

The WAVES in World War II Oral History Project

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Sept mois après l'attaque japonaise sur Pearl Harbor, le gouvernement des États-Unis a créé une réserve de femmes de la Marine américaine, les WAVES - "Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service" ou femmes admises pour le service volontaire de secours - en langage courant, pour faire face à un manque de main d'oeuvre. Dès 1945, il y avait plus de 8.000 officiers féminins et environ 78.000 femmes enrôlés dans les WAVES. Leurs occupations, telles instructrice d'artillerie, assistante de mécanique d'aviation, et opératrice de radio, étaient devenues bien plus variées que celles des femmes dans la Marine pendant la Première Guerre mondiale.

Ceci représentait les premières étapes dans le long processus d'intégration permanente de femmes dans la Marine américaine. Le présent article se concentre en particulier sur des femmes enrôlées, vétérans de cette guerre. L'effort de l'auteur en réalisant ces entrevues fournit une ressource valable car les projets précédents de tradition orale n'ont donné prééminence qu'aux femmes officiers dans la Marine.

In 1993, I began an oral history project interviewing Rhode Island women who served in the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) during World War II. I wanted to commemorate their service, given the recent 50th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor and American entry into the war. The United States Naval Institute (USNI) had interviewed the WAVES leadership for their oral history program, but the stories of those in the ranks had largely been ignored during the anniversary celebrations. I hoped to remedy that oversight, in part, by my interviews and together with manuscripts create a body of documentation that would shed light on the experiences of the WAVES and the impact it had on their lives.

My first task was to find candidates for the project. Fortunately, I discovered that a national organization existed, WAVES National, and that the Ocean State WAVES was the Rhode Island chapter. When I contacted the president of the Rhode Island group, I obtained a membership list, and began my interviews. Most of their members were enlisted personnel during the war. Through colleagues and friends I located other

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Illustration 1: Yeomanettes in the Supply Department in front of Luce Hall, Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, October 3, 1918. Naval Historical Collection.

WAVES, both enlisted and officers, who were willing to be interviewed. I widened my search by publishing a notice in *White Caps*, the WAVES National newsletter, and received responses from hundreds of women who wanted to tell their stories.

First, a bit of historical background: the WAVES were not the first women to serve in the Navy. The Navy Nurse Corps was established in 1908 and during World War I women were recruited to serve as yeoman (F) in clerical billets, as telephone operators, intelligence specialists, and workers in munitions factories. They even sold war bonds. After the war, they were discharged and the Naval Reserve Act of 1925 excluded women from service. These women proved that they could make a positive contribution and that they could serve in billets other than nursing.¹ Indeed, they were pioneers and prepared the way for the acceptance of women in the Navy some twenty-five years later.

When America entered the war, the Navy, like the other services, faced a manpower shortage and had to rely on women to free men for sea duty. On 30 July 1942, legislation was passed establishing the Women's Reserve and the acronym WAVES came into being. Mildred McAfee, the president of Wellesley College, was named director with the rank of lieutenant commander (she would be promoted to captain in 1943). McAfee and her staff labored arduously and quickly to develop the recruiting and training programs that brought women into the Navy.

In order to join the WAVES, one had to be single, at least twenty years old, a U.S. citizen, five feet tall, ninety-five pounds, in good health, and of good moral character. The enlisted personnel had a high school diploma and officers were college graduates. At first, the WAVES were assigned to the continental United States (in late 1944, they were sent to Hawaii, Alaska, and Puerto Rico). They could not serve in ships, nor were they assigned combat roles. They enlisted for the duration of the war and six months and received the same pay as men in the Reserves. They were not entitled to retirement benefits; but they were entitled to the educational benefits of the GI bill. Afro-American women were not accepted in the WAVES until late 1944

¹ Jean Ebbert and Marie-Beth Hall, *Crossed Currents: Navy Women from WWI to Tailhook* (Washington, D.C. : Brassey's, 1993), 12, 16, 19, 21. Hereafter cited as Ebbert and Hall, *Crossed Currents*.

when Frances Wills and Harriet Pickens joined.²

Basic training for officers took place at the U.S. Naval Midshipmen's School (WR) on the Smith College campus in Northampton, Massachusetts. College campuses were considered safe havens and had the facilities needed by the Navy. The Navy took over three dormitories, one classroom building, and the Northampton Hotel. The WAVES studied communication, correspondence, ship and aircraft identification, naval history, naval organization, ordnance, and protocol. Physical education and marching and drilling were part of the regime as well. Once they finished "boot camp" they were promoted to ensign and, depending on their specialty, given additional training.³



Illustration 2: Enlisted WAVES in Regiment 35, Company 5621 pass in review at Hunter College, Bronx, New York, 22 July 1944. Naval Historical Collection.

Enlisted WAVES were also domiciled on college campuses. Initially, training was held at Iowa State Teachers' College in Cedar Falls, Iowa, but by February 1943 Hunter College in the Bronx was selected as a training site. It was more centrally located and accommodated 5000 women at any one time. The enlisted WAVES studied many of the

² Ibid., 37, 86, 87.

³ Ibid., 46, 49.

same subjects as the officers. They took aptitude tests at "Camp Hunter" to determine their vocational abilities and then they were selected for advanced training in specialties for which they qualified. There were twenty advanced schools for enlisted women and thirty-eight ratings open to them.⁴ Both the officers and the enlisted women held non-traditional jobs, but once the war was over these jobs reverted to men. Some of the billets



Illustration 3: A WAVE received training in occupational therapy, Hunter College, Bronx, New York, ca. 1944.

Naval Historical Collection.

that the enlisted WAVES held were gunnery instructor, link trainer instructor, aviation mechanics mate, occupational therapist, parachute rigger, storekeeper, pharmacist's mate, radio operator, and hospital corpsmen, while the officers held positions in communication, intelligence, cryptology, and personnel administration.

To date, I have completed over seventy-five interviews with WAVES. Most of the interviews have been with enlisted personnel, since they vastly outnumbered (78,000) the officers (8000). I wanted to know why these women joined the Navy and what was attractive about the Navy vis-à-vis the other services. The vast majority of the women joined for patriotic reasons. Patriotism was at an all time high after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Other reasons were adventure, travel, to learn new skills, because a relative or beau was in the service, or to escape a humdrum job in the mill towns of northern Rhode Island. Janet Coit Petrucci of Pawtucket joined because her aunt had been a Yeoman (F) and her brother was in the service.⁵ Mary Hawthorne of Providence wanted to be where the action was.⁶ Luisa Costagliola White said "that this war belonged to us and I wanted to be a part of it."⁷ Some women liked the Navy uniform better than Army Khaki.⁸ Betty Fitzgerald Brown joined on a whim and

⁴ Ibid., 61, 64, 66, 68.

⁵ Janet Coit Petrucci, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 20 March 1998, Naval Historical Collection, 6.

⁶ Mary Hawthorne, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 24 August 1994, NHC, 9.

⁷ Luisa Costagliola White, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 6 November 1996, NHC, 9.

⁸ Virginia Copeland Smith, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 20 January 1995, NHC, 5.

did not realize that she would have to go through with it once she enlisted.⁹ Most of the women signed up as soon as they reached the legal age. Several said it took courage to join as it was a step into the unknown and they did not know what to expect. But a mitigating factor was that the Navy was perceived to have higher standards than the other services, so that allayed their concerns.

I wanted to know how the women heard about the WAVES. Future enlistees heard announcements about the WAVES on the radio, saw posters in the Post Office, attended recruiters meetings, or read ads in the newspapers. Several heard positive reports from friends, while June Nesbitt Gibbs, a student at Wellesley College, took a course in cryptology before joining the WAVES.¹⁰

I was curious as to how their parents felt about their joining the Navy. For the most part, the parents of these young women supported their decision to join the WAVES. Mary Catherine Keenan Sullivan's mother was a Yeoman (F) and encouraged her to join.¹¹ However, some fathers adamantly opposed their daughter's enlisting in the Navy. Women led more sheltered lives in those days and tended not to leave home. Tina Toselli McNiell had her mother sign her enlistment papers when her father objected.¹² Luisa Costagliola White said her father and her brother worried about her safety and were concerned about how her decision would reflect on their family, since deviations from social norms were more keenly commented upon in those days.¹³ Eileen O'Connor's brother thought that military women had a bad reputation and tried to dissuade her from joining.¹⁴

Basic training, whether in Northampton, Massachusetts, or New York City, was a period of indoctrination in the Navy. The enlisted WAVES followed a rigid schedule, beginning with calisthenics at 6:00 a.m. and ending with lights out at 10:00 p.m. Captain's inspections were held on Saturdays when rooms had to be in order, beds made, and closets neat. Marching and drilling with regimental reviews, eating in mess halls on tin trays, classes, and homework kept the women busy during the week.¹⁵ How did the recruits react to training? Dorothy Ronald Midgeley said she was homesick and called her mother every night;¹⁶ Jean Lett MacDonald was chagrined over the lack of privacy

⁹ Catherine Elizabeth Fitzgerald Brown, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 18 March 1997, 4.

¹⁰ June Nesbitt Gibbs, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 26 March 1996, NHC, 3,4.

¹¹ Mary Catherine Keenan Sullivan, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 10 January 1996, NHC, 3,13.

¹² Tina Toselli McNiell, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 25 October 1994, NHC, 4.

¹³ White interview, 12.

¹⁴ Eileen O'Connor, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 24 February 1993, NHC, 34.

¹⁵ Ebbert and Hall, *Crossed Currents*, 50.

¹⁶ Dorothy Ronald Midgeley, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 7 February 1995, NHC, 14.

and wanted to leave,¹⁷ while Luisa Costagliola White thought it was a great adventure.¹⁸ A few WAVES participated in extra-curricular activities at the U.S. Naval Training School (WR). Edith LePage Smith sang with the WAVES chorus on the Perry Como Show.¹⁹ Arlene Linn Chilson wrote articles for *The Conning Tower*, the Naval Training School newspaper.²⁰ By the time they finished their six weeks of training, the WAVES were ready for their assignments or additional schooling.

Yeoman received training in their specialty at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, Radio Operators at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin or Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, storekeepers at Georgia State College, Milledgeville, Parachute Riggers at Lakehurst, New Jersey, Link Trainer instructors at Naval Air Station Atlanta and gunnery instructors at Hollywood, Florida.²¹ After they finished, the WAVES were assigned to their duty stations. Depending on their billet, they were transferred several times during the war.



Illustration 4: Parachute Riggers hang chutes in the dry locker, NAS, Corpus Christi, Texas, 1943. Naval Historical Collection.

The WAVES served in over five hundred shore establishments all over the country. WAVES held seventy per cent of the Bureau of Personnel billets, 75 percent of communication billets, and 55 percent of the Navy Department billets. Washington, D.C. had the highest concentration of WAVES with 22,000 serving.²² The vast majority of my interviewees were positive about their

assignments and work routine. They felt that they were making a contribution to the war effort and they enjoyed their work. A few officers said they were not challenged and complained that the men had the billets that required decision making, while the women were relegated to typing and other routine clerical tasks.²³

For the most part, the WAVES were treated well by male sailors and officers;

¹⁷ Jean Lett McDonald, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 22 August 1996, NHC, 8.

¹⁸ White interview, 14.

¹⁹ Edith LePage Smith, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 23 May 1995, NHC, 14.

²⁰ Arlene Linn Chilson, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 22 March 1994, NHC, 19,20.

²¹ Ebbert and Hall, *Crossed Currents*, 68, 70.

²² *Ibid.*, 89.

²³ Jane Rembowski Scheck, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 23 May 1996, NHC, 15.

however, several reported that they were harassed and experienced discrimination. Emily Stone Cocroft mentioned that the women in her communications office in San Diego were made to wash the floor by a Navy Chief,²⁴ while Donna Beebe De Wildt reported that she and the other aviation mechanics mates were subject to taunts by sailors regarding their ability to repair and maintain aircraft.²⁵ Sailors resented that they were being displaced by the WAVES and had to go to sea where they would be in harm's way. Some were uncomfortable working with women and requested that they be transferred as was the case with Alma Nygaard Killam who worked in the Photography Department at Anacostia.²⁶ However, Luisa Costagliola White said that the pilots she instructed on the link trainer "accepted us as equals. We were all working for the war effort and this was part of their training, so they took it in their stride, usually with a smile."²⁷

Living arrangements for the WAVES varied with rank or rate. Officers were able to rent houses or apartments and commute to their jobs, while enlisted WAVES lived in barracks either on base or nearby Arlington Farms in Arlington, Virginia, and Potomac Park in Washington D.C. that were built to accommodate the large number of WAVES serving there. Accommodations were comfortable with four to a room, lounges, dining room, and laundry facilities. The WAVES in Charleston, South Carolina, lived in wooden barracks with no fans for cooling and in Gulfport, Mississippi, in barracks where they had fans.²⁸

Most WAVES worked an eight-hour day, Monday to Friday, so they had time for recreation. Tina Toselli McNiell sang with the Navy Band, while Margaret Hall Pease joined a Navy chorus that sang with Fred Waring.²⁹ Basketball, baseball, and swim teams were organized on base and competed with other base teams.³⁰ Those stationed in cities took advantage of cultural activities and went to museums, restaurants, and the theatre. Others traveled to Bermuda, Cuba, and Miami, Florida, on Navy planes.³¹ Many dated and married the men they met while in the service

V-J Day, 15 August 1945, was a time of celebration throughout the country. The WAVES joined the crowds in the street rejoicing. Edith LePage Smith commented on the joyous spirit that day in Newport, Rhode Island, where she and her husband joined the milling crowds and then went to church.³² In Washington, D.C., Barbara Brandt Wood

²⁴ Emily Stone Cocroft, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 24 September 1996, NHC, 14.

²⁵ Donna Beebe DeWildt, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 8 July 1996, NHC, 31.

²⁶ Alma Nygaard Killam, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 22 April 1996, NHC, 38.

²⁷ White interview, 39.

²⁸ Midgeley, interview, 19,23; McNiell interview, 24,26.

²⁹ Margaret Hall Pease, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 21 August 1998, NHC, 25.

³⁰ Lena Thompson Montonara, reminiscence, 9 September 1997, NHC, 2.

³¹ O'Connor interview, 77; Midgeley interview, 26, 29, 30.

³² Smith interview, 37.



Illustration 5: The WAVES baseball team at NAS Barin Field, Pensacola, Florida, 1944.

Naval Historical Collection.

went to the White House.³³ June Nesbitt Gibbs and friends, also stationed in Washington, D.C., went to the Maryland shore.³⁴

With the war over, the WAVES knew that their service was coming to an end. Most of the WAVES were separated within six months time at five centers: New York, San Francisco, Memphis, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. They were given a pay check, a physical exam, a ticket home, and indoctrination on returning to civilian life. They wore a pin, the ruptured duck, on their uniform to indicate that they were not AWOL. The WAVES were eligible for the Victory, the Good Conduct, and the American Theater Ribbons.³⁵ Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal sent each WAVE a letter of appreciation. President Truman presented each WAVE with a certificate and Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Ernest J. King praised the WAVES saying "It's a pleasure to report that in addition to their excellent reputation as a part of the navy, they have become

³³ Barbara Brandt Wood, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 13 August 1997, NHC, 32.

³⁴ Gibbs interview, 21.

³⁵ Ebbert and Hall, *Crossed Currents*, 93,94.

an inspiration to all hands in naval uniform." ³⁶

The Navy needed to keep some WAVES on duty after the war ended as the largest demobilization in history was taking place. Eileen O' Connor remained with the Chaplains Corps until 1948;³⁷ Jean Teresino Yarnall continued training pilots on the link trainer at Quonset Point, Rhode Island, until the same year;³⁸ and Mary Catherine Keenan Sullivan worked in the Department of the Interior when the Navy took over the coal mines during the 1947 strike.³⁹

The WAVES left the Navy with mixed emotions. Some were sad because they were leaving friends. They felt their time in the service was a wonderful experience and they had good memories. Others were looking forward to marriage and a new life. Several made the transition to Navy wives as their husbands remained in the service for years after the war. In 1948, the Women's Armed Service Integration Act was passed that allowed women in the regular navy and the reserves. Winifred Love, Jane Potter, and Dorothy Council joined the Navy in 1948 and made it their career, while Dorothy Ronald Midgeley and Gabrielle Pouliot joined the Reserves.

I wondered what long term impact the Navy had on the lives of my interviewees. Many said it broadened their horizons. They met people from all the country, had new experiences they never would have had if they remained at home, and they had the opportunity to travel. They learned responsibility, punctuality, good work habits, and they became more independent and self-reliant. Some held non-traditional jobs and succeeded at them. Their goals were heightened and their work experience contributed to future success and professional development. They developed confidence in their abilities, because they felt they could accomplish anything and did things they never knew they could do. They grew and matured. Some never returned to their home town because of career changes or marriage. Several took advantage of the GI Bill and went to college, then pursued a career, something they would not have done if they had not joined the Navy. Such was the case with Mary Silverman Ravin who was a pharmacist's mate. After the war, she went to medical school and became an internist.⁴⁰ Doris McKersie O'Toole also was a pharmacist's mate and attended college and graduate school after she was discharged. She worked at Pfizer Corporation as a researcher.⁴¹

Mary Hawthorne said of her experience: "I think the navy gave me ample opportunities and challenged my talent, my wit, and my knowledge and skills to the

³⁶ Public Relations Office, U.S. Naval Training School, Comp. *Navy Service: A Short History of the United States Naval Training School (WR)* (Bronx, New York, US. Naval Training School Public Relations Office, ca. 1944), 8

³⁷ O'Connor interview, 75.

³⁸ Jean Teresino Yarnall, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 20 April 1995 , NHC, 47.

³⁹ Sullivan interview, 54-60.

⁴⁰ Mary Ravin Silverman, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 29 June 1999, NHC, 60.

⁴¹ Doris McKersie O'Toole, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 9 March 1995, NHC, 52,53.



Illustration 6: WAVES officers with WAVES director Captain Mildred McAfee (center) at the Honolulu Outrigger Canoe Club, Hawaii, 17 June 1945. Naval Historical Collection.

extent that they could be challenged.⁴² June Nesbitt Gibbs said "I look back and I am delighted I served in the Navy. It was the appropriate thing to serve because of the war, and I am very proud of it."⁴³ Donna Beebe De Wildt said "I felt that I had done something worthwhile for my country. It helped me to do a better job at whatever else I did. It was a valuable experience."⁴⁴ Doris Dawson Bergquist said "I think it made me a better person. I loved it, every minute of it. I think of it all the time and it has never left me."⁴⁵ The bonds of shared service were so strong that many WAVES kept in touch with each other long after the war ended. Many eagerly joined WAVES National when the organization was founded in 1979.

The WAVES made sacrifices when they joined the Navy. They left safe and comfortable homes, family life, secure jobs, and plunged into an unknown and untested

⁴² Hawthorne interview, 38.

⁴³ Gibbs interview, 35.

⁴⁴ DeWildt interview, 66.

⁴⁵ Doris Dawson Bergquist, interview by Evelyn M. Cherpak, tape recording, 11 September 1998, NHC, 34.

organization. Their youth was an asset as it helped them cope with the rigors of training, new jobs, new places, and new friends.

While the WAVES personally benefited, the Navy did as well. The WAVES did not serve in ships, nor were they in combat, but they played a vital role in support, administrative, and training functions on the home front. Without them, the Navy would not have been able to function as efficiently and as effectively as it did. Living conditions on bases improved and the barriers to racial integration slowly gave way with women in the war time Navy. The Navy hierarchy also was ready, three years after the war, to accept women in its ranks, given the positive example of the WAVES and the need for personnel in the postwar period of downsizing. In July 1948, the Women's Armed Services Integration Act was passed and women were now part of the regular navy and the reserves. The WAVES were pioneers, just as their predecessors the Yeoman (F), and they paved the way for women to be accepted in the Navy, but they did not realize it then.

