

**Ester Flashner
Veteran**

**Paul Zucker
Interviewer**

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Q: Ester, do you want to tell us a little bit about when you were born and what you did in your early years?

EF: I did what most people do in their early years. I went to the public schools and the public high school, then I was admitted into Hunter College under a special degree. I didn't have the qualifications because I've gone to the wrong high school and had taken a commercial course. My father thought a woman should be able to earn her own living, and when I wanted to get into Hunter, I found I couldn't but the just fortunately ran the special program. They were trying to train teachers of commercial subjects and I was admitted under that, so that's what I trained to be and when I graduated in 1938.

Q: That was in New York City?

EF: In New York City Hunter College. I qualified as a substitute teacher and I did substitute teaching while I went to Columbia University for my Masters. I was interested in pursuing an accounting career, I wanted my CPA, but in those days it was utterly impossible for a woman to get a job with an accounting firm. They just for reasons, which were valid from their point of view. They wouldn't hire any women unless you've had a relative who's in the business. There was no way you could do it. So I always said the Second World War started to help me become a CPA because when all the men were drafted suddenly I could get a job. And I did get a job with a rather prestigious firm, but I got tired. That was in 42 or 43 and after working for a while, this was in the midst of the war and I was very much concerned as everybody was about what was happening to all the men and then the idea of being an accountant and worrying about the bottom line and whether the firm was making a profit when people were involved in war it was just something I found I couldn't bear. And I decided to, that I wanted to be involved with the war. I was very specifically inclined and therefore I wouldn't join the "WACS" and learn how to shoot.

Q: What were the WACS?

EF: The Women's Army Corps, because they had to take military training which I didn't want. Also I wanted to be sure that I would go overseas and the Red Cross seemed to be the best place to do it so, I joined and I was accepted.

Q: And the year was?

EF: 1944 that I went and I trained in Washington and then they asked me where I wanted to be sent and a very good friend of mine who had joined just before me had

asked for Paris, had asked for china and wound up in Paris. So I asked for Paris and I was sent to the Philippines.

Q: Alright, so you went to the Philippines and what did you do there as a red cross volunteer?

EF: Well frankly not very much. I landed in Manila, and then I was sent back after a while down to New Guinea which at that time was sort of almost out of the war. The main action had gone and I was hired as an accountant so I did a lot of the clerical work in the office in New Guinea, and it was a very quiet life and when people ask me, and I say I've been to New Guinea, actually I feel as though I've never been there. What I was in was a piece of the United States super imposed upon the New Guinean landscape. We had no contact with any New Guineans, we were protected like crazy and we just had a very insular life. And I was there when the war ended and I must say before the war I sort of made a damn fool myself I guess because we had no television of course, it didn't exist, there was no radio we had very little contact with the real world except for occasional radio reports. We didn't have radios ourselves and rumors and suddenly this rumor arose came around this day that the united states had dropped a bomb on a Japanese city and killed hundreds of thousands of people and everybody was very excited about it and I went around like an idiot saying to everybody "you won't believe any rumor that comes along would our country do a thing like that it couldn't have happened!" I wish I had been right.

Q: At the time that you were in New Guinea, now you were there, were the service men there as well, you were a woman basically among men. Do you remember any experiences and how you felt about that?

EF: Well it's the same way that I felt when I finally went onto the Philippines and to Korea. You're in a strange position because there were comparatively very few women, there were an enormous amount of men you were there for, you were "wooded" and solicited but you never had a feeling that you were being, that at least I didn't if I was being wooed or solicited it was because anybody cared about me I happened to be female and there were so few of them that you had no, that I had no feeling that people ever cared about me for myself and that did effect relationships.

Q: Did you meet anyone in the service at that time that you had a love for or anything?

EF: I met one man later on in Korea that I think I really cared about.

Q: And so the Red Cross work you were saying was mostly for the most part clerical and administrative but you worked with other Red Cross women that were actually helping troops in hospitals?

EF: Yes and after a while I changed my job, I became a club mobile and what that was there were two women assigned to this vehicle with a driver and we would go around bringing donuts and coffee to men who were in isolated areas and had no place to go. I did this especially in Korea and they were really isolated because they had no contact with the natives there and so the fact that there was this little club mobile with these two women coming up to serve them coffee was nectar and the donuts were incredible and I

never found out where the hell we got donuts and coffee in Korea so it was kind of a wanted activity but honestly when I think back at it when I consider how much time and money was spent by the army and taking care of the few women there and protecting us and seeing that we were kept out of harms way I'm not sure that the services which we gave were worth it.

Q: What kind of accommodations, you obviously had separate accommodations from the men. What were your accommodations?

EF: Oh yeah we were in instillation, they were, it depended of course upon where we were. When I was in New Guinea I lived in a tent with a wooden floor and I had to be sure that before I got into the tent at night I made a lot of noise so the rats would all get out first. And in the Philippines we lived in little building usually two woman to a room fairly comfortable, and in Korea we lived in Korean built houses with tatami on the floor on futons, there were no beds but in all cases we were comfortable I guess the most uncomfortable thing was the fact that for the first couple of months in Korea we had to brush our teeth in beer because the water was undrinkable and there wasn't enough fresh water to get around.

Q: Did you eat with the military? Did you eat in their mess halls?

EF: At times we did. Very often we did and the food was pretty awful but that's what was. The big thing in our lives food wise was when we would manage to get on a navy ship because the food there was so much better than anything we got in the army that the navy was very popular.

Q: Okay, and throughout your times there did you come close to any action at all that put you close to a front?

EF: Outside of the fact that our trip overseas which we made in convoy it took thirty six days to get from where we left in California to Manila and there, there were occasional reports of bombings close by but outside of that I never felt like I was in any personal danger. We were very well protected and then of course after the war ended most of that was over anyway.

Q: Okay, so you said you went in, in 1944m and when did you leave?

EF: Well I left finally in November of 46 from Korea because I went into Korea with an occupation troops and I spent 11 months there.

Q: And what you did was the donut and coffee lady in Korea?

EF: In Korea I was a donut and coffee lady exclusively and for a while I was in Seoul and then the most interesting part was when I was sent to southern Korea and my partner and I, Ethyl Halverson serviced an army unit that had four or five bases and we would go around base to base with our little club mobile.

Q: At the time, this woman that you just mentioned was this a friendship that you kept after the war?

EF: This was indeed a friendship that I kept after the war and we still have. We saw her not too long ago. The women were very, very close. We were just a few of us and we had

a comradeship that was as warm and beautiful as anything I had ever had. She is still, now one of my best friends. She invited Marty and me to stop by in North Carolina on our way to Florida one day, I hadn't seen her in, I guess it was 50 years at that time but we stopped by and she was one of the reasons that charmed Marty so with North Carolina that we are now living there. She's a big factor, she married a physician of the chapel hill of the North Carolina university hospital.

Q: After you left service, not service but the red cross at that time and your friendship with her you went back into the world in the 50's and what did you do?

EF: As soon as I got back I was appointed to the high school as a teacher and I took the job and took another exam and became a high school supervisor and all along I had been teaching at Hunter College as an adjunct. I had been invited to go there right after I left and in the early 70's I was invited to come on the faculty as a full time professor but at that time I needed my CPA and I hadn't taken it because I just hadn't gotten around to it and I didn't think I had sufficient experience but one of my former students who had a very influential job had checked into the whole matter so that I got my experience and as a matter of fact I was given an experience rating for my service in the red cross which came as a big surprise. I got it the last week they were closing the office and I just happened to call off the right time and the man says "tell me what I have to say because you know about it and I don't. He wrote the letter I went through the board of CPA examiners and they accepted my credentials and I took the exam and I passed it and I got my CPA which enabled me to take the job at Hunter College.

Q: I didn't understand about what credit you got for the Red Cross, what was that?

EF: What you needed in order to be eligible to sit for the CPA exam you needed a year of accounting and auditing experience, public accounting and auditing experience and I had left to go to the red cross before I had finished my year at Seedman and Seedman so I needed a few months and this ex-student of mine helped me get certification from the red cross that the experience that I had gotten there that was in new guinea would qualify and so I was permitted to sit for the exam.

Q: You mention that, I got New Guinea, and you also talk about Korea but was there something in-between those two?

EF: Well after the war ended I was sent from New Guinea back to the Philippines and I spent a while in San Fernando in Luzon as a matter of fact I had one day in Okinawa I don't remember how that happened. I know I spent one night in Okinawa at Naha the winds were blowing at 60 miles an hour but that was only one night, and then I was asked if in winter whether I would like to go to Korea and I said yes because I knew that if I said no I would be sent there anyway. I've never heard of Korea it was Chosen it had been occupied by the Japanese for forty years and the united states troops were sent in there as part of the end of war operations because they were trying to liberate everything there and they had no idea what they were going to find when they got into Korea so and enormous amount of troops were sent in and red cross and hospital people and all the adjuncts were sent into and as a matter of fact there was practically no resistance so the troops were just sitting there having very, very little to do because and they were able to

send all the Japanese who have been occupying Korea back to Japan and that was a very sad, sad thing to watch. A refugee is a refugee even if he's a Japanese refugee and these people who didn't know where they were going or when they would get a train or when they would get bus how they would get back home were in very bad shape.

Q: You went to Japan at that time as well?

EF: No I went to Japan I stopped off in Japan on the way to Korea that was the way to get there and I spent two or three weeks there.

Q: But during your time in Luzon and in the Philippines there what were your feelings about the Japanese? I see you have some sympathy for the refugees now but at that moment how did you feel about them?

EF: They were the enemy that's all. I had no contact with any of them. I never had any terrible strong feelings until I got to Japan and then I felt very queasy being in Japan because I felt that everybody around me would really slit my throat even though the war was over then.

Q: And you visited as a civilian years later, 20 or 30 years later?

EF: Well that was one of the most, practically one of the most unique experiences I had. I had gone to China as a tourist very fortunately in 1978 when China was first opening up to ordinary people coming as tourists and on the way home since I was in the neighborhood I figured I'd love to find the Korea I had been to. And so I, all by myself went into, got on a plane and went into Seoul and I registered at a big hotel and I spent 3 or 4 days and I discovered that Korea had been totally and I mean totally ruined during the Korean war it was decimated. I could find no place, no place, no place that had existed when I was there our old hotel was gone not only was it gone but nobody had ever even heard about it. The only place I found was what we used to call the duck soup palace, that was still there and then I decided I wanted to go back and find Puyo, the place I had been stationed in and so I rented a car and I was going to leave that morning and one of the ladies at the hotel who spoke English came over to me and said you're going down into southern Korea? I said yes she said I'm coming with you I said what do you mean and she said you must be out of your mind you're going to take a car by yourself and travel on these roads where there's no signs in English, everything is in Korean you don't know the roads you don't know where you're going you won't find a person who speaks English once you leave Seoul were not going to let you go alone, I'm coming along. I was delighted I said fine and she came along with me and those were 4 of the saddest days of my life because she knew how to do it and she looked and looked and looked and she could not find the places we had been in, they were gone cholera epidemics had whipped them out and my little well beloved towns were no more so I came back.

Q: So what I'm hearing is that out of your experiences and going over as part of the red cross to the Philippines and then to Korea and stopping in Japan it gave you a bit of confidence and wanderlust and being able to go back into these places and feel perfectly safe and adventurous in doing this and has enhanced your life in other words.

EF: Absolutely and I said, I think I may have mentioned that I had asked to go to Paris and I had wound up in the Philippines and New Guinea and I think that was the best thing to ever happen to me. Paris I would have gotten to myself but Hollandia New Guinea and that as you said created the wanderlust in me and I have been traveling ever since and loving it.

Q: So that was one kind of activity that was influenced, was there anything else that out of your experiences and war, and during the war that have changed your life or changed your outlook on life at all? Your feelings about war?

EF: My feeling about war, well they were pretty different before as I told you one of the reasons I chose the Red Cross was because the idea of bearing arms is outside of my natural feeling I'm very as close to a pacifist as you can be. I feel as though the war against Germany could have been averted if we had acted, if politics had been a little better, but once it had happened there was no way out but to get rid of Hitler so therefore I reluctantly agree that, that war had to be.

Q: And what about that war against Japan then?

EF: Well they had bombed Pearl Harbor and I had just felt as though I didn't know anything about it. I didn't have any. The war, Germany and Japan became one to me and it was just a war that I had to be involved in, as a matter of fact I felt so strongly that for a while any man I ever met who was of proper age for some reason or another was not in the war I felt a little less respectful for them for those people who have served.

Q: So you went from that feeling to one of total passivism now is that what you're saying?

EF: Well I am as close to being a pacifist as you can be. I believe that one human being should not throw a bomb on another human being and that's, it's wrong and if we do it and we think we have reason for doing it, it's still wrong.

Q: I don't want to get into politics at this point, I wanted to understand how your experience at that time affected you today and it affected you temporarily but today you have changed your mind about what you saw from the time you were in the Philippines.

EF: When I came back, when I came back from Korea I came back with stars in my eyes I felt that we human beings had learned something that now we knew we'd have to find other ways of solving things. I've even become a united world federalist, I believe in world federation and I thought it was going to happen and the fact that we are farther away than ever for it makes me very hopeless about the future of the world.

Q: So you have a belief now that World War II was of no value then and looking back 50 years.

EF: It did didn't, I wouldn't say it was of no value because it did get rid of Hitler but it didn't accomplish positively what I had hoped it would accomplish which was to teach people how to learn to live together.

Q: Well let us hope, Ester that with your remaining years that we all get to see that.

EF: I hope so.