When You Wish Upon A Star is the autobiography of a woman, now 84. As teenagers during the Great Depression and the start of World War II, she and her sister dreamed impossible dreams and lived to see them fulfilled.

When You Wish Upon A Star

When You Wish
Upon A Star

An Autobiography

Carolyn Crosser Volpe

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Marine Corps

In March, 1943,while I was still at Shurtleff and working at the powder plant, I was sworn into the Marine Corps. Since I was in college, they deferred my leaving for boot camp until the end of the quarter. Early in April I received orders to leave by train from St. Louis for Camp LeJeune, North Carolina, There were about thirty of us. I knew none of them. As we were lined up for boarding I was handed the orders for all of the group and put in charge. I never knew what that meant as there were 3 officers traveling with us and my only job seemed to be to carry the orders. I was apprehensive of the responsibility and was afraid of doing something wrong. I did not need to worry as I had nothing to do.

The trip was very pleasant. The officers were friendly and kind. They paid a great deal of attention to the girls who were fearful or homesick. Some of them had never been away from home. There was little indication of what was awaiting us when we reached our destination.

The train arrived at Jacksonville, North Carolina, after dark, in a pouring rain. We had been told to bring only one small suitcase and to wear comfortable shoes. I soon found out why and was very glad that I had obeyed orders. We were met by two male sergeants who ordered us to claim our luggage and then yelled "Fall In - Forward March" Some of the girls had two large suitcases plus a hat box. Most were wearing high heels. The buses were parked about a half-mile away and we were marched over

very uneven ground, full of potholes, in pouring rain and almost total darkness. Looking down to avoid a puddle brought forth a shouted command from one of the sergeants, as did raising a hand to wipe the rain from one's eyes. It was a difficult walk for me and next to impossible for the girls with too much luggage and high heels. We were pretty thoroughly indoctrinated before we even boarded the buses. I know the long walk to them was intentional, but I never knew how they arranged the rain.

After a ride of about thirty minutes, hair streaming, clothes and shoes wet, cold and more apprehensive than ever, we arrived at the base. Since the dinner hour was over, we were rushed into the mess hall. They were anxious to close it, so we ate as we were - not even towels on which to dry.

Arriving at the barracks, we were assigned bunks, given schedules, lists of rules and punishments, taught to make the bunks and had time for a quick shower in a community shower room before lights out. It was an eerie feeling, lying there in total darkness, in a room with 75 double bunks that were occupied by strangers. Some of the girls were crying softly. If the female sergeant whose room was next door heard, she would come to the door and yell "Knock it off'.

I was the youngest girl there but, having been away from home, in college and working in Los Angeles, since I was sixteen, I knew I could adapt. I was afraid, however, of making a mistake and earning punishment. I

had never been shouted at like that and it terrified me. In spite of that, I was thrilled to be there, to be a part of the biggest event in history during my life and I was looking forward to a grand experience.

Lying there in total darkness, in the company of 150 strangers, in some unknown location, I could not visualize where I was and felt weirdly disoriented. Just then, I could hear, as from far away, the bugler playing 'taps', listening to which I had always found difficult. They may not have been the loneliest moment of my life but it is the one whose haunting memory will always be with me.

By the end of the next day, we were so indoctrinated that no order was questioned, no rule ignored. I was so intimidated that when a sergeant barked: "What is your name, Private?", I could not remember it. I adjusted quickly and well and loved every aspect of the training - the companionship, the feeling of doing something important, the uniforms and the certainty of the rules. There were no decisions to be made. I ate when and what they said, I wore what was prescribed and did the job I was given without question. I became a good Marine, graduating as Honor Woman of our battalion -180 girls.

At that time, every marine, even those bound for officer's training school had to go through boot camp. After graduation, candidates for officer's candidate school were chosen. Any candidate must have completed two years of college. Since I was honor woman of the

battalion and had completed three years of college, I was one of the chosen. A very nice, young woman lieutenant called me into her office and advised me to turn it down, saying that the average age of the women officers was 44, most were married, most had been a Dean of Women at some college or university. The young officers had no social life, couldn't date enlisted men and were very lonely, she told me. If I turned down the assignment, I could live in the barracks and be assigned to any school I chose. I was very happy to take her advice and chose the link trainer school, to be followed by the celestial navigation school, with a view towards teaching pilots. The schools were approved, but the first class in link trainer was not to start for a month so, in the meantime, I was put on mess duty. The hours were long - 4 am to about 8 pm with an hour or two off between meals - and the work was hard, lifting milk cans, swabbing floors, scrubbing pots and pans, etc. In addition to that, due to some mix-up, I was on guard duty from midnight to 2 am. I wasn't sure I could survive a month of that, but, after about 2 weeks, I was called to the personnel office. The officer in charge said that there were only eight enlisted women in the Marine Corps who were chemists. They were requesting that I accept an assignment as a chemist. I firmly stated that I did not want to be a chemist. I wanted to keep the schools to which I had been assigned. She said I had that right since the honor woman got her choice, but she felt it was my patriotic duty to accept the assignment. She wanted me to go back to the barracks and think it over. I was to report

back within 24 hours. "I do not need to think it over", I replied, "I do not accept."

I had been back in the barracks for less than an hour, when orders were delivered to me. I was to leave immediately for El Centro, California where I would be assigned as a chemist. Train tickets and meal vouchers were included. I was broke and had to borrow money from friends. The train tickets were for a lower berth, but when I boarded I was informed that none was available and I would have to ride in the chair car as far as New Orleans, where I would change trains. When I reached New Orleans, I was again told that no berths were available. Several other service people were having the same problem. It was later found that the railroads were charging the government for berths and then selling the same space to civilians, knowing that the service personnel had little choice. There was another Marine girl next to me in line, so we agreed that we would take our orders literally, i.e., ride in a lower berth'. We informed the railroad official that we would just stay in New Orleans until they found one for each of us and then we would explain why we were late reporting in. After about 3 days, during which we had a great time seeing the city, they called and informed us that we each had a lower berth. I began to worry that I would be in trouble for not reporting in on time and, sure enough, as soon as I stepped off the train, I was met by an MP. I began explaining why I was late, but he was not interested. I was out of uniform.

My orders specifically stated that I was to travel in summer uniform, the light green and white striped seersucker, which I did. El Centro, however is in the 11th Naval District whose headquarters are in San Diego. Headquarters sets the rules regarding dress, food, etc. without consideration of the difference in temperature. Even in temperatures of 120 degrees, the winter uniform must be worn if one is more than 50 miles from the base. The MP was doing me a favor, by giving me a ride to the base, since I would have been arrested if seen of the streets of Niland in summer uniform. I reported to the Personnel Office, so frightened I could hardly talk but prepared to explain why I was late. It was not necessary. They were not expecting me, there was no chemical lab and they didn't know what to do with me, since the orders specifically read "assigned as a chemist". The next morning, when I reported back as ordered, I was informed that I had been assigned to the laundry where my job would be to take in the dirty laundry, hand out the clean laundry and charge $1.50 per laundry bag. Of course, they said, this would be temporary until they could get my orders straightened out. At least they kept their word on that. In about three weeks, I was reassigned. The new assignment was selling jewelry in the PX.

About six months later, I was conscious that there was someone waiting at the counter. I finished the problem I was solving and stood up to wait on him. It was the Commanding General of the entire base and he was very angry to have been kept waiting. "What are you

doing, Private?" he barked. "Working a calculus problem, sir", I replied. He asked why and I replied: "In this kind of a job, sir, one must do something". He turned and left. Sure enough, at 9 am the next morning I was ordered to report to his office. I was terrified, but he was very nice and said he thought that the Personnel Office had made a mistake. He had obviously looked at my record and seemed to have learned a lot about me. The next morning I was assigned to the Disbursing Office as Chief Clerk. The office consisted of three other girls and the male Disbursing Officer. We all got along very well and I liked the job very much.

There was no air-conditioning at that time and the temperature during the summer was over 100^{o}. In spite of the heat, duty at El Centro was very good. Every Friday night one of the men's squadron's would invite the women's squadron to a picnic out on the sand dunes near Holtville. That was the location where many desert movies were made. A 'cattle wagon' would take us out there. The men's mess hall would provide hot dogs, potato salad and a huge GI car filled with 6% beer on ice. Someone would bring a guitar and we would sit on the dunes, eat and sing. The desert nights were so beautiful.

We could get a weekend pass every other weekend. They furnished a Martin bomber to fly those who wanted to risk it to Los Angeles. Most didn't since the plane had been condemned and was very uncomfortable. There were no seats except for a row of bucket seats along each side. Those were meant to have a parachute on which one sat. Unfortunately, we had no

parachutes. When we sat in the hard metal seats, the three inch high metal rim in front hit us just behind the knee.

We could usually hitch a ride or go by bus. That was also uncomfortable since we had to travel in winter uniform in spite of the high temperatures. Usually we would go to Los Angeles, Hollywood, Laguna Beach or Palm Springs.

If it was just after payday, we would stay at a nice hotel, eat and drink in good restaurants. When we were broke, we would often take advantage of the USO. Many of the famous old hotels in Palm Springs, for instance, had been turned over to the USO since gas was rationed and there were no tourists. For 50¢, one would be assigned a cot and issued a pillow and blanket. The next morning breakfast would be cooked to order by volunteers. Most of the USOs, though, did not have overnight accommodations. They offered dances, entertainment and food. The most famous of these was the Stage Door Canteen in New York and the Hollywood Canteen where movie stars provided the entertainment, served the coffee, lemonade and sandwiches and danced with the service people. Other movie stars and well-known people would open their swimming pools on Sunday afternoon and serve sandwiches and lemonade around the pool.

One particular visit to the Hollywood Canteen stands out in my mind. About six of us had come to Hollywood for the weekend. We had a great time on

Saturday night, going to a good restaurant and dancing and drinking at several famous nightclubs. By Sunday afternoon we were all broke so we decided to go to the Hollywood Canteen. We were seated at a table for six in the first row in front of the stage, in the middle. Sandwiches and coffee were served from a long table against the wall by several stars, including Bette Davis and Joan Crawford. We danced and then it was time for the show to start. There was a raised stage with a well-known band. (I've forgotten which one). George Jessel came out and asked if anyone had a birthday. No one responded, so my friends all pointed at me. I protested, saying it was not my birthday, but they dragged me onto the stage anyway. The show started.

I've forgotten most of the entertainers, but do remember George Burns, Gracie Alien, Ella Raines and George Jessel. I had to sit on the stage while they all made me a part of their acts. When the show was over and I started to return to my table, Gracie Allen grabbed me by the hand and insisted I go backstage. I remember her as a very tiny, little old lady, very birdlike with very small feet. She was 41 or 42 at that time, but to a 20-year-old that seemed old. She took a very worn black leather purse from a hook on the wall, opened a small coin purse, removed three very dirty, worn, one dollar bills and said she wanted me to have them for my birthday. I refused, again saying it was not my birthday, but she insisted, apologizing that it was all she had. Now that I had money, three of us went to Don the

Beachcomber's for a celebratory drink. While there I met Pat O'Brien who owned the gift shop.

My boyfriend, Ed, and I went to San Diego on weekend liberty. We were both privates. After booking cots at the USO, we met for dinner. Ed told me we had been invited for a friendly game of poker at the Barcelona. Apartments. We did not know where it was but he had been given directions. Shown to a fourth or fifth floor apartment, I was rather surprised to meet five older men, all civilians. I had expected seeing Marines. We were ready to back out, but they shook hands and handed each of us a pile of chips. We did not know how to leave graciously, so we sat down to play.

While we had been told that, 'it was just a friendly game', it seemed very serious to me. There was little conversation or pleasantries. After playing for about 3 hours, feeling very intimidated, we decided to leave. Cashing out, when we found out what the chips were worth, we realized how foolish we had been,. Fortunately I won about $30 while Ed lost about $20, so we were happy about that.

After we got safely out of the building, Ed asked me how much money I had when we arrived. I replied; "Less than $20." He admitted that he had had only about $30. They had given each of us $100 worth of chips. I asked what they would have done if we had lost and couldn't pay. His reply: "Probably broken our arms or legs or shot us in the knee caps." We decided they were professional cardsharps preying on gullible service people.

Glad to be safely out of there, we went to the nearest bar and celebrated our winning.

I now live about three blocks from the Barcelona Apartments and think of that every time I pass it.

After I had been working in the Disbursing Office for a couple of months, there was an inspection of our base by an Admiral and a Marine Corps General from Washington. When they read our Table of Organization and found that the Chief Clerk, a private, was over a sergeant, a corporal and a PFC, they said that could not be. The Disbursing Officer said they could not replace me since there was no one on the base with a higher rating that was qualified to do the job. I was to continue temporarily.

About a week later there was a notice on the bulletin board that Private Crosser (me) was to receive a promotion of one rank a month until she reached Staff Sergeant, "as long as she remains in her present job". That kind of thing is disastrous. Suddenly, one finds herself boycotted, even by friends. There was the assumption that I had some kind of pull in Washington. Life became miserable. At about the same time a notice was posted that applications for duty overseas were being accepted. I immediately applied in order to leave the Disbursing Office. That solved the problem of the promotions. I also applied for and received a 10 day leave. I went back to Illinois for Christmas. On Christmas Eve I received a telegram stating that I had been accepted for overseas duty and that the remainder of my

leave was canceled. I was to report immediately to the Marine Base in San Diego. There was no need to be in such a rush. When I arrived, I was informed that I was the first girl to be accepted, the first to report in and that it would take a couple of weeks to assemble the company. Training would start in about a month. I was assigned to an empty barracks where I was to wait until the others assembled.

Gradually the other girls arrived, and eventually the training started. We had a list of clothing we must have: uniforms, a dozen pair of panties, 6 bras, 2 pair of pajamas, dungarees, shirts, towels, washcloths, etc. Each morning we had to lay all of it out on our bunks in a particular order. The bunk was completely covered to a depth of 5 or 6 inches and all of it had to be packed in our backpacks. It was inspected to be sure we packed it all. We learned how to do this by rolling each item tightly. We attached a bedroll, 2 blankets and a poncho, around the backpack. It now weighed 60 pounds. We then dressed in dungarees, shirt, field jacket, raincoat with liner, belt, to which we attached a canteen, mess kit and flashlight. This was all done by 9 am when we mustered on the parade ground to march for an hour. We then went back to the barracks and unpacked, unrolled, and put it all back in our footlockers to be repeated the next day. There were lectures on survival in the jungle, edible plants and bugs, what to do if taken prisoner, etc. We had gas masks and went through the drills with real gases and learned to identify them. We went to the swimming pool and had to pass a swimming test. After we passed,

we went to the highest diving platform, took off our dungarees, held them over our heads as we jumped and whipped them under our arms while holding the legs closed in order to make water wings. Oil was then poured on the water and set on fire. We had to jump from the platform, through the burning oil and swim under water until we were clear of the fire. The training lasted for about a month and was very rigorous. Many girls washed out.

One day we were told to write our last letters to friends and family. They painted all the windows in our barracks black. We were not allowed outside. While all our friends and families thought we had gone, we were in the blacked out barracks, still attending lectures and seeing inspirational movies. Finally one night at midnight, we heard "Fall out in full field gear" We assembled on the parade ground. There were 3 cattle wagons, waiting to take us to the ship. After another lecture about our duty, we were ready to board. Just as we started to march to the cattle wagons, we heard: "If I read your name, fall out". Five names were read; mine was one.

The next morning I was told that I had tuberculosis and would be sent to a sanatorium outside of Denver on Monday. Monday came; no orders. On Tuesday, I went to the base hospital and was told there had been a mistake. I did not have tuberculosis. I was to wait in the deserted, blacked out barracks until my footlocker was returned from Hawaii, which is where the contingent went. The other four girls who had not gone to Hawaii had been sent home. The officer in charge of the barracks and I

were alone. She was about my age and very lonely, proving what the earlier young officer had told me. We became friends and had great fun. She would sign a 3 day pass for me, loan me a dress uniform, since mine was in my foot locker, and we would go on liberty, sometimes as privates and sometimes as officers. San Diego was a great liberty town.

Eventually, the footlocker returned and I got orders to report to El Toro as a chemist. The mystery was solved; the lab was in El Toro, not El Centro. When I reported in at El Toro, I was told that the lab wasn't equipped yet. In the meantime I would be assigned to a casual company. Each morning we found what we were supposed to do: long marches, bicycle rides for exercise, picking up cigarette butts, pulling weeds. The bike rides and marches were ok, but I resisted the other duties. After muster, I would disappear around the side of the building and go to the PX, then rejoin the group going back to the barracks. The sergeant was suspicious, but couldn't catch me. Each day she liked me less and kept a closer eye on me. Just at the time it seemed that I was going to have to pull weeds, I saw a notice that a class on the hydraulic system of the F4U would be starting on Monday. It was only for aviation mechanics but I applied. I was told that if the class was not full, I could attend although the instructor could not understand why I would want to. I did; it was great and I passed the final exam. That class was followed by one on the electrical system of the F4U that I also took. Alas, the schools were over and I was reassigned to the casual company to pull weeds.

The same sergeant was still in charge and wasn't happy to see me.

The following Monday, there was a very bad santa ana coming. The base was secured, all personnel were sent back to the barracks, the planes were tied down, but our sergeant insisted we hike the two miles out to the field we were to clear and insisted that the truck bringing the tools would meet us there. We arrived at the field and, considering that the base was secured, it was no surprise that there was no truck. The wind was blowing 60 or 70 miles an hour, hurling rocks the size of ping pong balls through the air. I finally said to the sergeant, "I think we should go back to the barracks, the truck won't be coming." Her reply: "Sit down and shut up." I did, temporarily.

After a couple of minutes, I stood up and informed her that I was going back to the barracks. She again ordered me to sit down. I ignored her and continued down the road. Gradually the others followed. A day or two later I was informed that I had been charged with eleven counts, including direct disobedience of orders, dereliction of duty, inciting a riot and leading a mutiny. The Captain's Mast to decide what kind of court martial I was to receive would be held at 9 am the following morning. When the first sergeant, a friend of mine, informed me of the Captain's Mast, we both knew this could be very serious. She advised me to answer each of the eleven charges by saying, "I respectfully request that I be tried on ALL counts as charged, sir!"

I had thought it would be better to plead guilty to those that were true and not guilty to the more serious ones, but she convinced me that would be disastrous, so I followed her advice. The Captain's Mast was held at 9 am the following morning. After reading each of the eleven counts and listening to my answer to each she gave me a long look and finally said, "All charges are dismissed." The advice of the First Sergeant had been excellent. I learned later that had I pled guilty to the charges that were legitimate, she could have dismissed the silliest of the charges and tried me only on the charges to which I was really guilty. In that case, I would have been in real trouble. I was very relieved but also a little disappointed. The First Sergeant had been standing by to call the newspapers in Santa Ana. My chance at immortality was gone; the only girl in history every tried for mutiny. She later told me that the captain had 'read off' the sergeant of the casual company, saying: "You are very lucky that private had sense enough to go back to the barracks. If anyone had been injured you would be facing your own court martial."

They did not send me back to the casual company. Finally, I was assigned to the chemical lab - two big empty rooms on the mezzanine of one of the huge aircraft hangars. There was no furniture so I sat on the floor and read or stretched out for naps. Gradually supplies began to arrive so I could unpack a couple of cartons. The other chemists began to arrive so I had company. I was promoted to corporal and assigned as

NCO in charge. One of the girls under me had a Ph.D. in Chemistry, but that was ok since she was only a private.

The lab was just starting to be operational when the war ended. I married, applied for my discharge and was sent to Camp Pendleton for separation. Imagine my consternation when I found that the separation officer was the same personnel officer who had made the first misassignment. I need not have worried. She did not even remember me. When my name was called to march up for my discharge papers, she saluted me and announced to the assemblage "Corporal Crosser is being separated from the service with the highest score of any Woman Marine to date." Two years and all I had contributed to the war effort was unpacking a few boxes and pulling a few weeds. I would like to have done more, but was very glad I had the experience. I had a great time, made lots of good friends and became disciplined. Best of all, I was eligible for four years of schooling, with all expenses, including living expenses, paid. I made the most of that and like to feel that I more than paid the country back with my taxes.

With all the mistakes, I believe that joining the Marines was one of the best things I have ever done. "Once a Marine, always a Marine".

When You Wish Upon A Star

Star Light. Star Bright
First Star I've Seen Tonight
I Wish I May, I Wish I Might
Have The Wish I Wish Tonight

That was a faithfully followed ritual for my sister and me. We always wished on the first star, on white horses, on birthday candles and turkey wishbones. My mother did also and encouraged us in our dreams. Our dreams were extravagant and seemingly unachievable in those days of the great depression, but she never discouraged us. Rather, she felt that without dreams there was no reason to achieve.

We would lie on our twin beds after a dance at the high school, very late at night, and listen to a Chicago station bringing the music from "the beautiful Aragon Ballroom on the shores of Lake Michigan", as they announced it. One of the songs that directed our lives was "Far Away Places with Strange Sounding Names". We talked and dreamed of seeing them all.

I dreamed of college and becoming a chemist, wearing a white coat, discovering something new every day and meeting many interesting people. I wanted to study mathematics and work difficult problems.

Naturally, I would have a three-bedroom, two bathroom house with a two car garage in the suburbs. That was the epitome of success. It had to be in California. We would have two beautiful, well behaved

children. We knew that many of our wishes and dreams seemed to be beyond our reach, but we felt that we would be happy if we could attain only a portion of them. Never would we have expected that all our wishes and dreams would come true, much less that our experiences would exceed our wildest fantasies, but they did.

At the age of 19, 1 was a chemist at Mallinckrodt in St. Louis. While that was not as glamorous as my dreams of it had been and new discoveries were not made every day, I did develop the indicator for the soda lime canister and the process for extracting tannin from the taro weed. After leaving Mallinckrodt I worked at the Hercules Powder Manufacturing Plant at Alton, where I helped develop a powder that would not explode at the high temperatures of the Sahara Desert before the North African campaign could begin. Most of the work, however, was hot, tiring, smelly, dangerous and routine. I was glad to leave chemistry and enter the Marine Corps.

After the war, I went back to school, studied mathematics for the next *25* years and did have the opportunity to meet and to work with some of the important men of science and mathematics. I did have the house, which by that time didn't seem so unusual, and the children of which I had dreamed. Like many fulfilled dreams, though, the marriage was not perfect. I divorced him after 26 years. As for the travel, I exceeded all of my dreams, 140 countries, all the continents, all the oceans and seas.

If one doesn't dream, there are no dreams to come true. I hope we encourage our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren to dream. Those dreams can come true if you "wish long enough, wish hard enough" and work to make them happen.

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