

A Young Girl Joins the Army



CATHERINE OTT

Story by Tara Melish

Catherine Ott sat on a plush recliner, wearing a Roger Rabbit T-shirt. She spoke with a raspy voice about her experiences as a young woman during World War II.

I grew up on Liberty Street in East Greenwich. Until the Navy came, East Greenwich only had about 2,000 people. Everyone knew everyone else. Your mother knew what you were doing before you got home.

I remember when I was in high school at the old East Greenwich Academy, there was this Jewish boy named Felix. He had escaped from Germany or somewhere. At our senior picnic, we were in swimming and we could see these welts across his back. Somebody asked him what they were from. I was amazed to find that he had been beaten by the Gestapo (See Holocaust).

In 1940 I went to Rhode Island State College for about two and a half years. I guess for my day I was considered somewhat of a rebel. Women didn't do much in those days. In a small town, you graduated from high school, you got some kind of job, and you got married. There weren't many of us that went on to college.

Meanwhile, my mother was in charge of the hostesses at the USO, which was where the Kent Theater in East Greenwich is now. We used to have dances there. The sailors and soldiers and everybody else would come. I would come from college on weekends and spend the whole time at the USO. You weren't supposed to leave the building with men, so we would leave alone and meet them around the corner. (Laughs.) There are always ways of getting around things like that.

Soon after I started college, there was Pearl Harbor . I remember that day when the war began. I was sitting in Eleanor Roosevelt Hall on a Sunday afternoon listening to the Longine Symphonette on the radio, when they interrupted with the news of Pearl Harbor. Everyone was up in arms because all of our then current boyfriends were going to be drafted. My father had already been called up for active duty, six months or a year before that. He was the Commander of Fort Wetherell and Fort Getty over in Jamestown for harbor defenses. He kept predicting this was going to happen. I'm sure our government knew it too.

After the war began, Curtis Wright, the airplane factory, needed women to replace their engineers who had been called up for the draft (See Rosie the Riveter). They recruited ten from my college, and I was one of the ten. I guess it was somewhat of an honor. But I just thought of it as something new, something different. They sent us up to Renssalaer Polytechnical Institute in Troy, New York. We learned just the essentials: machine design, drafting, calculus integration, electricity, and airplane engine. For one year we went to school from, near as I can remember, 7:30 in the morning until 5 at night.

From there we went to work. I went to the propeller plant in Caldwell, New Jersey to work in the experimental lab as an engineer's assistant. You see, they were having trouble with the variable pitch propeller. They would wear out too quickly. The engineer that I worked with was trying to find out why this happened. I didn't much like this work, though. Sure, it was kind of exciting, but remember, it was wartime. We worked from 6:30 in the morning until 6:30 at night. I think, though, that I was earning somewhere around \$40 a week, which was considered good money in those days. My father had been supporting a family of five of us plus two cousins on just \$25 a week before the war started.

Finally, after a year of working at the Curtis Wright Factory, I tried to get into the army. My parents were against me on this. They felt I could better spend my time practicing the piano and riding my bicycle. All those fun things. But I really wanted to join. My two brothers were in. My uncles were in. My cousins. My whole family. All in the army. Oh, I was jealous. I wanted to be in too. I thought they had the chance to do all these exciting things. I finally got in the WACS in 1944. From there, it was a very different life.

I first went to basic training at Fort Oglethorpe, in Georgia. The days there were very, very busy. Our mornings started at 5:30 or 6, I forget which, and went on until 5 at night. We went to classes and learned military discipline, mostly it was drilling and physical education. Then there were all kinds of films. A lot of propaganda things that the Germans had done. In basic training, everything was regimented. All of our clothes had to be hung a certain way. In fact, I still hang my clothes that way. Our uniforms were something else, too. We wore brown and white seersucker dresses with bloomers under them to match, dark khaki cotton stockings, cotton ankle socks, and "Little Abner's" -- great big clod hoppers! Oh, they were real sexy looking clothes, I'll tell you. (Laughs.)

At this time, there was no question that a lot of men still did not want women in the Army. They didn't approve of it, "A women's place is at home and not in uniform." They would try to say that all women in the Army were tramps and that they were only there to keep the soldiers happy and all this type of propaganda stuff. We tried to fight it, most of us, by acting the way we were brought up but what really irked them was when they found out the women really did good jobs.

The war was a great eye opener to many men. One time in basic training, we had this male lieutenant who really hassled women. Now, the uniforms we wore didn't always fit the shape of the woman too well. In the pockets of the shirt, they had a place for your pencils. But we weren't supposed to put anything in our pockets. There was never enough room between us and the shirt to put a pencil in anyway. (Laughs.) Now, when you stand for inspection in the Army, you stand at rigid attention and never look at the officer. And you never speak unless you are spoken to. This lieutenant came up to me one time and he said -- I had about had it with his hassling -- and he said, "Private, you know you're not supposed to have anything in your pockets." I said, "Yes, sir." "Well, do you have anything in your pockets?" "No, sir." "Are you sure, Private?" "Yes, sir. Would the Lieutenant like to feel and find out?" and he never bothered me again. (Laughs.) Of course, I got company punishment for awhile. Confined to barracks. But it was worth it!

From basic training, I went on to Camp Atterbury, in Indiana, to laboratory technician school. After classes were over, we worked in the hospitals. Camp Atterbury had this particular ward which had a lot of German prisoners in it. They sure got nice and fat and well fed. Many of them didn't want to go home when the war was over. And, you know, once you got to know those soldiers, they were just like anybody else. He's no longer a soldier. He is just a sick, hurt man who needs care and needs help.

I met my husband while I worked in the hospital. He was a patient. He had been in the Battle of Mount Casino in Italy during the winter. Both his legs were frozen up to the knees -- trenchfoot, they called it. Camp Atterbury was a rehabilitation center. They did a lot of work with amputees and reconstructive surgery. He had three operations there.

But, anyway, what made me single him out? Well, I'll tell you. I used to dance. I used to drink. I used to smoke. I wouldn't associate with a man who didn't. One day I was sitting in the service club, writing a letter to my fiancée, who was in the Navy in California. There was this very nice looking man across from me who was on crutches. He just sat there the whole time I was writing, just watching me. He didn't say anything. I got done. He looked at me and said, "Do you want a coke?" Strange, I said. "Sure!" So we walked over to the service club and we had a coke. Didn't say a word. No conversation at all. The minute we finished the coke, he said, "Do you want to go to the movies?" I said, "Yes, sure." We went to the movies. Never said a word. Just sat there and watched the movie. It was a comedy, as I recall, and I sat there laughing. He said, "Don't laugh so loud." I thought, "What kind of guy is this?" I was so intrigued. So different. He didn't drink. He didn't smoke. He didn't dance. He couldn't with his legs.

When the war finally ended in France, I was on my way home on leave. I happened to be in New York City when it was announced, so I was in Times Square celebrating that night. That was wild. Millions of people. Streets were jammed. From there, I went up to Stewart Field. I was transferred to the airport where they trained pilots from West Point. Then I went on to Scott Field, Illinois. On the way, I stopped off and we got married. We had met March 5 and we were married July 5. Very short courtship. In fact, I got married in my uniform. Including khaki underwear. Can you imagine lovely, silk, rayon underwear? After I made sure I was safely married to him, I broke my engagement to the man in California. Bird in the hand, and all that stuff.

My husband had received a disability discharge and stayed home while I went on to army camp. I left four days after we were married and was gone for three months. I originally wanted to go with the Army of Occupation to Japan for a year, because the war was then over. But my husband wanted me to come home. I didn't really want to. I figured we would be married for the rest of our lives. But he insisted. So I applied for my discharge and got out.

Once I got out of the army, we lived in Pennsylvania for about six and a half years before we moved back here to East Greenwich. I had my daughter Karen there. As my daughter grew up I worked at various part time jobs and took a lot of courses. Then, when she went to high school in 1960, I started back at the University of Rhode Island. A slow learner -- 23 years to get a Bachelors Degree!