

# Community Assistantship Program

## Women and War

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# Women and War

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History Museum of East Otter Tail County

by

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Women have served and served in the military of the United States of America since before the country existed. At home, women have also served their nation as citizens. Oftentimes when we study the history of nations at war we focus on men, minimizing or even forgetting the vast contributions of women and thereby robbing ourselves of the knowledge of half of the members of our history. This project is an attempt to capture a fuller history, the one that remembers that wars affect everyone no matter the gender. It has been my privilege to work on this project.

### Duties

As the student researcher on the Women and War project my duties consisted of a few things. I did general background research on women's military service throughout this nation's history as well as search for and compile a number of articles that focus on how the WWII affected East Otter Tail County women. By no means is the background research that I have done comprehensive but it does give a solid base from which to continue. The majority of my work on this project, however, consisted of listening to the interviews of women who recall what war eras were like for them and taking notes of their interviews in order that the knowledge contained therein is easier to compile at a later date. When I was not working on research of one sort or another my time was generally spent focused on how this information could best be presented so that the general public could easily derive benefit from it.

## **Methods**

My work on the Women and War project consisted primarily of listening to interviews and taking notes on them that the information they contain can be compiled with greater ease. I endeavored to be meticulous in how I went about this in order to assure that it was done properly and well. To that end I set up a specific method that I used to take the notes.

The method that I used for the interviews consisted of first copying the original tape so that the original can be preserved. Next I listened to the copies of the interviews without distraction so that I could understand what the person interviewed had said. I did this with the intent of minimizing errors in interpretation that might arise from trying to take notes at the same time I was trying to understand the details the person interviewed imparted. After listening to the interviews I would then listen to them again while taking notes on paper. This is the longest part of the process because I often had to stop the tape to be sure that I was getting all of the important details into the notes. To do this I used a pen and paper because I know that when the next step of typing up the notes came I would be able to make sure my final notes were written clearly and captured the details. This method was the easiest way for me to make sure that my notes were of the highest quality I could make them in the limited period of time I had.

## **Research Summary**

The research compiled during my tenure is easiest examined one individual at a time in order to best capture the information that has been gained from each of these remarkable women.

### **Alta Mandt**

Mrs. Mandt recalled the WWII Era. Before the war Mrs. Mandt was living in south Minneapolis, Minnesota and working as a billing clerk for Sears Roebuck. During WWII Mrs. Mandt worked for the War Department at an ordinance testing facility in New Brighton, Minnesota doing clerical work. After the war Mrs. Mandt was accepted by the State Department to a position in occupied Berlin, Germany where she first worked at the United States Consulate with displaced people by helping them fill out the Visa application form so that they could go to the United States. She recalled that the people that she helped had traveled a long distance to get to the Consulate and that she largely worked with individuals because families had been torn apart. She later became the Secretary for the head of the Consulate.

While Mrs. Mandt was in Europe she took the opportunity to befriend the people she worked with, American and German alike, and to travel. Mrs. Mandt has pictures of the people that she worked with, a memorial service held in Berlin by the Allies to commemorate the fallen, and the devastation that the war wrought on Europe.

### **Catherine Drahman**

Ms. Drahman also recalled the WWII Era. Mrs. Drahman worked in her father's general store during the war as a bookkeeper. She explained how rationing worked from the store's perspective. Rationing made operations of a store quite tricky. Ms. Drahman gives a clear insight into what the war was like on the home front recalling everything from entertainment to the trials that were faced by soldier's wives. Ms. Drahman's

interview is invaluable because it allows us to understand what the war was like for everyday people at home.

Ms. Drahman has kept journals and scrapbooks from the time she was 14 years old. She also had a pen pal in England during the time that the war was going on in Europe but before American involvement. Ms. Drahman also has memorabilia including the nameplate given to her by her cousin who claims to have taken it off Eva Braun's door when she had gone to Germany immediately following the war.

### **Lillian Olsen-Ragan**

Lillian Olsen-Ragan was not officially interviewed but she came into the museum during Turtle Fest 2003 in order to loan memorabilia from the time she spent in the Marine Corps Women's Reserve during WWII. When she was at the museum Mrs. Olsen-Ragan took the time to impart some of her memories to me while I took notes which I summarized and have in the "Women and War" binder. Lillian originally worked as a Rudder Rigger at a factory that produced B-25 bombers. After working there for some time she grew frustrated with the men there whom she felt were trying to escape their duty to serve their country. Ms. Olsen-Ragan became frustrated enough that she decided that if they would not serve then she would. When asked why she chose to join the Marine Corps instead of one of the other services she stated that she had, "always read and heard that they were the best." Ms. Olsen-Ragan recalled her time in the Marine Corps with fondness.

The items donated to the museum by Ms. Olsen are a welcome addition to the collection.

### **Rose Winkels**

Mrs. Winkels also recalled the WWII Era during which she lived in Perham, Minnesota. Like Catherine Drahrman, Mrs. Winkels lent insight into what effect the war had on small American towns and the people that resided there. Mrs. Winkels spent most of the war working at Kemper's Drugstore as a pharmacist a fact that alone lends testament to the far reach of the war as the reason Mrs. Winkels was trained in pharmacy was because nearly all of the men with any sort of medical background were used in the war effort. Mrs. Winkels also recalled what day to day life was like during the war for people who were not in the military but were affected by the war daily in spite of it.

### **Geraldine Christianson**

Mrs. Christianson's interview regards the WWII Era. Her interview also lends insight into the day-to-day life of individuals on the home front. The primary focus of her interview, however, is the work that she did on the Manhattan Project without knowing that was what she was working on. This is an angle on the war that no one else has been able to give us. Mrs. Christianson also tells of her wedding during the war, one of the few recollections of war weddings that the project has to date.

### **Dorothy Wacker**

Ms. Wacker recalled the impact her service in the Women's Army Corps during the Korean War shaped her life. A fascinating life colorfully recalled makes Ms. Wacker's my favorite interview overall. Ms. Wacker explains everything from her duties

in the WAC's to tips on child rearing. Ms. Wacker talks of her fellow Korean War veterans with love and makes it clear that the Korean War is not the "forgotten war" to her by any means. She is active in Korean War organizations that support the veterans as well as make sure that their contribution is never forgotten. In giving this interview Ms. Wacker has made another contribution to that end.

Along with Ms. Wacker's memories of the Korean War she imparted some memories of being a child during WWII. This is another great contribution because it allows us to better understand the impact of the war on children.

Ms. Wacker had donated much of her wartime memorabilia, including her uniforms, to the museum prior to her interview.

### **Lorraine Olsen**

Mrs. Olsen's interview focuses on her time as a Navy wife to a sailor who retired from the Navy after twenty years. Mrs. Olsen's interview is unique not only because it covers such an extended time period but also because it talks of a way of life that many American's may not fully appreciate but also is critical to the success of the military. The military spouse is often the person on whom a serviceperson's home life depends. That spouse's ability to support their serviceperson and run the home from day to day in situations that often leave them by themselves is critical to maintaining the morale of sailors, soldiers, airmen, and Marines. If the serviceperson cannot count things at home being maintained they are distracted and that distraction interferes with their ability to do their job, something that not only hurts morale but could potentially also be deadly. This

account of the life experiences of one of these spouses is a great contribution to this project.

### **Audrey Esser**

Mrs. Esser's interview consists primarily of her memories of WWII. During WWII Mrs. Esser worked first at a munitions plant mixing the powders for the shells and then testing those shells. She did this work because she wanted to do something that benefited the war effort. Mrs. Esser grew frustrated with people who came to work at the war plants just for the money, people who were happy that the country was at war because it allowed them to make more money for themselves. She was hurt by these people's apparent lack of concern for the soldiers who were fighting in the war. After some time at the plant Mrs. Esser decided to join the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, which later became the Women's Army Corps. She worked for the Army Air Force as one of the first women Link Trainers. It was her job to teach the pilots how to fly a plane using only their instruments.

While in the WAC's Mrs. Esser met Mr. Esser and was married. Mrs. Esser gives us an account of her "war wedding" in her interview as well as an idea of what day-to-day life was like for her. Mrs. Esser was one of seven of the first women in the world to do what she did in the military and her work was vital to the war effort.

### **Verna Drummond**

Mrs. Drummond's interview focuses on the WWII Era when she was "frozen" in her job as a telephone switchboard operator. Mrs. Drummond could be "frozen" in that position because the U.S. government considered it a vital system on the home front.

Mrs. Drummond explains what it was like to have a fiancée serving overseas in the Pacific Theatre during the war and the anxiety that entailed. Mrs. Drummond was friends with a group of young women who also had fiancées or husbands in service and she relates how their friendship got one another through. She also explains what her work consisted of at the phone company.

Mrs. Drummond's experiences are helpful to understanding how difficult it was for young women whose loved ones were abroad. It is also helpful in understanding the bonds that young women formed in this difficult time. Her experiences at the phone company could provide a good deal of background if there is ever a display or project that explores the history and development of telecommunications.

### **Sonja Kosler**

Ms. Kosler's interview concerns, primarily, the Vietnam War Era. She was an activist during this time. I was unable to take all of the notes on this interview because I felt conflicted for personal reasons and did not want to jeopardize the validity of my work or put myself through the personal difficulty that would have been involved. It is my fervent hope that someone more impartial than I could continue the notes on this interview.

## Questions to Pursue

In my research I have come across things that I have questions on and think would be valuable to pursue. Some of these questions are:

1. When did people find out about the concentration camps and the Holocaust? What was their reaction when they found out?
2. Geraldine Christianson stated that she recalls that the dropping of the bomb and the end of the war were announced at the same time at the plant. I'm not clear on when this announcement was because the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki both, days apart, and neither one of those days were when the Japanese announced their surrender. I think this needs to be clarified.
3. Audrey Esser also spoke of her memories of hearing that the Atomic Bomb was dropped while she was listening to the radio. Does she remember if it was the bombing of Hiroshima or Nagasaki that she heard about?
4. What were War Weddings like from the perspective of people who went through them?

5. The two people who were Navy wives, Lorraine Olsen and Sonja Kosler, both speak of the other Navy wives and the friendship/bond that they shared very differently. Ms. Kosler speaks of these women with contempt calling their lives “a shallow existence” and stating that she was, “... in the real world,” while, the other wives in her eyes, apparently, were not. Mrs. Olsen, on the other hand, speaks of how it was that support group that helped her get through not only her husband’s deployments but also the loss of two children. The time periods that they speak of are not that far apart, what might cause this vast difference in conception?

6. Do any of the children from the WWII Era recall the tin and milkweed drives mentioned in the paper? What about the Bond Stamps? What were these like? Do they think that these things made them feel more like they had some control over the situation and they felt like they were contributing to the war effort?

7. Alta Mandt mentioned the saving of pork drippings, does anyone else recall this?

8. A few people mentioned Victory Gardens. How were these put to use? Did anyone feel that they were helping the war effort by growing their own food so that the soldiers could have the majority of the fruits and vegetables produced by the farmers or were they mostly thinking about Victory Gardens in terms of ease and having to deal less with rationing?

9. Dance Halls seemed to be very popular at the time. What do we know about the Dance Halls in the East Otter Tail County area? Who owned them? Where were they? What food and drinks did they serve? What did people wear to these establishments?

10. The Alaskan Highway was mentioned in an interview. It was noted that a lot of the men who were not in military service went to work on that highway. What was it like to have them gone? Was it built then in case of an attack on Alaska?

As this project evolves and moves through other wars there are some other things that I know I would be interested in knowing. Some of those questions are:

1. When talking to military spouses there are a number of questions that can be asked:
  - How did/do family support groups (formal military sanctioned groups or just friendships) affect a spouse's ability to handle the stress of having their husband or wife deployed? What about children
  - How does faith affect a spouse's ability to cope when their husband or wife is deployed? What about how it affects the children's ability to cope?
  - "Do you mind telling us what it is like for yourself and your family when your spouse is deployed? We understand it must be a hard thing to balance your personal difficulties with having them gone and supporting them in their work but we would like people to realize what a great contribution and sacrifice military families make for their country."

2. When talking to people in general I would like us to find out where people were and what their reactions were to major events in our nation and our world's history.

- Pearl Harbor

- John Kennedy's Assassination

- Bobby Kennedy's Assassination

- MLK Junior's Assassination

- September 11<sup>th</sup>

- Other things that they recall that had a significant impact on them (i.e. for me, I remember Somalia, the bombing of the U.S.S. Cole, the start of the First Gulf War, the start of the war with Iraq, and the Space Shuttle Columbia Tragedy. My sister, similarly, very clearly recalls the Space Shuttle Challenger Explosion.)

### **Ideas for Future Research**

While doing this project the interviews I listened to gave me a wealth of ideas that, if pursued, would be a very interesting addition to the overall project I see this becoming.

1. Alta Mandt mentioned the saving of pork drippings in her interview. The reason pork drippings were saved was because they contained glycerin. Glycerin was used in the makings of explosives. I think this is an example of how people on the home front were contributing to the war effort in a very direct way. I am curious to know if a program to collect these drippings was implemented and, if so, how was it operated?

2. I think that more research on the various drives should be done. I think that these are very important because they allowed people to contribute to the war effort regardless of age and socioeconomic status. Did drives like these contribute to the psychological well being of people in any way? For example, did feeling like they could contribute in things like these reduce the feelings of helplessness that can occur in during a war?

3. The Service Flag hung in the window to signify that family had someone serving in WWII is making resurgence in the present day. Does anyone who flew that flag, or who recalls someone else flying it, recall if those individuals who made themselves visible in that way receive support because of it?

4. War can make children feel helpless, like the world is very big and there isn't much someone small can do. During World War II, however, there were many ways for children to get involved in supporting the war effort. How did children at that time feel about this? I think a museum display regarding how children felt and how they contributed would be very helpful to understanding things. If this is done, though, I would recommend that it is done at a child's level so that they can really feel like they understand and, hopefully, develop at least a small appreciation of history and a knowledge that they can do something no matter their age or size.

5. Catherine Drahman spoke of the heyday of baseball in the area. That's just good stuff to know about because it intrigues many people. Hopefully some of those people will develop a liking of the history of baseball. That could turn into a liking of history in general.

6. I think that it is important that people understand the recreation of past generations. When people realize that the fun thing to do was go dancing or to the movies there will be people who make the connection that those are fun things today as well. That helps develop the realization that people in the past are just like people in the present.

7. I think that research on the significance of veterans groups like the kinds that Ms. Wacker belongs to is something worth researching.

8. How do veteran's memorials affect the veterans they commemorate? What are their thoughts and feelings on those memorials? Does having a memorial make them feel like they are being remembered and will continue to be remembered? Do they feel like that is a memorial that commemorates the sacrifice of a buddy that died in the war?

9. I think that war weddings are always a good research. Most every woman loves a wedding and a display and history of that might draw her in so that they would learn more about history in general. Besides, it is a very vivid reminder that life goes on and that there is still love in the world even when it's in turmoil.

### My Ideas about Where this Should Go

It is my hope that this project will develop into something much larger that looks at war from all different points of view from battle histories to how children at home were affected. I think that war is a multifaceted thing and to examine it in any real measure you need to not only have an understanding of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu but an understanding of family support groups and tin drives. I hope that there will be a war museum in East Otter Tail County some day that has it's own very large building and is considered one of *the* places that Military Historians have to visit. In order for that to happen, though, I think that not only should research on the affect war has on everyday people be examined but also the research on battles and military leaders should not be spurned. Everyday people who face these battles are changed like metal on a Forge in them and that should not be discounted. War leaders are usually just everyday people who found themselves in difficult circumstances and rose to the challenge in order that they and other men could go back to being everyday people later. This, too, must not be forgotten.

More than anything else I would like this project to help further a movement that realizes that wars are about people just like us. Epic battles are fought by our family members the fight to keep things as normal as possible is fought by other family members. People like Douglas MacArthur, Dwight Eisenhower, and even Erwin Rommel have more in common with us than not. They are just men whose situation caused them to do something else that made them names that we all know. I want people to realize that war is an awful thing and no one sane likes it but the people who fight it are just like us except they are willing to sacrifice themselves for us. You don't have to like war to like

them. Most of them do not like war; they just believe that some things are worth fighting for. They deserve our thanks and our support. They also deserve our understanding and that will only come from listening to them and having a knowledge of where they were and where they want(ed) to be. I also want people to realize that soldiers only go to war when nations do. World War Two could never have been won without Rosie the Riveter and there are soldiers out there who would have bled to death if it was not for the bandage that was made by the women of the Red Cross who got the fabric from the milkweed collected by children and woven with the money from war bonds. Only from understanding the total picture can we truly say we have an understanding of war.

It has been my privilege to work on this project. I have been made a better person by listening to the stories of these fine women, most of whose modesty will prevent them from being able to fully comprehend how much better they made this world just by standing up and doing their part. They will continue to touch the hearts and enrich the world of all who listen to their stories in the future.