

Catherine VyVerberg nee Cresto

Tape 1 of 2

Question: So I can get your name on tape, to get your first and last name so I have it on tape, so give me your first --

Answer: Well, you want my name now or what I served under?

Question: Well, give me right now and then tell me I served under.

Answer: Oh, all right. My name is Catherine D. VyVerberg, and I served under Catherine D. Cresto, my maiden name.

Question: C-R-E-S-T-O-L?

Answer: T-O.

Question: T-O.

Answer: Cresto, it's an Italian -- a short Italian name. Fortunately, yeah. So that should be recorded, just in case anybody would happen to know me or my brothers, I had two brothers that were in, too. So.

Question: Were you the oldest?

Answer: No, no, I was the youngest.

Question: You were the baby?

Answer: Yeah, I had two big brothers. And they went down and enlisted and I had to go, too. I always followed my brothers. I was a tomboy.

Question: Is -- is

Answer: Well, you know, I was working at Lockheed then, do you want all this?

Question: Yeah. What were you doing at Lockheed?

Answer: Small parts assembly. This -- I went -- they were taking on women before we got -- before Pearl Harbor -- they were -- had started to hire women. And I heard that, so I went and took a night school course for a month. They taught us small parts assembly. And then we went out to Lockheed and they hired us. And the men, at that time they were so jealous, because they got deferments, you know, for working, and there were a lot of them that were not eager to go. In fact they were downright cowardly, some of them. And they would stand around the gate as we came on the night shift and just devil us and razz us and call us names. They just resented us taking the jobs because that put them up to be drafted, you see, and they hated that. So that's when I started. It was small parts assembly, and it was neat, I liked that. I could have stayed right there. But then the WAC was formed in May of '42 and oh, I wanted to go so bad, I -- I wanted the -- you know, it was a big -- well it was history in the making and I wanted to be part of it. I wasn't content to sit there at Lockheed -- I could have sat there, out the war, like most of them did. And my mother knew I wanted to go so bad. I think she was the bravest one of us all. She knew I wanted to go, but I was part support for her and I had a little sister that was only 11, nobody between us, she -- just my baby -- I always called her my first baby. So she knew I wanted to go so bad. She hadn't worked in 30 years and she went out to North American Aviation, and got herself a job. And she came home, I'm going to cry. I get very emotional. And she came home and she says

Catherine VyVerberg nee Cresto

Tape 1 of 2

you can go and enlist now Dorothy, she says, I got a job. And she did that so that I could go. She just did that for me.

Question: Wow.

Answer: So that I could be free to go. And so I went down and enlisted. That morning I was going down, my oldest brother, John, the bombardier one, later. He was -- he was in his front bedroom there. He was still at home. The other one was married and gone. But as I went out, he was in -- kneeling on his bed, begging me not to go. He didn't want his sister to go to war. He says Joe and I will fly the planes, you just stay here and build them. (laughs) And I said nothing doing John, I'm going to. And I just went on and enlisted. You know, and it was such a big adventure. Because it's really -- it's a horror for those who fight it, who are actually in the fighting. But for everyone who is actually up there doing the fighting, there's at least eight support troops in the rear and they're not in much danger, you know. They don't really get -- get into it like that. People don't realize that, a lot. They think if you're overseas, then naturally you were in all of the worst of it. But it's not that way. There were just sometimes when it was a little dangerous. Like during the Battle of the Bulge, we were in Reims, and I guess we were just kind of on the edge of it. But the Germans came over every night and strafed the city. You know, and we could hear them going overhead and we were blacked out and all like that. And incidents happened. But we were never in the front lines, you know.

Question: Were you a young girl? At this --

Answer: Well, I was young. Not a kid. I was -- let's see, I was 20. When did I enlist -- I enlisted in January of '43, I was 22 at that time, and when I got out, I was 25. So yeah, I was young, but I wasn't just a kid. You know. And you had to be 21 to join the WACs at that time. I think they've lowered it to 18 now, but you had to be 21 then. And they were newly formed. If you've ever read Tom Brokaw's book, don't pay any attention to what he said about the WACs. He got it all wrong. All wrong.

Question: I heard that he even got it -- cause it's the WAAC?

Answer: That was originally, the WAAC. And then it -- they dropped -- it was the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps and I just started to read his book, my brother gave me his book. And I, well, you know, The Greatest Generation. Well, parts of it are good, but he got -- I don't know where he got his information on the WACs. Because we were the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps, and he said in the beginning it was the WAC, the Women's Auxiliary Corps. No way. And then he goes on, later on in the book, he says Eisenhower suggested to a WAC major general -- this was after the war -- he says Eisenhower suggested to a WAC major general, and I don't think there was a WAC major general. There couldn't have been because the supreme commander of the WACs was a colonel. You could not have a WAC that was higher ranking than the commander. Right? So, and I never heard of a major general WAC until years later. But anyway, he said, Eisenhower told this major general -- WAC major general, that they should drop the "auxiliary" and it should be the Women's Army Corps. Okay, at that point, we had been the Women's Army Corps for two years. (laughs) And so I thought -- I thought where did this guy get his information, you know? It was ridiculous.

Question: Well, I know he's gotten one letter in regards to that because we interviewed a woman named -- June Jackson was her name, and she was a WAC and --

Answer: Yeah. Did she point that out?

Catherine VyVerberg nee Cresto

Tape 1 of 2

Question: She pointed out, got a nice letter that said, you know, thank you very much --

Answer: Oh, yeah.

Question: -- we'll take care of it in the next edition.

Answer: Oh, yeah, sure, hm-hmm. Well, I don't -- I didn't finish the book. There was probably other things too but he got it all wrong. I'm glad somebody wrote. I was going to write and then I thought oh, they'd never see it anyway, or they wouldn't pay any attention. He's not going to come forward and admit that he was stupid, you know. (laughs)

Question: So you were a member of the very first WACs --

Answer: Well, I was -- yeah, I joined when it was the WAAC in January. I went down and enlisted January 30th, I think it was, in '43. See, it was still the WAAC, and the reason I know this positively, we had to re-enlist. We had to go through -- in May of '43, they dropped the auxiliary and it became the Women's Army Corps. We were all in radio school at that time, and you had a choice. They would let you -- you could get out, or you could re-enlist. And we had to go through the physical, the written, the interview, the whole -- it was ridiculous cause we'd already been through all of that, you know. And we had to go through it all over again and re-enlist in the WAC, the Women's Army Corps. So I -- I would argue Brokaw right down to the roots, you know. But then -- so we re-enlisted, and this was in May of '43, when they -- then they changed it. And little while after that, I forget the exact date, but we had to go through the whole thing again. (laughs)

Question: So when you enlisted, what did you -- because stereotypically, a lot of people, when we talk about World War II, they say, oh, well, women nurses.

Answer: Oh, the nurses were not WACs.

Question: I know.

Answer: No, they were -- people get that wrong, too. I've had people say that. The nurses -- the Nurse Corps was its own Corps.

Question: But I mean a lot of people think that's all that women did in World War II.

Answer: I know.

Question: So we need to straighten them out.

Answer: Well, please straighten them out. I'm not doing this for myself, I want the WACs to get some recognition at last, late though it is. They deserve it. Cause well, whenever -- all through these years, it's been what, 56, seven years. And all of these years, whenever I've read anything mentioning the women in World War II, it's always the ferry pilots and the nurses and the WACs get nothing. And I say, well, fine. They did their job. They were fine. I wouldn't take away from them, but we were there, too, you know. And we were up a lot closer to the front. Well, the ferry pilots just flew the planes over. They didn't have anybody to fight with. Nobody was dropping bombs on them, you know. The nurses, yes, they would be closer to the front even than we were. But they deserve their praise, but we do, too.

Question: So when you signed up, what choices -- did you have choices --

Catherine VyVerberg nee Cresto

Tape 1 of 2

Answer: No, you didn't have. But I had four things I wanted. I wanted to go -- have basic training in Daytona Beach, Florida, because that sounded much better than Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Answer: I hope I didn't insult South Dakota, but Florida sounded like more fun. And that was the first WAC training center was in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, then they opened a second one as it grew, you know, in Florid

Answer: And so I wanted to have basic training in Florid

Answer: I'd never been down there and it sounded good. And then I wanted radio. I don't know why I wanted radio, I was never interested in it before. And I can't remember, but I thought that would be a good, a fun thing, you know. I wanted to be a radio operator. And I wanted to go overseas, and what was the fourth thing? Oh, I forgot the fourth thing. There were four things, anyway I got them all. I just lucked out, I got everything I wanted. And -- and I got through radio school and oh, I had a letter in that batch that he's got there that my brother wrote me from -- he flew the Hump, you know, he's one of the now legendary Hump pilots. That was the toughest route in the world for the pilot -- the planes of that day. And they lost over 900 planes and crews on that route during the war. It was from India to China, supply route, do you remember that? And I got a letter from him and he was teasing me. He said -- we were in a ground station, you know and you had contact with the pilots, you'd give them weather reports and things like that. And he -- he was -- he said, you know, you get a lot of cussing for the ground stations. He was teasing me, and he says, but once in awhile somebody says something nice, so don't feel bad. (laughs)

Question: So how long did you -- how long did you train?

Answer: Oh, one month in basic training and then we went to our -- our schools -- whatever school you were going to, if you went. If you were doing office work, of course you'd done that. That didn't take training. But something like radio, you'd have to -- that was a five month course. We went to Kansas City, Missouri -- oh, that was fun. We were housed in hotels there. Not one to a room, but we had -- but we were -- I think we were eight to a room with double-deck GI bunks, but we had a bath for just those, you know. And we -- we thought that was pretty good, right in the heart of Kansas City, Missouri. And it got better. And we found out right next door was another hotel full of GIs. (laughs)

Question: Maybe that was the fourth thing you wanted.

Answer: Oh, no, no, we had plenty of those. But you know, on all the bases they had civilian workers, and oh, those women hated us. They were so jealous. Because they had to leave the base, they got off work, you know, they worked in the offices. They got off at 5 o'clock so they had to leave the base. And there we were, all evening (laughs) So we had the advantage over them, but stuff like that, I mean, it was fun.

Question: Was the military ready for women? Or were they --

Answer: Oh, the guys were very receptive. I mean they were nice to us. I mean, oh, they would kid us, you know. One time we were -- where was that base? That was up in Wisconsin, and we were marching in formation somewhere and here came a bunch of the guys in formation towards us. And when they saw us, they all started to sing, "the WACS and WAVES will win the war, parlez vous" You know, the parlez vous thing. And they went through all that and they said, the WACS and WAVES will win the war, so what in the hell are

Catherine VyVerberg nee Cresto

Tape 1 of 2

we marching for? (laughs) And we started right in, as soon as they got past, just as though we'd rehearsed it, we said, "The soldiers thought they won the war, parlez vous" etcetera, etcetera, "The soldiers thought they won the war but the WACs got there the day before." (laughs) That sort of thing went on all the time. And there -- there was one song -- I won't repeat it -- it was one of the nasty ones. Every time this squad was coming past our barracks they'd start singing that song, just guy-like, but stuff like that. But, oh, we got along, and we -- we dated them and they, you know, they didn't resent us at all. Oh, maybe some of them did, but not usually. It was the women that resented us cause we were right there with their men. (laughs) They didn't like that. No, we -- we got along fine.

Question: Now did you choose to enlist because of a patriotic --

Answer: Oh, partly, partly, yes. My country was at war just like my brothers did. And they felt it was their duty to go. They -- they didn't wait to be drafted. They went down -- both of them went down together and enlisted in the Army Air Corps. And, yeah, there was patriotism there, but I wouldn't say that was the only thing. It was also -- it was history being made. A big world war, how could you sit it out, you know. Well, had you been there, would you have sat it out?

Question: I don't think so --

Answer: You're too young to have been there but --

Question: Yeah, I'm too young.

Answer: But think about that. Your country's at war, if you were young and single. Well, there were married men with children, no, you wouldn't -- they couldn't leave their families to starve, you know. There were a lot of them that worked in the defense plants. Those weren't the cowardly ones. But some of the young ones were. They would come up for deferment and they would just absolutely get sick, they were so afraid. Really. And you had to despise those kind. They were not anything. My brother, Johnny, had already enlisted in August of '42 and then they waited to be called. They waited -- they didn't get called -- we were all called up the same week. In February, mind you. Well, while he was waiting to be called up, after he was already enlisted, he thought, well, he may as well go work at Lockheed and do some good while he was waiting. So he lasted a month and he quit. He said I can't stand to work with those cowards out there. Cause they -- they were like that, you know. Some was -- a lot of them were. They actually were coward. And you can't -- I think Brokaw kind of gave the defense workers praise for being so patriotic -- they didn't go to work there to be patriotic. We -- I went from a \$16 a week job in a shoe store when the Lockheed started to open up for women, to a \$42 -- now it doesn't sound like much these days, but that was money back there, to \$42. You think I went for patriotism? No, the pay was better. What people don't stop to realize, we had just been through a Depression. You know, the '30's was terrible for a lot of people. My dad managed to work through it but a lot of people actually went hungry. It was tough. And if you could finally get a job, and this was early -- it was 19 -- well, before we got -- before Pearl Harbor it was, the '40's, '41, they started hiring, and people didn't go there out of patriotism, not at that point. We weren't even at war at that point. But they get -- they get a lot of credit for that. They say they were patriots. No they weren't, somebody like my mother was. She went to work so that I could go in the Army because she knew I wanted it. She was funny. The day the war ended in -- in Europe, she quit right then. She worked in the tool crib at North American. She told me, she quit -- it was about noon. She just quit right then. Laid -- took off her apron, laid everything -- she said I'm through, the war's over, I'm going home. And then she sat in -- in the -- restaurant, you know, they had there, and waited for her ride to take her home, all day. She just quit. She was quite a

Catherine VyVerberg nee Cresto

Tape 1 of 2

character, but she -- she was so dear. She did all that just so I could go. Now that was -- she was the best patriot of us all, I guess. But the boys went down and enlisted. The one -- the youngest one, was married already, but he didn't have any children so he figured he should go, too. And he stayed in, or he got in again, after -- when they formed the Air Force. You know it was the Army Air Corps during the war. And then in, I think '47, they activated the US Air Force. Well, he was getting out. He got back from the Hump in '46 and he had to get out then. So he waited the year till they activated the Air Force. Then he applied for -- he was a pilot. Then he commanded -- applied for a commission and got it. So then he served 30 years.

Question: Wow.

Answer: And he -- he flew B-52s when they were new. He ultimately commanded a B-52 squadron and he came out a bird colonel. That was pretty good for a kid with a high school education. Nowadays you have to have college.

Question: That was the interesting thing about the -- about the war was the fact that a lot of people that might not have had even a high school education, I mean some of them went in --

Answer: Yeah, yeah, you could. They didn't have -- later they raised it -- you have to -- now you have to have a college degree to be an officer. Now you do, but at that time -- and he barely got through high school. He wasn't dumb, he was just one of these kids that fooled around. He was always pulling little gags in school and he would -- he would just study enough to pass. He never failed a course, but he -- he'd make like C's or even a D once in awhile. He just didn't care. He wasn't a student. But, boy, when he got to fly, that was the dream of his life. You know in the '20s when we were growing up, in the '20s, planes were just new. And where we lived on the outskirts of Los Angeles was all open fields clear across and there were six little airports in a row over there of these little tiny planes that if you -- you've seen pictures of the early planes. And that's what they flew. And oh, he was always dragging us over to -- a bunch of kids over to the airport, and he'd seen a plane fly over. I can still see him. He was about nine years old. Standing in the back yard, and just watching a plane go over with his dreams in his eyes and he says some day I'm going to be an aviator. It was his dream. And then when they went down to enlist, by that time they were sorting them out. At first they trained them all as pilots and then if they didn't have what it took to be a pilot -- they used to say a pilot is born, you can make a navigator or a bombardier. But you know a pilot has to have -- oh, the reaction time and all kinds of things that you can't teach them. You have to be born with it. So they both went down. John wanted to fly, too, the older one, but somehow he didn't have what it took. They made him a bombardier, they sorted them out at that time. Well they found out it was a waste to train them all as pilots and then -- then take the ones that didn't make it and train them again. as bombardiers and navigators so they got smart after awhile and they sorted them out first. I don't know what tests they took, but whatever. But Joe made it for pilot, and I thought if one of them had to not make it, it was John that shouldn't have. Because it wasn't his dream.

Question: So Joe was the --

Answer: So Joe was the one --

Question: He was the dreamer that wanted to --

Answer: He was the dreamer that had to fly. And then he did. He spent 30 years in -- in the Air Force and retired a bird colonel.

Catherine VyVerberg nee Cresto

Tape 1 of 2

Question: Wow.

Question: Now you ended up being a radio operator, is that right?

Answer: Yeah, in a ground station. Except for the one time in Florida that I was telling him about when we got to fly. Well, it was a B-17 transition base they called it, and girls did not fly in those days. Nowadays they would, they'd do everything the boys do. But in those days, we were treated like ladies. We really were. We got the best quarters and when we -- we sailed on the Queen Elizabeth, we got the best quarters, and first class. Well not, you know, many of us in a cabin, but the guys were sleeping downstairs on the decks cause it as a troop ship then. But in Florida that time, Hendricks Field, it was at Sebring, Florida, right in the -- about the center of Florida, it was, was a B-17 base where they trained pilots to fly the big bombers. So every time they went on a training flight they had to have a full crew. They had to have a radio operator. And the only radio operators on the base were all girls. So we got to fly and we were told it was the only base in the States where the girls got to fly. So you see, I got the breaks all along. I remember flying over Miami one time as a crew member of a B-17, mind you. And that was a big thing. And I just remember the lights of Miami all spread out underneath of us. Magnificent sight, you know, just was. I just got that kind of a break all the way.

And then when I -- when I got to England -- oh, we arrived at the 8th Air Force Replacement Depot in Stone, England on orders that were nine months old and all the jobs had been filled. And that poor captain -- the WAC captain had 500 WACs with no jobs on her hands. And she was going crazy. I felt sorry for that poor woman. She was -- she had to hunt all over England for all the bases and she started sending us out one or two at a time, wherever she could find an opening. And my secondary classification was clerk-typist, which I hated office work. Oh, that was, you know. She finally sent me out all by myself. But again I lucked out. I got to the headquarters of the 9th Bombardment Division -- 9th Air Force, it was up by Colchester, and when I got there, the guy that interviewed me, the officer that was interviewing me, he said well I see you're a radio operator. He said wouldn't you rather be doing that? Oh, I almost hugged him. Oh, yes, sir, I certainly would. So he put me back in radio. I just got that kind of luck all the way. And because I landed there, I got to go to France and Belgium because we kept moving up, see. The medium bombers -- that I was telling the other guy -- the 8th Air Force were the heavies -- the B-17, the B-24s, four engine bombers, and they could fly clear to Germany and back again. But the -- we had the -- what were they -- the B-25s and something else, twin engine, and they didn't have the -- the distance, see. So as the front moved through France, we had to move, too. So we -- we went to France, and we landed on Omaha Beach, the most famous beach in the world, but not on D-Day, of course. We were in September. That was funny. We landed on Omaha Beach on September 10th, and exactly one year later, September 10th, I sailed into New York Harbor on the Queen Mary and everything was over. Exactly on the same day. It was funny. Boy, that was a day.

Question: So -- so when you landed on Omaha Beach, and you were --

Answer: Well it was three months after D-Day, but we all landed on Omaha Beach. It was probably the most famous beach in the world.

Question: And that's where -- I mean that's where, when you talk about history,

Answer: Ah, yes, history was made right there. And yeah, as I say, I had to be part of history. I didn't know I was going to land on Omaha Beach but -- but we did. And then we went -- we were stationed at Chartres, and that had been, they told us, just two weeks before

Catherine VyVerberg nee Cresto

Tape 1 of 2

we got there, it had been a Luftwaffe base -- the German Air Force base. And they had moved out just two weeks before we got there, they told us. And so we were just pushing because we had -- our planes had to move up, in order to function.

Question: So what was your radio equipment -- was that in a truck or how did you move your radio --

Answer: Well, just you know, earphones like you've got, and da-da-da, we had the little - - you've seen that in movies if you haven't see it anywhere else. With a little key that we sent on, Morse Code was. We -- everything was coded. We never got a message in the clear. It was all coded. And we had contact with -- oh, one of our nets was 8th Air Force and the -- oh, different squadrons around that were, you know, I forget how many. Five or six you had. Each operator had about five or six. You sent and received messages and then those messages, being in code, about every half hour they gathered them up and took them over to what they called the message center where they were decoded. But we never saw that. It was all code.

Question: So were you having to -- did you hand write the messages --

Answer: Yeah, you'd hand write with them, and then you'd send back with your -- I can't -- I can remember some of the Code now, but some letters I kind of say, was that right? Like an "A" was da-da, "B" was "da-di-di-dit", "C" was "da-da-da-dit", "D", "da-di-dit", like that. I can remember most of them still, but I haven't used it, you know, for years. But I loved it. It was a good job. It was interesting.

Question: So did somebody come over your shoulder and dictate a message to you, or did you have to --

Answer: No, no, they'd give us a message to send but it was in code. You couldn't tell what it was, you know. We weren't -- we weren't -- well, we didn't need to know. You just sent the letters, that's all. But it was real neat and -- and the gang was always -- there was always oh, maybe just five or six of us there and we all knew each other and we got along. And in between work, working, you know, you'd kid around and it was really a nice job. It was interesting. And we worked shifts. We'd only work -- because you can't pick up those signals after about six hours, your ears get kind of dead. You can't pick them up good. So our shifts were only six hours and then we had 12 hours off so we got a nice break. Like if you'd work from noon till 6:00 P.M., then you wouldn't be on again till the next day at 6:00 P.M. You'd work from six till midnight, then you wouldn't be on till the next midnight, so we had a lot of time to play and see the sights and have fun. It was a really good job. And it was a nice bunch to work with always, you know.

And -- oh, it got a little hairy sometimes. When we were in Reims, it was during the Battle of the Bulge. And our radio room was outside the main gate. It was in a building just outside. So in order to run the messages, we had to go through that gate. We had to go outside and through the gate. And one time there were snipers shooting at the guards. One of our guards on the gate got shot, I think he was just wounded. But during the Battle of the Bulge there were French collaborators that would do things like that, and outside our -- there was a little alley that ran by our bedrooms out there and one night we heard the rattle of a machine gun out there. And the next day they, you know, we asked what was that all about. And they said, oh they caught a collaborator out there sending flares up to show the Germans where our headquarters was. And they -- they caught him and just naturally mowed him down. And the guys -- they had what they called tent city. I never saw that. It was on the outside. See, we were -- the headquarters was in a -- it had been a school, a private girls school, so it was nice. There was a courtyard in the front and buildings all around, quite a large school. But

Catherine VyVerberg nee Cresto

Tape 1 of 2

the girls were quartered there. But the guys were -- we never quartered near each other, always separated. Nowadays they don't do it that way but they should. You know, it's stupid not to. It just causes trouble. My -- my daughter was in the Air Force, and she told me -- and my daughter-in-law was too. But anyway, that's the way it was then. They had it -- they called it tent city and they lived in tents outside. As I say, I never saw it. We had no occasion to go out there. But they were very vulnerable to the planes coming over, just in the tents. And they -- I don't know what they -- they must have bomb shelters, or what they did. Where we were in England they had bomb shelters and when there was an air raid we were supposed to run to the bomb shelters. What we did was run outside and watch the buzz bombs -- the buzz bombs were coming over. Do you remember the buzz bombs? They were coming over. And they were scary. They were little things that were shaped like a bomb-like, with little fire tails streaming out behind them. And they would come over -- we'd run out and watch them and they never landed right on us, fortunately. We weren't supposed to do that, we're supposed to go to the bomb shelter. But one time, if you were receiving a message, you were supposed to stop in the middle of it, and you sent what they called a "Q" signal that tells -- told them it was an air raid. So I sent the "Q" signal and the guy sent back in the clear, run. (laughs) You weren't supposed to send anything in the clear, but whoever, on the other end, he sent back "run". But we ran outside and watched them go over. After we left there we heard that one of those landed on our main gate. They -- they weren't aimed at us. We were about 60 miles northwest -- or northeast I guess, I lose directions over there. Anyway, closer to the channel by Colchester, from London. They were aimed at London, but they couldn't aim those. They weren't delivered by plane, they were sent, you know, the buzz bombs, and so they couldn't aim them that good and so we'd get the fallout up there. But usually, oh, two or three a night would wander up there, enough to keep us active, you know.

Question: That was a -- an air strip that you were at, where you were stationed at?

Answer: Well, it was 9th Bombardment Division, yeah. They had an air strip, 9th Air Force, 9th Bombardment Division, headquarters though. It was -- we weren't an active air base exactly, but there was an air strip there. I can't think of it -- telling him that plane that landed, maybe you heard me.

Question: No.

Answer: There was a real beat-up plane that just barely made it across the Channel and landed on our air strip. Now we were not an active air base is what I'm saying. But they had an air strip there, I guess for the big shots to come in and out, you know like that. So this plane, and it was a B-17; that was just shot to hell from nose to tail. I don't know how it got across the Channel. And they carried off three dead gunners from that plane. Boy, that -- that really brought the war home to us, you know. And we were just -- we went to see the plane and they were carrying off the ball turret gunner, the tail gunner and the nose gunner -- were all dead. And the guys carried them off. I don't know how the pilot got that plane home. You know, it was -- every once in awhile.

And when we came and we landed on Omaha Beach, and as we were going up, the guys, again the guys had to march. We had to go two miles to meet the planes that were picking us up to take us to Chartres where we were going. So the guys had to march those two miles. They brought trucks down for us to ride in. That's the way they treated us. Nowadays they'd have the girls marching too. And I don't go for that. But anyway, as we were going along in the trucks, we're all excited, we're looking around, you know, here we are in France, and we're all excited. All of a sudden, dead silence, just as though the sound had been cut off. We had all -- I guess we had all looked to the left at the same time. And over there were those rows of white crosses. You've seen that scene. They often show that. The cliffs, there were high cliffs, and then the cemetery was right there, and they buried a lot of them that

Catherine VyVerberg nee Cresto

Tape 1 of 2

died on Omaha Beach, and oh, we just sobered up right then. It was just the most awesome, heart-breaking site. Cause we realized we had just crossed the beach where those boys had fallen and it just sobered us all up right there. Nobody said a word the rest of the way, just one of those dramatic moments. But there's rows and rows of white crosses out in that cemetery. I've seen pictures of it since. They always show that. Cause it's right above Omaha Beach and it -- it's an historic spot. But that was very -- there were, you know, things like that.

But we were not -- we were headquarters and headquarters of bombardment division is not like I guess an Infantry headquarters would be right up front along with them, but when you're flying the planes, we're not. And that was one advantage the Air Corps had because the Infantry is always right up there. They have no relief, you know, they're in the trenches, they have no relief. But the bombers would go over and of course that was hell. They'd get shot down, they'd get wounded, you know, like that. But when they got back to base, then they were -- they could relax and rest over night. They weren't under fire then. They got back to England. So I always thought they really had it a little better although the -- the mission would be terrible, you know, that could be really -- like the plane that came in with the three dead gunners. They often had. And then my brother went missing in action, the bombardier, and I got the story on that. At first I'd just heard that he'd gone down over Germany. We were in Reims then. And it was just -- just before the Battle of the Bulge started, that was in December, just before Christmas. And he went down the end of November and nobody knew whether he was dead or alive for awhile. That -- that was terrible time. But then his name came through on a prisoner of war list. And he -- he was one of the lucky ones, too. You know a lot of them -- the pilots would bail out, but John told me this when he got back after the war, so I know it was authentic. It wasn't just gossip. But the civilians, they'd see the pilots coming down, you know, you could see -- well, not just pilots the crew. If they had to bail out, they'd come down in Germany the civilians would try to capture them and they'd beat them to death. They would actually kill them and beat them to death. And if the Infantry caught them, they didn't -- they didn't go that far but they kind of were abusive. They let them go hungry and they didn't -- they were kind of mean to them but they didn't actually kill them. So the Luftwaffe, there always seems to be a -- a kind of a brotherly feeling between the Air Corps. If you remember in World War I we used to read stories about how the Aces -- where they'd challenge each other and if one of them -- they went down, the other one would fly over his base and drop a wreath. Have you read that? I used to read -- and there was kind of an honor among them. So the Luftwaffe would see an airman coming down and they'd rush to get to him before either the infantry or the civilians could get him. They'd rescue him from their own people, imagine that. And they did and that's what happened to John. He jumped with -- with three other guys, and the three of them landed together -- one of them broke his leg and John and the other guy were trying -- carrying him, trying to find help somewhere when the Luftwaffe found them. And the other one drifted away and was never heard from again. And they figured the civilians had probably caught him. So John was just lucky all the way. And then he was sent up to a Luftwaffe base up on the Baltic where he said they didn't mistreat them but they just -- they didn't have any food but the guards didn't have any either. They even shared their food with the prisoners. So all they did was go hungry. But you probably read, at the end of the war, the Germans were so terrible, they would march the prisoners back so that they couldn't be rescued. And they called those death marches. Cause they kept them marching, as the Allies approached, they would march them. Instead of just leaving them there and letting them be freed, they'd march them and then a lot of them would die along the way cause, you know, they weren't in good health anyway. They hadn't had much to eat and -- and they called those the death marches. So John was just lucky all the way like that. He got back all right when the war ended. The Russians overran that camp and saved him and he said the first thing they did, they came bringing beef herds with them. The first thing they did was slaughter the beef and feed everybody. So they're not as bad as they were painted. John was always grateful. He

Catherine VyVerberg nee Cresto

Tape 1 of 2

said they rescued us and they fed us -- fed them right away, and immediately sent to the nearest American headquarters to tell them they -- that they were freed. Now I've had people tell me, oh, the Russians were terrible. When they captured, like that, a prison, a German prison, they wouldn't tell the Americans. I've had people tell me that and that's nonsense. Why would they do that? The war was ending. They didn't want a bunch of American prisoners on their hands. Gee, that doesn't make any sense at all. But I've had several people tell me that over the years and they tell it, they believe it, somebody told them. That's nonsense. Anyway, John -- they were freed right away and so he was lucky. By that time he had a little baby girl he had never seen at home. When he went down he had a little baby girl that was two months old and I thought, oh, that poor man, how he must have suffered there. Not knowing what would happen to him or if he'd ever get back, you know. But he was lucky. He did.

Question: And you had -- while you were over there you heard that your brother had been captured?

Answer: What?

Question: While you were over in Europe you heard -- you got the news that your brother had been captured?

Answer: Oh, Yeah. Oh, yeah, I -- I got a letter from my mother. They had notified her. He was missing in action. He was carried as missing in action for about, oh, two or three months. Before word came through that his name was on a prisoner list. The Germans used to send -- I guess they'd exchange lists with the Allies of the prisoners cause the Allies took prisoners too. And they would send a list of the prisoners and his name showed up on a list. I got two sweet letters from -- from two of his crew members wrote to me, very encouraging letters, you know, and telling me, oh, we know Johnny will be all right, and, you know, and finally the word came. Well, my -- my CO had friends in the 8th Air Force in England and she -- she when -- I went to her and told her, and she checked up and she finally got word from 8th Air Force. So then he -- well, he was a prisoner but at least he was alive and safe and -- then the war ended and he got back.

But I met him -- I started to tell you - I met him when we got to the 8th Air Force Replacement Depot in Stone, and all the way, we -- we had been stationed in -- in Florida about ten miles apart. And we both got overseas orders the same week. Well, they don't tell you where you're going. We didn't know if we were going to the Pacific or to Europe, either one of us. So he had already left by the time I stopped by to say goodbye to him. So I went on, I had to leave, and anyway, I -- I got to New York. We sailed on the Queen Elizabeth, which was a troop ship, and I didn't know, all the way -- there were a lot of crews -- flight crews -- on the ship, too. And oh, I kept looking, and looking and looking and thought, well maybe John's on the same ship. And then I'd think oh, he probably went to the Pacific, you know. But I kept looking for him all the way. And it turned out, we landed in Stone, England. It was the 8th Air Force Replacement Depot. We landed there the same day and we didn't know -- we didn't know it but that turned up. He had gone -- they had sent him up to Newfoundland or Labrador, somewhere like that, and they had been weathered in for two weeks, and then they flew over. So we arrived at the same time, not knowing it. And I'm still looking for him because I know there's crews all over. And one day we were marching back from a gas drill we'd been through and here came John down the sidewalk. And I, for the life of me, I could not march past him. I leaped out in front of him. I happened to be on that side of the ranks and I just leaped out in front of him and I said, John. And he stood there (gestures) he couldn't even get my name out. He was walking with another guy. And then -- oh, I didn't dare stay. I was out of formation, you know, you don't do that. I thought oh, boy, I'm going to catch hell when I get back. But I couldn't have passed him by. So we made

Catherine VyVerberg nee Cresto

Tape 1 of 2

a date then to meet that night and I got back to the -- to my, you know, barracks, and I had to go in to see the captain, of course, right away. And she was ready to bawl the devil out of me. But I says, I said, oh, mam, that was my very own brother and I just couldn't go past. And she calmed down. She said -- she just said well, don't do it again. But she didn't punish me. She let me go. And they were all looking for -- all the girls were thrilled cause they were looking for brothers, even husbands, fiancés, you know. Everybody. And I was the first one that found one so they were all excited about it. And that night, oh, this -- this was funny. You were not allowed at that time, I don't know what the rule is now, but enlisted women could not fraternize with officers. You just didn't -- well, they did, but they weren't supposed to. I never did. I never met one I wanted to. But anyway, so John and I were standing there, of course in uniform, you know, we were just standing outside a building talking that evening, and being a bombardier, he was -- he was a second lieutenant, just, but he was an officer. And this major comes by, he sees us standing there. And he came stalking up to us, mad -- he was just mad. And he said, of course, they don't -- they ignore the lesser rank, they'll speak -- if you're in a group, they'll speak to the highest rank and ignore the rest. So he was talking to John, and he starts bawling the devil out of him for being -- he says, you know better, you don't belong with an enlisted woman -- he's going on. John's standing there, rigid at attention at a major. And he just lets him rant on. He couldn't interrupt him, you know. And finally the guy stops for breath and John says, sir, this is my sister. And that major just -- he turned beat red and he -- he was so embarrassed. He said "Sorry" and spun on his heels and stalked off. We stood there waiting till he got out of earshot and we broke out down laughing. It was funny. That poor major. Well he shouldn't have just assumed, you know, he should have found out who we were. But you don't expect to see a brother and sister in the middle of a war like that. But that was -- that was funny. There were a lot of incidents like that. It was a big adventure.

It was a -- war is hell. People suffer through it and I've read all the stories, too. But what I'm saying is if you're a support -- in the support troops, you're behind the lines. You're not in that kind of hell. And I think it's the Infantry that gets the worst of it -- those -- you know, and the tank corps and all the -- I always thought tanks were awful. You're just trapped in that tank, you know, and that's not protection if it hits -- gets a direct hit. You might think well, it's good protection around you, but no, you're trapped in it.

But, oh, Patton was one of our heroes. We thought he was great. You know, he was very dramatic. He was always getting in trouble too, with his superiors. But what was it -- maybe you remember -- I can't remember the -- at Bastogne --

Question: Was that on the bridge?

Answer: What group --

Question: Oh.

Answer: What group was surrounded at Bastogne and they fought and fought and held out for days -- do you remember that? And they called them the Battling Bastards of Bastogne. Do you -- I can't --

Question: I'm trying, cause a gentleman just told me this story yesterday about it and -- Patton was -- OFV: 101st.

Question: 101st.

Answer: 101st -- oh, the 101st Airborne. Good girl. I didn't know you were over there. Oh, Michael. If I'd known you were there, I'd be more self-conscious. OFV: We're not here.

Catherine VyVerberg nee Cresto

Tape 1 of 2

Answer: That's my daughter and my bonus son. Well, yeah, I couldn't think who was there. It was the 101st and they were trapped there and they fought -- just fought like the devil. And -- and Patton became -- clear across France with his tanks and finally relieved the siege. Yeah, I just thought of that. I just remembered what they called them. And no, we visited -- later on we visited the 82nd Airborne and, well that was -- that was funny. They had a dance for us. They were back on, a -- well, what they call an R & R, rest and relaxation. They were back. They had been -- they had made by that time, I think it was five jumps and company that we -- we went to visit them, we were in Reims then and they were a little ways outside, a little ways out. And we went to visit them one time, a bunch of us in a truck, it was an official visit, we weren't just wandering out there. And they were so nice. They were so glad to see us. Those guys. And a couple of the officers -- they kidnapped, sort of, me and my buddy and took us to -- to their orderly room and they were trying to give -- they had all kinds of stuff they were giving us everything, you know, soap and stuff. And then they wanted to give us their boots. (laughs) Their jump boots. And this one guy, they had made, well, it was a whole company, I don't know how many, a hundred and some would be in a company -- there was 122 in our company, but I don't know what theirs was. But there were only three left of the original company after they had made, I think it was five jumps, only three of them left. They had terrible casualties in the paratroopers. And just -- just those three. And then all young guys, you know. It was just ahhh. It was things like that that really brought the war home to you. But -- but they were -- they were so neat, they wanted to give us everything they had. And this one lieutenant, he was one of the original ones, too, and he wanted to give me his jump boots but he -- he said -- well, he said they were -- well, he went and got some new -- he said they were too big for me and he went and got some smaller ones. And he insisted on giving me those jump boots. And they were funny.

But they -- have you seen the movie The Longest Day? You remember that? Remember the character John Wayne played? He was a colonel of the 82nd Airborne. I watched that movie several times till one day it dawned on me, I danced with that colonel -- the character that he played. Cause they invited us to a dance, you know, oh, WACs were American girls, and they were, you know, they were always -- we always got that -- American girls. But they were -- those guys were so nice. But I actually danced with a colonel. It didn't dawn on me until I -- the last time I saw the movie, I guess, I have it on my VCR. And I thought, hey, wait a minute. That was a colonel of the 82nd -- yeah. (laughs)

Question: How many -- were you just a small band of WACs? Cause you --

Answer: Well, the company -- we were a company, a hundred and 22 of us.

Question: Oh, okay, so a whole company traveled together then.

Answer: The company traveled, yeah. Yeah, we got sent out -- well, telling you when we got to England, we didn't arrive as a company. There were 500 of us, we just had overseas orders and were shipped out. Well, like the guys, I guess sometimes they traveled as companies, I don't know. We didn't travel that way, we left a company and joined another one at the other end, where we were going, if you were transferred. So we were -- there was a bunch of us being sent overseas at the time, but not as a company, there was, oh, six or eight of us left the base. What they would do, they would send orders to the CO but not by name, was by classification number. And then she would pick who she wanted to get rid of. (laughs) Literally she did. Cause one girl there, well, she was a young CO, unmarried, and she had a thing for the lifeguard -- she was dating the lifeguard -- we had a pool. And this girl, Anita, oh, she was a beauty. She had been a model in New York. So she was making a play for this lifeguard, and we all got the biggest kick out of this. Anita was -- I forget what she was -- oh, she was a driver, a driver. And she was on leave in -- back in New York when

Catherine VyVerberg nee Cresto

Tape 1 of 2

these orders came through. Well, they wanted two drivers and I think it was four radio operators and like that, but not by name, just by -- and darned if that captain didn't send for Anita all the way from New York. She saw her chance to ship her out. We got the biggest kick out of that. She -- she couldn't stand the competition. I don't know how heavy that was, but Anita was making eyes at him, you know, and she was really a beautiful girl, she was. I don't know whatever possessed her to go and join the WACs. She was a New York model.

Question: So what other types of jobs did the WACs have? Cause you talked about radio operator --

Answer: Well, we were radio operator, teletype operators, any jobs like that, all -- all kinds of office work. I don't think we had any weather forecasters in those days -- they had later. I know a girl that was a weather forecaster in later years. But, oh, just regular office, drivers, they -- sometimes they could drive trucks, sometimes they just would drive -- officers always had their own driver, high ranking, you know, like that. And oh, any kind of an office job.

Question: Now did they give you a special uniform or did you get just the regular Army?

Answer: Oh, no, well, we wore just a WAC uniform, you didn't have a special uniform. You mean for the job that you did?

Question: Well, men versus women. So you did have a WAC uniform?

Answer: Oh, yes, haven't you ever seen pictures of WACs?

Question: I may have, but what was -- what was the --

Answer: Well, we wore skirts, you didn't wear pants in those days. Skirts and a jacket and shirts and tie, and, oh, clodhopper shoes. We hated those shoes. Brown oxfords, just about as ugly as you could imagine. Finally in the -- when we were overseas, it was about the last year of the war, they allowed us, for dress wear, we could wear high heel. Just a plain brown pump, but oh, that was so much nicer than those. And they issued dresses at the -- not -- not for formal wear, or if you were on duty you couldn't wear them, but they were sort of -- I don't know, sort of a grayish beige, but they weren't too bad. The color wasn't too good, but they fit pretty well if you had any kind of a figure, you know.

Question: So you're --

Answer: So, and then my daughter -- my sister-in-law sent me a pair of -- of high heels to wear with that, so boy, I felt all dressed up by that time. But ordinarily, no, it was just uniforms. And then we had fatigues like the guys have, you know, the mottled, green, and you've seen those. We had those. And they were pants.

Question: Oh, so -- so some of the time you were traipsing across Europe, you at least got to wear pants rather than having to wear a skirt --

Answer: No, we didn't wear the fatigues off base. That was only if you were doing some work job, you -- if you, you know, if you were -- you couldn't wear them around casually. Like going to the NCO club in the evening, no, you'd have to be in your garment -- your dress. Until they issued those dresses and then you could wear those if you were on a date night. But mostly, no, the fatigues were just if you were on a work detail. You couldn't just run

Catherine VyVerberg nee Cresto

Tape 1 of 2

around in them. But, yeah, it's -- we thought those WAC uniforms were pretty ugly. But when we got overseas, do you remember what they called the Eisenhower jacket, he wore a short, short jacket. Well, anyway, it was known as the Eisenhower jacket. They issued those to the WACs overseas and we were very proud of those. The ones back home didn't get them. Just us. Oh, boy, there was almost a riot when we came home to be discharged -- oh, we were going home. We sewed everything on -- everything we had -- on those jackets, you know, oh, all our patches and everything from overseas. And when we got to our base in -- they'd send you to the nearest -- they had several -- well, about six bases around the country where they'd send you to be discharged. So I went to Camp Beale in California, it was up by Sacramento. And we got there, and damned if they didn't take those uniforms away from us. And they wanted to issue us -- it was September, and they issued us what they called suntan, the light colored, and the winter garments were OD, with a -- you know, the dark, dark color. And that's what those were, the Eisenhower jackets. And we were so proud of those. They took them away from us and we -- and they almost caused a riot there. That poor captain had never been overseas. She didn't know what the score was. And she says, oh, it might make you feel better if you know what they're going to do with them. Says what are they going to do with them? Oh, they're going to send them back to the poor French girls. Oh, we, we liked to lynched her. But we couldn't, you know, you can't fight the Army. We -- some of the girls tried it. I don't know how they made out. I just wanted out so I thought oh, well, okay. But I was so burned up about that. We had to go home in these brand new suits, suntan, which meant nothing to us, you know.

Question: So you didn't get them back?

Answer: No, we didn't get them back, hunh-huh. They sent them over to the French girls. Those French girls. But they hired them to clean the barracks at one point, and they would -- well, they would do what they thought was a job, but it didn't suit the Army, you know. You got a GI -- when they say GI the floor, they mean you get down on your hands and knees with a scrub brush and you scrub the floor. Well, those poor French girls -- they didn't know, you know. Their idea of mopping the floor was to wrap a wet rag around a broom and -- (laughs) But that wasn't good enough for the Army. So they -- they fired those, and guess who had to GI the floor. We did. (laughs) And so then they told -- they tell us they're sending our Eisenhower jackets back to those girls. Oh, gee. That -- that just -- we just blew up. That poor captain. She didn't know what to think. Well, she didn't understand cause she'd never been overseas. She didn't know, you know. To her it didn't mean anything. But stuff like that, I don't know.

Question: Was there a -- did war create an equality for women? Were you seen as -- as women in the service, or were you just all seen as service people?

Answer: No, I don't think it was equal, no. Cause we were -- we were -- no, we were women in the service, I think. That equality stuff came along later, I think. As I can remember. No, we were definitely the women in service. The guys did not treat us like -- like we were guys, you know. But when -- like when we had a leave in Paris, my buddy and I, after the war ended over there, and we started out to see the town a little bit, you know. We got about two blocks from the hotel, and a cry goes up all around us, American Girls. And they (gestures) you know. And they weren't -- if there was equality, they would have ignored us. Oh, the GIs came running from all around. Surrounded us. American Girls. (laughs) Like that. So I don't think they looked on us as equal. And they liked to tease us, I told you how the WACs and WAVEs will win the war. Like that. It wouldn't call that equal, would you? You know. Oh, there was a lot of kidding, good natured kidding, back and forth. No meanness that I ever ran across.

Catherine VyVerberg nee Cresto

Tape 1 of 2

Question: So you must have been a real minority over there then.

Answer: Well, yeah, we were, you know. And of course the British girls resented the heck out of us. We'd go to the dances and there we were -- butting in on their guys, you know. Cause, oh, they really went for the Yanks. Well, for one -- for one thing, they had a lot of money and they could give them things that they hadn't had for years, but it wasn't only that. Yanks, I noticed over there and remembered it, they have a -- well, I guess it's from freedom, you know, but they have -- they'll walk down the street like they own the place, and the British don't walk like that. (laughs) They didn't. And they were big and husky and healthy and good looking and they'd come down the road and all the women are eyeing them, you know. They just have -- have a presence, I guess you could call it. That the Frenchmen didn't have. They were all -- well, not all, I guess they have tall ones, too, but they were much -- next to the Yanks, they didn't look nearly as alive and healthy and -- and like. The British didn't either. They were, you know, they're all great fighters, but even -- just didn't have that look that the Yanks had, and the women really went for that. You could always tell a Yank a block away, just, they walk with their head up, like they own the earth. Well, it's just the way we've been -- I remember I went to see my brother one time. I could see him three blocks down the road. He always walked like he was the king of the walk. And he came striding along there, head up, just like he owned the place. I thought, oh, that's John. I couldn't even see his face, he was so far away. It was him. And that's just the way they all were.