

## Primary Source

**An Interview with Peggy Terry**

*During World War II, millions of women went to work to support the war effort. Peggy Terry was one of these women. Her hometown was Paducah, Kentucky. In the following excerpt, she describes her experiences during the war.*

The first work I had after the Depression was at a shell-loading plant in Viola, Kentucky. It is between Paducah and Mayfield. They were large shells: anti-aircraft, incendiaries, and tracers. We painted red on the tips of the tracers. My mother, my sister, and myself worked there. Each of us worked a different shift because we had little ones at home. We made the fabulous sum of [\$32] a week. (Laughs.) To us it was an absolute miracle. Before that, we made nothing. . . .

I was [18]. My husband was [19]. We were living day to day. When you are involved in stayin' alive, you don't think about big things like a war. It didn't occur to us that we were making these shells to kill people. It never entered my head.

There were no women foremen where we worked. We were just a bunch of hillbilly women laughin' and talkin'. It was like a social. Now we'd have money to buy shoes and a dress and pay rent and get some food on the table. We were just happy to have work. . . .

Mamma was what they call terminated—fired. Mamma's mother took sick and died and Mamma asked for time off and they told her no. Mamma said, "Well, I'm gonna be with my mamma. If I have to give up my job, I will just have to." So they terminated Mamma. . . . I told 'em I was gonna quit, and they told me if I quit they would blacklist me wherever I would go. . . .

I think of how little we knew of human rights, union rights. We knew Daddy had been [active] in the mine workers' union, but at that point it hadn't rubbed off on any of us women. . . . You could only get a drink of water if you went to the cafeteria, which was about two city blocks away. Of course you couldn't leave your machine long enough to go get a drink. . . . We couldn't leave to go to the bathroom, 'cause it was way the heck over there. . . .

We were very patriotic and we understood that the Nazis were someone who would have to be stopped. We didn't know about concentration camps. I don't think anybody I knew did. With the Japanese, that was a whole different thing. We were just ready to wipe them out. . . .

My husband was a paratrooper in the war, in the 101st Airborne Division. He made [26] drops in France, North Africa, and Germany. I look back at the war with sadness. I wasn't smart enough to think too deeply then. We had a lotta good times and we had money and we had food on the table and the rent was paid. Which had never happened to us before. But when I look back and think of him. . . .

When he came back . . . he used to have the most awful nightmares. He'd get up in the middle of the night and start screaming. I'd just sit for hours and hold him while he just shook. We'd go to the movies, and if they'd have films with a lot of shooting in it, he'd just start to shake and have to get up and leave.

from Studs Terkel, *The Good War: An Oral History of World War II* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984), 105–108.

**Main Ideas**

1. Why was Terry's mother fired from her job?
2. How did the war affect Terry's economic well-being?

**Critical Thinking**

3. **Making Inferences** According to Terry, how did Americans view the Nazis and the Japanese during the war?
4. **Analyzing Causes** What do you think caused Terry's husband's problems after the war?