

**Vera M. Fenimore
Veteran**

**Marlene Zecca
Interviewer**

**Interviewed on March 24th, 2004, at the
Chemung County Historical Society in Elmira, NY**

Q: This is Wednesday March 24th, 2004. Today's interview with World War II veteran Vera Fenimore is taking place at the Chemung County Historical Society in Elmira New York. Vera is eighty years old, having been born November 19th, 1923. As Vera Whitmarsh Fenimore, she served in the US Navy from the fall of 1944 to November 15th, 1945. At the time of her discharge she held the rank of Hospital Apprentice First Class. Vera currently resides at twenty-three Route thirty-four Waverly, New York. My name is Marlene Zecca and I volunteer to interview you, Vera, as part of the veteran's history project. I wanted to find out from you, as a woman, you know there weren't too many women that went into the military, what brought you into the military? Why did you get into the military at that time?

VF: My husband had gone off to war and he had a sister who was in the Navy, her name was Alice Daly, and she suggested why don't I come in? So I decided to go, and I enlisted.

Q: You were a nurse at the time?

VF: No.

Q: Where were you born? Where are you from originally?

VF: I was born in Halsey Valley in my parents' home. What else did you want to know?

Q: Where you were from, but you were born in the in the home then?

VF: Yes in the home, they did that those days.

Q: Halsey Valley, that's near Waverly, is that not correct?

VF: It's closer to Spencer I think, although coming the back way it might be.

Q: Where did you go to school?

VF: We went to a little one room schoolhouse. We had eight grades in the one room. We had a hill outside where in the winter the bigger children would sit on their skis and go down the hill. The older children helped with the younger ones. I remember studying with this older boy and he taught me my ABCs. One time he went away and he brought me back a little tiny doll, and I had that doll for years and years. It was my treasure.

Q: What grades were in this Schoolhouse? Is this like K through twelve high school?

VF: No, we didn't have kindergarten then, so we went through first grade right straight up to the eighth, and then you went to Spencer to high school.

Q: You were married before you went into the service?

VF: Yes.

Q: How did you meet your husband?

VF: Well I met him at Fraley's [Laughter] the dance hall. I was dancing and he came and asked me to dance, then he asked me out, and so I went out with him.

Q: How old were you at that time?

VF: I was still in high school, so I was probably seventeen.

Q: How old were you when you got married? Do you remember?

VF: It was in 1943, we got married in what is now the Salvation Army in Lutheran Church at that time.

Q: You must have been just twenty years old then, at the time?

VF: Yes.

Q: You say that your husband went off to war. He was wasn't enlisted at the time you got married?

VF: No, he enlisted later. He worked for the railroad, the Lehigh Railroad, so he was deferred for quite a time. Then while he was there, he taught soldiers how to do electric wiring and things like that.

Q: So where was he stationed?

VF: He was in Hesler Field at first.

Q: And where is that?

VF: That's in Mississippi, I think, and he was there for a while. Then he went over to Omaha and they took him out of the service and put him in teaching the military.

Q: Is that still like the electrical field? [VF Nods] So he was there and you were at home?

VF: Yes.

Q: It was your sister-in-law that said why don't you—

VF: —Come in, because she was a career, she spent twenty years there.

Q: That's your husband's sister?

VF: [Nods] Alice.

Q: Based upon that suggestion then, you joined up? [VF Nods] So where did you go to enlist?

VF: I went to [unclear], I think right in [unclear] there we enlisted.

Q: That was to go into the Navy? Was that a suggestion your sister-in-law made? How did you get what branch of service you went into?

VF: I wouldn't have thought of anything else because Alice was in the Navy and she told me all about it, so I wouldn't have thought of any other service.

Q: Once you enlisted what happened then? Did you have a training camp to go to? Sort of like a boot camp?

VF: Yes we went on Hunter College, and that was in Brooklyn. We were there for a long time. Well, six weeks it seemed like a long time, because it was boot camp you know? We had to make sure we did things right and kept up because they would— well, as an example, we were going to go to [unclear] next. We were told to get ready, and the day that we got ready it wasn't raining, but the day we were going to go, there I was, and I hadn't packed my rain hat and coat. So the [unclear] there, she said 'I have been trying to get you all this time, and it's a shame now because you're leaving and I can't let you scrub the floor'. [Laughter].

Q: What was the training like for you? What can you remember?

VF: We studied, and every morning we got up really early. If it was raining we had our slickers and our rain hat on. It was a wonderful sight, because you would be walking along the water's edge, and all these people in black uniforms, dark hats and coats, it was just a beautiful place, really. Then we went back, into the mess hall, and as you came in the smell of the homemade bread came at you. Everybody ran to get a seat because if you didn't, you sometimes didn't get any bread because it would be gone. Everybody scooped it up and it was just like that, all gone.

Q: Did they have you doing things like marching?

VF: Yes, that's what we did at morning. We'd march and we'd march, in the afternoon too.

Q: You had a regular marching drill to go through every day?

VF: Every day, yes.

Q: How far would they have you march? How long would you march?

VF: We would probably be out an hour more. We worked a long ways. Early morning too, we would probably be out there before six.

Q: What were the classes like then? What kind of topics were taught?

VF: How to be orientated into the service, how to behave, what you could do, what you couldn't do. We were only there six weeks, but we got a lot of training in that six weeks.

Q: So was kind of the indoctrination into the Navy itself?

VF: Yes.

Q: You were going into the medical field, were your responsibilities in the Navy always to work in a hospital situation?

VF: You do all these tests and then they figure out what they think you could do best. They put me in there, and I was there for quite a while. But as I worked on the wards, all the boys coming back were sadly wounded, some of them were very bad. Even talking about it now upsets me. I asked them if I could get in some other place, and they put me in the officer of the day's room, and I spent the day there. Each day a different doctor came and did all the recording and all the phones and all that, and I would be in that office helping them.

Q: I want to dwell on the basic training aspect of those first six weeks. What were some day-to-day things? What was the food like? You talked about homemade bread.

VF: Yes. The food was really good, very good. There was lots of it, except that bread, but yes we had a lot of good food.

Q: Did you gain weight or lose weight?

VF: I don't think we gained any because we were on our feet all the time, marching or doing exercises or something to build our body up, to make us healthy and stronger.

Q: Did they give you any firearms? Anything to do with guns or anything like that?

VF: No, not at all.

Q: Did you have any free time during those six weeks?

VF: Yes, we had time off on Saturday, and we could go to church on Sunday.

Q: What did you do for entertainment, or did they provide any entertainment?

VF: They would sometimes have entertainment come in for us, but usually by the time we got through our day we didn't care if we had entertainment. We went to bed to get some rest. At times, later on, they would take sailors if they weren't too badly wounded, we'd take them in ambulances to Jones Beach and we would be

in the sun. We would have picnics for them and we would throw them a nice time.

Q: While you were at Hunter College, were you already immersed in working in the hospital work, with the soldiers or wounded coming back?

VF: Yes, in the beginning.

Q: Were they very seriously wounded?

VF: Yes, some of them were very seriously wounded, and some weren't. But most of them, they weren't too bad, I think the ones that who were worse came there to be treated right. They would do a lot of miracles there.

Q: It was nice that you took them out like that, those that could go out for the day.

VF: Sometimes we would take them to a movie, something to entertain them if they were able to go. Some of them going to the beach, they could even take a wheelchair or gurney and take them to get some sun.

Q: Do you have any other recollections of your basic training experience that you want to share?

VF: I know I met a lot of wonderful people.

Q: You did?

VF: Yes, we were girls and we were all so new. You stick together and have friends for the rest of your life.

Q: Is there anyone that you still communicate with?

VF: Not so much now. It's been a long time. But there are times that we get together and talk, or maybe call on the phone,

Q: Where was your next stop after boot camp? After Hunter?

VF: I went to Maryland, and I wasn't there too long so I don't know where. It was a nice place, and we still did our marching and our exercises and our eating of course. Then from there we went out to Long Island, we went to St. Albin's, and that was a hospital.

Q: And St. Albins, is that where they received a lot of wounded?

VF: Yes.

Q: Was that a mixture? Was it primarily Navy men or army, or both?

VF: No, Navy.

Q: It was strictly Navy?

VF: Yes.

Q: What kinds of things did you work with there then? What were your duties?

VF: We had to take care of the sick. Each day you were assigned to something different. One day you'd make beds and the next day you would feed them. It was all different kinds of things that we did.

Q: Does anything stand out in your mind of your experience at St. Albin's?

VF: We used to go into New York on the subway because we didn't have the hard marching like we did before. We went into New York quite a few times, and Alice was in New York at that same time so we would get together and go to a play or a show or something. Then I'd go back to Long Island, and that was quite scary because there weren't too many people after ten, eleven o'clock when I would be coming back.

Q: Were you in uniform this whole time?

VF: Yes.

Q: You were expected to be in uniform whether you went to go to a play or?

VF: Yes, uniform always,

Q: I am not trying to pry, but if you wanted to go into a bar to have a bite to eat and a drink, was that permitted?

VF: Yes you could do that. I remember being there when I was in St. Albin's. The war was over, the German one. We went to downtown New York, and it was afternoon and evening and the bars were all open, the doors were all open, and

they would have a drink and throw the glass into the road. There was glass up to your ankles, it was very dangerous, but it was wild.

Q: This is when the war was announced that it was over? It was all the bars and people would toss their glass right out?

VF: Everybody was just so happy.

Q: It must have been an experience to be there, to see that.

VF: It was like New Year's Eve, they would always have a big time.

Q: How large was the group that you started out with when you enlisted when you were at boot camp? Were you in a particular group, do you remember?

VF: I don't remember what group it was, but it was large, I know that. One hundred or more maybe.

Q: Did most of you stay together as you went from one place to the next?

VF: We got separated. Most always we were separated because we'd all go the same day usually, if you were in this group you went the same day, but each one went where they were supposed to go.

Q: Do you have any idea how long you were at St. Albin's?

VF: I don't know how many months. It was just months, it wasn't a year.

Q: Was that the primary place that you were stationed at for the length of service?

VF: Yes, then I went to Balboa Park in California. I was there a few weeks, and then the war was over and I got out. Then I went up to Spokane with my husband.

Q: He was still stationed up in Spokane, Washington?

VF: Yes.

Q: That was good that you could finally get back together.

VF: Yes. I went back up there and stayed, and came home with him when he came home.

Q: Do you remember about when he came home?

VF: It was about six months or so after the war was over.

Q: Did you ask to go to California so you could be there to hook up with him, to get back together?

VF: Yes, there was a choice. I chose that part because it was the closest to that.

Q: You knew that you would be discharged from there? Because I see on your on your discharge papers, US Naval Personnel separation unit it's called Balboa Park, San Francisco. Yes, so that would put you pretty close to where he was going to be?

VF: Yes.

Q: You talked a little bit ago about requesting some other duty because of the stress of dealing with some of the wounded, do you want to elaborate on what that was like for you?

VF: I got very, very upset. I couldn't sleep at night. So I told my officer, and they gave me that new job.

Q: It would be understandable, seeing young men coming back so terribly wounded.

VF: With my own husband being in it.

Q: It would make you constantly thinking of what might be happening to him. So what was the new assignment like that they gave you? What did that, officer of the day was it?

VF: Yes, office of the day. One doctor each day, a different one each day, came and he worked in there. I answered the phone and did all the things he had to do then, people came in and went out. I was in there and I did office work.

Q: When you got back together with your husband, you said it was about another six months or so of service before he was discharged, and then you came back here to the Elmira area?

VF: First we went back down to San Francisco. He was still in the service and I worked in the gift shop.

Q: Of a hospital?

VF: Yes.

Q: Was this a Navy hospital?

VF: Yes.

Q: But as a civilian?

VF: No.

Q: You were still enlisted you think, at the time?

VF: Yes. Well let me think. Maybe not, maybe I was a civilian. I guess I was.

Q: You might have been a civilian but were still able to—

VF: —Because I had gotten out before that.

Q: Can you think of any other experiences that you might have had that stand out? I know you were only in for a year, so it must have gone by pretty quickly.

VF: Yes, it did. Except I wanted to be with him all the time that made it seem long, but it wasn't really long. [Pause]. I can't think of anything right now that I can tell you.

Q: Did any of the experiences or any of the training you received in the Navy help you prepare for any jobs that you may have had in your civilian life?

VF: Yes I work in a gift shop now. I volunteer at the Packer. I've been there fifteen years now. I volunteer every week. [Pause]. I wish I could think of some smaller things.

Q: You felt that it was a good experience?

VF: Yes. I wouldn't have given it up for anything. I'm very glad I went in, and it did help me in a lot of ways. It helped me to mature and be more sure of myself. I

felt that I could do things. Before, I was young and I wasn't experienced, and so gave me a lot of self-confidence and self-assurance.

Q: And that started with that basic training and the job assignments and...

VF: ...Reading people. Yes.

Q: Do you often think of what it's like for women today to be in the military?

VF: I go to a reading at the Holiday Inn. Every other month we have a meeting and it has all the soldiers. We get to talking about things like that at those meetings. But I don't know anybody right now that's in it, so I don't have information.

Q: You don't have any direct information from any women in the military, because at that time men were being drafted but women weren't. So it's neat to find out from someone, a woman, why they went in and what propelled them. So here, it was your circumstances and sister-in-law saying 'well why don't you come on in', that kind of thing. Was there ever any concern about possibly being sent overseas?

VF: No, they didn't go over there. Well the nurses did but not the other ones.

Q: The Navy nurses would have gone, the RNs...

VF: ...The Army nurses, they would have gone.

Q: But not the Navy nurses?

VF: No, both.

Q: You were classified as a Hospital Apprentice, first class, so they wouldn't have sent anybody with that classification?

VF: I don't think so, because I wasn't in that long to really get into it. I don't think so.

Q: What did you end up doing after the military?

VF: I went to beauty school, to be a beautician.

Q: And your husband, what did he do after the military?

VF: He worked for the Lehigh, he went back to the Lehigh and retired from there after forty-two years.

Q: What Lehigh railroad, based out of [unclear] was he?

VF: Yes, he worked in the [unclear] shops, he was an electrician and he wound these big motors and things that they needed for their trains.

Q: Your life has, except for the military experience, revolved around our local area?

VF: That's right. I lived in Elmira for a while when I was young. I actually didn't live in [unclear] long, but we moved to Waverly, we had three girls and we raised them mostly in Waverly.

Q: Is there anything else that would come to mind about your military experience?

VF: No I don't think.

Q: You've listed a few things here. Hunter College, then the experience at St. Albin's, and you wanted to mention about that walking in the morning, the marching in the morning, and you mentioned storm hat?

VF: I told you when I forgot to pack it.

Q: And you needed it?

VF: And I needed it, it rained that morning. [Laughs].

Q: You have a sister-in-law that's been in the military, and you say you have a neighbor, these are all women you know that served in the military. Are there any other women that you know of locally?

VF: Well there's quite a few of them that come from Barton and places like that for...

Q: ...This meeting that takes place.

VF: Yes they're all from here, some are even from Corning. We have about maybe fifty or sixty come for these luncheons.

Q: Every other month then?

VF: Every other month. It keeps us in touch. Alice and I always go together.

Q: Right, I think that's where we got your name. Must have been from that group.

VF: Probably so.

Q: Anything else that you'd like to add?

VF: I was very happy that I went, I'm very glad that I went.

Q: It was a good experience for you?

VF: Yes it was.

Q: I think it's noteworthy too that you, given your youth, that you say it gave you some more confidence.

VF: It did a lot for me.

Q: Alright, well I guess I'm going to shut this off and if we talk anymore, we want to add some more, we'll just turn the tape back on otherwise.