



Ann Cottrell Free Covering World War II Washington

Transcript of an interview of Ann Cottrell Free (ACF)
By Tomas Dinges (TD) for a Woodrow Wilson Senior High School project
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4700 Jamestown Road, Bethesda, MD

Contact: Elissa Blake Free
202.537.1434

elissabill@gmail.com

More information available at: AnnCottrellFree.org

TD: I wanted to start with, where were you exactly on December 7, 1941?

ACF: You'll have to give them my name first.

TD: Okay. What is your name?

ACF: My name now is Ann Cottrell C O T T R E L L and that was what my name was then, and it still is, Ann Cottrell Free. I married much later after the war to Mr. Free, Jim Free. And the question was, where was I on December 7, 1941? I was in Washington, D.C., and I had been horseback riding with a Peruvian diplomat and I think he had his mind on a lot of other things besides political affairs! But I didn't, because I figured that something horrible was going to happen because of those two Japanese who had gone to see the Secretary of State the day before, something was happening, so I said "let's turn on the radio," this is in the middle of the day, and my gosh that is when this man, I remember him saying, it was Upton Close, see we didn't have any television then, and people didn't even listen to radio much in the daytime because news wasn't the way news is today. And there it was, I said, "My God, I've got to get to the office."

TD: Where were you working then?

ACF: I was working downtown for the *Chicago Sun* which was the Washington bureau, which was quite a large bureau located in the National Press Building at 14th and F, and I rushed home and my roommate was in tears because she said, I had two women roommates then, and she said, “my brother will have to go to war.” She knew it right away. And I rushed to the office and I was just about the first person there, and I was the only woman on that bureau, and the men including the high VIPs in Washington, were all, would you believe it, were at a football game. I guess it was the Redskins, and we didn’t have a stadium then, but I got to the office right away, so they sent me, the editor was there, the desk manager, he told me “go find out what people are thinking...go to the...”, they didn’t have a Department of Defense, “go to the Navy Department,” you see because it was Navy ships that had been bombed. So I went. I hardly knew where Pearl Harbor was, because you know, I had never been to Hawaii, and although I had a friend who was at Pearl Harbor at that time and she was married to a naval officer, and he would have been killed except he switched duty, but that’s another story. So I went to the Department of the Navy, which was then located on Constitution Avenue in long low buildings which were left over from World War I; no Pentagon then. I interviewed admirals and generals who were all rushing back from the football game

because they had been paged at the football game, “General So and So, Admiral So and So, Admiral King, Admiral Jones, General this, that and the other,” and then people in the audience, nobody was thinking that our lives were going to be changed forever, people began to be aware of the fact that all these people were paged, and then by that time, some of the men in the bureau, in the newspaper bureau, had gotten back to work and relieved me doing that work over there. Then I went to the White House and, the most interesting thing I did that day was, I went to the Japanese Embassy, which is located where it is now. It’s different places now, there’s a much bigger one and a smaller one on Massachusetts Avenue. And a small crowd of people gathered around, mainly residents of the neighborhood, and we saw some curling smoke coming from the back. They were burning their papers.

TD: Wow.

ACF: Because, after all, they were the enemy. They were the enemy, as of that moment.

TD: So they didn’t want to relinquish any documents.

ACF: No, so they were burning their papers and I remember the different people that were there. One was a woman, she was all dressed up, very elegant in furs, it ended up that her husband then became a big general in the war and then he ended up in China, but that’s another story. In other

words, things were just so dramatic, everything was so electric, and there were so few people who were really aware of the danger we were in, although we knew that, of course Roosevelt wanted us to get into the war because of what was happening on the other side

TD: But he wanted them to --

ACF: He couldn't have gotten the country into war just so --

TD: He needed some help?

ACF: He had to have an incident, yeah. So at that moment, you see, the Japanese and the Germans were allies, and so that was automatic that we were getting into a two-front situation immediately. So as a reporter, you can imagine what I was doing. I did the Navy Department, I did the man on the street, that was interesting asking people, they didn't know where Pearl Harbor was, you know, after all, you wouldn't have either. And then I was taking taxis all around. You could take a taxi almost anywhere in Washington for 25 cents then, and so I went all over the place like that. And that is the way it was. Then that night Roosevelt got on the radio and spoke to the public, the country, and he said, and I was there, but not in the room, I was in and out of the the press room. We were a much smaller press corps then, than there its today. That is when he said, I think, can't remember all the things exactly, when they happened, he said this is the day, December 7,

that will “live in infamy,” which, you’ve heard that. This is the day that will “live in infamy.” And then, I think it was the next day, that he went up to the Congress and asked for the declaration of war. I saw that too, from the press galleries. I should have kept a more detailed diary. I was so busy writing about these things that you didn’t have any strength left to put down your own personal impressions, and my husband, he was one of the those, I think he had been at the football game, he wasn’t my husband then, he was just one of my boyfriends at that time. He knew that he would be involved. Every man of that age knew. And, so then, we just kind of got in, you wouldn’t say a groove, but I covered everything. I had already been covering Mrs. Roosevelt, who is a profound influence on the public and the nation, and indeed, on history forever, I guess, because she was a woman who felt very deeply and had a very good mind, and of course was extremely political.

TD: Yeah she was.

ACF: And she had press conferences, which you’ve heard about I guess, for women only, and that’s a story in itself, how we would traipse upstairs to a little living room she had on the second floor. And she covered everything in these press conferences, we would ask her almost everything. In the war she threw herself, I jump ahead because your

question was, “where was I on Pearl Harbor Day?” But anyway, she threw herself into it, and of course, she finally went practically all the way around the world, the South Pacific, and she came back and told us all about it, and wherever American soldiers were, she went to visit them. And so your question was where was I on Pearl Harbor Day. I was all over the map in Washington and --

TD: Running frantic throughout D.C.

ACF: Well, I tried to get bits and pieces of stories.

TD: How did you feel about World War II before that day, before the U.S. entered, before the Japanese instigated --

ACF: Oh, when I was at college we knew the Japanese, the girls at my college, were, this was several years before, were boycotting Japan because they knew that it was a very military chauvinistic state, and they boycotted Japan's silk stockings, you know, because the silk, this is pre-nylon, and our stockings were all silk. They looked very much, well, that would be a good museum piece, to find a real silk stocking left over. And they used to run, but so do nylon stockings, and later on, when nylon was invented, then nylon went to war, you know, in parachutes and all of that. So when, as I say, when I was at college, I went to college in New York, Barnard, and the girls up there were all very political, very, very anti-Nazi,

very, very anti-Japanese at that time. They had these parades against the Japanese, and boycotting them on the silk stockings, so we all ended up wearing cotton stockings and the word for cotton, it must be, I'll have to look up the derivation, is "lisle", you never hear that word any more. Everybody wore lisle stockings, it was nothing in the world but cotton stockings, very unattractive. So, no, nobody had any good vibes about the Japanese because, I ought to get my history book out, you can tell me more, but you see, they had already, when did Hong Kong fall?

TD: I'm not sure, but they had already been attacking --

ACF: Oh yeah, horrible, horrible what they did in China.

TD: We don't get that much information about it, I mean, there is really not much Asian studies so --

ACF: You see, but the Chinese, that's when we were, that's a whole story in itself, in which I had got involved in a peripheral way. I went to China, later and, but then you see, the Chinese thing is a whole other story because the Chinese Communists, Chinese Nationalists, they tried to ally themselves to each other to fight the Japanese, and of course the Japanese --

TD: Were a tremendous fighting force.

ACF: What I think is pretty damn well documented, but it looks like all people are savages if you let them be, look what's going on right now. The Rape of Nanking, did you ever hear of that? They are not the best guys in the world.

TD: So there was already discontent?

ACF: Yes, so there was a lot of anti-Japanese feeling at that time and from the standpoint of the Japanese, were becoming the great exporter and developer of, like these little tape recorders that we're using right now, they were noted, you probably didn't realize this, for just cheesy stuff, they only manufactured little cheap toys.

TD: So it was kind of like Taiwan?

ACF: You say "Made in Japan," it meant zero, zilch.

TD: It is kind of like how "Made in China," is now.

ACF: Well, yeah, I guess so, you know just cheap stuff. But after the war they got their act together.

TD: They modernized with the help of U.S. reparations.

ACF: General MacArthur, you know he pulled them together. He beat them up and then put them back on their feet. But anyhow, so go ahead, you asked me how did people feel? People felt terrible about this. No one knew about . . . they knew, I had heard that there were some kind of

camps in Germany, but it was all so vague. You know, like we had camps, what did we do but round up the Japanese and put them out there in camps?

So --

TD: Except we don't look at it like that.

ACF: We don't look at it like that. But on the other hand, you might look at it like a camp, getting people congregated, being like, going in an Army camp.

TD: It was internment.

ACF: Internment, entirely. So that is why people, the little bit they knew about the European thing, I think it's horrible that a story didn't break, about the death camps.

TD: Yeah, I mean, but they only found out about the Holocaust years later didn't they? I mean --

ACF: The end of the war.

TD: Right , and then it became important.

ACF: People knew, but it never seemed to get articulated. I didn't know.

TD: But there were some people in the United States who did know?

ACF: I don't know if they did know, but it seems the Jewish groups were very heavy on trying get help to European Jews and then there was something set up by, Henry Morgenthau was Jewish, he was Secretary of the Navy then, I mean, excuse me, I mean the Treasury then, and it was under him that something called the War Refugee Board was founded but it had no personnel, and I covered it for my newspaper and I realized that something bad was going on, but you don't think anybody in their right mind would run into a story about gassing and not telling it, I mean it just boggles the mind. But also, it boggles the mind that Germans knew about it too.

TD: They had a totally different mind frame so they couldn't really --

ACF: They figured if they spoke out they would be the next ones. Anyway, there was a lot of anti-Nazi. Hitler, after all, we had heard him raving and ranting on the radio for years, and there was a famous man named H. V. Kaltenborn, whom you never heard of, well he had a really strange accent, but he was a newscaster and he was . . . German himself, but he was always the one bringing, it seemed to me, always the one bringing us Hitler's speeches. I didn't know German but we knew damn well that what he was saying was not good. We heard these rallies you know, oh yeah,

“Heil Hitlers” and all the rest. So your question was, there was a lot of hostile feelings?

TD: Toward the Nazis. Did, so but definite accounts of the Holocaust just came out after the war?

ACF: Yeah, actually when the American correspondents went into, when Poland was liberated, I think the first camp, in my recollection, I may be quite wrong factually. I mean a little bit wrong. Lublin - L U B L I N - was the camp, where, is the first one they kind of went to, and that is why I told you all these piles of shoes and everything, but that's not a big camp from the standpoint of Auschwitz and --

TD: But I recognize the name.

ACF: Yeah, so then of course we would, we still didn't have television. Papers were still just filled with description of these bodies, you've now seen them on television, and Eisenhower, I don't think he could believe it.

TD: I think some people kind of blocked it out of their minds thinking that this could never happen. Did, I mean this may be a very broad question, but it's on here, it's an extremely broad subject, did World War II, I mean I guess it affected you tremendously in terms of, totally changed the scope of your writing, didn't it?

ACF: Well yes, I grew up pretty quick then . . . the kind of stories, I was writing on a subject I really had no background in and you had to cover all kinds of economics and you had to cover things you obviously couldn't have any schooling in. I think one of the most interesting things for me personally, I found myself covering not only, of course continuing with Mrs. Roosevelt and all that, but the whole country went on a war footing economically. That changed everything that was made, you had to get, almost permission, to make it. They set up the War Production Board.

TD: That's right, they regulated everything.

ACF: Everything was regulated. I'll tell you this one thing. This country, everybody reacts nobly I think under stimulus, particularly of that kind. It was a marvel of organization, an absolute marvel. All this industrial genius we've had for years in making cars and ice boxes and everything else, was all thrown into this one cohesive unit which is the War Production Board and one of the men who headed that had been the former president of General Motors, and used to thinking big, you know. The main thing is that they divided up all the commodities into sections, and how much steel could be used, could we make the cars, no, there were no cars made, except for essential use. I went to this unveiling one day of a car that has changed our lives, the unveiling of the first Jeep.

TD: Oh, wow.

ACF: Made by Willys, Willys-Knight I think and --

TD: Back then I guess there were lots of car companies instead of the big three as there are now.

ACF: Yeah, they were diminishing by then, but way back there were millions of them, there was Nash and there was Willys as I said, there was the Studebaker, oh God so many, and Hudson, this goes way back in my childhood. They were all swallowed up by the big boys. So therefore everything, this was interesting covering, because you had to get out to the public through the media, all the things like shoes, stockings, and we just talked about stockings, pots and pans, and of course, food. Then you had the other thing called the Office of Price Administration, OPA , which set the price limits on everything, and the rationing. We had ration books. I still have my ration books, I found them. And what was rationed was sugar and meat, primarily. I was not a vegetarian then, so everybody was always collecting their stamps for steaks and all that. A good bit of black market. I remember people would say “Oh, I know a place where you can go and get steaks,” and so on, but you know that kind of thing goes on. So then we had, right after Pearl Harbor, and all, that the interesting thing I got involved in, was the closing down of the German Embassy. They sent those people,

those diplomats, everybody was treated very well, because after all, think about what could happen to any our opposite numbers, up to some place like, I think they sent the Germans up to some fancy resort like White Sulfur Springs. The German Embassy is right there as you're driving down Mass. Avenue coming to Thomas Circle and to your left is, they dug a hole, there going into the circle, underground, but that was the German Embassy then.

TD: Underneath Thomas Circle?

ACF: No, right next to it, as you approach it, and now the German Embassy is quite a big establishment.

TD: They are making a new one up in Foxhall.

ACF: I know it.

TD: Well, what happened when President Roosevelt died, I mean --

ACF: You're jumping ahead.

TD: I'm doing it not necessarily in chronological order.

ACF: I'll tell you if ever a country was mourning and in grief, if ever a country had a broken heart, our country's heart broke. He died April the 12th - today is the 13th - 1945.

TD: Wow, that's an eerie anniversary.

ACF: But nobody commented on it. I mean, I haven't seen it in the papers or anything like that. But you know, he was of course, there hasn't been a president in the class. I don't know, before, I didn't know Thomas Jefferson, but he had a charisma that just absolutely enchanted you. He was the ultimate father figure in a way because you put your trust and faith in him and he had a golden voice, and his use of the English language. He had some ghost writers of course, Judge Sam Rosenman helped him a lot and all of that, but not like today where everything is like a factory. I think that his suffering, and feeling his own career had been blighted by losing the use of his limbs from infantile paralysis, I think that deepened him a great deal.

TD: Emotionally --

ACF: Deepened his soul, spirit, resolve, and he had become more introspective and had a little bit more time to think, because in many ways he was this big extrovert, you know, loved to sail and do all those things.

TD: He was a big guy.

ACF: Yeah, he was a big guy and so, but somehow or another he and Winston Churchill rose to the occasion, and Charles de Gaulle. It's really amazing

TD: Charles de Gaulle?

ACF: Charles de Gaulle, the head of France. You see France fell and then the people who were leading France were Marshal Petain and Daladier. They became kind of half collaborators --

TD: That's right, it was a puppet government --

ACF: Kind of, the Vichy, what they called the Vichy government. I think what they were trying to do, I don't think they were pro-German, but I think you know what I mean, pro-German. After all, the French are not going to be pro-German, but I think what they were doing, is what they thought was best, just like you could use the same argument that Roosevelt didn't bomb the concentration camps because he thought he was doing what was best, and that's a whole other subject because it does seem pretty awful that he couldn't have done more earlier, but he was keeping his eye on the ball I guess.

TD: Did people regret that Roosevelt didn't --

ACF: I don't think people, except maybe the people marred by the Holocaust and people who are Jewish who lost their families, I don't think you had much of the American public dwelling on that. You don't hear much about them.

TD: No, you just hear that he didn't do it.

ACF: Well he won the war. He and Winston Churchill. Of course I think to have lived through the days of hearing Winston Churchill quote unquote “live” you know, “We will fight from the rooftops,” that voice reaching out across the ocean, because you knew they were up against it.

TD: Yeah, that’s true because Germany was a powerful fighting force.

ACF: And very, they are very smart people, the Germans, but they would go crazy when they got into a situation like this. I mean that’s a whole other subject about the Germans. I think maybe the reason they made good citizens and are law abiding, is because they like authority. It might be, I mean that’s just a theory, could be, respecting authority in your job, your shop foreman, your manager, you are going to pay attention to them, so that is a way of life.

TD: Even now everything is, I mean my experiences aren’t very broad in Germany, I’ve been to Frankfurt and the airport, but still just looking at that, you have cops all over the place riding bicycles.

ACF: Everything is orderly, everything is orderly.

TD: Everything is organized and clean and sanitized.

ACF: Now this is why they stumbled into this horrible situation, because a lot of emotional reasons after the Weimar Republic, and the inflation and all that, after World War I, everything was a mess, and they don't like disarray. Disarray messes it up, so they want to get right back straight again. I think it was the Germans' love of order.

TD: I guess that's one of the things that probably --

ACF: It's a strength and a weakness.

TD: That's probably one of the things that made Hitler come to power because after World War I he just dwelled upon their disarray and ordered them so they --

ACF: They were in disarray, they had terrible inflation and all of that and then he had to have an emotional whipping boy. It was the Jews.

TD: I guess D-Day was June 6, 1944, did that, I mean, was that really a big day?

ACF: Yeah, we were all expecting it. We didn't know what day it was going to be. Everybody knew something was up but nobody knew when. Hitler didn't know either but we all knew that something was coming on. There were no letters, no nothing, there was kind of a blackout, kind of, you knew something was going to happen.

TD: And is this just within Washington or the inner circles of the media?

ACF: I don't know, I can't answer that because I was here and I don't know how somebody would have felt in Dubuque, Iowa. I can't answer that.

TD: But there weren't a lot of stories reported on, I mean I guess you can't report on nothing can you?

ACF: It was a kind of a semi-blackout I guess. We just knew it was going to happen. I remember the morning it happened. I was between apartments at that time, I was with some people who were . . . staying with these friends of mine. He was head of the Red Cross here and they called me, "It's happened, this is it," you know, because we all knew.

TD: Yeah, it was a big day.

ACF: It will be fifty years this month, next month, I mean month after that.

TD: I guess information --

ACF: No, of course no traveling back and forth, so what else do you want to ask me about what went on here?

TD: I guess --

ACF: The living conditions, like in Washington, all these government women came to work and they had no housing. Well you know, they were doubling up all over the place, boarding houses all up and down Massachusetts Avenue. For awhile, before I got a little apartment, I told you I had one with two other women, you couldn't get any housing because the city was overcrowded with people for war work.

TD: Oh, for all the bureaucracy --

ACF: Yeah, somebody had to push the papers.

TD: But the total, I guess the whole family changed almost --

ACF: The other thing is this, don't forget, that's the beginning of the sociological breakdown, if you want to call it that, in this country. Thank God the thing was not complicated by drugs, but you see you've got people on the move. After the New Deal a lot of the southern black people had come up north, there were more opportunities --

TD: The great migration.

ACF: They worshiped Roosevelt and there were a lot of opportunities. Then you had the war workers and people were crisscrossing the country for jobs and that is when the trailer camps grew up in a big way and that is when people still having babies and --

TD: The baby boom.

ACF: They were having babies and working in war places, their husbands were away and that was the beginning of the breakdown of the American family, the mother at work, the father at war, the kids running around loose, and it was a loosening of the family bond. The war changed the American family, particularly of a certain social economic class, particularly around the big cities. It was horrible. I think the educational standards started going down then and then of course it all got so horribly complicated with the introduction of drugs which I often wonder if that wasn't a deliberate ploy.

TD: To break up the --

ACF: Some enemy of this country decided just to do us in with drugs.

TD: Drug warfare. So there is drug warfare and there is germ warfare and I guess it is plausible, I mean because you just --

ACF: See you must see drugs around you all the time at school.

TD: Yeah I mean, it's marijuana especially is just commonplace. I think .

ACF: It's been commonplace for years.

TD: Yeah but I guess I think it's been experiencing a resurgence the past couple years maybe before --

ACF: Well I think the reason drugs are so popular is that the bounce you get from them fills something that you are not getting in real life. Well of course everybody grows up, Elissa and Bill, they grew up in a much more, I don't know, which era is worse but they came up right at the height of all that stuff.

TD: That's true I guess drugs were a lot more open.

ACF: We had an awful lot of crazy nuts coming around here seeing Elissa, they looked like they were, they were all dressed up like morons and I knew a lot of them were pretty high. What can I do about it though, but want her to be safe.

TD: That's true. I guess that's what everyone wants.

ACF: It's hard to even think about it. You want your children to have opportunities but you don't want them to kill themselves trying it all out, that's the trouble. But so Washington changed completely. It grew up and --

TD: I guess the whole nation changed.

ACF: Naturally.

TD: What happened when everyone came back, when all the men came back, did society revert back to its normal --

ACF: Not really, not really. It's funny there was all this pent up consumer demand for automobiles and refrigerators and this, that and the other, so that took up the slack, I mean your war worker, you didn't have unemployment because the jobs could transfer right over, and veterans, not too many veterans were out of jobs. We had a real good economy in the 50s, we had a good economy in the 50s.

TD: I was reading about that and I think people said there was a boom afterwards everyone --

ACF: Because there was a consumer demand, a boom, all that. Everybody was so thrilled to get a car they couldn't get all that time. I felt so sorry for my mother. She didn't have a car and I was able to get her one when I was in China. I heard they were making cars at a Ford plant but only for export and I got her one, but paid for it over there.

TD: And sent it over?

ACF: No, it never left this country. I paid a Chinese dealer. His name was Bill, he was not Chinese, for my mother's car which is sitting on the dock in Edgewood, New Jersey, it was all perfectly legal I think, and I got her to get somebody she knew to go up there and get it.

TD: You must have gotten it for a lot cheaper?

ACF: Well not so much cheaper. I was so pleased to get her a car because she needed one.

TD: It's kind of ironic too.

ACF: Yeah I got her, I sent her a telegram. I have that telegram downstairs, I've been going through all these papers, about how, "hold everything you've got a car waiting for you in New Jersey."

TD: Can we, I mean are you up to seeing those documents, or I guess no --

ACF: You wait here, I'm not going to take you down in that room, it's too -- [END RECORDING]