



**TRANSCRIPT: INTERVIEW WITH
DOROTHY DEMPSEY
26 NOVEMBER 2012**

QUESTION: Why did you join the Coast Guard?

DOROTHY: I grew up on the water, on Long Island Sound, right off an island called City Island, where they made sailboats and still do. The sails are a big item there. I was in the water maybe three times a day. We lived about two or three blocks away from the water and we belonged to the Westchester Country Club. I watched some of the big swimmers, the New York State breaststroke champion and then my father pointed out Gertrude Ederle as having swam the English Channel, and she was a member of the club. I was just a kid. Well, I was in awe of these people, you know, and my father would push me and push me and I was the only girl. I had two brothers and they were great swimmers. They were tall, thin guys and I was not built like that. But he'd say you got to keep up with them and he'd tell me come on, stroke, stroke. Do it the right way. But anyway, I love living there and when the war came I wanted to do something to help and I joined something called the American Women's Voluntary Services. We didn't have women's services yet, no Army, Coast Guard, whatever. I worked with them for about a year and then they opened the services to people. I said I want to go into either the Navy or the Coast Guard. And I went to the Navy, which was great. But something about the Coast Guard kept drawing me back. Maybe it was because it had more to do with boats and I grew up that way. So I joined the Coast Guard, came home, and my father threw 10 fits. I was the only girl in the family and I was the only one in the military. What am I going to tell my neighbors, he said, that my daughter's wearing a uniform? I said yeah, be proud of it. I did my boot camp in Florida under the hot sun, oh God, on those drill fields. The girls were dropping like flies, but they actually had a big need in the Coast Guard because the fellas had to stay in the harbor and, of course, they had to be out in the boats, especially in Boston because that area is where the German subs were trying to come in. They couldn't make it in New York, so they went around the bend and thought they could get in in Boston. Anyway, when I joined, I worked on planning and where the jobs were needed most so that the men could go out in the boats. We would man the desks. We would do the shore work and let them go, it worked out really well. We were even, I think, stronger than the Navy at that time in the very beginning. We did our boot camp, as I say, in Florida. When I came up to Boston, I saw how busy that harbor was and especially patrolling at night on the beaches, because this is where the subs were trying to come in. So, our girls were stationed all the way out almost to the end of Cape Cod and I really enjoyed my work. It had to do with transfers and where the need was. It wasn't anything specific that you could tell somebody. I could just say I took care of transfers and where the need was.

QUESTION: What were some of the names?

DOROTHY: SPARs. It stood for the slogan of the Coast Guard, Semper Paratus, Always Ready. And it was the second origination to be founded, I guess, and that was up in Massachusetts. They met at Wesley College and they formed these various groups. We were the smallest, but then the Marine came in and the Marine were just a little bit smaller than we were. We had women all over wherever there was a harbor. I have seen so many wonderful posters, the recruiting posters. What sort of impact do you think those posters had on other women joining? I think they had quite an impact. I know when I first thought about it, and I would go

to these recruiting places, they were important. And first I thought of the Navy, and then I thought, well, I've watched the Coast Guard where I grew up on Long Island Sound, let's see what they have to offer. Well, they really had a need because up in New England they had all those harbors, so I enlisted there.

QUESTION: What was the general attitude to women joining the military during that time?

DOROTHY: It wasn't good. It was fine for women to sit at a desk and do something else, but you don't wear a uniform and you don't join the military. Although we had them way back to the Revolutionary War, women couldn't wear uniforms. And throughout history, if they served in whatever capacity, Army, Navy, whatever, never in uniform, so that people wouldn't know what they were doing.

QUESTION: Why do you think that is?

DOROTHY: I think because the women's place was in the home raising a family, raising children. And for a women to take a man's role and wear a uniform, that wasn't right. Even in the era that I was in, people looked at me, you know, and wondered about did you do this to run away or did you do this to show off or something? But I went in to release a man to go on duty and the way it worked out I worked directly with the women on transfers and where the need was. In the barracks that we had in Boston, it was quite a job up there. Then they had to think of ways to keep the women interested when they were off duty and not running around with guys because that wasn't what they did. But people liked to say they did, so that's when they came up with things like this big musical thing that I was in in Boston.

QUESTION: Patriotism was a different thing back then.

DOROTHY: Oh, very much so. Yeah, you never showed your patriotism. You wore it, but you never showed it. And it's something you always felt, something in you that you wanted to do. And regardless of the criticism of other people, you had to come out front and say, look, this is it. I'm going to do it.

QUESTION: Tell me how everybody was involved with World War II.

DOROTHY: Well, at the time the need was so great and Margaret [Chase] Smith was the first one who ever suggested that women go in there. Her husband died and she took his place in the Senate. And she could see this need. Women were doing jobs that were part of the war, but it wasn't the same thing. We could take the place of the man on land, which is what our whole objective was. We were on shore and we did whatever those men were required to do here without going overseas or going on ships because we didn't, as I say, go on ships.

QUESTION: What was your personal sacrifice?

DOROTHY: Well, I enjoyed my life at home with my family and the things that we did with our boats. We were a closely-knit family and I liked my life. I knew that I would have to give it up if I went in. When I went down to enlist, I said look, I don't type, I don't do any of that. I don't know where you can fit me in, but I work with music and I thought maybe I could be a chaplain's assistant. They said great, we need them. We're going to open up chaplain assistant school. And I was trained to do that, to work with him, to travel with him where he had to do these things, whatever he had to do. And then with services, I would play the piano with the organ or whatever. Then it became a little bit more involved because where we were in Boston being it

was a big base. The women would sit around when they'd come home from work, and suddenly, I got called in and said do you notice that the women are beginning to feel homesick now after they've been in? I said yes, I do. We had a recreation room and they'd be sitting and reading and you could tell they were crying. But they just missed their families and they missed their homes. And while they were glad they were doing what they were doing, that big thing always came up. They were away from home.

QUESTION: Tell me a little bit about Margaret J. Smith.

DOROTHY: She felt that women doing these other jobs, line of jobs, if they were trained they could fill in the spots for people. So when she suggested it in Congress, everybody laughed at her and said, you'll never get women in uniform. Well, she kept at it, and I forget her whole name now, but she's the one that started women in the military. And as they did, the general public began to warm up to the fact that they aren't in there just to meet a guy or anything. They know what they're doing, and they seem to be filling in these spots. So, we began to feel that it was something. And one incident in New Orleans, one of our girls got on the bus and it had been a rainy day. She had her umbrella with her and she got on the bus and she was standing near this woman who got up out of the seat and grabbed the umbrella and started to hit her with it. And she said, what's the matter with you? And she said, because of you my son is on a ship and he can be killed. You took his place. She said yes, we did and that's what our job is. We never thought people resented us, but they were the rare ones, you know.

QUESTION: You are proud of your service.

DOROTHY: Why am I so proud of it? Well, because the girls in my generation very rarely were out of their homes. If you went away to college, and there was no money, that was the time of the Depression, so we didn't do that. But we were very closely-knit with our families, and we went on picnics, we went to visit relatives and suddenly the war opened up and the world changed completely. You had to sit back and think about it, are you going to be part of it and leave what you know so well? And that was my angle. Could I leave my mother and father, my brothers, and so on, and what can I offer? I had been in photography, and I had learned how to retouch negatives and I thought possibly that was of value to the military that I could retouch negatives, make it look like something they didn't have, you know. And so, when I went to the Navy, they said yes, we have a need for that. But, there were no openings at the time, so I went to the Coast Guard and they did. But I liked the Coast Guard anyway.

QUESTION: When you left the military, how were you treated?

DOROTHY: It didn't always work out well. I applied for a job that I read in the newspaper and so I went for the job. And when I told her I was in the military, oh, you were in the military? I said, well, yes, what's wrong with that? You wouldn't know how to dress in an office because you wore a uniform. I said, please. I have clothes. You know, but I began to get a feeling that some people looked down on us because we did what we did. They didn't want you part of whatever they were doing. And it took a while until I realized that it was a very hard thing for people to accept during the war that women wore uniforms and did the same jobs as the men, but on shore. So what I did was I used my military background so I could go to college.

QUESTION: Did they have the GI Bill for women?

DOROTHY: No, not when we went in, they didn't. That came later on. We were out of uniform by then and working. I was just clerking and worked. I didn't even think about going to college because I thought this was the way my life was. I'm back living with my family now, and I have a job and let's just leave it. But that's when I thought I always wanted to have an education but we couldn't afford it. Now I could, so I thought a lot about that and I went down and signed up for the GI Bill and went to college.

QUESTION: Were you eligible for the GI bill?

DOROTHY: Yes.

QUESTION: What would you have to say about the perception that women don't make good leaders?

DOROTHY: I would say that they're equal to anyone. Give them the same chances that the men had, the college, the GI Bill, and give them the jobs where you could see what they could do, and you could see that they could do equally well.

QUESTION: What does the struggle of women for equal rights say about determination?

DOROTHY: It makes you want to try harder, to prove to them that you can do it, that it's not just the run-of-the-mill. When I finished school in, you know, the '30s and '40s, women never would wear a uniform. You went home, you lived with your family, and you got a job, and you got married, and had a family and that's it. But now the world had changed and if you wore that uniform you had to prove to them that you could do what you had to do. There were times when the people would question me or do things. I was stationed in Boston once I finished boot camp and little things would happen on and off, like on a train going home. I'd get on at Boston Back Bay and I'd go to New York where my mother and father lived. You had to stand up and explain to people what you did and that you were not there to meet a man. That wasn't it at all. But I think eventually as the time wore on with the war, people saw that we were doing a good job and it was releasing the men to do the active duty where we did the shore jobs.

QUESTION: What are your thoughts on the role of women in the military today?

DOROTHY: Well, I think they now have proved that they can do equally whatever the men can do. If they have training, they can do the same thing. And I think the whole attitude is different now. I see where I live in the summer in Northern New York near Fort Drum a lot of women in Army uniform. When I first went up there I kind of resented it a little bit and I thought, ooh, they're all over the place. But then I realized I did the same thing. They must be doing a good job.

QUESTION: What does the sacrifice of lives of women in Iraq and Afghanistan say about their role now?

DOROTHY: That they go in and offer themselves, you know, offer their work. They don't know what the future's going to be so they just have to say whatever it is I accept it.

QUESTION: When you were in, were you aware of all the women that lost their lives?

DOROTHY: Not in the beginning. You were just so anxious to do the right job and let people know that you could do it. I think they kind of kept it quiet so that that wouldn't be a drawback on the women, you know. And once Senator Margaret Smith brought this up in Congress, and I

wish I could remember his name, there was one Air Force general that thought it was about time that they took women in and let them try. But he worked with Senator Margaret Smith and that's how we all got in.

QUESTION: All the statues we see are men.

DOROTHY: Well, about maybe 10, maybe 12 years ago, I started to look into that, because I found then only six states had statues of women, women alone, who did something that was of merit. But if a woman did anything to help they never broadcast it. They were still at the stage where women have a spot, okay, but not in the military. Now that we are accepted in the military, I think we should see more of those statues.

QUESTION: Tell me about the statue that you designed.

DOROTHY: Well, we had been talking about this, and I was at an affair in New Jersey down at the Capitol when the general was giving out all of these awards. And I thought to myself, there's not one woman in that list. So I went up and said to him later where are the women? He said, yeah, where are they? I said, well, they did things too. He said, but they always kept it quiet. And I said, well they shouldn't do that anymore. But anyway, when I started to research it, six states only had statues of women alone who did something for their country or for that state or whatever. And yet, the women were there in the beginning, they didn't wear uniforms, but they did what they could. They cooked for the troops and they followed them because they had to. They didn't have cooks, they didn't have people that sewed, so the women began to go with the troops back in the time of the Revolution, and it's fascinating to realize how many women did do things. That was how this statue came to be, that she represented women and she was a mother. That's the child. She could defend her home while her husband was fighting. That's the musket. And the lantern was to light the way for the future that women would have a part in the military. So the three symbols were there.

QUESTION: Tell me about that meeting in New Jersey?

DOROTHY: Where I decided that it was time women

QUESTION: Somebody had said something.

DOROTHY: Yes, I forget the gentleman's name, but we were at a big meeting here in New Jersey and it was about things that had gone on and I said, they're not even talking about women. Yet, I was sitting with a group of women. They were Army, Navy, we were all veterans, about eight of us. I said, you realize they never mentioned a woman? So what did, I came home and I talked to somebody in the American Legion and asked if they had any information on it. No, we never had anything. They just let the women fall into the background. So when I talked to the New Jersey Commission on Veterans, I said, you know, I got to work on this. And as I said, only six states had statues in parks with women alone, the rest of them all had a woman leaning against a horse with a man on it, but that's about it. So, that's when we started to do some research on this.

QUESTION: You love boats, you love the sea, how did it make you feel that you weren't allowed to serve on a ship?

DOROTHY: I was so hurt and there was nobody I could talk to to say, you know, we're here too and we love the water. But there's nobody to talk to, nobody could do anything for you.

QUESTION: A film like this that collects these stories, why is it important?

DOROTHY: Because I think people should know that we were here and we still are and that we can do everything that's required that the man can do, except, of course, we couldn't carry a gun and you couldn't go in any area where there were guns. I think they just kind of accepted us in the beginning but then when they realized that we could do and accomplish a lot, I think they began to back down and now it's really wonderful to see people serving.

QUESTION: This is not taught in schools and people are unaware, and this film, *Unsung Heroes*, that's what this is all about.

DOROTHY: I think it should be because I taught school for 27 years, elementary from 4th up through 8th, and whenever I could, I would bring in the fact that women did something. I would check with the principal first before I get bumped on the job. When I wasn't teaching anymore and I was having my family, when people would ask me to come to a school and talk about having been in the military, I would carry this suit on a hanger and my husband's suit on another hanger. I would put it on the tray where the chalk would be and I would say, how many of you would like to wear these suits? Oh, and all these hands went up and so I'd let them come up and say, and do you feel pride? Yeah, I feel proud. I said, so did we you know. I still have his uniform and mine up there too, but they don't call anymore about it, but I'd be more than glad to talk to any group about what we did. We weren't always known on the surface for what we did in our work, but we were there.

QUESTION: Is there anything I didn't ask you that you want to talk about?

DOROTHY: When we came out of the service after WWII the American Legion wouldn't accept us. It was still there, that little thing, you know, no, they don't belong. And that bothered me knowing, but I didn't have the time to join anything anyway because I had my family, but to think that we did these things and they still wouldn't; but if it wasn't for the military service, I never could have gotten my college degree, which I didn't know about when I went in, they didn't have it for us, but later on that was how I got my degree for teaching. We tried to stay together as much as we could, WWII women here in New Jersey, we had a nice group but I think there's only four of us left now and we still are proud of what we did, the people that we met and the things that we did, you know. There's a lot of little side angles I wish I could tell you but you don't have the time.