

Interview with Dorothy Cordier

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Interviewer: Sandy Wheeler

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Wheeler: Dorothy, I'd like to have your name, with your maiden name, please.

Cordier: I'm Dorothy Vitavec Cordier.

Wheeler: And you were born and raised where?

Cordier: In Canton, Ohio.

Wheeler: And Vitavec, that's an interesting name.

Cordier: That's a Slovenian name. My parents came from Austria, around about 1910 or something like that.

Wheeler: And what language did they speak?

Cordier: That's Slovenian.

Wheeler: And did you learn to speak Slovenian?

Cordier: I think I spoke a little bit of it until I got to first grade in school, and then I learned English. But today I do not know a word of it any more.

Wheeler: Oh, that's a shame.

Cordier: It's a shame.

Wheeler: Do you have siblings?

Cordier: I have two brothers; both of them are gone, and one sister, who is ninety-three years old, and she's living in Texas now.

Wheeler: Oh my goodness, ninety-three. Looks like you're going to be here for a good long time.

Cordier: Well, I hope so.

Wheeler: So, you're married to a gentleman named George Cordier.

Cordier: Mm hmm.

Wheeler: Where did you meet George?

Cordier: We met at a bus station in Canton, Ohio.

Wheeler: Who introduced you?

Cordier: Well, he came over because he was the last man on board, and they made him come to Canton, Ohio. I didn't pay any attention to him, because all the other girls were flocking around him, because he was a handsome young man.

Wheeler: I was going to say, he must have been a handsome young man.

Cordier: He was a handsome young man. One bus driver came up to me and he said, "You know that guy over there? He'd like to date you." And I said, "Why doesn't he ask me?"

Wheeler: So did he wander over and ask you?

Cordier: I think it was a couple days afterwards he did, and we went together for about two months and got married.

Wheeler: Wow. Where is George from?

Cordier: George is from Tarentum, Pennsylvania.

Wheeler: Pennsylvania. And he came to Canton for a meeting or to work?

Cordier: To work. There was this little bus line — he had to because he was the low man on the board.

Wheeler: How long did it take him to propose?

Cordier: Not long; about a month.

Wheeler: And then two months later you were married?

Cordier: And we were married.

Wheeler: Tell me what your parents thought about that.

Cordier: Mother was a little—didn't like the idea. In fact she said, "I don't even know the young man." And I—you know how it is when you're young.

Wheeler: And in love.

Cordier: And in love.

Wheeler: How old were you?

Cordier: I was twenty-one and he was twenty-three.

Wheeler: Well, in those days, people were getting married at that age.

Cordier: Mm hmm.

Wheeler: Were you working? Were you at the bus station?

Cordier: I was working. I worked as a cashier at the bus station.

Wheeler: Did you have a big wedding, a small wedding?

Cordier: No. This was a very small wedding. We both worked that day, and it was at nine o'clock at night. We were married in a Methodist church, and the only people there were my parents and my sister, and his brother. That's all.

Wheeler: What year was that?

Cordier: Nineteen forty-one.

Wheeler: And did you then live in Canton?

Cordier: We lived there for a while until he was transferred again, and then we moved to Youngstown, Ohio.

Wheeler: Where were you when the war broke out?

Cordier: We were in Canton. No, no, I'm sorry. We were in Youngstown.

Wheeler: And is that where you were when Pearl Harbor was bombed?

Cordier: Yes, yes. Uh-huh.

Wheeler: What did you think then, with a twenty-four year old husband?

Cordier: It was something that I thought about and worried about; didn't like it. I knew that it meant that a lot of my friends would be leaving to go into the war. In fact, my high school class, the graduating class, about half of the boys went; [They] were the first ones called in.

- Wheeler: And did you and George discuss it, that he might get drafted?
- Cordier: No, we didn't discuss it, because we just enjoyed life and work and this and that. Of course, we kept up with the news of what was going on, but we didn't worry about it at that time.
- Wheeler: When did you have your first child?
- Cordier: First child? About a day before our first wedding anniversary. (both laugh) Yeah, he was born on September the 23rd, just a day before our first wedding anniversary.
- Wheeler: When was your anniversary?
- Cordier: The twenty-fourth.
- Wheeler: When did George get drafted?
- Cordier: The next year, in September.
- Wheeler: So Richard was a year old?
- Cordier: Just going to be a year old. George left one day before Richard's first birthday.
- Wheeler: How long before he had to leave to be deployed did you know that he was going?
- Cordier: That I don't remember.
- Wheeler: Do you have any idea why he picked one of the roughest services, in my opinion, the Marines?
- Cordier: Oh, I don't know why he chose that. He keeps saying that it was ...I have no idea why he chose the Marines, really I don't.
- Wheeler: So, how did he leave Ohio? On a bus, a train? I would think that he'd leave on a bus.
- Cordier: You know what? I don't remember.
- Wheeler: Can you remember what it was like to have him leave?
- Cordier: Yes. I worried because I had a small child to take care of, no income, no job. But fortunately, the company that he worked for offered me a job as an information clerk at the bus station in Canton, Ohio.
- Wheeler: You moved back to Canton then.

- Cordier: I had to move back with my mom and dad, yes.
- Wheeler: Who took care of Richard?
- Cordier: Well, I took the afternoon shift because this way I could stay at home and help mother. Mother was in her sixties already, and I didn't want her to have too much to do. I helped her and took care of Richard, so that all she had to do was just to feed him at night and then put him to bed. But of course, he used to follow my dad around like a shadow.
- Wheeler: So if you were home with her in the morning, she could probably put him down for a nap in the afternoon.
- Cordier: Yeah, and then I went on to work, and then I got home at 12:30.
- Wheeler: Oh my goodness. Long, long days.
- Cordier: So that was mostly—that was my day, taking care of the child, helping mother and working. That's all I did.
- Wheeler: Did you get involved with any of the war effort at all? Keeping the family together was a major job for the women of the war.
- Cordier: No, I didn't. We did have a camp in Sharon, Pennsylvania, where a lot of the Army fellows came to Canton, Ohio, where I talked to them and this and that. But otherwise, I didn't, no.
- Wheeler: When George left, he went to basic training. Where was that?
- Cordier: Parris Island [South Carolina].
- Wheeler: How did you communicate with George?
- Cordier: Oh, a lot of times by phone, and then we wrote letters. We were very good about writing letters to each other.
- Wheeler: When George would write, would he tell you about what he was going through, or was it just generally homey stuff?
- Cordier: Oh, he would tell what was going on, and then of course I would tell him what I was doing and what Richard was doing. But it was just idle chat.
- Wheeler: Husband and wife stuff.
- Cordier: Yeah, yeah.
- Wheeler: And the hugs and kisses that were always so important in those letters.
- Cordier: Yes.

Wheeler: So your support group was your mother and dad, and probably your people at work. Everybody was involved in the war effort in one way or another. Were the people at work very supportive of you, knowing the chore that you had?

Cordier: Oh, yes.

Wheeler: Taking care of a one-year-old.

Cordier: Yes.

Wheeler: I'm supposing that that was very, very hard on George, to be away from that little guy.

Cordier: Yes, it was. I think it was.

Wheeler: Did he write about it?

Cordier: Yes, he did. He wrote letters or those little V-mails that we got. He did a lot of promising, what he was going to do when he come home.

Wheeler: Do you still have those letters?

Cordier: No. I do not have those letters.

Wheeler: Were they censored when they came from Parris Island?

Cordier: Not from Parris Island, but from overseas they were, yes.

Wheeler: He went from Parris Island to another location?

Cordier: To Camp Lejeune.

Wheeler: Which is located where?

Cordier: I think that's in North Carolina, and then he went to Oceanside, California, and from there he went then overseas.

Wheeler: Did you get to see him at all during that time?

Cordier: I made a trip down to Camp Lejeune. I took a few days off from work and went down to see him, but we weren't able to see each other much because he had his drills and everything else. I mean, they were training them real fast.

Wheeler: I happened to hear some of George's interview, and I guess that was a tough weekend, because they canceled his liberty.

Cordier: That's right.

Wheeler: And how did you feel about that?

Cordier: A wasted trip more or less.

Wheeler: How did you get down there?

Cordier: By bus.

Wheeler: Did your bus company charge you for that trip?

Cordier: No. I had good support from them. My boss said at one time, when mother called me one day, and she said that Richard fell down the stairs in the house. I was worried, and I went to one of the bosses there, and I asked if I could go home because my son had fallen down the steps, and he says, "No." He says, "You're an information clerk, you have to stay here." And I marched right up to the main boss, and I said to Mr. McKibbon, and he said to me, "First Dorothy, you're a mother, and then you're an information clerk." So they took very good care of me.

Wheeler: Obviously the man that gave you that first message didn't have children.

Cordier: But they did. I mean, as I said, they gave me the job, and I could take any time off I want to.

Wheeler: Well, did you get checks from the military about George's pay?

Cordier: Well, whatever he got, and I think he got around about fifty or sixty dollars a month at that time. He asked the government to send me fifty dollars of it, and he only kept ten dollars. Otherwise, I didn't have anything coming in outside of what I'd worked.

Wheeler: What was pay like back then? You worked until midnight. How much an hour did you make? Did they pay by the hour?

Cordier: That I can't remember. Well, I don't remember what I made, and then it wasn't too long afterwards until I advanced to being a ticket agent. So I made a little bit more money at that time, and then of course, it was a little bit easier on me.

Wheeler: Of course living with your parents helped, because you didn't have housing to provide for yourself. Did you contribute to their household?

Cordier: Oh yes, oh yes. I paid them room and board, because I just felt that I was imposing on mother, that I shouldn't have done that.

Wheeler: Do you think your mother felt that way?

Cordier: I don't think she did, but then, I thought maybe I owed her something.

Wheeler: Talk to me about the day-to-day rationing, and how food was hard to come by.

Cordier: Well, that was pretty hard, especially on shoes for Richard, because he grew so fast. I wasn't able to keep him in shoes because of the shoe rationing. But that didn't bother me too much. We had a garden at home and this and that, and mother—

Wheeler: Was that called a Victory Garden?

Cordier: We called it a Victory Garden, yes, and we had a big garden. In fact, dad made it an extra plot, so that we could have more food then.

Wheeler: What was your father's employment?

Cordier: He worked in the brickyard.

Wheeler: Making bricks?

Cordier: Mm hmm.

Wheeler: And your mother stayed at home.

Cordier: Stayed at home. She always stayed at home, yes.

Wheeler: Were any of your siblings at home when you were living with your mother?

Cordier: No. My two brothers were also in the service. One was in the Army and one was in the Navy, and my sister was married, and she lived in Pennsylvania.

Wheeler: So your mother's heart was full.

Cordier: Yeah, mm hmm.

Wheeler: Were both of your brothers sent overseas?

Cordier: One was sent over to England, and the other one was sent out to the Pacific. He was a Seabee [naval construction].

Wheeler: Did he ever run into George?

Cordier: Yes, he did.

Wheeler: Really?

Cordier: In Guadalcanal.

Wheeler: That's the most amazing thing. Well, so George went from Camp Lejeune to California, before he shipped out?

Cordier: Yes. Oceanside - Camp Pendleton.

- Wheeler: The last time you saw him was at [Camp] Lejeune.
- Cordier: At Lejeune, yes.
- Wheeler: And was he able to tell you that he was shipping out?
- Cordier: Oh, yes.
- Wheeler: Did you know the day and the time, or you just had to guess?
- Cordier: Oh, I think he did tell me, but I don't remember.
- Wheeler: And could he tell you where he was going?
- Cordier: You know what, I bet he did, but I don't remember.
- Wheeler: I would almost think that possibly would have been censored out. I thought they kept that information pretty close to the vest.
- Cordier: That I don't remember.
- Wheeler: So, where did he go first?
- Cordier: You know, I really don't know because, when he came home, he didn't talk much about it. It wasn't until recently that I found out all what he did and where he was. He didn't talk about anything at all.
- Wheeler: We know that George has a Purple Heart, which means he was injured in battle. Tell me about how you found out about that.
- Cordier: Well, of course, everybody was notified by a telegram at that time. This was—I came home about twelve-thirty, as I said, from work, and mother met me at the door. Immediately she said, "Something happened to George." And I said, "Did I get a telegram?" And she says, "No telegram." But she said, "Richard got up at nine o'clock, stood up in his bed and he yelled, 'dada dada dada.'" And she said, "Something's happened to George." And so we jotted down what time it was, and the date and everything else, and it wasn't until oh, a few days afterwards, until I got a V-mail from George, where he did tell me that he got wounded and he was in the hospital. And then, I think a week or so later, I finally got the telegram saying that he was wounded.
- Wheeler: Well it was probably good to hear from George first, if he was able to communicate with you, but that's an amazing part about Richard. Did anybody else in the family get a telegram?
- Cordier: Yeah, his father got one too.
- Wheeler: Before you?

- Cordier: Well, I think we got it both at the same time.
- Wheeler: Why do you suppose it took so long for them to notify you?
- Cordier: Well, they said it was a minor wound that he had gotten, so it probably was not that important.
- Wheeler: What was George's job when he was on Guadalcanal in Guam? What did he do?
- Cordier: He was a telephone—something to do with telephones. Operator? I don't know what all he did. As I said, he didn't talk much about what he did in the service.
- Wheeler: How was he wounded?
- Cordier: By a mortar shell.
- Wheeler: And where was his wound?
- Cordier: Near his lungs.
- Wheeler: So what happened after he was wounded? Did they ship him home?
- Cordier: No, no. He was in the hospital, I think, for two or three months, and then I think he went back to Guam or something, but he ended up being in the Philippines as a cook for some generals and lieutenants.
- Wheeler: So he went from a communications company to a cook.
- Cordier: Because, from what I understand, one of the generals said something about, "George, you don't want to go back to fighting do you?" And George says, "No, I don't." So they gave him a cook's job.
- Wheeler: Well, wouldn't you have thought, when he was wounded, that that might have been the end of the war for George, that you were getting him to come home?
- Cordier: Well, they did say something about he was unfit for battle. So I don't know.
- Wheeler: So he went to Manila. What were his qualifications to be a cook?
- Cordier: That I would like to know today. (both laugh)
- Wheeler: How long did he do that?
- Cordier: Gee, I don't remember, maybe six months or something like that, until he earned what they called points. When you had so many points, you were able to come home. I remember he called me and he says, "I got my points. I'm coming home."

Wheeler: And how did you feel?

Cordier: I was glad it was all over with, that we can resume our life.

Wheeler: Where were you when you found out he was coming home?

Cordier: I was working in the office, and I forgot that the mike was on, and I think the whole station heard our conversation.

Wheeler: (laughs) The mike was on. Did you cry?

Cordier: I think I did, because I was hoping that he'd come home, because I worried a lot that he would get killed or something.

Wheeler: Did you have a special time of the day when you were reflecting, and you wrote your letters to George?

Cordier: I had three letters to write. I wrote to George every day, and then I also had to write to my two brothers.

Wheeler: If you were to reflect on what was the most difficult part of those years in your life, what would you say?

Cordier: The most difficult part was the fact that it was at a standstill. I mean, it just seems like I was on pause. I wasn't doing anything.

Wheeler: And you didn't have the support of your husband, but you had the total care of...

Cordier: It was just more or less about two and a half years of wasted life, that's all.

Wheeler: Were you angry?

Cordier: No, I wasn't angry. I knew what we had to do, and it was important that we went to war. I mean, it was something we had to do. Just like today. There are things we have to do, whether we like it or not.

Wheeler: So George let you know he was coming home.

Cordier: Yes.

Wheeler: And from that time that you got that phone call that everybody in the station heard, how long did it take him to get to you in Canton, Ohio?

Cordier: Let's see, that was from Chicago. I don't remember.

Wheeler: He was in the states when he called you and told you he was coming home?

Cordier: In Chicago.

- Wheeler: At Great Lakes?
- Cordier: Great Lakes, yes.
- Wheeler: So he didn't tell you from Manila that he was coming home.
- Cordier: No, no, no. He called me from Chicago.
- Wheeler: You must have jumped up and down.
- Cordier: I did. Of course, I knew he was coming home because he had written that he had his points, but I didn't know when he was coming.
- Wheeler: So by that time Richard was how old? He was a year old when George left. So he was almost three?
- Cordier: Almost three years old.
- Wheeler: How did you keep George in Richard's thought process and his memories? I know he said, "Dada, dada." But did you show him pictures? Did you talk about him?
- Cordier: I talked about his father, and of course for George, I did send pictures now and then, so he could see how Richard was growing up. (telephone rings) But when he came home, actually we had no problems whatsoever. I mean, it just seems like there was no two and a half years there. We had no problems. You hear a lot of people say that they had problems adjusting and this and that. We absolutely had no problems whatsoever.
- Wheeler: So when Richard saw George for the first time?
- Cordier: I think he was a little puzzled, because he was connecting with his grandfather, but then it wasn't too long afterwards, we went back to Youngstown, Ohio, and so of course he knew that that was his daddy.
- Wheeler: When George came back to Canton, you had to pack up your whole family?
- Cordier: And move back to Youngstown, where his job was yes, and I had to quit my job.
- Wheeler: You were not happy about that were you?
- Cordier: No, I wasn't, because I really wanted him to go to college, because they were offering the GI Bill of Rights. I was willing to go ahead and work while he went to school, but he said he didn't want to go.
- Wheeler: And that was that.
- Cordier: And that was that.

- Wheeler: He continued to work for the bus company?
- Cordier: Yes. Of course he eventually became in a managerial position, but he just liked his job that's all.
- Wheeler: Does Richard have siblings now?
- Cordier: He has a brother and a sister. Bob was born two years after, and Cathy came in about another two years.
- Wheeler: Where did you go from Youngstown?
- Cordier: We moved to Canton, Ohio, again, where his job was transferred.
- Wheeler: You must have had a pretty good path between Canton and Youngstown.
- Cordier: We did a lot of moving. In one of his letters, he did tell me we were going to go places.
- Wheeler: And he meant it.
- Cordier: We moved to California, and I got lonesome out in California. So we came back to Canton, and he worked again for the bus company there. They transferred him up to Jackson, Michigan as a manager, and we stayed there for a while. Then they transferred him to Danville, Illinois, and we stayed there for a while, and then he got transferred again out to California.
- Wheeler: On your two trips to California, did he take you to Camp Pendleton or any of the places that he had been?
- Cordier: No. No. He just sort of — as I said, that was past.
- Wheeler: Was that not the general attitude? When the soldiers came home, they didn't want to talk about it?
- Cordier: No. He wouldn't talk about it.
- Wheeler: Do you think maybe pretty much that was their attitude when they had to go to war?
- Cordier: Probably so.
- Wheeler: We've got to do it.
- Cordier: Got to do it. Just something you had to do.
- Wheeler: So you went to Danville and then back to Canton?
- Cordier: No, from Danville we went to California.

- Wheeler: And how long were you out there?
- Cordier: This time we stayed there thirty years. We got involved with some very nice people around, in square dancing, and we enjoyed that.
- Wheeler: So your children were educated in California.
- Cordier: Out there.
- Wheeler: Did they ever ask you about what you and their father went through during the war years?
- Cordier: No, they haven't.
- Wheeler: They never asked their dad about his Purple Heart?
- Cordier: They learned recently, when he got involved with the Illinois World War II Memorial. They learned all about what he did. Otherwise, they didn't know anything about it either. They knew he was a Marine, but that's it.
- Wheeler: I think he's a proud Marine.
- Cordier: He's a very proud Marine.
- Wheeler: How did you come back to Illinois?
- Cordier: We had visited our children here, Richard and Carol, when they suggested at our age, that if they found us a little house, we'd be back. And they found a house for us and so we came back.
- Wheeler: And that's when George and you, of course, got involved with the Veterans' group that ultimately began the process—
- Cordier: Well, we were square dancing when we came to Springfield. We were square dancing, and then unfortunately, I had a stroke. I could not dance any more, and I looked at George and I said, "You're going to have to do something to keep busy," because George always wanted to be active in something. So he found the Marines and a Vet center, and then of course the World War II Illinois Veterans Memorial thing, which he enjoys very much.
- Wheeler: With George being involved with this, did you feel that you were an important part of the war effort, and that this should be built?
- Cordier: Oh yes, oh yes.
- Wheeler: What do you think when you stand out there and see what you and George had such an important part in, seeing it built?

Cordier: Very proud. I think he's very proud that he has done something. He's left his mark.

Wheeler: But you have too.

Cordier: Well I did help a little, yes.

Wheeler: I think you helped there, but you also helped George with your letters throughout the service, and your love, that I'm sure, was felt in those letters and he knew. I've been very hopeful that the women's stories will be told and continue to be told. I can't imagine what it was like for you, with a baby. I am surprised the children haven't asked about it, but of course now that you're into it and George has been telling his stories, how do you feel about that? How do you feel about all these stories coming out?

Cordier: I don't know, it just didn't bother me at all. I mean, it was just life is all I can say. It's life.

Wheeler: If you had to talk to a young woman, whose husband was going, or a mother sending their son off, what would you say to them, having had the experience?

Cordier: Well, it's pretty hard. It's something that you have to do that you don't like to, but you have to do it. I know there's no need to complain about it. I didn't complain about it at all, that he was gone.

Wheeler: It probably wouldn't have done any good, would it?

Cordier: No. As I said, that's life. There's a lot of things that happen in life that you don't like that is happening, but it does, and so you just take it.

Wheeler: How long have you and George been married now?

Cordier: In September it will be sixty-six years.

Wheeler: Sixty-six years. You've been through World War II and a Purple Heart and three children, and how many grandchildren?

Cordier: We have six grandchildren and eight great grandchildren.

Wheeler: When you look back at those years, did you ever think that you would get this far and enjoy sixty-six years of married life?

Cordier: No, and I don't think anybody thought we would have sixty-six years, after two months of going together and then getting married.

Wheeler: (laughs)

Cordier: I think we surprised everybody.

Wheeler: There's a message there. I have had the good fortune of knowing you both, and what a wonderful story. Dorothy, in all the years that you have lived, in all the conflicts that you have seen, from World War II to the Korean conflict, certainly Vietnam, and now we're faced with this situation in Iraq. Do you reflect on that and think, there are more young wives, there are more mothers sending their sons? Does this come back to you during a conflict, or is it just out there and you leave it [alone]?

Cordier: Well, I have thoughts about the wars. A lot of times I think a lot of these things could be done differently. I don't like wars. I'm sorry, but I don't like wars. I feel sorry for the girls today and the mothers, and I pray that soon it will be over with.

(end of interview)