

Norma Ringsrud

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Question: Now your last name is -- it's Norma?

Answer: Yes. Ringsrud. R-I-N-G-S-R-U-D.

Question: R-U-D, okay. It's a name I got from Fred. Otherwise it would be --

OCM: (inaudible)

Answer: No, that's Scandinavian.

Question: Oh, is it Scandinavian?

Answer: Yeah.

Question: Ahh. See, I'm Karl Gustav Schmidt, good American name.

Answer: Yeah.

Question: My uncle takes credit for the Gustav part.

Answer: Well, his dad's name was Gustav.

Question: Oh, really.

Answer: Yeah. So it's a good name.

Question: I've never met another Gustav. So, when the war broke out, where were you when the war broke out?

Answer: I was on December the 7th I was out in the yard playing with the dog. I was 16 years old and it was a nice bright sunny day. Wasn't any snow on the ground, wasn't cold. And suddenly I was aware that the radio was on in the house and I could hear it. They usually had it louder than I liked it anyway. And they kept repeating the same thing, the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. And they kept repeating it and repeating it so long I went in and said look, what's this that they're talking about? Said, well the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor and there's going to be a war. I wasn't really surprised that it had happened because I knew that bad things were happening in Europe. And people were being taken away from their homes and killed because I saw that in the newspapers. We didn't have TV, of course, and radio wasn't as invasive as it is now. But I listened to that, I thought oh, this is really going to make a big difference. Then I started worrying about my two younger brothers. But they were too young to be in the service. But I was only 16.

Question: I was going to say how old were you. You were only 16. You were like --

Answer: I was a senior in high school in Cashmere High, and we had just moved down there and so I didn't know very many people. But it was scary because almost immediately after school started and this, you know after we went back to school after we heard this, the boys started being gone. They just weren't there any more. They had joined the Army or the Navy or the Marines or whatever. And they weren't there. Even some of them lied about their age so they could get in and fight the so-called dirty Japs. And it was scary, really scary.

Question: So, see, that's -- I'm trying to put where I was at 16 years old and what I was doing and what my mind set was and the concept of world war -- I mean, did it become a

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thing that you were afraid of them getting all the way here to Cashmere? I know the coast, they were afraid of it.

Answer: Well, we had air raid drills at school and we were taken out on the football field and they put out little batches of poison gas so we'd know what that smelled like. And one smelled like newly-mown hay which I really -- I liked the smell of that, and I thought that's a dirty thing to do. And we had drills where the kids would all go downstairs in the basements of the school and stand around the walls until the all-clear was sounded. And they organized older, like high school kids, to walk the little ones home on the bus routes. So I was walking these children home one day and I was thinking now, why would anybody want to do anything to us. Because we never did anything to them. I didn't hate the Japanese, I didn't like what they did but I just couldn't figure out why people would want to bomb us. Then we were showed films in school about incendiary bombs and things you could do to prepare yourself for that. It showed putting insulation up there so that if they fell through the roof, then you would be able to get them out. And I had nightmares about that. And I dreamed that the bombs came over and they dropped the -- I mean the bombs fell out of the plane and they dropped down into our house. And I was up there in the attic trying to get them out before they burned the house down. I mean for a 16-year-old kid, that's kind of scary stuff.

Question: Now run that back by because I haven't heard that before? You were supposed to do what to stop the bombs?

Answer: There -- there wasn't anything you could do to stop them, but you had to have something around there so that you could put, smother the fire or something so it wouldn't burn the whole thing down. Of course I don't think that would have helped. I think they would have blown it apart. But I -- think of all these things now, why would they do that to us?

Question: So there -- even this far removed, there definitely was a fear that you would --

Answer: Yeah, there was because you don't know how far the planes would go. And there was -- I don't remember what they called it. A plane watch, where the women would take turns sitting in this little observation place looking for planes coming into the valley and spot them. Do you remember what it was called, Fred?

OCM: (Inaudible)

Answer: Well, anyway, his mother sat down there -- yeah, his mother worked down there. And they would take turns sitting there. And of course none ever came but --

Question: Even all the way over here in Cashmere --

Answer: Yeah, it isn't actually that far when you go over the mountains.

Question: Well, that's true.

Answer: Yeah. And I remember that my mother went down to a place downtown where they rolled bandages. They tore up old sheets and rolled them up and sewed the ends together and when the roll got big enough they'd sew that and it was sterilized and sent off to take care of wounds. And I helped roll them sometimes, too. But it was just weird things that I remember.
We had rationing.

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Question: Yeah, tell me about that, because I've heard a little bit about the rationing. How did that -- what did they ration and how did they do it?

Answer: Oh, they rationed canned goods, meat, butter, shoes, I don't remember if there were textiles or not but we sewed our own -- my mother and I sewed our own clothes so we didn't have to worry about that. And you could get ration points to buy new shoes. But I was only use to one pair at a time anyway so that didn't bother me. And we had our garden and we raised our own meat and chickens and eggs; had a cow so we had butter and milk. But in town where they didn't have all these things, I think they had a worse time. There were blue points and red points and right now I don't remember which was which. There were little ration books about like that with little stamps you could tear off. Because one time when I was in college I had to help plan a meal, and I had to tell all the other girls who were coming to this meal to bring so many points so we could order the things we wanted. It was kind of a nuisance. And then they had little -- little round coins. They weren't made out of metal, but they were kind of a wood fiber stuff and they were red and blue too -- they were smaller than a dime. And we could use those the same as the others. And I remember when I went away to college, the next year, I guess, I was 18 when I went there, over on the coast, there were almost no boys in the whole school, except for the Army boys who were there being trained. But we never had any contact with them. We'd see them marching around from here to there but they kept us and them very well separated I must say. Except in the chemistry class, there were a couple soldiers in there taking the chemistry class with me, but they never talked about what they were doing.

Question: So that must have been pretty different -- well, I know my mom talked about that because like her senior prom and all that, that all the men were gone, all the boys were gone.

Answer: Yeah, almost overnight it seemed like they were out. Most of the ones were left were on a deferment of some kind or else they were too young or whatever. And they had what they called 4F's which maybe you've heard of, too. Through no fault of their own they weren't able to serve.

Question: So I guess in a way that was the beginning of women's liberation?

Answer: Well, you could call it that. I have some friends who said that they went to the coast and became Rosie the Riveters. And we had an orchard so I already knew how to do all the things in the orchard so it wasn't anything different for me. But there weren't that many people around to help. You didn't -- at that time we didn't have any Hispanics coming up to help. The work was hard and the days were hot and long. And I carried a wooden ladder around a 40-acre orchard more than once (gestures). But I don't do that anymore.

Question: So it was -- I mean it sounds like it was almost an instant change.

Answer: It was.

Question: Pearl Harbor and then --

Answer: And then the radio started having all sorts of propaganda. I recognized it as that because overnight it changed. There wasn't anything like that before. The newspapers would have pictures of this, as they always said, this dirty little Jap. And they had a caricature and it just was hideous.

Question: So you even at that time realized that they were --

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Answer: I knew they were telling us what they wanted us to think. But people do that in war times. Bad things happen to good people in war time. And other times, too. When I was away at college my girlfriend and I had an apartment at one time and all we could get was margarine and it came in a little bag like this that you had to squeeze and get the coloring and the flavoring mixed in. And it was -- tasted terrible. And when I went to the little store one time I said to the man behind the counter because it wasn't a market like you have now. I said don't you have any butter, I'm so sick of eating this stuff. He went in the back room and he found me a quarter pound. I don't remember what I paid for it, I'm sure it was more than I should have but it sure did taste good.

Question: So was that little black market --

Answer: Well, it was just a little market. And I don't know if he just had his share back there and -- cause I didn't ask any questions except I sure wish I could have some butter.

Question: So did -- so you were -- you started in Cashmere then you went to college in --

Answer: In Tacoma.

Question: Oh, in Tacoma. So at PLU, UPS?

Answer: No, it was College of Puget Sound in those days.

Question: Oh, okay.

Answer: It's UPS now.

Question: Okay, yeah, good.

Answer: I went to Wenatchee Valley College one year first. But I said this is just like high school.

Question: I was afraid you were going to say you went to the University of Washington, we'd have to end the interview right there and --

Answer: No.

Question: So did life go on as normal then, or was -- I mean it's hard for me to understand -- was war a part of your daily life then still?

Answer: Well the newspapers were and the lists in the paper of the people who'd been killed. I got so I didn't want to look at the papers because I didn't want to find the names of my friends and acquaintances in there. And yet I was fascinated. I had to find out what was going on. So I was drawn between knowing and not wanting to know.

Question: And did you -- I assume that over the period that you did see friends names?

Answer: Yes, I certainly did. And sometimes just because I didn't look at the list then, I see new ones that I didn't know had died in the war. Like I was reading the Okinawa County Journal the other day and was listed in there a young man that I had played with when we were both babies. I didn't know that he had died in the war but he had. It still was a shock.

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Question: Did you have any friends that were in the service that you kept in contact with during the war?

Answer: I wasn't into social things very much at that time. I went to some USO dances. I wasn't dating -- there weren't any guys to date, up until Fred came along.

Question: Now the USO dances. Where did they hold those? Where did you --

Answer: Well in town here they held one at the Masonic Hall and the soldiers who were brought over from Moses Lake, I presume, in buses. And we were not supposed to hold hands. It was real neat. And you weren't supposed to walk out of the building with them and they weren't supposed to go home with you. They were supposed to go right back to the bus and go home but not all of them did I guess from what I heard. But kids were kids, you know, no matter if it's war time or not.

Question: I was going to say I liked how you prefaced it by saying they were supposed to not hold hands and --

Answer: Yeah, they were supposed to, but I heard that some of them didn't. There was a boy that I got acquainted with over in Tacoma -- he was a member of the youth group from the church that I'd went to over there. And when he was over in Europe -- I didn't particularly like him but he was going through that tough Battle of the Bulge and he wrote to me one time, he said, I wish you'd write to me. I need to have a letter from somebody. I said I don't even like him, but I wrote to him anyway for awhile. And I don't know whatever happened to him after that. We had a few letters exchanged and that was it. But I guess it served a need he had at that particular time. He was a nice enough kid, I just didn't like him.

Question: When he wrote you, what type of things did he write about? What was happening over there or -- how lonely --

Answer: He just said it was terrible and he missed his friends and he needed some contact with somebody that he could pretend was his girlfriend, you know, it was all pretend. So I don't know if it helped him very much.

Question: Well, it must have, I mean some, at least some connection to home or something like that.

And when we went home on -- at Christmas vacation, transportation was jammed with forest - - servicemen going home. So we oftentimes couldn't get on the plane or the bus -- not the plane, the bus or the train, because it was so full and if you got on the bus you might have to stand half way home. Because you weren't supposed to make servicemen do anything except sit.

Question: So the whole role reversal going on and --

Answer: No, they were -- they were the young men who'd been risking their lives for us, getting ready to go into battle, and you didn't want to take anything good from them. So I'd sit my suitcase down in the aisle of the bus and sit on the suitcase. After I got tired of standing. But if there wasn't enough room to do that, then you'd stand. And these buses weren't made for -- with any place to hang onto. I don't even remember if they had the luggage racks overhead. I don't think they did then.

Question: Must have been a long bus ride.

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Answer: Yeah. Well one time our -- a bunch of us were going to go home to Cashmere or other places. And we got as far as the train station in Seattle. And there wasn't any transportation anywhere that late at night and so one of the boys in our group said well, I'll call my parents and they can come and get us. And so he called his parents and this group of five or six girls -- we went to his parents home, we spent the night, and the next day we got on the bus or something to go the rest of the way. But I thought that was really nice of him to do that. I don't even remember his name anymore.

Question: What -- so in college did they continue the air raid drills and all of that that you were doing in high school?

Answer: No, I don't think that they had anything like that -- at least I don't remember anything like that. That made such an impression on me when I was a senior in high school. But I don't think they did. Maybe they had some, but I don't remember any of it. I guess by that time everybody knew what they were supposed to do.

Question: So when you were in class, in university, did -- did the war, while you were actually in class, could you separate the two? It's like, we're going to go to school and then get out of school and --

Answer: Hm-hmm. Well, see, I was a girl. I could do that. The boys couldn't because there weren't very many of them there in the first place. It was almost all girls. It was almost like a girls school. But you'd worry about -- about people and what was going to happen. But I liked my classes so well that I paid close attention. I was always a good student and I didn't want to waste any opportunity to learn.

Question: What did you think about the war? I mean, I hear even at 16 you understood that they were sending you propoganda. You understood that was part of the war machine, how war works and all that.

Answer: Hm-hmm.

Question: What was your perception of the war as an American?

Answer: Well, it was not good and it makes me shiver yet thinking about it, what I knew was happening. But to tell you what I thought about it. I thought about the Japanese people who were interned in Tulle Lake and some of these other places. And our youth group took up a collection and -- for money and went down to some of the stores in Tacoma and bought some gifts and sent them to the children down there because we thought, these are children. They don't need to be punished for what somebody else is doing across the ocean. So we sent gifts there to try to make their days a little bit better. It's kind of odd talking about this now because just this last year my daughter had a Japanese student, high school student, staying with her. And one of his assignments was to interview somebody who had lived through the beginning of the second world war. So he was asking me some of these same questions. He had a list of prepared questions. And I thought this is odd to be talking to a Japanese about what happened that many years ago. Really odd.

Question: And he was an exchange student?

Answer: Yeah, he was an exchange student. He was only 17, I guess

Question: So were his questions -- did they have a different perspective to them?

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Answer: Maybe my answers made a difference to him, but he had a list of questions that the class was supposed to use when they interviewed people. But I added some things, too. Like I said I have a friend now who used to be in the Army of occupation and he said at first when he was in Japan in the Army, that the people were afraid of him. They wouldn't come out at all. And then the kids started coming out. And the soldiers started giving him chocolate. Well I told this to this boy and when he wrote up his paper he said that his grandmother remembered asking for chocolate when she was young. So I had a different view of it than somebody a little older would have.

Question: As we talked to Dee Bachman earlier and he went into Yokohama after the war had ended and describing the things that you would never think about. It was like - he walked into a big garage sale. I mean you hear about the devastation and everything like that, but he said -- and he said -- had photos of it, walk down these streets and people were selling anything that they had and he said they didn't want American money but they were trading cigarettes and things like that, but the thing that you forget about, this whole population that is devastated now the war is over -- their cities have been devastated, now what do you do?

Answer: Yes. I just got through reading Memoirs of a Geisha, and this gives me an entirely new look at this culture. Because I didn't know a lot of the things about them. I had heard lots of stories but the war always has two sides to it. And I can understand why they thought they needed more land and more this and that because they don't have much. But I didn't like the way they did it.

Question: Yeah, they live on a rock basically, I mean they live on a small island. Now did you have any friends that were Japanese-American citizens that were interned? Did you know any --

Answer: No, I didn't. I had never even seen any Orientals at all. In fact I didn't even see a black person until I was in college. It was a very small town that I lived in and this isn't a very big one, either. The one I lived in was only 200 people until we moved away, so it was pretty small.

Question: Because going to school in Tacoma, now the Puyallup Fairgrounds was an internment camp.

Answer: Oh, it was?

Question: Yeah, and because I've just gone through a bunch of, you know, of course they're trying to repay some of the citizens what they took away. And that was such a weird concept. In fact that was again, in some of the papers that I've read about these -- well one of the POW's I interviewed was in Japan. And he got to talking to one of the guards and one of the guards went to UCL

Answer: And so here's this --

Answer: Yeah, how come? Aren't we brothers?

Question: And that was (inaudible) I mean there was some but it was just a confusing thing that you lose sight of.

Answer: Well after Fred and I were married we were over in Seattle one time and there was a soccer game going on. And it was a group or some groups of Italian prisoners of war. They just looked like ordinary kids and they were because they were from Italy. But they

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were our so-called enemies at that time. But they -- they had to have their entertainment. I mean it was nice they didn't just keep them caged up all the time.

Question: So this is -- while we had them as prisoners of war, this was their --

Answer: Yeah, this was some of their exercise they were permitted.

Question: See and that's the thing the history books, you know, I mean we see the bad things that have happened in like Dachau and things like that, but you don't hear a lot about us having prisoners. You don't know what we did with them. Where they were, how did we care for them? Same thing in Japan were our people -- it seems like at least the history that I have read focuses on Hitler and his concentration camps, and all of that but there was all this other going on with war and how, and a war wasn't five days long. I mean some of these people were out in these ships for years. Six months before they saw land again. How do you get through the day in and day out, the average, you know part.

Question: Do you remember where you were when you heard the war was over?

Answer: No, I don't remember that. I guess I was just so glad it was over. I remember looking at the papers and seeing the picture of the sailor kissing the girl -- you've probably seen that classic picture. I was just glad it was over. Really.

Question: Was it -- I mean was it -- you were glad it was over, now let's get on with life?

Answer: Yeah. Well, I'd been doing life one day at a time anyway, I still do. But it's -- it's nice to know that they finished it up except it's never finished because there's always remainders of problems that haven't been solved. And people's anger goes on forever it seems like. I know there's supposed to be forgiveness but lots of times it doesn't appear that it works. I mean people don't use that opportunity.

Question: Now that's been one of the questions that I've been looking for into the vets to understand their feelings. I said do you -- when the war was over, were you fighting a country, were you fighting a people, do you leave hating people, do you hate the country, you know, what were their feelings. And it's been real interesting because I thought my misconception was I thought there would be a lot of hate that came out. And a lot of them said no, I understood they were doing for their country what I thought I was doing for my country. And there wasn't but one -- I mean the Hitler regime and some of that. The regime there was animosity towards, but the people, they were like, oh, they --

Answer: Well, I have an acquaintance who came from Austria and she was German and she had been -- she and her family had been roused out of Germany and -- when she was a young girl, lost their home and everything. And she was telling me this one time and she said, well, do you hate the Germans? And I said how can I? Some of my ancestors were Germans. I says we're all related. And it's time we get on with it.

Question: Do you think there was --that there is or you would want there to be a message for future generations from World War II?

Answer: I hadn't thought about that. I think it -- one thing people need to do is to realize that we are all related and we all have needs and that we need to consider each other. Be considerate, not too quick to anger, but that's easy to say when you're not being hurt.

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Question: Was there contrasting -- I mean World War II, Korea, Viet Nam -- is there no question in your mind that World War II was a different war than --

Answer: I think it was. And it was different than the war that my dad fought in -- World War I. Because that was supposed to be the war to end all wars and it didn't because people still have their hatred. And they hang on to their traditions and they remember what happened to their family a thousand years ago perhaps or more. But since we all live on this same world, it behooves us to make it so that everyone has a place. And opportunities.

Question: We talked to one gentleman who speaks to high schools -- he says he didn't realize it until the second high school he was in. He said he was 20 minutes into his presentation and he didn't realize the kids didn't know World War II -- what he was talking about. They all thought it was Viet Nam.

Answer: No, it's been long enough ago so that they don't know about that. And I guess maybe the only reason I knew much about World War I was because I knew that my dad had fought in France. But he never talked about it. He said no, you don't want to know what happened.

Question: I haven't talked to World War I vets, but the World War II vets that -- how each of them handle it differently. Some, when the war was done, well, A, it was different -- they said here are your papers, we'll see you later. And today, you know, we'd analyze it -- have 6000 counselors in there dealing with it. Where they said here you go, go back, get the country running, get back to your jobs. So here we are 50 years later and some of these gentlemen, it's the first time they've ever talked about it.

Answer: Well I knew when they came back that they were different -- they weren't the kids that left. They were much different. And I knew they had a lot bottled up inside. And whether they felt like talking about it or not, that was their business. I didn't ask a lot of questions because you see the hurt. You don't want to hurt anybody anymore, at least I don't, I'm chicken maybe.

Question: Do you think that -- did you feel the world was -- the world meaning and I'm speaking very ethno-centric right now the US pre-war, post-war -- was there a big change? Was it a different place you were living?

Answer: It was different in that women had to go out and do a lot of things that they had never done before. Otherwise a woman's place was in the home. The girls were supposed to get married and have a family. In fact that's what our chemistry teacher told me one time. No, you don't want to go into that field. Girls don't do that. They're going to get married. I said well, I wanted to get married but I wanted to do something else, too. No, you can't do that. And I believed him and I shouldn't have, but it was OK, getting married, having a family.

Question: So you studied chemistry, is that right?

Answer: Chemistry and biology. I didn't graduate though, after they told me that, I thought I don't have any money. What am I doing in here wasting my time? I didn't feel that the amount of education that I'd got so far was a waste but I thought, why?

Question: So where did you meet this strapping young man?

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Answer: Oh, he was a friend of my younger brother. Because although younger men were gone, and he worked in the orchard next to me, came out from North Dakota. He had a wonderful voice; I heard him singing in the orchard and he knew how to dance and he was a lot of fun, he still is, not that we dance much anymore, but yeah, that's where I met him.

Question: Most men when they get married stop dancing.

Answer: Well, we did a lot. We did dancing with Sons of Norway dance and song corps for a long time and that was really fun. But the other members got so old they couldn't do it so we had to quit, too.

Question: So were you both, and I'll transition here in a second, were you both home during the war or did he serve?

Answer: No, he was -- he had an agricultural deferment. He was a little bit too old to go in right away, and he'll probably tell you about his mother wanting him to go in but he said he didn't want to get shot at either. And she wanted a flag to put in her window to show that she had a son in the service. And if the son had been killed, then she got a gold star to put on there. They called those the Gold Star Mothers. Some of them had two or more but they didn't ever want the last son to get killed too so sometimes he was excused from the service.

Question: And that was Saving Private Ryan, I mean that's part of what the movie was based on.

Answer: Yeah, and there was a lot of gloating sometimes about mothers who had so many stars on their flags if they had a lot of sons in the service. And I guess some of the daughters went in too. But I didn't ever consider that.

Question: So as you walk through town, you could look at houses and see --

Answer: Hm-hmm.

Question: And a lot of the parents were honored to have them.

Answer: Yes, they're glad that they were doing their part to serve the country because that was drilled into you all the time on the radio, in the newspapers, the magazines, no television. I read about a box that you could put on your wall that you could have pictures for you to see all the time. I thought who'd ever have time to watch that? Too busy for that. (laughs)

Question: Some ways it might have been better had we have not --

Answer: Yeah, and the media is so persistent these days -- they have to know exactly how it feels, if your son or daughter has died. I don't think that helps. It makes a story but it's not -- I don't think it's right.

Question: That's interesting, your whole recollection of being 16 and seeing the war go on.