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Woman Marine Corps Vet Shares Story of Service

By Jennifer Wake





Catherine Sinnott today Photo Jennifer Wake

While history often focuses on how women filled openings at factories as 'Rosie the Riveters' during World War II, more than 300,000 women served in the military between 1941 and 1945.

□ In February 1945, when the war was still raging in Europe, Catherine Sinnott (who was 21 years old at the time, and who now resides in Lafayette) decided to help her country. She had finished three years at UC Berkeley, and knew that she could take advantage of the G.I. Bill, which offered college or vocational training funding for returning World War II veterans, so she did something many of her friends never would have considered. She joined the Marine Corps Women's Reserve.

□ Soon after, Sinnott found herself at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina with hundreds of other women recruits, and thousands of men preparing for deployment overseas.

□ While more than 70,000 women were part of the Army and Navy Nurse Corps during World War II, hundreds of thousands of women served in other military branches and filled many jobs, including those in all aspects of food service, transport, mechanics, as guards, and as members of marching bands. The Marines had a separate training program and facility for female recruits and many of the women Marines, like Sinnott, filled jobs to free up men to enter combat.

□ Sinnott had been studying nutrition dietetics at Berkeley, so decided to become a cook and spent eight months at Lejeune in the mess hall using cooking pots as big as bathtubs, stirring food with spoons the size of boat oars.

□ "It was so hot, the sweat from our brows would sizzle when it dripped on the grill while meat was frying," Sinnott said.

□ According to retired U.S. Marine Corps Reserve Colonel Mary V StremLOW, who wrote "Free a Marine to Fight: Women Marines in World War II," many female recruits had a difficult time adjusting to military life, which began the day after arriving at Lejeune with a 5:45 a.m. reveille.

□ "Before the war, women were kind of competitors, traditionally not working in teams," Sinnott said. "World War II shocked women out of the traditions. Everyone worked for the war effort."

□ Upon arrival, Sinnott said they boxed up their civilian clothes and mailed them home. "We marched hard and did lots of calisthenics," she said. "We learned words that were used in the Corps: 'the galley' for the kitchen, 'portholes' for windows, 'the head' for the bathroom . . . We were taught the Marines were way better than anyone else."

□ According to StremLOW, when women were allowed into the Marines in 1943, many of the drill instructors (D.I.s) were not happy about having to shape up a bunch of women with a war going on.

□ By mid-1944, however, StremLOW said open hostility gave way to "some sort

of quiet truce and it wasn't long before the women's competence, self-assurance, sharp appearance, and pride won over a good many of their heretofore detractors."

□ "Most of the men were really nice, but they teased us," Sinnott said. "They would ask funny questions. One guy asked me, 'Do women Marines wear khaki skivvies?' And the D.I.s (and all the training) was very strict."

□ After her time at Lejeune, Sinnott was sent to Camp Pendleton in California, where she served an additional four and a half months before the end of the war. She then returned to UC Berkeley before transferring to UC Davis, where she earned her bachelor's degree in home economics.

□ Her family has continued the military tradition Sinnott started 64 years ago. Sinnott's grandson joined the army two weeks before the attacks on the World Trade Center, going on to serve in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

□ Sinnott currently belongs to the Women Marines Association and continues to meet quarterly with approximately 30 other female World War II veterans who live in the Bay Area.

□ There are approximately 200,000 women currently on active duty in the United States, according to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs. "Women Marines today do almost everything the men do," Sinnott said. "Our boot camp was tough, but theirs is really tough."

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Catherine Sinnott stands in her Marine Reserve uniform in 1945 Photo provided
Reach the reporter at: jennifer@lamorindaweekly.com

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