

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS  
An Oral History Interview with Loretta Reilly Hoffman  
Women's Army Corps, 1225<sup>th</sup> Army Service Unit  
April to October 1944  
Interviewed by Mary Rasa, NPS  
June 10, 2003  
Transcribed by Mary Rasa, 2011



Loretta Reilly Hoffman in 1945 while stationed at the Pentagon.



Loretta Reilly Hoffman on leave at home.



Mrs. Hoffman's husband, William Hoffman. Mr. Hoffman was the movie projectionist and spent then entire War at Fort Hancock. According to Loretta, each time his unit was shipped out the commanding officer changed his unit so he would stay and operate the movie projector.



Mary Rasa and Loretta Hoffman photographed during the interview in 2003. They are on the steps of Barracks 25.

Editor's notes in parenthesis ( )

MR: Today is June 10, 2003. My name is Mary Rasa. I am a Museum Curator for the National Park Service and I am here today with Loretta Reilly Hoffman who was a WAC stationed here in 1944.

LH: Correct.

MR: And I we are going to do an oral history interview today because she is the only WAC I have ever met, especially stationed here. I have a particular interest in the Women's Army Corps because I do some re-enacting in that and I am very excited to have you here today.

LH: I am excited to be here.

MR: We are sitting on the front porch of Barracks 25 which was the home of the Women's Army Corps during your time here in World War II. My first question is where and when were you born?

LH: I was born in Brooklyn, New York on February 14, 1923.

MR: And were you schooled there as well?

LH: Yes, I went to Catholic elementary school and public high school, Madison High School.

MR: Okay, did you go to college before your military service?

LH: No. I went to college afterwards on the G.I. Bill.

MR: Oh, okay. Do you have any relatives or friends before you joined up that were in the military?

LH: Just cousins who had been drafted and that sort of thing.

MR: Did you know much about the Army before you joined it?

LH: No. Absolutely nothing about the Women's Army but I really knew nothing about it. I knew my Dad was in the Army in World War I and this is the reason I chose the Army, but other than that, no.

MR: Why did you join?

LH: There was a war on. If I had been a man I would have been in so...

MR: What was the reaction of your parents?

LH: My, I was afraid to ask my Father because the way I was brought up if I had asked him before I was old enough to go in and he would have said no that would mean I couldn't go in when I was older. So, I waited until my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday and I went to work and at lunch time I went down and enlisted and went home and told them. (laughter)

MR: Was he quite shocked?

LH: He was thrilled.

MR: Oh. That's good.

LH: I was amazed because my Dad was the old school, you know. Girls stay home and do this. He was thrilled.

MR: That is good. Where did you go for basic training?

LH: Fort Oglethorpe in Georgia.

MR: It must have been hot down there.

LH: Well, it was in February.

MR: What year?

LH: 1944.

MR: Okay.

LH: And it was lovely. I remember the first Sunday I was there and sitting outside and it was just a day like today. I washed my hair and was drying it in the sun, writing a letter to my family up in snowy New York City, telling them how lucky I was to be down there. It was beautiful, yeah.

MR: And was Fort Hancock your first assignment?

LH: Yes. It was. I finished basic and came up here with one other girl.

MR: Oh okay. What type of job did you have before you joined?

LH: Clerical. I forget what they call it now. The Army number, whatever they gave you for your classification number. 005 I think it was, general clerk.

MR: Well, before you joined, what type of job did you have?

LH: General clerk.

MR: Oh, okay.

LH: I worked for Western Electric and just...

MR: Oh, okay. Did your civilian job pay more than the military?

LH: Well, my civilian job paid me I think I was getting \$18 a week and I had to pay \$10 a week home for board and it cost me \$2 a week to go back and forth to work, so I ended up with more money here.

MR: Oh, that was good. What did you think of the uniform?

LH: I was thrilled to death. I had no complaints with it, really.

MR: Did it fit properly?

LH: Mine fit alright. My father complained the first time I went home. "Tell them to give you smaller shoes. They're too big." (laughter)

MR: And, they issued you two of each item, two shirts...

LH: As I recall, there may have been more than two shirts. But like the dress uniform you had two. And I think we had two fatigue dresses and all the underwear. I don't remember how much we were issued.

MR: Which was all olive drab?

LH: All olive drab, rayon. Treco knit rayon and it got wet and it just dragged.

MR: And you got nylons.

LH: You get nylons for going out.

MR: Oh, okay. But regularly would you get cotton stockings on base?

LH: Well, I worked in Post Headquarters so I wore nylons.

MR: Oh, okay.

LH: You had to look nice.

MR: Sure. So you worked in that building next door?

LH: Right next door, yes.

MR: Barracks 24.

LH: In the rain it was lovely.

MR: It was nice and close.

LH: You could run between the raindrops.

MR: How was the food?

LH: Well, unfortunately I have had the reputation all my life for saying, "Where is the food and when do we eat?" I had no complaints.

MR: Okay, that is good. How did the male soldiers treat you?

LH: For the most part they were great. They, I think it was very different because everyone had the same idea. We have to go in. There is a war on and do the best we can. The only thing I did run into was the one soldier that I was relieving for active duty. He gave me a couple of bad steers on how to handle people but I learned the hard way. But other than that I had no problems.

MR: And you were allowed to socialize with enlisted men but not officers?

LH: Oh, yes. Yes. Yeah. That is how I met my husband.

MR: Which I will ask you about in a little bit. Did you ever notice any discipline problems with the women?

LH: I was never, if there were any I think they had a tendency to keep them quiet. And I think if you worked in the office like this the sergeant in charge of the WAC detachment you were aware of them but other than that we didn't hear of it.

MR: And you just heard about you knew one WAC that got pregnant.

LH: One WAC, I don't know if she was even pregnant but she was caught necking.

MR: Oh.

LH: With a soldier down behind the car pool and she was immediately sent to another base.

MR: Really?

LH: I didn't even see her again.

MR: Were promotions fair among the WACs?

LH: I don't know because when I was here I came as a buck private and I left as a buck private and there so to tell the truth I never expected to be anything but because I figured, well, what can I do. I am not helping to win that war, I am just here. If they need me I am here to do it.

MR: Did you get any medical care while you were here?

LH: Yes, I did.

MR: Where they good doctors?

LH: Oh, they were fine, yeah.

MR: Did you want to go overseas?

LH: I did but unfortunately I didn't know when you were sent to the Pentagon you stayed there.

MR: Oh, okay. Did the other women you served with have similar educational backgrounds? Were a lot of them college graduates?

LH: For the most part we were all high school graduates and I don't recall I think a woman had to be a high school graduate...

MR: Yes.

LH: ...in order to join but a man didn't.

MR: Right.

LH: I met a few who went on to OCS (Officers Candidate School) who had gone to college but that was very few.

MR: And what did you like most about the Women's Army Corps?

LH: It was exciting. I got away from home. You know, my Father was very strict. I lived in Brooklyn, New York. I wasn't allowed to go into Manhattan except to go to work. A friend of mine I worked with was being married. She lived in Greenwich Village. My Father said I couldn't go to the wedding because it was in Greenwich Village. I was, you don't expect that in New York. But it was like that for most of my friends.

MR: You got independence.

LH: And I got some independence, yeah.

MR: Did the skills you learned in the military help you later on?

LH: Well, I think the most I learned as far as skills were people skills and they did help, yes.

MR: Okay. Now, I have some other questions. When did you start being involved at Fort Hancock? What were your dates here?

LH: I came here I don't know the exact date but it was April of 1944 and I left here in October of 1944.

MR: Did you know anything about Fort Hancock before you were assigned here?

LH: Never heard of it.

MR: Let's see. Did you know the type of job you were going to be assigned to?

LH: I had no idea.

MR: Okay. You just showed up.

LH: I just showed up and they said, "You go over there and do that work."

MR: Now, did you come on the train, the bus?

LH: We came on the train to New Jersey. I guess it was to Newark. And then I think we got the Jersey Central Railroad.

MR: Yes.

LH: And an Army vehicle met us. I don't remember. It was just two of us. It may have been a car. I don't remember.

MR: And it brought you out to the Hook.

LH: Mmm. Hmm. Yeah.

MR: What was the first thing that you did when you came here? Did they send you right to your barracks?

LH: I think so. Yes. Because I recall it was at night. It was dark and I didn't even know what it looked like until the next day and the next day I was given my assignment.

MR: What was your...so your rank while you were here was private first class?

LH: No. Private.

MR: Oh, private. Okay and the unit that you worked for was the Headquarters?

LH: I worked for Special Services and that was housed in the Headquarters Building.



(pause while big truck drives by)

MR: Were there ever alerts of potential enemy attacks while you were here?

LH: Not that we knew of. There may well have been. I don't know. I do remember if I could just through something in, I wasn't here but while my husband was here he said that there was a soldier on guard duty on the beach and he lost a foot. His foot froze and they didn't have the equipment to keep in contact like they do now. And he stayed there until his time was up and he lost his foot.

MR: Oh. When you were working did you work with both civilians and military?

LH: Yes. The civilians were mostly from the Red Cross. And in fact, my husband was also affiliated with Special Services. He was the motion picture projectionist and we worked with the setting up of shows to come to the base and it was very, it was really interesting. Things that I had no idea existed.

MR: Were you here when Judy Garland performed?

LH: No. I wasn't.

MR: Missed that. (laughter) So, your typical day was you got up and eat and went to work.

LH: It was really just like any other day. You get up and you have your breakfast and we had exercises in the morning. And you got to work and you have lunch and you go back to work and you are finished at the end of the day, at five o'clock.

MR: And then after you came home you ate and then you would be able to relax in the dayroom?

LH: Yeah. We had a nice sized dayroom and we just sit and relax and some of them played cards. I didn't because I didn't know how. I never learned. And we sat and talked and wrote letters.

MR: Did you go to the Service Club, the Theater, the dances?

LH: Well, I went to the Theater because I got a job working in the Theater.

MR: What did you do?

LH: Well, I started as an usher. And I liked it because I got paid at night. It was separate and apart from your military job. And then I became the cashier and then I became the manager. And as manager I got like five dollars a night. So, it was good.

MR: Oh, okay. Did you go to dances out here?

LH: No.

MR: Any sporting events?

LH: I don't know if they...no.

MR: No.

LH: Well, see for one thing they had the boat they called the Q boat and every weekend I could go home unless for some reason I was on duty. But we get the boat right down here wherever it would be I don't know.

MR: Right over that way.

LH: Over that way. I will take your word for it. And take us into the Battery in Manhattan. Get on the subway and go visit my family and come back Sunday night.

MR: Okay.

LH: I was very lucky.

MR: So you didn't spend much time here on weekends at all?

LH: No. I didn't.

MR: Did you ever go to church services out here or was that because you were home?

LH: I was home. Yeah. I did go into the Chapel and it was very, very small as I recall. It seemed to me they had two and one was smaller. (St. Mary's Catholic Chapel, Building 123, was a small building and the main Chapel, Building 35 was much smaller. Both are still standing.)

MR: Right. That's right. Did you ever go to the beach while you were here?

LH: No. I didn't even own a bathing suit while I was here.

MR: Did you ever see any servants or minorities while you were here?

LH: Nope. And you know I felt terrible later when I realized I didn't even notice the fact that there were no black women at this. We just grew up in an atmosphere where that was just the way it was. And later when I began to realize what was going on in the world I felt so guilty.

MR: Was this a fun or boring place to be working?

LH: Well, when you are 21 everything is fun. I really enjoyed it.

MR: Did anything especially humorous occur while you were here?

LH: Well, I can't think of anything off-hand. One thing I wasn't here but my husband was telling me that Edgar Bergen came. And Edgar Bergen came to entertain the troops and he acted as if the world had waited on him. He said to my husband who was a very independent thinker, "Sergeant, get my bags." And my husband said, "I am not your maid or your butler. Go get them yourself."

MR: The other thing I wanted to ask was how did you meet your husband?

LH: In Special Services Office. I, the first day I was here I met him and he scared the death out of me. (laughter) He was a big man and he was very deep and he talked and you heard him coming and he was really very nice and I guess that is why I enjoyed Fort Hancock. Because after the show because he was running the movies we would get on an Army bus and go into Highlands to a diner that was there and have something to eat and come back on the bus when it came back.

MR: So, you were here for six months and then you were reassigned to the Pentagon?

LH: Yes.

MR: And you were able to keep in touch with him?

LH: Oh yes, we kept in touch.

MR: And then you were married after the War?

LH: Yes. We were married in 1946.

MR: Then I have some specific question I would like to ask while we take a walk into the barracks and if you want to hold on to me. (getting off step and moving)

LH: I am a little apprehensive on the steps. (inaudible talking while moving)

LH: I was looking in here before and nothing seemed familiar. (walking)

MR: We are inside the south end of Barracks 25 which according to the Post Newspaper, the *Sandy Hook Foghorn* was where the dayroom was. It's been chopped up into offices since then. Do you remember coming in the dayroom?

LH: I have been trying to orient myself. And of course, with all the partitions nothing looks familiar. But I do remember the dayroom was a large room.

MR: And would they typically have a radio and chairs?

LH: They had radios and chairs and tables and we would sit and talk and relax. And then the dayroom was where we had our exercises.

MR: Oh, so everybody got together. And you think how many people do you think were stationed when you were here?

LH: Well, when I was here I would think maybe thirty. I could be wrong.

MR: Okay.

LH: That is what I remember.

MR: What we are going to do... do you remember the bathrooms? Did they still have urinals in them when you were here?

LH: No. No. They didn't. Not when I was here.

MR: Okay.

LH: We did have one small room that was really a bathroom with a tub in it and we took turns getting to use it. We had showers but we had to take turns getting to use the tub.

MR: Right.

LH: And that was nice.

MR: Do you remember going into the basement.

LH: Never was in the basement.

MR: In the basement they had washtubs.

LH: Oh really. I must have been down there if they had washtubs.

MR: They said that washtubs and ironing boards were installed.

LH: I must have been down there but then I was going home every week. I may have taken it home.

MR: Sure. That was lucky.

LH: I had to do it myself there.

MR: Oh, okay. (laughter) What we are going to do is walk upstairs to the bunk room and discuss a little bit about where you slept.

LH: If I can recall. (Walk upstairs)

MR: We are in one of the large barracks rooms where Loretta most likely slept. And when you were in here did you have a wooden bunk?

LH: I don't think so but I don't know. I am inclined to think they were metal.

MR: Okay.

LH: They were set up like this.

MR: What did they give you? Did you get a footlocker and a wall locker?

LH: We had a footlocker and a wall locker. Yes. We had to have the wall locker for the clothes that you had to hang. They weren't permanent press then, you know. You had to iron them. You took care of them.

MR: So, you think that most of the members that you were stationed with would have been in one side.

LH: One side or the other yeah.

MR: Did the officer, probably had a private room.

LH: Oh yeah.

MR: Do you think the sergeants also had private rooms?

LH: Oh yeah. I think they did downstairs.

MR: So, the room was not crowded then?

LH: Oh no. It was very nice as I recall. I was like the third or fourth one from the wall.

MR: So you think you were in the middle or against...

LH: In the middle.

MR: Oh, okay. Did they sleep head to toe or was it heads on one side?

LH: I think it was pretty much just every body facing east or whatever. Not for any specific reason but we slept in the same direction because when the beds were made they had to be uniform. So, all the heads were...

MR: And when you left for the weekend did you have to do anything special with your bunk?

LH: Well, make it up and make sure it was clean and ...

MR: Do you have anything else that you would like to say while we are in here?

LH: No. I am just I feel so terrible that I can remember so little but its how many years ago. 59 years ago.

MR: Something like that.

LH: Yeah that's like a couple of weeks. (laughs) and its so good to see and it and I just wish my husband were here to see it.

MR: Well, thank you..

LH: Well, we did come back one time when the children were small. And we got up to Main Gate and they said, "You can't go in unless you have a pass," or whatever.

MR: It was still military.

LH: And my husband said, "They wouldn't let me out of here for four years and now they won't let me in." The guard said, "You were stationed here?" And he said, "Yes. We both were." So, he let us come in. He said, "Just don't take pictures." That was it. Great security.

MR: Okay, well thank you very much.

LH: Well, thank you.

MR: I appreciate this. This has been a lot of fun and there you go. This is the end of the interview.

END OF INTERVIEW