

# Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

## Hritsko walked off job to serve country, was a trailblazer

In the United States, Veterans Day is celebrated every year on Nov. 11. This day has been a federal holiday since 1926 and once was called "Armistice Day," marking the end of World War I on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918.

Veterans Day recognizes veterans who have served in all branches of the U.S. military, while Memorial Day honors military members who have died in the line of service.

On this Veterans Day, the Ripon Historical Society honors Army veteran Gladys Jolly Hritsko (1919-2010), who was one of the few woman from Ripon to enlist during World War II. Hritsko grew up in the Green Lake area, then moved to 121 Howard St. with her parents and was a 1938 graduate of Ripon High School.

Hritsko worked at Ripon Knitting Works, the current site of Ripon Drug, 308 Watson St. She was just a couple of weeks shy of 22 years old when Pearl Harbor was bombed in December 1941 and America joined into WWII.

In 2005, Hritsko was interviewed at age 86 by history professor Robert C. Daniels for the book *World War II in Mid-America*. She noted that on a Monday morning while working at the Knitting Works making socks and gloves for the Army, she was handed a stack of mittens to work on. She told her boss, "I'm not fixing 'em, I am going to join the Army."

Hritsko left her job that morning with no notice, walked the three blocks to the train station and left Ripon traveling to Milwaukee to enlist.

"I just had \$5 in my pocket" Hritsko related in a 2004 Ripon Historical Society interview. At that time, the train trip to Milwaukee cost around \$2.50 (approximately \$44 today).

Hritsko had never been far from Ripon and had never been to Milwaukee before.

"You were lucky to leave Ripon," she said. "... We were at war, so we were staying pretty close to home because of our work."

After she enlisted, Hritsko called her father that evening.

"The first thing he said was 'Where in heavens name are you?' I said just call me private," she recalled. "I can still hear the dead silence."

Hritsko noted in the historical society interview that "At that time when we went in we were under the WAAC, the Women's Auxiliary because we were not regular Army."

"The government had not quite made up their mind about using women for the general purposes of the service. At that time, of course, we had the draft, so they were bringing the boys in about as fast as they could draft them [in addition to] the ones that enlisted. That left a lot of empty spaces in office work and personnel. So, they decided to take girls out of wherever and put them into the Auxiliary Corp."

Congress instated the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) in May 1942. WAAC was reorganized in July 1943 as the Women's



**SGT. GLADYS HRITSKO** was stationed in Missouri during World War II. Hritsko walked off her job at Ripon Knitting Works to enlist in the Army.

Army Corps (WAC), an official part of the U.S. Army. This gave the WAC's the same rank, privileges and benefits as their male counterparts. Over the course of WWII, 150,000 women served in the WAAC and WAC working in non-combat jobs.

A *Ripon Weekly Press* article from April 8, 1943 stated that Hritsko "who recently enlisted in the Woman's Auxiliary Corps, received official orders yesterday and reports to Chicago on Saturday."

Hritsko went to Camp Chaffe in Monticello, Ark., for basic training.

"We thought we were in jail," she said of the basic training. "We had guards — we had the whole ball of wax. So that was a very new experience for me. They did throw the kitchen sink at us ... The officers were looking us over to see if we could handle anything connected with the war. That means being shipped overseas, you had to accept that."

Since Hritsko's father had been a driver for the Lawsons at their estate in Green Lake (now the Green Lake Conference Center) she learned to drive and repair vehicles. Because of this, Hritsko was assigned to the transportation corps of the Army.

Hritsko served in the Army Service Training Command Engineer Corps. She trained for six weeks in Des Moines, Iowa at the Motor Transport School and worked in Ames, Iowa and also Fort Leonard Wood, Mo.

"I was a driver, and handling the big trucks, recons, jeeps, sedans, whatever," she said in the interview with Daniels. "... When we were in Ames, Iowa, that was the melting pot for the trucks to come in, be repaired and then shipped back to another fort."

The Aug. 28, 1943 edition of the *Ripon Weekly Press* stated that "there are 50 girls at Camp Leonard Wood, six of whom are driving ton-and-a-half trucks and the rest jeeps and carry-alls."

Hritsko was one of the six who

drove the larger trucks.

WWII ended Sept. 2, 1945, but Hritsko was not discharged until January 1946. She returned to her job at the Ripon Knitting Works.

She then married John Hritsko (1915-1974), a fellow Army veteran originally from Pennsylvania who she had dated during the war. Hritsko told her husband that she would only live in Ripon, so they made their home at 515 West Fond du Lac St., and had three sons and one daughter.

After WWII, she also was employed with Green Giant and for 14 years at Ripon Foods (the maker of Rippin' Good Cookies). She retired after her husband passed away.

Because her husband was a veteran, she first joined the Woman's Auxiliary of the Brown Parfitt American Legion Post 43 in Ripon. The 1981 book "When a Woman Wills: A narrative history of Ripon, Wisconsin women" stated that "In 1962, Gladys Hritsko joined the local American Legion post and became an activist promoting the rights of women veterans. Mrs. Hritsko realized the men in the post didn't welcome her membership even though she had served [as a sergeant] in the Women's Army Corps."

The book went on to say, "In fact, many posts for years refused to admit women even though they were eligible veterans. As an indicator of changing times, Gladys Hritsko was elected Ripon post commander in 1977."

At the American Legion, Hritsko was known as "Sarge."

"I was the first woman in Ripon to become a first commander. I was the first woman to become a district commander. Then then went on to state to become a vice president," she told the Ripon Historical Society in an interview.

She also was a member of The Honor Society of Women Legionnaires's Twenty and Four. She served as a state director and national chaplain of this organization.

A 1975 edition of the *Ripon*



**GLADYS JOLLY HRITSKO** receives an award and standing ovation during a Ripon Chamber of Commerce dinner. Among those honoring her are, from left to right, Barb Arnold, former chamber executive director Ellen Sorensen, Cooper Jess (in the back) and her son Tom Hritsko.

*Commonwealth Press* stated that "The positions Gladys has held with the Legion are more numerous than the pins on her Legion cap."

Hritsko herself stated in a *Ripon Commonwealth Press* interview that she "had held every chair from here to hell and back in the Legion and Auxiliary."

Hritsko also served on the Wisconsin State Veterans Committee on Woman and the Commission of Veterans Affairs in Fond du Lac County. Hritsko spent 20 years on the staff of Badger Boys State, an American Legion sponsored activity which was hosted at Ripon College for more than 80 years.

Hritsko was appointed by the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs and the Board of Veterans Affairs to a veterans panel to oversee the needs of the Wisconsin Veterans Home at King. She was featured in a 2004 documentary "Wisconsin World War II Stories: Home Front," which was shown on Wisconsin Public Television.

Besides being active in veterans organizations, Hritsko served on the state commission on aging in Fond du Lac County and the Green Bay area agency on aging. She also was active in the Ripon Santa Club, the Rebekah Lodge, was on the board of the Ripon Service Center and helped to found and participated in the

Senior Citizens Center bowling league. In the summers, she ran the concession stands for the Little League and Babe Ruth games in Ripon. She received the Fond du Lac County Outstanding Senior Citizen Award in 1991, and well as the Outstanding 6th District Award. In 2001, she received the Community Service Award from the Ripon Chamber of Commerce.

"I've made my mark," she told the Ripon Historical Society.

The *Ripon Commonwealth Press* featured an editorial about

Hritsko in July 2010 just after she passed away. The editorial, written by Tim Lyke, stated that "So beloved was the white-haired tornado that all Ripon residents they could have selected to be their first-ever fest master in 1997, Ripon-fest organizers chose Gladys." The editorial went on to say that Hritsko "Had a spirit that was fueled by being around other people: Her children, fellow veterans, volunteers, a gym full of Badger Boys ... I bet even God is calling her 'Sarge.'"

*The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.*

*For more information follow us at Facebook/riponhistory or www.riponhistory.org.*



**GLADYS JOLLY** Hritsko wears her American Legion hat. Hritsko was the first female commander at the Ripon American Legion and the first woman to become a district commander.

*submitted photo*

fellow veterans, volunteers, a gym full of Badger Boys ... I bet even God is calling her 'Sarge.'"



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