with no one, no enemies or anything to annoy us [??].

Brooks: Do you remember how you —do you remember what the mood was when the Pearl Harbor was attacked? Do you remember how people were feeling?

Robertson: Oh, I can't remember.

Brooks: That's okay. So when you were—so you were stationed in Breckenridge, and then you went up to New York, I think?

Robertson: Yes.

Brooks: Before you left. Do you remember being at Camp Shanks at all?

Robertson: Shanks, New York. That's the point where we sailed from across the ocean, and we got on that ship in Shanks, New York.

Brooks: And what was that like? What was Shanks, New York like?

Robertson: Oh, we had all of our belongings in our duffel bags, like I tell you, and they had us wait outside and all get together. We had to wait, and I guess time for us to load on the ship. So we were sitting out there for a while. But it was okay.

Brooks: Was it busy? Were there a lot of people there at Shanks?

Robertson: No, just the group that I went over with.

Brooks: And do you remember how many people were in your unit, about? Just an estimate?

Robertson: No. [Laughs]

Brooks: Okay. That's okay. So when you were getting ready to leave, do you remember how you were feeling about getting ready to cross the ocean and go somewhere new?

Robertson: Yeah. Well, I got ready to leave because I didn't go over—I didn't come back as a group like I went over because there wasn't many of us being discharged at the same time. So I came back on a smaller ship, but everything went fine.

Brooks: But on the way over, before you—when you were still in New York, getting ready, before you had gone overseas, do you remember how you were feeling?

Robertson: I don't know. I guess I was sort of getting used to the Army ways and everything, so I wasn't too upset or anything about it. Just a lot of waiting you have to do.

Brooks: So you said you were getting used to the Army ways. What does that mean? What are the Army ways?

Robertson: Well, they tell you everything, you know, and you have to do. So I can't remember. It's just been so long now, but the Army wasn't bad. It wasn't bad for me because I went probably to the Army under different circumstances than some of the other people there.

F2: Because you wanted to go to the Army?

Robertson: No, my mother died.

F2: Yeah, so then you needed to go.

Robertson: I needed to go to have somebody to take care of me.

F1: To help take care of you.

Robertson: Uh-huh.

[00:15:00]

Brooks: And so what were the—the other people who were joining, that you were with, what were their circumstances? Why were they there, do you think?

Robertson: I don't know why they were there. I guess they just wanted to see what the Army Corps was like, I guess.

Brooks: And were you paying attention to what was going on during the war? Were you keeping track of the news from the fighting?

Robertson: Yeah, I'm sure we was.

Brooks: And what about your brother? Were you able to stay in touch with him while he was in the Navy?

Robertson: Yeah, he would just write me, and I'd write back to him.

Brooks: And where was he stationed?

Robertson: I don't know where he was stationed. I can't remember.

Brooks: Okay. Did he go —was he out in the overseas, do you know?

Robertson: Yeah, he must have been just the opposite from where that I was because he left from—his ship sailed from a different part from where that I sailed, and I sailed from New York, so he probably came out back from Georgia or someplace down and then sailed.

Brooks: Okay. Okay. So you kept in touch with him while he was in the Navy?

Robertson: Yeah.

Brooks: Okay. And how fast would the letters go between the two of you? How long did it take to get a letter?

Robertson: About two weeks, I guess.

Brooks: Okay. All right. And what would you write to him, when you were going to write him a letter? What would you tell him?

Robertson: Just I'd tell him where I was, what I had been doing, and how he was doing, and what it was like sailing over on the ship.

Brooks: So what was it like sailing over on the ship?

Robertson: Oh, it was okay. We would go up on the deck, and just stand up on the deck. The waves built up on the ship when you'd get all soaked. It's water takes the reroute [??]. But it was okay.

Brooks: Did you get seasick?

Robertson: No. I don't think so.

Brooks: Wow. That's good. That's impressive.

Robertson: I don't think so. [Laughs]

Brooks: So what did you do while you were—when you had down time, if you weren't busy with something? How did you entertain yourself?

Robertson: Well, I don't know. They had different little things that planned for us that we could do. For entertainment they had a special officer that was in charge of that.

Brooks: And what type of things would they have for you to do?

Robertson: Sometimes we would have dances. You mean after I got over in Italy?

Brooks: Sure.

Robertson: Yeah. And we didn't do too much.

Brooks: What about the food? How was that?

Robertson: Just Army food. [Laughs] It did all right.

Brooks: I've never had Army food before, so.

Robertson: Oh. [Laughs] Yeah. It did all right. It's—I guess we had a balanced diet so that you were eating the right things, so it wasn't too bad. We had our own cooks, um-hm.

Brooks: So then when you—after you crossed the ocean, I think you landed in England, right?

Robertson: Yes, we were. No, we were in France. Birmingham, England.

Brooks: Birmingham, England was your first—the first place you landed, and so since you'd never been out of Arkansas before, what—how did you feel about England?

Robertson: Oh, I don't know. I thought England, you know, was something different, something I'd never seen before, but I didn't think nothing about England and their horses and things like that, but I can't remember. There wasn't very much over there.

Brooks: So what did they have you do while you were in England? What were your tasks?

Robertson: About the same, I guess, that they had got your training for before you got there. That's what you did. You had to go through more training for something different if you didn't want—if you wanted to not do the thing. You didn't have much choice. You was in the Army. They would tell you.

Brooks: Did you ever—was there ever anything you wanted to do that you asked to be able to assign to?

[00:20:01]

Robertson: No.

Brooks: No. Did you work with the mail? I know that a lot of people in your battalion worked with the mail.

Robertson: Yeah, that's where we was assigned to. We was a mail group.

Brooks: So can you tell me a little bit about what that work was like? What did you do?

Robertson: I can't remember. Just sort mail, I guess. You know, and—that's about all.

F2: But did you take care of soldiers, too?

Robertson: Soldiers?

F2: Yeah, because you worked in a hospital. Did you have to take care of the wounded soldiers?

Robertson: Yeah. She was talking about the mail. You—that's why I thought she was talking about the mail.

F2: But you did both, right?

Robertson: Yeah, I did both. Uh-huh. I worked at the VA Hospital here.

Brooks: Here. When you came back, right?

Robertson: When I came back, yeah.

Brooks: But when you were in England, mostly you were working with the mail, when you were working with the bakers and the cooks?

Robertson: Yes.

Brooks: Right. And you were also working at a hospital. Were—you weren't doing all of that at the same time, though, were you?

Robertson: No. No, no, no.

Brooks: One thing at a time, right?

Robertson: One thing at a time.

Brooks: Okay. So you were in England, and then you travel—you had to go into houses that were blacked out with blacked out windows?

Robertson: Oh yeah, we lived in schools. There were so many of us to house, you know. So we needed a lot of room. We lived in schools, but they had colored all of the windows because of the war. You see, the war was somewhat practically over by the time we got over there, but the painted windows and things were still up.

Brooks: Okay. Do you remember how you were feeling? Were you nervous or scared at all, being over there?

Robertson: I don't think so.

Brooks: Were you having fun?

Robertson: Yes, I was trying to.

F2: Why did they paint the windows?

Robertson: Oh, because of the war. There was war there. There was shooting and everything else before we got there, and we came after the shooting, so that's why the windows were still covered because they didn't want the recruits that were shooting at you to have a good view with a clear window, so they covered all the windows.

F2: That's what I was trying to get at. Okay.

Brooks: Right, yeah. So there were—they had, like, blackouts, right? Where nobody could use any lights and everything?

Robertson: Yep. No lights.

Brooks: And were you—did you have friends while you were there? Were you making friends?

Robertson: Yeah. I made friends. I came here to live with one of my friends.

Brooks: Okay. So then the next stop was France? After England you went to France?

Robertson: Yes.

Brooks: And what was that like?

Robertson: How am I—could I have made friends there [??]? It was okay. I said there was a lot of horses. I can't remember anything very much in France.

Brooks: Did you work—when—did you work in a hospital while you were overseas? While you were in England or France?

Robertson: Yeah, I did.

Brooks: So can you tell me a little bit about what it was like to take care of the soldiers while you were over there?

Robertson: No. I can't remember. You mean to give the baths and change and make the beds, and take temperatures, all kinds of temps.

Brooks: Did you ever talk to the soldiers and hear stories about the battles and things?

Robertson: No, I didn't talk to any in particular.

Brooks: Okay. So were you still paying attention to what was happening with the war?

Robertson: Yeah. I was wondering, you know, when we would be able to leave and come back.

Brooks: Do you remember when the war was declared over? It was in May of 1945. Do you remember hearing about that?

Robertson: Oh yeah, we hear—well, we heard about when the war was over because I guess we couldn't get out of the Army until then. We couldn't sail back when they had a war. Then when the war was over, well and then that's when we got the chance to come back.

Brooks: So when the war was over was there a celebration?

Robertson: No, not that I know of.

[00:25:00]

Brooks: No big party or anything?

Robertson: No, no. [Laughs]

Brooks: Okay. Do you remember anything special about any of the people you worked with while you were over there?

Robertson: Anything special? I don't know.

Brooks: Just any memories or stories about some of the other women who were in the Army Corps. I just kind of want to know a little bit more about what it was like to be a part of the Women's Army Corps.

Robertson: I can't remember. It's—I probably have forgotten. It's been such a long time for me.

Brooks: So, any memories about how you felt? Anything about how—what you wrote to your brother, and things you would report back to home?

Robertson: Yeah, he would report back sometimes and tell me some of the things that was happening where he was.

Brooks: What types of things did he tell you?

Robertson: I can't remember what he used to tell me.

Brooks: Okay. So while you were in England and France, what did you miss most from being at home?

Robertson: I missed everything from home. In France, it wasn't like home for me. [Laughs] But it wasn't bad at all. I didn't think so. You'd meet friends, you know, and you'd get to know them, and you know, they'd get to know you, so.

Brooks: So what was your favorite part about being in the Army, if you had to pick a favorite thing?

Robertson: Hmm.

F2: [inaudible]

Robertson: Hmm?

F2: Did you like traveling?

Robertson: Traveling. I liked traveling okay. I had never been on a ship before. I probably hadn't even seen a ship before. There's a lot of water.

Brooks: How did you feel about the Army always telling you what to do and where to go?

Robertson: It was all right with me, because I never did go anyplace I guess. You know, you had to have permission to go into the city, if you wanted to shop or if you wanted to—for a movie in the city, you had to get permission of course before you could go in. I didn't do too much, though. But you could go in. You could go into the city. You had to get a pass.

Brooks: And when you'd go into the city, what would you do?

Robertson: Just walk around, mostly. [Laughs]

Brooks: So do you remember if you were treated any differently because you were a woman? Was it hard to be a woman in the Army when you were overseas?

Robertson: No, it wasn't hard to be a woman in the Army because all that we had was women, you know. So the Army didn't do anything to me. I didn't do nothing to the Army. [Laughs] I had a reason, I guess. That's why I felt—why I would feel different from some of the other people that were in there.

Brooks: What types of things did you learn while you were there? Did you learn anything that you don't think you would have learned otherwise?

Robertson: No. I don't think so.

F2: What about a second language? Did you learn any second language?

F1: Training-wise.

Robertson: No, I didn't learn a second language.

F2: A little?

Robertson: A little, maybe, yeah. You would learn a few words.

F2: A few words. And you wouldn't have learned that if you were here.

Robertson: *Comment allez-vous* and that kind of stuff.

F1: See, see.

Brooks: There you go.

F2: *Comment allez-vous*, what's that? That sounds French.

Robertson: It is.

Brooks: A little French?

Robertson: Yeah.

F2: *Bonjour. Je m'appelle* Anna. But that's not my name. That's yours.

Brooks: So you learned a little French. Did you ever interact with the other soldiers, with the—with male soldiers?

Robertson: No, not unless they came to your group to visit with you, you know, if you knew someone they'd have to get a pass and go into the day room, and could visit with them in the day room.

[00:30:01]

Brooks: So when you—in England, you were living in schools. When you were in France, where were you living?

Robertson: In a school building, I told you. With the windows painted.

Brooks: In France?

Robertson: Oh, that was England, huh. They'd paint the windows black. In France, what did—where did we live? It had to be something pretty large to house all of us because there was so many.

Brooks: Some people—sometimes people lived in tents. Some other people lived in bigger buildings, so I wasn't sure if you remembered ever—do you remember ever living in a tent?

Robertson: No.

Brooks: Okay. So you were probably pretty lucky. Yeah. What was the hardest part, do you think, about being a woman in the Army?

Robertson: I don't know, just being away from home, you know, and doing the things that you would do when you were at home. You'd always have to have permission to do anything.

Brooks: So what was the —and then what was the trip back home like?

Robertson: Oh, it was nice. I said we came back on a smaller ship, and it was not quite so different from the larger ship that we went over on.

Brooks: It was different?

Robertson: I thought it was.

Brooks: Okay.

Robertson: Maybe it wasn't as old a ship as the other one was. I don't know.

Brooks: And was it just the one ship? Or were there—did you travel in a big fleet?

Robertson: Just one.

Brooks: Just one ship. And did you get seasick on that trip?

Robertson: Maybe a little bit, but you learned how to not get seasick, so.

Brooks: So what were your feelings when you knew you were going back home?

Robertson: I guess I'd also be glad to be coming back and trying to think and plan for what's I going to do. Where was I going to work?

F2: So you were more scared to come back than going in.

Robertson: Yeah. I had a lot more to worry about because it's all on you. Otherwise the Army taking care of everything.

Brooks: And what were you thinking? What were your thoughts about what you were going to do?

Robertson: I don't know. I guess I'd just go back to work like I was doing when I left. But I came over here. I went to Detroit and I visited with someone I knew in Detroit, and I left Detroit and came here for the wedding, and then I went back to Detroit, and in a couple weeks I came back. I stayed here. I've been here ever since. I didn't go back.

Brooks: So when you (baby screaming) so when you went back, did you come back through New York?

Robertson: Did I come back through New York? I don't think so. I can't imagine enough when we came back. I should know. I know it was a much smaller ship.

Brooks: Smaller ship. And was there—do you remember having any kind of homecoming? Was there a celebration when your ship got back?

Robertson: No.

Brooks: No celebration?

Robertson: No.

Brooks: And how were you feeling?

Robertson: I was feeling fine. I was feeling fine. They'd probably fix you a special meal, something, you know, that you—but we didn't have too much of a celebration.

Brooks: Okay. So then you went to Detroit, correct?

Robertson: Yeah.

Brooks: And why Detroit?

Robertson: I had an aunt that lived in Detroit, and I went over there to stay with them.

Brooks: Okay. And what was your brother doing at that point?

Robertson: He was still in the Navy. I got out before him. And then after that he started—went over to live with his dad. His dad lived in Flint, Michigan.

Brooks: So when your brother got out he lived in Flint?

Robertson: In Flint.

Brooks: And so you were in Detroit, living with your aunt, until you came to Milwaukee for a wedding?

Robertson: Yes.

Brooks: And whose wedding was it?

Robertson: Margaret Williams. She was in my same outfit that I was in.

Brooks: So she was getting married?

Robertson: Yes.

Brooks: Okay. What's her name?

Robertson: Margaret Williams.

Brooks: Margaret Williams, okay. Can you tell me a little bit about her? What kind of person she was? (cell phone ringing)

Robertson: No. She was nice and friendly. She was good to me. I came back here to stay and never left [Laughs].

[00:35:09]

Brooks: So you—did you move in with Margaret?

Robertson: Yes, I did.

Brooks: Okay. Hold on one second. So you said—we were talking about what you did with Margaret. You didn't really play cards?

Robertson: No, I wasn't that good at playing cards. They played cards. I would sit there and I would watch them, but I wasn't much for playing cards.

Brooks: But you did like to read and watch movies?

Robertson: Yeah. Mostly everything else, but I just wasn't very much at playing the cards.

Brooks: Did Margaret play cards?

Robertson: Yeah, they would play cards. They would play cards.

Brooks: So why—do you remember why you and Margaret became friends? How you became friends?

Robertson: I think maybe because we probably worked at the same place. And I lived in the same unit, or something.

Brooks: So then you guys kept in touch, and you came to Milwaukee for her wedding.

Robertson: Yeah.

Brooks: And then—and you never left.

Robertson: Yeah. Well, she probably got discharged the same time that I did.

Brooks: Do you remember how you felt when you were being discharged? Because you said, like, you weren't sure what you were going to do, what was next for you. What did it feel like to have to leave the Army?

Robertson: Yeah, I was ready to leave the Army. [Laughs] I knew I couldn't live in there forever, you know. I had to get out on my own sometime to start doing something, so I started looking for work.

Brooks: So what did you do when you moved here to Milwaukee? What did you start to do?

Robertson: I worked at a fish factory, wasn't too far from where we lived and I worked, and I worked in that, at the fish factory.

Brooks: What did you do there?

Robertson: I can't think what's the name of the fish now, but every New Year they have it. Pickled herring. Pickled herring.

Brooks: So did you can the fish?

Robertson: Yeah, we canned them. Sure did.

Brooks: Okay. And what did you think of working in the fish factory?

Robertson: It was just a job, but I needed, so I didn't have too bad, but you'd get the smell of the fish in your clothes, and when you'd get on the bus people would be looking at you because I smell like all that fish, because that was where we worked.

Brooks: Okay, so we're talking about how you worked in the fish factory.

Robertson: Yes.

Brooks: And you didn't like it very much because you had to smell like fish.

Robertson: Yeah. [Laughs]

Brooks: So what happened after that? What was next?

Robertson: What was the next? I don't know. I guess at the month, my next thing was when I would start working out to the VA Hospital.

Brooks: Okay. So how did that happen?

Robertson: I just went out and made out the application.

Brooks: Did you feel like you wanted to work in a hospital?

Robertson: Yeah, I would rather work with the hospital rather than in a fish place. And I needed someplace to work, and I thought the hospital was a good start because they had—I don't know. It had stuff to work, and then everything was better in the hospital, maybe, than in a factory. A lot of people worked in factories at that time.

Brooks: Did you get any special attention because you were a veteran?

Robertson: I didn't get nothing special, no. [Laughs]

Brooks: Do you know if they considered you for the job in the VA Hospital because you were also a veteran?

Robertson: Well, I guess so.

Brooks: And when you were working there, what were you doing?

Robertson: A hospital aide. I'd be giving beds and taking baths and just everything you have to do in the hospital.

Brooks: And what do you remember about some of your patients, or some of the people who were in the hospital?

Robertson: I don't know. I don't know anything about this—the people that was in the hospital. They was all right. I had no problem with any of them. I just did what I had to do, you know, and often hated [??] doing that, and that was it. I didn't have any problem with it.

Brooks: Did you enjoy being a nurse?

[00:40:01]

Robertson: Being at the VA?

Brooks: Mm-hmm.

Robertson: Yeah, I liked my job. Not necessarily the hours all the time, because sometimes you worked nights, 11:00 to 7:00.

Brooks: So when did you meet your husband?

Robertson: I must have met him about the same time that I came over and started living back with Evelyn.

Brooks: Who's Evelyn?

Robertson: Mm-hmm.

F2: Mom, her [??].

Robertson: Evelyn was a friend that I had in the Army, Evelyn.

Brooks: Okay. So, you had Evelyn, and Margaret was your other friend, right?

Robertson: Margaret is Evelyn's sister.

Brooks: Oh, okay.

Robertson: She's the one that owned the house that I lived in. But Evelyn was in the Army the same time I was.

Brooks: Okay. So you met your husband when you were living with Evelyn?

Robertson: Yes.

Brooks: Okay. And how did you and your husband meet?

Robertson: I can't remember. [Laughs] I can't remember. Oh, I probably met him through some of his relatives, because they used to go to church, and then his uncle was the pastor of the church where I went.

Brooks: And he was a veteran of the World War II, right?

Robertson: Yes.

Brooks: Did you ever talk about your experiences together?

Robertson: No, not—I didn't.

Brooks: Do you know what he did while he was in World War II?

Robertson: Well, do you remember Jan [??]? I don't know what he said he did. I couldn't remember what outfit he was in, all of that, either.

Brooks: Okay. Do you know if he ever saw any combat? Was he ever in danger?

Robertson: I didn't hear him say so.

Brooks: Okay. So what else can you tell me about working at the VA Hospital? Any stories from when you were there? Any people that you met that were really interesting?

Robertson: No. [Laughs] I don't think so.

Brooks: Okay. And how long did you work there?

Robertson: About four years, I guess. Four or five years.

Brooks: Okay. And what came next?

Robertson: I guess I got married and I started having all these babies. There were six.

Brooks: So you start—when you started your family, that's when you stopped working at the VA Hospital?

Robertson: Yes.

Brooks: Okay. And you had eight children?

Robertson: Yes. Seven girls and one boy.

Brooks: And what was it like living here in Milwaukee and raising your children in Wisconsin?

Robertson: I liked everything but the weather. [Laughs] but I got my children, when they got old enough, to go to St. Rose Grace school that was right across the street from where we lived, and I liked having them getting in into that school. And I had so many kids, but they accepted them.

Brooks: So out of all the places that you visited while you were away, while you were serving, what was your favorite place to be?

Robertson: [Laughs] I don't know. I don't think I had no place. None of the places that were [laughs] —

Brooks: Nothing that—no place that you liked better because it was prettier or warmer?

Robertson: No. No. I probably would like the warm weather, but I don't know any place that I liked that I would have liked to go back to.

Brooks: So after you settled here in Milwaukee, did you ever get to travel again?

Robertson: No, I never traveled. Just here in the States, like Memphis, Tennessee.

Brooks: Okay. Did you ever think about going back into the Army? Or did you ever miss the Army at all?

Robertson: No. [Laughs]

Brooks: Do you remember any times when anybody was ever discriminating against you while you were in the Army?

Robertson: No.

Brooks: No type of unfair treatment or anything?

Robertson: No. I didn't have any. I didn't know of anyone that did have, because we was the Army Auxiliary Corps, and we could get out. You know, they could let us out if we wasn't doing the things that we should do. If we were causing any trouble, they'd just get rid of you.

[00:45:12]

Brooks: Do you remember anybody talking to you about any benefits you would get for being a veteran?

Robertson: [Laughs] No.

Brooks: So after you settled here in Milwaukee, what types of stuff did you do with your family? You said they went to the grade school here, and you were—were you a stay at home mom?

Robertson: Probably most of the time I was. And then sometimes I went to work out at the Milwaukee County Hospital. I worked out there for a while, until the children. I had to get up and get out early in the morning, and I had to leave them. I was working out there when the riot was, and I went out to work because I didn't know it was a riot.

Brooks: So what happened?

Robertson: I was to—went on to work, and that opened up [??] the door and let me in. I walked on in. And then he told me that it was a riot. And my sister-in-law's son got killed in the riot. He got shot in his house.

Brooks: Oh no. That's too bad.

Robertson: And then I got sort of afraid. You know, I said, "Well something could have happened to me." Because I didn't turn the radio on because I had small kids. I didn't want to wake them up because I had to be at work early in the morning. And I didn't turn on the radio or nothing, so I didn't know a thing about any riot.

And I went to the gas station. They wouldn't sell me any gas. They couldn't sell anymore gas because of the riot.

Brooks: So when you worked at the Milwaukee Hospital, what was your job there?

Robertson: The same as at the VA Hospital. Hospital aide. Baths, temperatures, and I used to have to take patients, push them in a wheelchair from when they'd go for X-rays or when they'd go down to the lab, and that kind of stuff.

Brooks: And how did you feel about that work?

Robertson: I liked it all right.

Brooks: And what did your husband do?

Robertson: Milwaukee Railroad.

Brooks: What is it?

Robertson: Milwaukee Railroad.

Brooks: Oh, railroad.

Robertson: Mm-hmm. It wasn't too far from where we lived, either. We lived at 3113 West Clyburn, and then the railroad shop was just a little ways down there.

Brooks: So when you—were there ever any get togethers with you and any of the other girls who were in the Army Corps besides your close friends here?

Robertson: No.

Brooks: Did you keep in touch with anybody?

Robertson: No.

Brooks: No reunions or anything?

Robertson: No.

Brooks: Okay. Did you ever feel like you might want to go back to the places in England or France that you were stationed?

Robertson: No. I don't think so.

Brooks: Okay. So and then after—how long did you work at the Milwaukee Hospital for?

Robertson: How long did I—only about two years.

Brooks: Okay. And then after that?

Robertson: I didn't work anymore.

Brooks: Didn't work anymore. You had a lot of children to raise. It was busy, I'm sure. And the VA Hospital that you worked in, that was in Woods, Wisconsin?

Robertson: Yes it was.

Brooks: Okay. Just wanted to make sure I had that right. So what have you (phone ringing).

F2: Sorry.

Brooks: What do you—what have you thought about living in Wisconsin in general?

Robertson: I think it's a good place to work, to find work growing up. I guess I liked living here. I guess I liked everything but the weather. I don't like the cold weather for such a long, long period of time. And we could—you could get work here because we had a lot of factories that I guess that we don't have now.

Brooks: So was there anything about the Army Corps that you missed when you were done with it?

Robertson: No. [Laughs] I didn't miss nothing. [Laughs] No. I mean, well within there that I did that I couldn't stay in there forever, but you know, I was in there normally in order to discharge somebody—if you wanted to be discharged, well they said, "Just give me your name." Some of the people stayed in, I guess. They probably transferred them to another place from where we was at. I came on home.

[00:50:28]

Brooks: And what happened to your brother?

Robertson: He was still in the Navy, and since then he's died. He was living in Flint, Michigan.

Brooks: Okay. Did he like the Navy?

Robertson: He liked the Navy all right, I guess. Mm-hmm.

Brooks: Do you remember what his job was in the Navy?

Robertson: No. I sure don't. You don't remember—he didn't say what he did? No.

Brooks: So what about your experience in the Army Corps was surprising to you? Was there anything that was unexpected?

Robertson: No, I can't think of anything.

Brooks: Is there anything that surprised you, that you thought maybe your experience would be different somehow?

Robertson: No. I didn't have any idea, I guess, what I was really going into when I got into the Navy, but it was something that when my mother died I had no one to support us. So we was going to have to do something, so that's what I decided I was going to do. That's what my brother decided that he was going to do.

Brooks: And how did people react when you went into the Army Corps?

Robertson: What do you mean? People here or other?

Brooks: Other people. Like, if you had any friends or relatives, anybody you had to tell? What was their reaction?

Robertson: I guess they agreed, I guess, as long as I was satisfied with what it was. We didn't do much complaining or anything like that, because we really didn't have just to stay in there.

Brooks: So how did you feel about being a veteran and having served your country? What are your feelings about that?

Robertson: [Laughs] I didn't know. It's just something that I did.

Brooks: And your granddaughter was saying that you have a lot of nurses in your family?

Robertson: Oh yes. Mm-hmm. Those are her children.

Brooks: And do you think that you were a role model to them?

Robertson: Maybe, yeah. Yeah. That's what they decided, I guess, that they wanted to do. And there's not too many jobs now, so if you can get a job, you just—that's the one you have to go to. And go to take all of the schooling and everything, and there don't be any jobs. So you might take nursing or something where you know that you can get a job.

Brooks: So a lot of the people that might listen to this interview are going to be younger kids. So I'm wondering what you would tell them about your experience in the Army Corps.

Robertson: Well, my experience in the Army Corps. I enjoyed it. I, well, you know, traveling from place to place or what. I guess I never would have been on a ship otherwise, so it was—I think the Army was all right with me. I didn't have any complaints about it at all.

Brooks: And do you feel good about having done that for the country when the country was in trouble?

Robertson: Yeah, I do.

Brooks: Well, is there anything else that you remember, any other stories or anything about the people that you were serving with that you can share with me?

[00:55:00]

Robertson: No, I guess I really can't. I know we had to fire our own furnaces.

Brooks: You had to fire your own—

Robertson: Coal furnaces, mm-hmm.

Brooks: And what did that—what does that mean?

Robertson: You had to go down the basement. The furnace, a big furnace in the basement, and the—we that lived in the building had to fire our own furnace.

Brooks: So you had to—

Robertson: Put coal in the furnace. And that could be your duty for at night. You could do that all night, or you could do it all day.

Brooks: Was that hard work?

Robertson: It's not hard work, just shoveling the coal and just throw it in there.

Brooks: While you were over in England and France, was it—

Robertson: No, no, no. That was in Kentucky I did that. Because we had to take the charcoals and put them in their little spots out there.

Brooks: While you were in the service, did you get homesick?

Robertson: No. I didn't have a home. You know, my mother died, [inaudible] I was there, and I didn't get homesick.

Brooks: Okay. Is there anything else that I didn't remember to ask you about that you can think that you would want to add?

Robertson: No. I can't think of anything.

Brooks: We don't have a lot of interviews with too many women, and we have probably even fewer interviews with black women, so just anything that might have been unique about your experience would be really great for us to add.

Robertson: What do you mean, unique?

Brooks: Anything that was different about your service as opposed to people—it was mostly men who served, and I think that a lot of the black people were segregated during their service. So you had a very different experience than all of those people.

Robertson: Yeah, it was all in a black group. We wasn't mixed. They were all one race of people.

Brooks: And do you have any feelings—did you have any feelings then about that?

Robertson: No. Not at the time, I didn't. [Laughs] I came from down Arkansas, remember?

Brooks: Any feelings now? Do you have any reflections on that time in your life?

Robertson: No. I can't think of any. It's been a long time.

Brooks: It has been a long time, yeah.

Robertson: [Laughs] And when you get older, your memories aren't that good.

Brooks: That's okay. You're doing great, yeah. And today is your birthday.

Robertson: Today's my birthday.

Brooks: And how are you celebrating your birthday?

Robertson: My daughter's giving me a big birthday party on Saturday, at the Italian community center.

Brooks: Great. Are you excited?

Robertson: Yeah. Been out to get a new dress and some new suit.

Brooks: That's great. That's great. Is there anything else about your Army experience that you can tell me?

Robertson: No.

Brooks: Okay. Do you have any questions about the museum or anything about the interview?

Robertson: No. You mean, the museum when I was in the Army or the museum here?

Brooks: The museum here, that I'm from. The Wisconsin Veterans Museum.

Robertson: I never was out there, I guess.

Brooks: Well, it's in Madison. You should come visit us.

Robertson: Oh, this is in Madison? Yeah.

Brooks: Yeah. And we collect all the stories of Wisconsin veterans, and we keep them all together so that people for future generations can learn about what it was like to be a veteran. So we're going to put your story into that collection. So if there's anything else that you remember, either right now or later, we can add it to your story.

Robertson: Okay. Okay. I'll try to think of something. If I do, I'll tell Sarah [??] and she—she lives in Madison, and she can tell you.

Brooks: Okay, great. Okay, I'm going to turn this off, okay?

Robertson: Okay.

Brooks: Thank you.

[End of OH1898.Robertson_access]

[End of Interview]