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# Interviewee: PSC Sandy "Grandma Gunner" Mitten, USCGR

Interviewer: Michael J. Salkowski  
Date of Interview: 18 September 2007  
Place of Interview: Her Home

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## Segment I: For the Record

1. Date and exact location of the interview: September 18, 2007 at 12607 W. Honey Lane, New Berlin, Wisconsin.
  2. Name of the person being interviewed: Sandra L. Mitten
  3. Interviewee's birth date: 9/17/41
  4. Names of the people attending the interview (including the interviewer and camera operator): Michael J. Salkowski
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## Segment 2: Early Years and Training

**Q:** Where were you born? Tell us about where you are from, something about your family and education.

**Mitten:** I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I stayed here (in Milwaukee) until I was 18 and then I joined the regular Navy. I was in for just a couple of years. As far as my family is concerned, I have 3 children and 4 grandchildren. As far as my education, after I turned about 30 I decided that I needed to go to college, so I ended up getting an Associate Degree in Horticulture. So that's my education.

**Q:** So you when did you go into the Navy?

**Mitten:** I went in the Navy in 1959 and got out in early 1961. I had married a navy man. He was a nuclear weapons man on the [USS] *Kitty Hawk*. We were stationed in several different places around the United States. I ended up having two children with him and we did end up divorcing. I remarried a few years later to another military man and I had a third child, my youngest son who just turned 40 this year.

**Q:** What did you do before you joined the service?

**Mitten:** I was in high school, basically.

**Q:** Did you enlist or were you drafted? If you enlisted, tell us why you chose the Coast Guard?

**Mitten:** I did enlist. Well what happened was I joined the Navy right out of high school. Then when I decided to go back into the Navy Reserve, I was back here in the Milwaukee area and I called around to recruiters and they said that because I was over 30 and because I had more than 10 years out of service and because I had three dependents under 18, that would be too many waivers for the Navy. So they suggested that I go to the Coast Guard. So I called the Coast Guard up while I was working third shift at Briggs and Stratton at that time and I went down to the recruiting office in the morning when I got off and they said, "Do you want to take a test?" I said, "Well you've got to understand that I've been up all night." They said, "That's all right. If you don't pass, we'll do all over again." So anyway, I took the test and I passed. It was just a general knowledge test. And so they asked me what I was interested in. And I said, "Give me some ideas." They handed me a leaflet with the port security rating had just opened up in 1973 to females. So the recruiter asked me, "Do you like boats?" I said, "Yeah." They said, "Do you like the water?" I said, "Yeah." They said, "How about Port Security?" I said, "Give me the brochure, I'll take a look at it and I'll let you know." I called them the next day and told them that would be pretty good as far as I was concerned. With that, I went to my first duty weekend at the Marine and Navy building across from the Coast Guard station at the lake front.



**Q:** And that was regular Coast Guard?

**Mitten:** No, that was Coast Guard Reserve. I went into the Coast Guard Reserve, June 21 1974 and I retired September 17, 2001.

**Q:** You said you were in the Navy for two years. What did you do in the Navy?

**Mitten:** Well, I went through recruit training, of course. And my first and only duty station happened to be NOB Norfolk, VA. I was awaiting radioman school because I wasn't going to be a yeoman, which was alright with me. I didn't want to be (a yeoman). I wanted to be a radioman. While I was awaiting the school, they put me in the legal office at NOB and I was basically a seaman, doing second and third class work in the legal office. And I enjoyed that while I was there.

**Q:** So you joined the reserve and you joined in June 21st, 1974. And you said you had a choice of what you wanted to go into, and you chose port security?

**Mitten:** I went into the port security rating and when I went into the Coast Guard Reserves, I went in as a seaman, because (and I didn't have to go through any training) I came from the Navy. When you go into the Coast Guard, whether the regular or reserve, if you've been in the Navy, it's the same training, basically. So I went in as a seaman and I just worked my way up over time and I retired as an E7 Chief.

**Q:** Where did you go for your training?

**Mitten:** One weekend a month, during the winter, we were always at the Naval Reserve Center. In the summer, because I was in port security I ended up getting involved in small boats and I went to small boats school in Alameda, CA and became a coxswain. So I had all kinds of ongoing training depending upon pretty much what I wanted to do.

**Q:** So you became a coxswain. How long did it take you to become a coxswain?

**Mitten:** Well, it probably took me a little longer than normal, because, unfortunately there was a discrimination and it was really between the regulars and the reserves. And we happened to have a regular chief who was stationed at Station Milwaukee (I have no idea what his name was anymore) who just didn't want to see a woman become a coxswain. And I happened to be the first female coxswain in the Milwaukee area. After he left...and I was a 3rd class, so I came in as a seaman, after I was in for 3 years, I went to small boats school so I could become a coxswain. Then I returned to our local area to qualify and I did all that.

**Q:** Was the small boat training thorough?

**Mitten:** Oh yes.

**Q:** So you felt you were sufficiently prepared when you reported for your duty station?

**Mitten:** Oh definitely. Small boats school in California...I don't know what it's like now, but I can only surmise that it's probably pretty much the same. It was a lot of hours studying in the classroom, and a lot of water time too, in the boats on San Francisco Bay. It was real cool.

**Q:** When you went to small boats school, were there other women in your group?

**Mitten:** No. I was the only woman going through that training at that particular time.

**Q:** Did you know if there had been other women to go through the training prior to you?

**Mitten:** Not in Milwaukee, but there were some from other parts of the country.

## Segment 3: Active Duty

**Q:** What cutters, ships or stations did you serve on?

**Mitten:** Well, like I said, when I was in the Navy I was at NOB Norfolk and in the (Coast Guard) Reserves I was at Station Milwaukee. I was at MSO. Milwaukee. I was in the Coast Guard Reserve 27 years, and of that time, I was at MSO Milwaukee at least 12.

**Q:** Where were you the other years?

**Mitten:** I was at Station Milwaukee prior to that and then PSU 303, and that's what took me over to the Gulf.

**Q:** Where were you in the Gulf as far as being stationed there?

**Mitten:** We were stationed in the Port of Dammah, Saudi Arabia, on the western side of Saudi Arabia. It's the largest port in Saudi Arabia, and that's where all the munitions, all the equipment and all the men and women came over there, and then they were sent north or where ever.

**Q:** How long were you there?

**Mitten:** We were there 6 months. We got there September 20, 1990 and we left about March 20, 1991

**Q:** Did you know well in advance that you'd be serving in the Middle East?

**Mitten:** Actually no. What happened was, that in September of 1990, I was here at home...well, let me go back a little further. In the 1980s the Coast Guard developed what was known as the Rapid Deployment Force. And there were times when I was pulled into that for my two weeks of active duty training (1980 or 1981). We would go and be trained by the Marines. We'd go down to Carolina or wherever. We'd go down to Key West, Florida. Some of the guys went out to California. It was actually playing war games in case we had to do this we'd be trained for it. There were some times that I was involved, so then I was part of the Rapid Deployment Force and there were times when I wasn't. So, consequently, in September of 1990, I was here at home and I got a call from my commanding officer, Tom Johnson, at that time. And he said, "Petty Officer Mitten, we're going for training in Camp Perry, Ohio. It's a week of training, and I'm calling to find out if you are able and willing to go now, when you have a choice, or are you going to go when you are made to go and have no choice?" Well, I said, "My only hesitation is my oldest son is getting married in my back yard on the 22nd of September. Can you guarantee that I'm going to be back here?" I had no idea about Saudi Arabia. He said, "No problem." So off I go. I left the 9th of September, went down there to Camp Perry, Ohio, for one week. 5 days into training down there, we got mobilized. PSU (Port Security Unit) 303 got mobilized. But what I found out was that while I was in training, first I was on the list to go, then I was taken off the list---on, off, on, off, like maybe 6 or 8 times. All of a sudden, on a Thursday night, probably 8:00 at night, I was told, "O.K. Mitten, you're going." So, we were shipped home—I think we came home on a bus. Actually I don't remember if they flew us home on a plane or they bused us. But anyway we came home on Friday and they said, "Get your affairs in order. I was married at the time and that meant that I left on Monday afternoon. I got home on Friday afternoon at 3:30, well how much can you get done in two hours? I had to go to the bank and everything, get our wills made out—the whole thing. So, anyway, at 1300 on Monday afternoon, I was standing at Billy Mitchell Field, ready to take a plane back to Camp Perry, Ohio. I left Milwaukee on my birthday and got to Ohio on September 18 and we left at 8:00 at night for McGwire Air Force Base. We actually were supposed to leave at 8:00 at night, but one of our crew members hit his head on a beam as he was leaving the plane. It's not funny really, but he had to have six stitches, so he was taken to the hospital. This was in Ohio. He was taken to the hospital and he was given the six stitches. This was at McGwire. He was brought back and we were alright to go and we left at 11:00 pm on the 18th (September, 1990).

**Q:** Now you had said that you had wanted to be back on your son's wedding, was that the same week?

**Mitten:** That was the 22nd.

**Q:** So you were gone for your son's wedding?

**Mitten:** Yes, I was gone. The wedding took place. What happened was I was able to call. I started calling about 1:00 in the morning Saudi time because they were going to get married at 2:00 in the afternoon, right on my deck. I mean I had planned this whole thing. It was a big wedding, flowers, everything. My step mom was still alive—she can in from Houston. My sisters came and they took over. And of course my husband was here. So the call came through at ten to 2 in the afternoon and we were able to talk. What I didn't know at the time was that they were videotaping everything including our conversation and they

ended up sending it to me while I was there with a note, "Mom, throw your boots up on the table and enjoy four hours." So that's what I did.

**Q:** What was a typical day like for you?

**Mitten:** When we first got there we were housed in a building, all of us. There were 87 of us all together—6 women and 81 males. I was the leading petty officer for the females and our leading petty officer for the males was 55 years old. I was 49. The average age for our unit was 37. We had kids who were 18 all the way up to 55. When we first got there, we flew over in C-141s and we took 6 boats with us and all of our equipment. The boats were not in the building. Everything else we brought over was in this building, which was about 75 x 50 feet. It had been an old galley. We did have air conditioning, but because there were so many people there, it just didn't work.

**Q:** This was a military base you were on?

**Mitten:** This was in the port area, but we eventually moved to a building that the Saudi's had built for the Pakistani people and the Bangladesh people—their workers. You see the Saudi's just don't work. They had built it 5 years prior, but nobody had occupied it. We got into it a month after we were in Saudi Arabia. The first couple of weeks it was basically hurry up and do nothing. It was typical military, hurry up and wait. We had to wait for our boats to be off loaded and put into the water. It all had to be done by Saudi time. They (Saudi's) were very nice to us, but their attitude was, "Well the sands have blown for 2000 years and they will continue to blow, so maybe we'll get it done today—or maybe we'll get it done tomorrow.

**Q:** What kind of boats did you have?

**Mitten:** 22-foot Raider boats.

**Q:** With a crew of...?

**Mitten:** Three. A coxswain and two seamen. I was a gunner on a .50 caliber machine gun. The other seaman was a gunner on a .60 caliber machine gun. The other gun wasn't as long as the .50, but it might have been a wider bore. I don't know for sure because I never fired it. We also always had on board with us a Saudi. A Saudi Coast Guard person. It was a man because they didn't have women in the Coast Guard of course. So, it was like I said, hurry up and wait. When we actually did the boats in the water we started patrolling with four hour watches. Our mission there was guarding the port and the inner harbor, actually. We had to have a Saudi along in case we had to board any of the boats. Which we did a few times, but not real often. Eventually our watches went from four hours to six hours, then eight hours and sometimes twelve hours.



**Q:** And you did that for...?

**Mitten:** Six months.

**Q:** From the stand point of the Gulf War, was this prior to, during or after the big push?

**Mitten:** This was before.

**Q:** And were you there when the big push came?

**Mitten:** Yes

**Q:**What did you do during free time?

**Mitten:** Tried to sleep a little. We had laundry to do. We had to do it by hand most of the time. We had to shine our boots. Our commanders required us, in the sand, to always have shined boots. So we had to shine our boots everyday, do the laundry and

try to get some sleep if we could and eat if we could. They had Pakistani men making the food and we had MREs most of the time. I didn't like the MREs because I only like the peanut butter and the cracker, the jelly—and once in awhile they would have a ham steak that was very good and au gratin potatoes. We would take them with us on the boat and because we didn't have a cover, we'd just put them up on the transom and in just a few minutes they'd be hot, hot, hot. If we went to the galley, you see I'm almost a vegetarian—over there I ate ham, but usually I only ate fruits and vegetables. The workers just used the water right out of the Persian Gulf to wash the vegetables, so a lot of people were getting dysentery. I didn't eat the vegetables. I ended up losing 25 or 30 pounds, but I was glad of that. I ate apples, oranges and bananas. But lettuce, no, I didn't eat it. But other food that was available, like pan cakes, they were cold most of the time. A lot of time we were out on watch—out on the water—during chow time. So when we came back we had to rely on other things



**Q:** Did you see any combat?

**Mitten:** No I did not. I did see the SCUDs, I didn't have to shoot anybody. I did shoot at things. But I didn't have to shoot anybody—thank goodness. But, I did see the SCUDs. And we saw the interceptions by the Patriots. So I guess you can say that I did see combat. I think that qualifies.

**Q:** Tell me about any liberty you took.

**Mitten:** We were able to take liberty. Fortunately I brought two dresses along. Over there a woman had to be in a dress. We were there a few months before we were able to go on liberty. Fortunately for me one of my very good friends was the communication director at Daharan Air Base. So consequently we flew into Daharan and when we went to the exchange the next

day, I called him and he said, "Where are you calling from?" And I said, "Oh, from the exchange." And he said, "Oh my God, you're less than a mile from my office." So he and his family lived on Daharan Air Base—in the community. So my crew and a few of our friends were able to, on occasion, be picked up by him at our compound and he drove us to his home and we just had a wonderful time. We went into Kobar, but you always had to have a man with you because they don't deal with women at all. And if we wanted to buy anything, the man had to do the bickering back and forth. I got some beautiful gold pieces and they have 22 carat gold over there. So liberty was good when we were able to take it.

**Q:** What was the pay like?

**Mitten:** I don't know, because everything was sent here (Milwaukee), allotments and everything. They gave us \$20-\$40 dollars every pay day, but the rest of it went home. I always had enough money. Everything was cheap and when you don't go anywhere, or do anything, you don't need a lot of money.

**Q:** What was your unit, and what was it like?

**Mitten:** It was Port Security 303. It was the first Coast Guard Reserve unit ever to be activated. It consisted of 81 men and 6 females. I was the leading petty officer of the females. We had no female officers. We only had male officers. When we first moved into the compound we were in separate buildings. The females were two blocks away from the males. This didn't go too well with us because the Army was the one who was directing everything and we were housed in an army barracks along with males from the Army, along with females from the Army. On one occasion there was an explosion that occurred off base and also a fire that occurred in one of the barracks. That's when we said we needed to be with our men—we needed to be with our unit. We were then moved into the men's unit. And as far as how the people were—we were all comrades. When you're put in a situation like that, you just have a special bond. You never lose that bond. We've had a couple of reunions—one was a very big reunion—since we've been back and it was just like yesterday. The people who are still alive—we've lost several, not from over there (Saudi Arabia) since we've been back, due to age and what have you, but you still have that special bond and it sticks with you the rest of your life.

**Q:** You had mentioned that you were one of six women and that you were a gunner on board the ship. Were there other women who were gunners?

**Mitten:** Yes, there were two other women (who were gunners). One was Robin Jacobs and the other was Jenny Roach. We were all on different boat crews. We were never on the same boat crew.

**Q:** What was the relationship like between the enlisted force and the chiefs?

**Mitten:** It was very good—it was very, very good. We respected our chiefs. I wasn't a chief as yet, I was a first class. It was always, go to the chief, ask the chief. It was very, very good. They looked out for us. It didn't make any difference if you were a female or a male. If you were on their crew and were supposed to be with them, they always were looking out for their fellow people.

**Q:** What were your officers like?

**Mitten:** Most of our officers were school teachers. Now I'm going to be real candid about this. Our leaders were school teachers and some of them hadn't even been to some of the training we had been to, and here they were, thrown into a situation where they had to be trying to save everybody's butt including their own. I don't know what they were really like, because I wasn't in on what they said. It was just standing back and chatting between ourselves about them. A lot of us didn't respect them because we thought that if we really got into trouble, they wouldn't know what in the world to do to get us out.

**Q:** Who was your CO?

**Mitten:** When we first went over there, it was a different gentleman and he was relieved. The word came down that he had had a nervous breakdown. It was really too bad, because he was a nice guy. A man named Tom Johnson took his place. He was from Beaver Dam, I think. He was a school teacher—a Phys-Ed teacher. The higher up person was also a school teacher and he was our sort of liaison between different units. I mean we were PSU 303. There was another unit over there, but they were in Baharain and they had other duties then we had. John Olson was the liaison between the units that were over there. He was a very, very sharp guy. We all respected him. We were very glad when he got over there because anything that might have gotten screwed up was straightened out once he got there.

**24.** What was Johnson's rank?

**Mitten:** He was a commander, I think.

**25.** And who was his CO? Was it the Army?

**Mitten:** Yes, the Army called all of the shots. There was also a Gary Anderson. He was part of the officer team. Kendall Filein(?) Johnson and Anderson are retired now. Filein is a captain now.

**26.** Was there any noticeable difference between reserve officers versus active-duty?

**Mitten:** Over there there weren't any active duty. They were all reservists.

**Q:** Did you trust those in command over you?

**Mitten:** Not really.

**Q:** You've already alluded to why this might be because you didn't think they were trained very well and that you guys thought you knew more then they did. Is that basically it then?

**Mitten:** Yes, that's it. And it wasn't that we didn't like them as people. It's just that when you're trying to make it through and come out alive, that's where the bottom line is.

**Q:** Did you have any interaction with crewmen of races other than your own?

**Mitten:** Yeah, the Saudi's. I've said this many times, and I'll say it a lot in the future—you know the Saudi Coast Guard, which is who we worked with, they're just like you and I. A lot of them are family people. They have their wives, or whatever, and their children, and their concerns are the same as our concerns—having enough money to support their wives and some of them had more then one wife—it's allowed over there. But for the most part they are nice people. I had the occasion to go aboard the "*Najran*"—a Saudi Coast Guard cutter. I was the only female in Saudi Coast Guard history to be allowed on their boat.



**Q:** What kind of ship was it?

**Mitten:** It was about 75 feet long. They treated me like a queen and that's very unusual over there. The only reason I was treated with respect was because I was in uniform. Their women are not on the same level as they are. Their women eat in a different room than the men. Even in restaurants—we had to go to what they called family restaurants that had a family room, so that if we went on liberty we could eat at that restaurant because the men eat in one room and the women and children eat in another. When I was on the "*Najran*" that was not the case. We all ate together. Like I said, they treated me like a queen.

**Q:** Were there any other ethnic groups in the unit you were in?

**Mitten:** We had one black man and one black woman. She and I became very good friends and she is now a senior chief.

**Q:** What were the relations between Coast Guardsmen and the other armed forces?

**Mitten:** They were strained between the Army and the Coast Guard because the Army had their rules and we had our rules. The Army attitude was that we had to follow their rules and their mission was entirely different from our mission. So it was very strained.

**Q:** And yet you had to report to them? Your officers had to report to them?

**Mitten:** I think so. I know there was a situation when there was a fire in my barracks. We had to call down to the Army to have them call the Saudi fire department. All of this took much more time than it should have. Consequently, the room right next to my room burned completely and the fire was so hot, that we had built a cabinet to keep our music tapes in—the tapes melted. That's how hot it was.

**Q:** Did you ever find out what caused the fire?

**Mitten:** No we never did. There were no inspectors over there.

**Q:** Did you have any negative experiences personally with other members of the armed services?

**Mitten:** I did not. I got along pretty much with everybody.

**Q:** Were there men in the service who reached out to help you/?

**Mitten:** I've been the kind of female over the years that the guys have always regarded me as one of the guys. Maybe it's just the way I am, because in my civilian jobs I've held many male positions. I don't know why, maybe it's because I'm mechanically inclined. I love to work with my hands in a factory and when I went into the Reserves, I went into basically a male rating. I always got support from the men—always.

**Q:** How were you perceived by the general public as a woman in the Coast Guard?

**Mitten:** Very good. Very well. Since I've been back from Saudi Arabia I've had various (positive) things happened to me. I've been in the newspaper. My neighbors have put notes in my mailbox saying things like, "Sandi, we're so proud of you." When I came back from the Gulf the company that I worked for had party for me. They presented me with an American flag and a Coast Guard flag. Everyone has made me feel really special and they always have.

**Q:** I assume then that they accepted the idea of a woman in uniform?

**Mitten:** There was no problem at all. Most people when they first find out, say "Really?"



**Q:** Do you think that service women should be offered the opportunity to serve in offensive ground combat?

**Mitten:** I think if that's what they want to—yes. My thinking is, that if a woman can do a man's job, and they can prove they can do a man's job—they should do it. And I don't care if it's civilian or in the service. And we can turn it around. If a man can prove to do a woman's job—let him do it.

**Q:** Did you generally enjoy your years in the service?

**Mitten:** I did. The only reason I got out was because I turned 60. The Reserves say that 60 is the magic number unless you're in a critical field—and I wasn't. I retired 6 days after 9/11, so my retirement party was one of happiness, but... (it was overshadowed). A lot of people said to me, "Sandi, would they call you back in?" But I said, "No, not now. But, I would go (if called up) without any second thoughts"

**Q:** What commendations have you received and for what?

**Mitten:** Well I brought some of them out. Because I was over there—the Kuwait Liberation Medal and National Defense Service, Humanitarian Service, Good Conduct of course, Expert Rifle, Expert Shotgun—just a lot of them. I can't think of them all right now. I'd have to look at my record. I had four bars on my uniform.

**Q:** Tell me about your most memorable Coast Guard experience.

**Mitten:** I was thinking a lot about that and you know I've had several. It's hard to just say one, but the thing that I thought of when I saw that question was when I was at Small Boats School in San Francisco Bay. We were on a 30 foot patrol boat and I was the only female in class. There were about 5 or 6 guys out on the boat with me--big strapping guys--6 foot, 6 foot-four like that, 200 pounds or more. They wanted to bring the Coast Guard helicopter down on the stern of the boat and have someone go into the basket and haul them off the stern of the boat. Well, there's Sandi and I raised my hand and said, "I'll do it." Now I'm afraid of heights—very afraid of heights. I thought that I'd be strapped into the basket. Well, I wasn't strapped into the basket. So I went into the basket, and put my knees up to my chest, put my arms around my knees. They took me up—way up in the sky and brought my butt end of the basket into the helicopter and I yelled at them, "Is that my boat down there?" They said, "Yes". We were flying around up there for awhile and then they put me back down on the stern of the boat in the basket. So that was very memorable. Another memorable time was when I was in Saudi Arabia and I was off the boats for awhile and I was on shore duty. I was at the communications center. We saw six SCUDS coming in from the other end of the port. We were right on the water. We saw them coming right for us. And we saw the Patriots intercept them. It was like fireworks. (Another memorable event) was going to Washington D.C. to represent the Coast Guard at the Veteran's Day Ceremony. That was memorable. My letters are in two different books. One written to my Aunt and one written to my step-mom. That's very memorable. I've been interviewed here in Milwaukee. They had a whole front page story with a picture and everything, in a Memorial Day newspaper one year. It was, oh my God, I couldn't believe when I saw it. There's a statue, which is a depiction of me, in the Veteran's Museum in Madison. I told the curator on the day it was dedicated—I was there with Tommy Thompson (then governor of Wisconsin)—that was memorable.

**Q:** That statue represents....?

**Mitten:** It represents me. It doesn't look like me, I told the curator, but it's my uniform and flack jacket. It's me standing behind a .50 cal. on a Raider Boat. That's what it's supposed to be. I said I was so honored because it has the largest name plate in the whole world. The brass plate at the bottom of the statue has my story—PS1 Sandi Mitten. They called me "Gramma", when I got over there—"Gramma Gunner"—I just kept that name and they just told the whole story.

**Q:** And this is located...?

**Mitten:** This is in Madison at the Veteran's museum, across from the square. Those are all so memorable, I can't just pick one thing. A year or so ago I was called by someone, whom I don't recall right now, asking me if I would be willing to send some pictures and a little bit of a story to them. They were setting up the Intrepid to be a floating museum. Of course I said yes. I feel that I have built, without even trying, a legacy for my family and my grandchildren. And they are proud of me. My oldest son was interviewed after we came back from Saudi (Arabia) by Jerry Taft, who was here at that time. He (Taft) asked, "Are you proud of your mother?" or "What do you think of your mother?" And my son said, "My mother wears combat boots and I'm damn proud of her." That's all I can tell you. It just keeps going on. Like you're (Mike Salkowski) are here. This went on in 1990 and 1991. I just say, I'm really just an ordinary person, from New Berlin, Wisconsin now. I've just been afforded so many opportunities that my neighbors don't have. I feel fortunate. I think that God has afforded me all of these opportunities. I've had wonderful times and I've had some of the worst times in the Coast Guard in my life. Things that I just don't want to remember, so I won't. But for the most part—I just had a hell of a time.

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## Segment 4—Post-Service Years

**Q:** Do you recall the day you left the service?

**Mitten:** That was September 17, 2001.

**Q:** Was there anything memorable that sticks out on that day?

**Mitten:** My birthday. My retirement party was just wonderful. There were a lot of people there. It was a wonderful day, after a terrible thing had happened in the United States.

**Q:** What was your career after the service?

**Mitten:** I went back to work at Briggs and Stratton and my job there, at that time, was machine set up. I became a supervisor and I started school—college. I actually started college in the mid 80s and I gave it up for awhile because I developed a heart problem. That was one thing I gave up. I was not going to give up the Reserve, so I gave up college for awhile. I took an early retirement from Briggs after 23.5 years in October of 1996. I continued on to college to get my college education. I graduated in 1997—in December of 1997. I got an AA in ornamental horticulture—which is my love. Flowers have been my love for years. From there I ended up taking a job as a floral manager at a Jewel food store here in Milwaukee. I left there after three years because they wouldn't give me a raise. I went across the street, to Home Depot, and was a cashier there for almost three years and then I decided that full-time employment was enough. I had turned 62 and I said that I was going to quit the full-time and I went to work part-time. I continued in the horticulture field as several different garden centers in the area. Finally 2 years ago next month, I was on my way to work at a garden center and stopped in at Great Harvest Bread Company, where I had drove to get some bread to take to work and I saw that they were in need of help and I asked if they had an application. I filled it out and that following Wednesday I went to work and that's where I work now—part-time. There's no grass that have grown under these feet.

**Q:** Did your Coast Guard career contribute to any of your post-service jobs?

**Mitten:** Not really. In the peace time here, I was in marine safety and pollution investigation and ship inspection. The one thing where I can tell you it did relate—when I worked in the shop (Briggs where I started in 1973)...this was in 1975 or 1976 and I was already in the Coast Guard. At Briggs, my department was dumping oil and coolant into the city sewer. I called the Coast Guard. At that period of time, at Briggs, they fired me, they rehired me, they laid me off and they brought me back—all in about a 24-48 hour period of time.

**Q:** So they (Briggs) knew that you had blown the whistle on them?

**Mitten:** Oh sure. I told them, because I told them, "You're polluting our city water and Lake Michigan. That just doesn't go." The big whigs over there at that time thought that they could scare me, but I don't scare easily—not when I know I'm right.

**Q:** What comments, impressions or thoughts would you like to share or elaborate on? Is there anything we've missed?

**Mitten:** I don't think so. We've covered quite a bit.

**Q:** If you could change something about the Coast Guard years what would it be?

**Mitten:** I've given this a lot of thought and you know, there was a big change, right before I retired from the Coast Guard. I'm going to say...in about 1998 or 1999, they were doing and integration. That is one thing I would have changed, because the regulars were accustomed to doing things one way and the reserves were used to doing things their way. To try and integrate them both together...it just wasn't going to work because the rules and regulations were different. The structure for the Reserves was for the reserve people and the structure over on this side was set up for active duty people. It's ok to integrate some of the things, but what they tried to do caused a lot of animosity. The Coast Guard today is not as it was when I joined. So even if I hadn't been made to retire, I was ready to get out just because of so many things that had gone on 3-4 years prior—negative things. I just don't even want to think about it.

**Q:** What do you think about the Coast Guard today?



**Mitten:** I don't really know it. I haven't really been down there. Since I've retired I've become very involved with the care taking of my Aunt who is right now in hospice. I just learned today that she probably only has a couple more weeks to live and we're praying that God is going to take her. I've been so involved with her the last 5 or 6 years with her needs that I really haven't been able to focus on my stuff. I went down in that area because I belong to American Legion Post 448, which happens to be an all female American Legion Post (there are only 2 in Wisconsin). This one is located right in Milwaukee, at the War Memorial. That's where we have our meetings. I went down there for a meeting a few weeks ago and I was so close to the station and I said to myself, "Gee Sandi, this is the first time you've even been in the area to think about going and stopping." But it was too late for the exchange to be open. It was on a Saturday

**Q:** I see you kept a diary and do you have some pictures?

**Mitten:** Yes I have some pictures. This is a picture of me taken by *People* magazine. They were going to do an article on me, but then the war ended and they ended up doing a story on the first female prisoner of war. How could I be miffed at that.

**Q:** What ensign is that on the boat?

**Mitten:** That's the Coast Guard (Sandi shows various pictures). This was our port. This was the communications center. This was a fishing boat. And this is when we were actually waiting to come home. This was the fires from the oil fields and this was the middle of the day, so the sun is out. This was a parade, here in Milwaukee. We also did one in Washington D.C. and New York. I did the one in New York. I couldn't make the one in D.C. And that (another picture) is when we came into New York. This (another picture) is when I went in...in '74. And this (Sandi shows a newspaper article) is the article that was done by the Milwaukee Journal. These (picture) are three other women. This is M.J. Zvara. She's still active. This is Mary Fowlkes, and she's still active. I mean active reservists. Michelle is not and I'm not.

**Q:** I would like to conclude the interview and the time is about 7:40 pm and we've been speaking for about an hour and 10 minutes. I'd like to thank you for your time in letting us record this and I will transcribe this and send you a copy of it. I will then send it on to Dr. Thiesen. This is a project for the Coast Guard to preserve the history of the Coast Guard by interviewing members who have served in various capacities around the world and the United States. I thank you very much for your time on this (project).



**With the Secretary of Transportation,  
Samuel K. Skinner, in November, 1991.**