

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

DORIS KACMARYNSKI

Mess Sergeant, Women's Army Corps, Korean War

2007

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Kacmarynski, Doris E. (née Hanson), (b. 1931). Oral History Interview, 2007.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 17 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 17 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract:

Doris Kacmarynski, a Green Bay, Wisconsin resident, discusses her experiences as a Mess Sergeant in the Women's Army Corps during the Korean War. Kacmarynski describes her family and early life in Wabeno (Wisconsin). Her father was an electrician and the family moved often, living in Green Bay, Tomahawk, and Greenwood. Kacmarynski reveals her father died in an industrial accident in the late 1940s, and her mother moved them back to Wabeno. In 1949, she graduated from Wabeno High School and moved to Green Bay where she worked at Red Owl lunch counter. Kacmarynski comments that because her brothers were both 4-F, she "always felt that somebody had to go fight for our family." Kacmarynski explains she joined the Army to escape the unwanted attentions of a suitor. She relates her mother supported her decision to enlist and gave Kacmarynski her father's World War I uniform. She briefly outlines her basic training at Fort Lee (Virginia), describing bivouac camping and sharpshooting. When her suitor enlisted in the Army and followed her to Fort Lee, Kacmarynski transferred to Fort Meade (Maryland). A musician in high school, Kacmarynski turned down an offer to join the 32nd Army Band because "being a little old country girl, that high-class stuff wasn't for me." Kacmarynski mentions her first detail was with the Military Police, but at that time, women were not allowed to carry weapons and had to have a male MP with them for protection. She jokes that her "protector" was smaller than her and *she* needed to protect *him*. Frustrated with the MPs, Kacmarynski transferred to the Mess Hall. She states she was the youngest Mess Sergeant and her cooking was voted the best in the company for six months running. Kacmarynski touches upon fraternizing between officers and enlisted soldiers: it was forbidden, but she and a friend often went on dates with captains and sergeants. Kacmarynski describes meeting and marrying her first husband, Sergeant Thompson. Kacmarynski relates she had orders to go to Japan towards the end of the Korean War, but because she thought she was pregnant, the Army made her pass a physical. She was not assigned to Japan and decided not to reenlist. She speaks about Army life, living in Germany for three years, and raising five children. She mentions she divorced Thompson after twenty-four years of marriage because he never adjusted to civilian life. She implies her ex-husband's gambling and drinking problems were exacerbated by the Army. Kacmarynski describes her recent stroke and the medical problems of her current husband. She states she used a G.I. housing loan to buy her first house and that she uses her medical benefits at the VA Hospital in Appleton (Wisconsin). She is very active in veterans organizations, especially the Women's Legion Post in Green Bay and the AMVETS of Pulaski (Wisconsin). Kacmarynski reveals she served as a District Commander for the AMVETS and was voted District Commander of the Year. Finally, she comments on her granddaughter's interest in the Army and how the Army has changed over time.

Biographical Sketch:

Kacmarynski (b. 1931) was born Doris Hanson in Wabeno (Wisconsin) to German and Danish parents. Her family moved around Wisconsin, living in Green Bay, Tomahawk, and Greenwood. She graduated from Wabeno High School in 1949 and worked briefly at a lunch counter in Green Bay before enlisting in the Women's Army Corps. Kacmarynski served as a mess sergeant at Fort Lee (Virginia) and Fort Meade (Maryland). She married a career officer and lived in Fort Meade and Germany. They had five children and were married for twenty-four years until they divorced. Kacmarynski now lives in Green Bay with her second husband and is active in the Women's Legion, AMVETs, and the Honor Society of Women Legionnaires.

Interviewed by Terry MacDonald, 2007.

Transcribed by Joseph Dillenburg, 2007.

Transcription edited and abstract written by Darcy I. Gervasio, 2009

Interview Transcript:

Terry: [This is an interview with Doris] Kacmarynski, who served with the Women's Army Corps during the Korean War. The interview is being conducted at about 12:30 p.m. at the following address of 2543 Hazelwood Lane, Green Bay, Wisconsin, and the interviewer is Terry MacDonald.

Ok Doris, could you tell us a little about your background, as to where you were born?

Kacmarynski: I was born in Wabeno, Wisconsin, 3/13/31, at one o'clock—let's see it was 1300 hours--that would be one o'clock in the afternoon, at 1300 hours, army time. And, I was the second daughter, and we lived there—well I have to give you a background, of my, my father was an electrician.

Terry: And what was the family name?

Kacmarynski: Uh, Hanson was my maiden name. But my father was an electrician, and he lived at a rooming house run by my mother's parents. And their last name was Bath. B-A-T-H, an old German name. And my dad roomed there for three years, and then he married my mother. And they always say my dad lived in Wabeno for three years and finally took a bath. (Both laugh) And that has stuck with the family for years. And then we lived there. And then he, uh, we came to, uh, see that was in '31, and then in '35 we moved to Green Bay and he worked for the Public Service.

Terry: Did you have some brothers and sisters?

Kacmarynski: Yes, I had two brothers and a sister.

Terry: Older or younger?

Kacmarynski: Younger. I was the second oldest. And they were all born at Wabeno there, except my youngest sister. She was born in Green Bay, and we always said--to this day, she's still classified as our city baby. (Terry chuckles) And then, uh, we moved—we lived in Green Bay, and then in '40, in 1940 we moved to Tomahawk, and my dad worked for the Public Service up there. And then from there, in '47 we moved over to Greenwood, which is west of Wausau, and he worked for the Rural Electric Company, and there we lived, there less than a year when my father was killed in an industrial accident. He fell and died of a broken neck in 45. [It is not clear if her father died in 1945, which would not fit with other dates, or if he died at age 45.]

Terry: And where did you end up taking your final schooling, your high school?

Kacmarynski: We went back--my mother--well, she was left there with 5 kids, all little ones, and we moved back to Wabeno, and I finished my schooling there, and graduated in 1949 from Wabeno High School. And then from there, we--my mother and my older sister were in Green Bay, and so uh--and the rest of us kids, we lived with my grandparents. And we came to Green Bay in--I came to Green Bay in—graduated in May of '49, then I moved to Green Bay right away. And I worked for the uh, it was a Red Owl store at the time, On South Adams Street. And I worked in the--they had a, um, um, (sound of fist pounding on arm of chair) restaurant in there. Or, *lunch* counter, that's what it was. And I worked there for two years, and got tired of that, then I enlisted in the Army—

[The sound of a fist pounding on the arm of a chair occurs throughout the tape, either while Kacmarynski is thinking, or in emphasis of her point.]

Terry: Now why did you want to enlist in the Army?

Kacmarynski: 'Cause I was tired of this guy following me around. (Chuckles) I couldn't go to church with my mother on Sunday, without him following me, to see if I was for sure going to church. Nah, that's not for me. So I enlisted in the Army--

Terry: So what did your mom think of this?

Kacmarynski: Oh, my mother, she thought that was great, she said get away. He was very pesty. And that was years ago, but everybody didn't have a telephone. You always went to the house, and he was *continually* over at our house. So I uh, told my mother, I says, "I'm going in the Army and don't tell Don where I'm at." So, finally she got tired of him coming, so she said, "She's just gone. I don't know where she went." And so he proceeded to go out, and all my friends wouldn't tell him. And I was stationed at, uh (fist pounding) Fort Lee, Virginia. I was working at the NCO [Non-Commissioned Officer] Club down there, in the office. And I'm sittin' there, had my back to the window, and all of a sudden, this fellow, somebody came up. And Mrs. Wood was the Service Club Director. And, funny, that voice sounds familiar. So, uh, I called her and says "Who signed up for that Ping-Pong paddle and the balls?" So she told me his name. I said, "That's who I thought!" Then, the best part, she had to leave, and I had to close the club up that night.

Terry: Oh my gosh!

Kacmarynski: And, so we came back in--the fella, he was a big, tall--in fact he was six foot three. And he came--he says, "I thought that was you," he says,

“thought I recognized you from the back.” He starts cryin’ like a baby. I thought, “That’s it.” So I went over to ____ (??), I says, “I’m through with you.” So--

Terry: So he joined the Army, and he ended up in the same spot--

Kacmarynski: Sure. He had, like I say, he went to, went to the recruiting station, and of course now they aren’t allowed to give out information, but then, they did anything and everything. They told him where I had, I had enlisted in the Army and I was stationed at Fort Meade, Maryland--or, or Fort Lee, Virginia. And uh, so he enlisted in the uh, within the Airborne, and they were training (fist pounding) at the same place. Anyhow, so then I put in for a transfer. And then from Fort Lee, I went to Fort Meade, Maryland. And I had been working with the uh, a Mess Sergeant. And uh, I liked it very well. In fact, it was at Fort, uh, well, Reagan Base(??) at Fort Lee, there I was in Headquarters Company, and we had about 360 women in our Company, and I was one of the *youngest* Mess Sergeants they had. But see all through high school it was all cooking, and from my whole family, we were always cooking, both sides of the family. And, like I say, I was but 21, 22 years old. And all my cooks were older women. And I had won, the best out of the whole company, the whole post, I had won Best Mess Award six months in a row. And that included all the men’s companies, and we had, there was, I think, four or five other women--the basic companies were these women, plus the Headquarters Company. But like six months in a row. Though from then on, as long as I was Mess Sergeant there, I didn’t have to stand the inspection. So, and then from there, I was transferred to uh, Fort Meade, Maryland. And there, we were the *only* (fist pounding) women detachment outside of the Army nurses. And, that, that was a ball. (Both laugh) And uh--that’s where I met my first husband. And we had--our Mess Sergeant was Lieutenant Mosders(??) there. And, of course, well she was going with this, who ended up being my husband, this Sergeant Thompson, and I was going with Captain Smith.

Terry: So, now--officers and enlisted--

Kacmarynski: They weren’t *supposed* to. We could go off post, in civilian clothes, but nothing--you couldn’t go any place, ‘cause, boy, you could very easily be court-martialed for fraternizing with officers. So, I told her, I said, “Well, that’s not right.” So, we traded partners. (Both chuckle)

Terry: And he ended up being your husband.

Kacmarynski: Yeah, he ended up being *my* husband! (Laughter). And I don’t think, to this day--in fact, I don’t think--she didn’t go with him very long at all. But I ended up with my husband. And I was married to him for--24 years

and nine months. Had to wash with--he had never changed his Army life. It always was gambling and drinking.

Terry: So he was in the Army. Was he a career person in the Army?

Kacmarynski: Yeah, uh huh.

Terry: And did you stay in a career person?

Kacmarynski: No. After I got, in fact, while I was on orders to go to Japan. And that was after I was married and everything--"I don't think I'm going to end up going to Japan." 'Cause I *thought* I was pregnant. So we had to go through this physical, but(??) (fist pounding) they wouldn't send me to Japan. So I says, "if that's the case, then I might as well get out of the service." And we lived at Fort Meade, that's when we lived at Fort Meade, Maryland. And uh--

Terry: So he made a career out of the Army, and you followed him, with him.

Kacmarynski: Yeah, mm hmm. And then, uh, it seems like every time he'd come home on leave I'd get pregnant. (Both laugh) So I had five of my own, or six, by the end of--my last little girl died. But uh--and then, while I was married to him, we--I spent three years in Germany. Lived there at, --and he was stationed at Dachau, there. And--then like I say, after--he couldn't--after he got out of the service, he just couldn't adjust to—

Terry: Civilian life.

Kacmarynski: --to civilian life. It was still gambling and drinking. He always told me, his gambling--no, his drinking was number one, his gambling was number two, and his family was number three. And I didn't--that didn't go with me.

Terry: So, when you were in the military, it sounded like you pretty much enjoyed it, your service time.

Kacmarynski: Yeah, mm hmm.

Terry: So what did you think about serving? You're in a military family with your husband, and stuff--

Kacmarynski: Oh, I liked it very much. Mm hmm. But I says, like, nowadays, to me it's *nothing* like it was then. Well that's when you got up at four thirty in the morning and you served reveille at five o'clock.

- Terry: So what did your kids think of you--they knew you were in the Army, so what did they think? Did they have any--it must have been natural with their father being a career serviceman, so—
- Kacmarynski: The thing, like, my father was in the Army, in World War I, he was. And I was—I had—right from my own family, there was three girls and two boys, and my two brothers were both 4-F, they could never get in—they both had pneumonia and had scar tissue and all—so I always felt that somebody had to go fight for our family. So I went in service. And, uh, yet to this day—like after my father was killed, my mother gave me all his—I've got his World War I Army uniform at home. And, uh, to this day, like--like, I've got a granddaughter who's sixteen, and she was thinking about going, so I'll tell(??). “Ooh,” she says, “and I wouldn't do, do like—.” I said, “Well nowadays it's nothing like it was when we were in.” And I remember when we had to go out on bivouac. And this was--that was in February, we went out in the woods for two weeks. Slept in a tent. And we had to go on the rifle range. Well, that's when I was a sharpshooter, too. I had 23 out of 25 on the bull's eye out on the rifle range. But I say, we had to cook out there--
- Terry: Yeah, you had to do the regular mess detail in the field.
- Kacmarynski: Right. Uh huh. Like I say, it was very interesting. Like I told my granddaughter, she's “Ewwh, I could never—.” But I said it's not like that now. To me it's just like a job. But, uh, I liked it very well. So, let's see, what else? And I'll—a year ago, I spent, we just--I was married to my second husband—we just celebrated our silver wedding anniversary, a year ago, or two years ago.
- Terry: Good for you. So, looking back on it, were you glad you went into the military?
- Kacmarynski: Yeah, mm hmm. And there's times that—like they wanted me, at first, I had—see I was in the high school band and I played, let's see, the trombone, the baritone, and a bass. And they said, “Boy, you're talented. You should go into—.” They wanted me to go into the--it was the 32nd Army Band at the time. But I said nooo. They said “Well, you'd be—and travel all over the world.” I said that wasn't for me, I'd be in a Class A uniform. I was the rugged type. (Both laugh) Being a little old country girl, that high-class stuff wasn't for me. But then I was in the military, the MPs, for oh, less than six weeks. And at that time, women weren't allowed to carry a weapon. And you couldn't ride alone; you had to have a man, one of the male MPs in the squad with you. And here, well, I was, what, five foot nine, about 180 pounds, and the fella they had riding with me, maybe about five foot six, maybe a 140 pounds. (Terry chuckles) I always says, “He wasn't there to protect me, I had to protect him.” So I

give that up. So then I went into food service, and that's where I really made out. Like I say, on my mother's side we were German, and my dad's side was Danish (fist pounding), so I knew a lot about cooking. I liked the cooking part.

Terry: You never went hungry, that's for sure. You had the best job!

Kacmarynski: That's for sure. Uh huh.

Terry: So, Doris, did you use any of your G.I. Bill benefits, at all?

Kacmarynski: Yes, uh huh. The uh, (fist pounding) housing loan. In fact, when I was first married we bought a home. Then after I got divorced, we sold that home. And then I bought the second home under just my name.

Terry: Good for you. Did you use any schooling with it?

Kacmarynski: No. I've never—

Terry: Did you join any military, veterans' organizations?

Kacmarynski: Mm hmm. I belong to the Women's Legion Post in Green Bay, the State Twenty and Four, that's the Honor Society of Women Legionnaires, and I joined the AMVETS Post, out in Pulaski. And then I worked myself all the way up to District Commander. And there are 12 districts in the state, and I was District Commander--two years. And the second year I won the state Commander of the Year Award, District Commander of the Year, from the AMVETS. And I still am very active in the AMVETS, and the Women's Legion Post. So, but, my--well my husband right now, he's a hundred percent handicap from service-connected disabilities, and I myself had a mild stroke three, four years ago, and I'm blind in my uh, left eye.

Terry: So, do you use some of your medical benefits?

Kacmarynski: Yeah, mm hmm. I go to the Appleton VA. And like, well even when I had the stroke when I went through a regular doctor, he said there's nothing that can be done about that blindness. Then I went to Appleton or to Milwaukee to the VA clinic, and they said, too, that there was nothing that they can do about it. So I say, "I'll just have to learn to live with it." But now I've paid-- my driver's license is due this, in March, and I've got to take an eye test. But, like, I know of many people who only have one eye, and are still driving, all of them. So they'd better not turn me down, because my husband can't drive.

Terry: Doris, just to bring back your time in basic training, you said you went in at Fort Lee, Virginia. Can you tell us a little bit about Fort Lee?

Kacmarynski: In fact, I believe it was the only women's basic training post in the States—for women—was Fort Lee.

Terry: At that time?

Kacmarynski: Yeah, mm hmm. And there'd be some—the summers were hot, hot, hot. Nothing--no coolness or anything. And out in the parade field, everything was all nothin' but sand, and dirt. But, like I say, I liked it very well. And I can remember the one time when we had one of the barracks burnt down there. We had a woman that perished, and to this day—I don't know if you've ever—but human flesh smells like lamb cooking, to this day I cannot eat lamb. But uh, it was rough, but when you were in basic, you had different details like KP. Well, I was—I don't know if you'd call it—well, be truthful, they all say I brown-nosed. I never pulled one day of KP! Because I knew my cooking and all that, there's a lot of times I'd fill in for cooks, and so—but like I say, and the—I should have brought different pictures I had at home. I've got a whole bunch of 'em.

Terry: Do you?

Kacmarynski: Yeah. That, if you want 'em I can send 'em to you.

Terry: No, but the Museum might be interested in them. Would it be all right if the Museum contacted you?

Kacmarynski: Sure. Sure.

Terry: So overall your military experience was a pretty good thing for you, overall.

Kacmarynski: I would never give it—I don't regret it, not one bit.

Terry: Ok.

[End of Interview]