

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE, NEWPORT, RI

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

HISTORY OF THE WAVES

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WAVES

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MRS. TINA MCNIEL

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NAVAL WAR COLLEGE

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The History of the WAVES

Interviewee: Mrs. Tina McNiell

Interviewer: Dr. Evelyn M. Cherpak

Subject: The WAVES in World War II

Date: October 25, 1994

C: This is the first oral history interview with Tina McNiell. Today's date is October 25, 1994. It's a Tuesday and the interview is taking place at her home in Smithfield, RI. Mrs. McNiell, I'm very happy that you've consented to be interviewed for our program on the History of the WAVES in World War II. I know that your remarks will add much to the historical record and, from our preliminary discussions, your career sounds very interesting.

I'd like to begin with a few personal questions, for background sake, and then we'll get into your WAVES service. Can you tell me where and when you were born?

M: Yes. I was born in Providence, RI on July 4, 1923, of Italian background. My father came from Italy and my mother was born here, but when she married my father in 1921 she lost her citizenship because he was an alien, and so she had to reapply for her citizenship, even though she was born in this country.

C: How odd! I've never heard of that kind of a regulation. But I assume he eventually got his citizenship.

M: Yes, he did.

C: What did he do for a living?

M: My father did mostly manual labor, like brick laying. Then he was a stationary engineer, which is taking care of burners and stuff in buildings.

C: Did your mother work outside the home?

M: Yes, she did. She worked in the mill in Olneyville Square. I don't remember the name of the mill.

C: Was that in Providence?

M: Yes.

C: It must have been a textile mill, I assume.

M: It was, and they ran these machines that made the thread or the yarn or whatever.

C: That sounded like very tiring work and then to have the house to take care of, too. Did you have any brothers or sisters?

M: I have one brother who is a physician and one sister.

C: Are they in this area?

M: Yes. My brother lives in Jamestown; my sister lives in Johnston.

C: So you're all still in the Rhode Island area. Can you tell me where you went to elementary school and high school?

M: My elementary school was in Laurel Hill Avenue School, I think it was. I went to Oliver Hazard Perry Jr. High School and I went to Classical High School in Providence.

C: What did you major in at Classical? Or what track did you take?

M: Well, in Classical you didn't major in anything. It was mostly the classics, which were Latin and French, German and chemistry and all of that. A preparatory school.

C: Did you take Greek?

M: No, but they did have Greek. I took French and Latin, but I studied in a German class and that was unusual.

C: Were you preparing for college?

M: I was. But we could not afford to have me go because he sent my brother to college, who's a physician, and in the old European families, they educate the boys and the girls are secondary.

C: That's right, unfortunately. Times have changed and now that's no longer true. So when you graduated--I assume you must have graduated about 1941 just about when the war was about to commence--what did you decide to do?

M: Well, I did work at Shepards Department Store in the cashiering department. And then, of course, I had some boy cousins who went in the Navy and when it opened up for women I was anxious to go, even though my parents were against it.

C: Oh, they were! Why were they against it?

M: Because women did not leave home. That was not a nice thing to do, for women to go away from home.

C: But you heard about the Navy through your cousins who had joined. What was your reaction to Pearl Harbor when that happened on December 7, 1941? Do you remember?

M: I think I was ironing clothes. I can't remember, and I thought it was a very, very terrible thing to happen to our country.

C: At that point in time, though, there was no legislation establishing the WAVES, so women couldn't join the service. The legislation was promulgated on July 30, 1942. So you must have heard about the WAVES after that time frame, obviously.

M: Yes.

C: Well, you say your cousin's knowledge and service in the Navy motivated you to join?

M: Yes, I used to write him letters and he'd write back. That kind of got me interested.

C: Would you say that patriotism was a motive, too?

M: Oh, I don't think our country has ever been so patriotic as it was during World War II and I don't know if it ever will be again.

C: I agree with you entirely. It was a great patriotic war.

M: We were very patriotic. We just couldn't do enough.

C: That's true. I think people were really supportive of the war effort, both civilian and military, in every way. So you

heard about the WAVES. What month and year did you decide to enlist?

M: Let's see now. This was very unusual for me because I had never been out of Rhode Island. I'd never been on my own to go anywhere. I had to take myself to Boston on a train and get myself to the recruiting station and go through a physical like I had never been through before.

C: Very thorough?

M: I'll say, and then take a written test. It was a minimum of 95 lbs and 5 ft and I met the minimum. If I was anywhere under that, I would not have been accepted.

C: Was there a minimum age requirement?

M: I think under 21 you had to have parental consent and I did have to have parental consent because I was 20 and a half. My father refused.

C: He did?

M: Yes, but my mother signed.

C: And that was enough?

M: Yes.

C: Your father sounds as if he were really adamant against your joining, but you persisted and somehow got beyond that.

M: I was a rebel back then, I guess.

C: So after you took these aptitude tests and these physical examinations, I assume you returned to Rhode Island.

M: I did and then I got a notification that I was accepted and that they would let me know when I would have to go on active duty. (I think I sent it to you and I can't remember off hand)

C: Wait a minute. I've got it right here.

M: I went in October 21, right around this time, 1943.

C: Fifty-one years ago. That's fantastic. You were working at Shepards then, when you decided to leave. Was there any notification in the local papers about your joining?

M: In fact, I had the Shepard's Newspaper where they listed all the people that joined from the store. I might have it somewhere.

C: So Shepards Department Store had a little newspaper?

M: Yes, that told all the people that left for the service and my picture was in it.

C: Oh, that's fantastic. But was it in the *Providence Journal* at all, do you remember?

M: I don't think it was that newsworthy, shall we say.

C: Well, sometimes they did put it in some of the smaller papers. So you were ready to go on October 21 and...

M: I did take the train to Hunter College in New York and that's where I had my basic training for six weeks.

C: I guess they called that boot camp, didn't they?

M: Yes. Basic training. Boot camp.

C: At Hunter College. Did you have any induction ceremony, or was that at Boston?

M: That was in Boston when they did tell me that I was accepted and we all had to raise our hand. It was a group kind of thing. Everybody that was applying there did it. So they told me they

would give me notification when my active duty started. It was a month before that I had gone. So it was about a month later that I went in, because they had to check your written exam and see where to place you--what your best aptitude was. That's why they gave you that test so then they would know which field to place you in.

C: And I guess WAVES at that time were the yeomanettes or radio operators or store keepers and later branched out into the hospital corps and to other fields, but I guess those were the basic ones. Well, you arrived at Hunter. You were in the big city, in the Bronx, in New York for six weeks, and what did your classes consist of and your daily regime and routine, as you remember it?

M: We had fire duty in the barracks. We had to be on fire duty for so many hours per night.

C: What did that consist of?

M: Just to be on duty in case of fire or whatever. We went to class to learn about the Navy and the equipment and all that naval history and protocol. We marched a lot in formation and because I have a very loud voice, not because I'm big, they made me battalion commander.

C: Oh, they did. How many were in your battalion?

M: I think there were six or eight companies or whatever when we marched.

C: I see. So you were head of your battalion.

M: Yes. Well, just to say hup, hup, hup. Not any other thing, just when you were marching.

C: Did you march back and forth to class? So you'd have to line up every morning and march outside your building. Any other physical activity?

M: Oh yes. Calisthenics; we had calisthenics to keep in shape.

C: Were those on a daily basis?

M: I can't remember if it was daily, but we did have them at least once a week anyway.

C: Your classes, obviously, were daily. Did you have tests at all? Do you remember exams?

M: I don't remember that to be truthful with you.

C: Did you adapt easily to Navy life?

M: I loved it!

C: And why did you love it? What was there about it?

M: I loved it, number one, because my father was a very strict disciplinarian, so I felt that I could make my own decisions. Well, not really, because the Navy makes them for you, but I didn't have to account to anyone if I went on liberty as to where I was going. I had to get in by a certain time, but it was just nice. I loved it.

C: The discipline didn't bother you because you were used to that.

M: My father was a very strict disciplinarian, so that didn't bother me at all--that I had to be in by a certain time or anything like that.

C: So you really had no adjustment problems, you'd say, at all. Did you find the classes and the drill and just the general regime challenging?

M: Yes. I liked it. I enjoyed the marching and everything and the camaraderie with the ladies.

C: Did you find the course work easy or difficult?

M: Well, being from Classical we had very tough courses there, and I didn't find them too hard.

C: Yes, I'm sure, because you had really a college background. Now you lived in a dorm. I know they had set aside all these former apartment building for the WAVES because they really didn't have enough space. You had roommates, I'm sure. Was it four to a room?

M: Yes we had bunks, about four to a room, up and down, upper and lower.

C: Do you remember who your roommates were, per chance?

M: I can not remember that. I tried to think of that the other day. I don't remember.

C: It was only a six week time period. But you met many girls, I imagine, from all over the country. So you had that kind of exposure to different people. Did you like being on your own, more or less, at this time frame, and did you ever have a chance to go out on liberty in New York?

M: Yes, we did. We had a few liberties, not that many, but a few and we met some guys from Kings Point. We had liberty once with the fellows from there. But I don't remember too many liberties to be truthful with you.

C: No, because I'm sure they kept you busy.

M: It was regimented. In boot camp, it's more regimented.

C: Did they have mandatory chapel?

M: I don't think so. I think that was optional.

C: It was on your own; you could go if you wanted to. Now you had to be outfitted with uniforms. Do you remember what they were like? And did you like wearing a uniform?

M: This was a white uniform and this was our Navy uniform here.

C: Yes. The typical blue, navy blue.

M: And then we had some seersucker ones for the summer. But this was what they issued us in boot camp. We didn't have the white in boot camp. This was our standard. It was a navy blue skirt, navy blue jacket, white shirt, black tie, tan hosiery and black tie shoes with a heel, kind of old ladies looking. That

was what they issued, and they did issue us a hat which is similar to the one that I had in the picture.

C: Right, that's with the company. That's a nice hat. Did they issue the havelock?

M: Yes, for rain. Yes, we had that rain gear and we had a raincoat. That was our standard gear.

C: So you wore that during the war.

M: And we were able to wear our own personal undies, where in the Army, I understand, it was issued. It was Army issued, but we were able to have our own lingerie.

C: Do you remember how large your classes were at Hunter? Were they enormous, your classes of instruction?

M: I don't remember the size of them, to be truthful with you, but I don't think they would have been maybe thirty or forty ladies, something like that. Some of the classes were more, depending on which classes you had.

C: Did you have male navy instructors or female?

M: Mostly female.

C: So I guess the gals from Northampton or the Officer Corps were prepared for teaching. Did you ever met Captain Amsden who was the CO at Hunter? He was from Jamestown, you know.

M: Was he? I think we saw him, but not personally. I did not meet him, but we did see him when we marched in formation in parades and everything. He was there.

C: You probably had to pass in review before him. Did the Navy plan anything social for you? Anything recreational or social? Or was it strictly business?

M: I think it's strictly business at Hunter.

C: Did you have a little time off on the weekends though? Did they give you Saturday afternoon and Sunday off?

M: Yes, a little bit of time. We'd do laundry and this and that and the other thing, write letters.

C: Did your father, during this time period, mellow at all?

M: Yes, he did, eventually, when I came back and he found out that I was all in one piece and whatever. He accepted it then.

C: That's good, because I wondered if you were estranged because of your ...

M: Oh no, no. It was just a momentary thing.

C: Yes, got used to it after a while. Do you recall what the feeling of the WAVES was about basic training or boot camp? Did everybody seem to like it? Was it a rah, rah atmosphere?

M: I think most of the girls liked it because they elected to join and I think they liked it and made the best of it. They complained about marching so much, but, other than that, it was fine. We marched in the rain and everything.

C: How did you react to the food? Was the food good there?

M: It was just fair. It was okay; it was something that nourished you, shall we say. The mess was not too great, but it was okay.

C: Did you get any pay during basic training?

M: I think we got very little, but I don't remember what it was.

C: Wages were so low then.

M: If we got \$60 a month, that was alot.

C: Oh yes, in those days, because it went much further. Now you said you had taken aptitude tests to get into the WAVES and I assume when you graduated from boot camp after the six weeks you were assigned to another duty station. Did the aptitude test determine where you were going to go?

M: I think so. Because I was always good in math, so they placed me in Milledgeville, Georgia, at the Storekeeper's School at the Georgia State College for Women.

C: So they decided to send you to be a storekeeper.

M: I guess from my aptitude test. I would assume that that was where they thought my greatest benefit would be.

C: So you really had no choice at all. You were just assigned.

M: No, we had no choice.

C: So immediately after boot camp, probably late November or early December, you were sent to Milledgeville.

M: I took a troop train.

C: Oh you did. That's what I was going to ask you. How did you get down there?

M: I took a troop train to Milledgeville, Georgia.

C: All women on the train? How long did it take you to get there? Do you remember?

M: Two or three days.

C: You left from New York?

M: Yes.

C: Do you remember the atmosphere on the train? Was there anything unusual about it?

M: I thought it was very unusual. It was good.

C: Were people singing? Was there a camaraderie?

M: Oh yes. Because everybody was in the same situation, so we all felt like brothers and sisters.

C: Did you have war news? Were you able to read about the war and what was going on all over the continents while you were on , you way?

M: Oh, yes.

C: So I guess that inspired you to patriotism. When you got to Milledgeville, Georgia, you were, I assume, sent to school again.

M: Yes, for eleven weeks.

C: Did you take classes and what were these classes in?

M: The classes were to do with payroll and navy payroll and what we had to do, pertaining to what I would be doing when I got out. Then, you know, we didn't have all this equipment. You figured it out in your head alot.

C: You had to do the actual math to determine everybody's pay, each person's. They needed an awful lot of people to do that type of work.

M: Yes, we had a lot of people in our office.

C: If you were going to do pay for a certain group of people...

M: We had a lot of storekeepers figuring payroll.

C: Did you live in a dorm there?

M: Yes, we did. We lived in a dorm right across the street, in fact, from the College.

C: It must have been part of the College, Georgia State.

M. Probably.

C: Did you enjoy this eleven week period of training?

M: I did. I had never been south, and I gained 20 pounds while I was there because I had never tasted country fried chicken and home made biscuits and country butter and gravies and all I did, of course, was go and eat and come back to the dorm and study. So you know there was not much fit there. Everything I ate was fattening to begin with and it just went right down. I was 120 pounds when I left there.

C: Good old southern cooking. So they didn't really plan any or require you to do any physical activity.

M: Walking back and forth to the classes was the extent of it and when we went on liberty.

C: That wasn't enough to wear off the 20 pounds. Did you make any permanent friendships there at Milledgeville?

M: No, my permanent friendships were made when I went to Gulfport, Mississippi, when I went to work there. It was like a job and my permanent friendships were made there.

C: Did you have any social life in Milledgeville?

M: Oh, we went to Macon and a few of the spots around once in awhile, a few of us girls.

C: But you were deep in the country, if you were near Macon, Georgia, halfway between Savannah and Atlanta.

M: Milledgeville was a very small town. We used to walk down to this little restaurant downtown to get pancakes on Sunday morning after church and everything. It was a very small town.

C: Obviously, not much to do and kind of a good place to study and receive training.

M: Right. I think they had that in mind, don't you?

C: I think so, too. They sequestered the WAVES, because they put them in Stillwater or Indiana and places where there weren't

too many other outside distractions for them. What was your rate when you were in Milledgeville?

M: It was apprentice seaman, I guess, but when I finished my training in Milledgeville I became a storekeeper Third class.

C: I assumed you were graded and you had exams to take with this course and you passed with no problem. After you finished your training in Milledgeville, which I'm sure you found challenging, where were you assigned next?

M: The Armed Guard School in Gulfport, Mississippi, and that was when our Seabee base was there, also.

C: What was the Armed Guard School? What was its purpose?

M: I think they paid ships that came in and different payrolls of that nature.

C: Oh, so you were going to be responsible for working on the payroll! So what did that work consist of?

M. Well, it consisted of figuring how much each seaman or naval personnel would get paid.

C: And you actually had to do the calculations?

M: Yes, we had to do the calculations.

C: Did you have to issue the checks? Type them up?

M: I didn't issue the checks, but we had a payroll officer there and he issued the checks.

C: How many WAVES were in that office?

M: We must have had about ten, maybe fifteen.

C: Where did you live when you were in Gulfport? Did you have a dorm?

M: Yes, we had a barracks that was quite a distance away from where I worked, away from the guys.

C: Was it on the base?

M: Oh yes, it was on the base.

C: All women obviously. Did you have a room?

M: No, we had a huge room which you had a single bed, bunk (no double deckers here) single with your own cabinet for your clothes. Your cabinet separated the next bed and the next

cabinet, and that was like, no cubicles or anything; it was one big room.

C: All in a row. Just as you see in the pictures. A real barracks. So no privacy, in other words.

M: None at all.

C: How did you cotton to that?

M: Well, it wasn't too bad, because, as I said, you had this big steel cabinet so you could get behind the cabinet and kind of undress or whatever. Although in the ladies room, you didn't have that much more privacy either.

C: No, I guess you didn't. Where were they located? Either end of the barracks? Do you know how many people were in a barracks? How many women did they house?

M: Oh, maybe 20-25, in our barracks anyway.

C: Did you make any permanent friendships there, either in your office or in the barracks?

M: Oh, yes. I had several women that I corresponded with up until recently. Two of them passed away and there's another one

that lives in Colorado Springs that I write to at Christmas time. We used to write. And, yes, I met a lot of nice friends there. ,

C: Were they from all over the country?

M: Yes, one was from Alabama, one was from Pennsylvania and one was from Iowa.

C: So people from all over and that gave you a lot of exposure.

M: Oh, yes. It broadened your horizons.

C: I'm sure it did. Very, very much. How long were you in Gulfport, Mississippi?

M: I was in Gulfport for a long while.

C: You went there in late 1944, I would assume.

M: Yes, I was there in 1944. I was there for a year or eighteen months.

C: Yes, it was over a long spell. Did you like living in the South?

M: I did. It was a real change for me coming from my background. I learned how the other half lives and I enjoyed it very much. I love the weather.

C: I was going to say, did you adjust to that hot, humid climate?

M: Well, I love hot weather anyway.

C: I tend to like it more than cold. I dread the winter.

M: Me, too.

C: So the heat and humidity didn't bother you and that was an age when there was no air conditioning.

M: No, we had fans in our barracks or blowers. We had no air conditioning at all.

C: You think about it, and you can't live without it now.

M: But you can; it's just what you get used to.

C: Did you have any social life when you were in Gulfport? Was there an opportunity to meet men or to do social things?

M: Well, I met Bob on my first liberty. I went to a USO dance.

C: Where did they have those?

M: Right in the town of Gulfport.

C: And they had a Canteen. Was that it? They called it a USO?

M: Yes, I left my heart at the Stagedoor Canteen.

C: Now Bob is your husband. Bob McNeil. Where was he from?

M: He's from the Appalachian area of Virginia.

C: Oh, how interesting.

M: So he was at the dance and that's where I met him.

C: Now what was his job in the Navy?

M: He worked for EE&RM; I'm trying to think of what EE&RM is. It's something to do with electrical engineering and stuff. He was a yeoman and at the EE&RM School.

C: Was that in Gulfport, too? On a different part of the base.

M: Yes, they had the Seabees; they had the Armed Guard School, they had EE&RM School all on one base there.

C: So you met him at this dance and struck up a conversation. Did you continue to see him for the eighteen months or so you were at Gulfport?

M: Oh, yes.

C: He was there for that long as well?

M: Yes. Before he shipped out, he was there a long while. Yes. I saw him on and off and then I got involved with the Navy Band and sang with them.

C: Well, tell us about that. That sounds very, very interesting.

M: I've always sung.

C: Oh you're a singer.

M: Yes, at home, anywhere. You know it's just a God-given talent. I never had any training at all.

C: Did you sing in a church choir at home?

M: I sang in a church choir in Gulfport.

C: Did you sing in Providence, too?

M: No I didn't. I did it once. I got away because, as I said, my father kept very strict control there. I never did any extra curricula at Classical because I had to be home right after school. I did join the choir at our church in Gulfport. We had a chapel that encompassed all the services so it was everybody's church. I sang there and then I happened to meet somebody or I got up to sing once. I can't remember now.

C: You were brave.

M: Oh yes. I had a lot of Chutzpah. So anyway, when I got up to sing, then they asked me to, you know. Whenever they had an affair, they'd call me in to sing with the Navy Band, so I did.

C: Were these popular songs, obviously? Songs of the period which were so nice. They were lovely.

M: Oh, yes.

C: So that was kind of an extra curricula activity on weekends, I assume.

M: Yes, it was and I got in trouble a lot in the barracks, because I would go out with my hair up in, at that time it was bobby pins. Whenever I'd get called, I thought, well, I better put my hair up so it would be great when I get there, especially on a rainy day. I'd put my rain cap on. But I got called by the sergeant at arms a lot of times. You're not supposed to go out with your hair in hairpins.

C: Even if it's covered?

M: Even if it's covered. So I would get called up on that quite a few times, about going out with my hair up in bobby pins.

C: Oh, for heaven sakes. And this was unpaid work?

M: Yes, I just enjoyed doing it.

C: So at dances and things like that you would sing. That's fantastic. Did anybody else do this? Any other girls that you remember?

M: I don't think there was anybody in Gulfport that did it but me. But there was a guy that would sing. It's in the newspaper. He would sing.

C: That's great. That's very, very interesting. Well, by that time your future husband was ready to ship out and where was he shipping out to?

M: Well, he was on the USS SAUGUS; it's a converted cruiser. They carried ducks and Marines and everything to the Pacific.

C: Was this a serious involvement by the time he shipped out?

M: Oh, yes. He was in the thick of it.

C: But was your relationship serious?

M: Oh, that's what you're getting at? Oh, yes. I think it had gotten to that point. We were just seeing one another.

C: And this was in 1944. So he shipped out, I guess. Was it 1945?

M: Probably.

C: Were you still in Gulfport when he left? Went out to sea?

M: I think I was because his ship came into New Orleans once and he called me and said could I get liberty. Well, I had to go to the captain to get permission and he gave me permission. (This

is a very funny story.) I went on the train and I got into New Orleans and we were supposed to meet him at the bus station. So, I went to the bus station and I waited and I waited and I waited, and he did not appear. It got to be late at night and I thought, Oh my God, I've got to get a room. It was kind of scary to be by yourself and get a room. So I went to the hotel and got a room and I put the bureau in front of the door and locked it up and everything. I never did hear anything until maybe a month later that I found out that an hour before he was supposed to come and meet me his ship sailed. He got orders and they just left.

C: He had no way of contacting you.

M: No, he had no way of contacting me, so I didn't find out about that until about a month later.

C: So back you had to go.

M: So back I went the next day and that was it until I found out what was going on. I thought oh, I've been dumped here.

C: Stood up in New Orleans, which was kind of a racy town.

M: Yes, kind of a racy town at that time, anyway.

C: It still is kind of; it has that reputation and perhaps is not the safest place to be stuck by yourself.

M: By yourself, one girl.

C: Because people didn't travel around, I think, as freely and independently in those days as they today.

M: Especially women.

C: Especially women, yes.

M: That's what I thought of, and, you know, I'm waiting there and like all the Navy guys are coming in and eyeing you. What you are doing there. Are you a pick up, or what's going on?

C: Were you in uniform?

M: Yes, and it was very uncomfortable.

C: Were you aware of the segregation in the South at that time?

M: Yes, I was.

C: How did you react to that?

M: Well, I tell you, I just minded my own business and went about my duty and did my own thing. I tried not to get involved, in that, because even though you thought it wasn't right you never knew, so you just minded your own business and did what you had to do.

C: Were you given standard liberty on a Saturday and Sunday in Gulfport? Were you free and allowed to leave the barracks and go out?

M: Oh yes, we did. I'm not sure if we had to be in at night unless you got permission. I think you had to get permission if you were going to be gone over night. Most of the times I just went out and came back whenever I was supposed to get back. At midnight.

C: What kind of a town was Gulfport?

M: At the time (I understand now they have casinos along Biloxi and everywhere. I used to go down there) but at that time it was not a big town; it was very small. They had a spaghetti house there I remember we went to. We had spaghetti there. I haven't been back since. I'd like to go back. I keep telling Bob that, because some of the women that have been back told me about all these casinos along the way...

C: You know, it's offshore casinos; they're doing a lot of that down there, and I think they've developed the Gulf Coast a little, bit more now.

M: Well, some ladies that I know in Florida, they took a bus trip up to Biloxi to go gambling. That was an excursion thing.

C: So it's a different place. But the Navy, I guess, had invaded and taken over in those days.

M: The Navy took over the town.

C: Oh, absolutely.

M: But there was an Army base there, also, close by. Because my lady friend who's in Colorado Springs met an Army guy and she married him. So there was an Army base close by.

C: Oh, for heavens sake. So it was a great opportunity for socializing and meeting people from all over.

M: Yes, because sometimes when Bob would call and say he's too tired to go out, I'd say, "that's fine." "I'll get somebody else." So he'd say "I'll be there in ten minutes." So, I mean, you could always get a date. There was no problem for dates. A lot of men around.

C: And so for dates you would just go to the town, I assume, or the Canteen, since there wasn't too much else to do. Did you have to work at all on Saturday mornings?

M: I think sometimes we did in the morning on Saturdays, if a ship came in or something and the men had to be paid.

C: Now after your time in Gulfport, where were you sent to next?

M: My next duty station was at, they call it the Receiving Station in New Orleans, but it was across the bay in Bay St. Louis. That's where this receiving station was.

C: Oh, Bay St. Louis, Mississippi.

M: No, wait a minute. I know it was not right in New Orleans.

C: Ok, across the river?

M: Yes.

C: Oh, I see. Do you remember what year you were sent there? It must have been in 1945.

M: I looked at my discharge; they don't list anything so it was probably about 1945, because I was out in 1946 and I didn't stay

there too long. Then they sent me to Camp Wallace, Texas, which was near Galveston.

C: What did you do in New Orleans? Was it the same billet?

M: Yes, the same billet.

C: Were you promoted at all during this time frame?

M: I ended up as Storekeeper Second Class. I probably, had I stayed in, would have been First Class, but I got out in 1946.

C: So you were in New Orleans for a couple of months at least?

M: Yes.

C: Again, did you live in a barracks?

M: I don't remember too much about it. I remember a lot about Camp Wallace and more about Gulfport. I can't remember too much about this New Orleans thing. I remember having to go in a boat from New Orleans to where this receiving station was and getting seasick. But I don't remember too much about that time period, so it couldn't have been too long.

C: Yes, probably very, very short anyway. After that couple of months in New Orleans, you said you were Camp Wallace, Texas, which is near Galveston.

M: It's between Houston and Galveston, but closer to Galveston because that's where we did our liberty.

C: Mrs. McNiel, I believe we were mentioning that you were sent to Camp Wallace in Galveston, Texas, again as a Storekeeper, doing the same kind of work, payroll work for the Navy. Do you remember how long you stayed there?

M: I wish I had jotted all of this down, but I didn't.

C: Was that your last assignment in the Navy?

M: That was my last assignment for eight to ten months before I got discharged on points.

C: Right, so that would have been 1945 roughly, early 1946 that you were in Texas. Was there anything unusual or interesting about that assignment as a WAVE?

M: Well, we had a very long walk from our barracks to the mess hall. We had to walk through these fields where we got chigger bites all over our legs from walking through the fields. It had

high grass. That was kind of a strange situation. But just doing about the same thing. On liberty in Galveston, I know it was a dry city and if you wanted to go to a club to drink, you had to ring a bell and they'd look through the peephole, so they let you in if they wanted to and they didn't if you were inebriated. I did meet a few nice ladies there and we palled around.

C: Did you have much social life? Did you meet any men there? Or was there a canteen there at all?

M: No, this was just a separation center, so we were just figuring payroll for separation.

C: Oh I see, for men getting out of the Navy?

M: Yes.

C: So that was in the waning days of the war. Were you in Galveston on VJ Day, in August 1945?

M: I think I was.

C: Do you remember what your reaction was to the dropping of the bomb on Japan and the declaration of victory?

M: We had heard about it, and Bob was at sea then and, in fact, I don't know if he saw the devastation. I have to ask him about that. No one liked the idea that you had to do that, but then no one liked the idea that they did us dirty at Pearl Harbor either, so it was kind of a necessary evil, shall we say.

C: Right. But I assume that when you found out that the war was over you must have felt very good about it.

M: Oh, I did. I did for our boys anyway, because I was in a safe place, but for the guys that were out to sea and everyone like Bob and the others guys that were in the thick of it ,I was very happy about that.

C: Did you write to Bob while you were at Camp Wallace?

M: Oh yes, I wrote.

C: Did he write back to you? And did you save the letters?

M: I did save the letters, to answer your question, and one day when my children were small and I had them in the attic they found the letters and we decided we'd better burn them, so we burned them. We found them reading the letters.

C: I know that's what happens to so many people. I told you about Judith Barrett Litoff up here in Smithfield at Bryant College who has collected a lot of these letters of military and civilian women to their beaux in the army and she has microfilmed them and written several books. But anyway, so we can't get a hold of those. You said that you separated from the service in 1946, I believe it is, you got out about March 1. Did you have to go to a separation center?

M: New York.

C: New York was where you were separated from the service. Did you receive any medals for your service as a WAVE?

M: Well, I'm eligible for the American Theater and Victory Medals, which I just sent away for. They never gave them to us. But I just sent away. I found out you could do that.

C: So you applied after the fact. Have you heard anything?

M: I heard something when I first sent away. They said try again in October and I just sent away again.

C: Did you send to the Veterans Bureau or the Navy Department?

M: It's in St. Louis, Missouri, I think.

C: Oh, I bet it's the Personnel Records Center. We've dealt with them in St. Louis. Well, it's a bureaucracy there, a little slow, but anyway...

M: They said they were out of them when I first applied, but they said try again in October, so here I am trying again.

C: Maybe they'll strike another series of medals or something. When you left the service, what was your rate?

M: Storekeeper, Second Class.

C: Did you have to take an exam to get up to the next rate or was it just automatic promotion?

M: I think that it depended on your officer who wanted to promote you.

C: How did you feel about leaving the Navy? Were you sad, happy, or had mixed emotions?

M: Well, I was happy because I got separated in March. I think Bob got separated in April. We got married in May, so that was a happy time.

C: 1946. So you wouldn't have stayed on if you could have.

M: Not at that particular time, but I am sorry now that I didn't stay in. You know, Bob and I could have stayed in, in the Reserves anyway.

C: Women were accepted into regular service in 1948; they made the enabling legislation then. Did you have any preconceived expectations when you entered the WAVES? Did you have any idea of what it was going to be like? Did you have any notions about the service?

M: No, I was just gung ho. I had a lot of patriotism.

C: What opportunities do you think the Navy provided you that you would not have had in civilian life if you had stayed, let's say, in Providence during the war?

M: Well, I had Bob, number one. (If I don't say that, I'll get shot.) I think I broadened my horizons, because I met people from all over the country and learned how the other half lived.

C: Sure. I think that was important in that time frame.

M: I really do think that was a very good education.

C: So you would speak positively of your Navy service.

M: Oh absolutely! Best thing I ever did.

C: Oh that's wonderful to hear that. Any cons at all, any criticisms or negativisms?

M: No.

C: None? Okay. You mentioned that there was a feeling of esprit de corps among the WAVES. But that was really very positive.

M: And we still see it, don't we, Bob?

C: Among the WAVES. Yes even after all these years of service.

B: Navy love. We signed our letters "Navy love."

C: Did you encounter any discrimination or prejudice or ill treatment from the men during your time frame?

M: None at all.

C: Did you maintain any WAVE friendships after you left the service?

M: Yes, as I told you, I have four friends that we corresponded with and I'm godmother to one of their children. I had about four ladies that we've kept in touch with all these years.

C: Close friends, that's great. When you left the WAVES in 1946 you got married. Did you settle down to domestic life after that?

M: Yes. I didn't do very much; I raised my kids. It was after they were grown that I did.

C: What kind of work did you do after they were grown? Did you do work outside the home?

M: Well, I did several things. I took a hairdressing course and did that for a while, took a travel agent's course and did that for a while. Then when I got involved with the Ocean State WAVES; I'm busy with that and I have my singing group.

C: With whom do you sing?

M: We have four people in our group and we call ourselves the Late Vibrations.

C: Oh, isn't that cute. Where do you sing?

M: Well, we go to senior high rises, nursing homes or senior centers, wherever.

C: Is it four ladies?

M: No, two ladies and two men. Bob and I and another couple, and right now we're looking for a pianist because our pianist is getting very old, but we haven't been successful so far.

C: Well, that sounds very, very interesting. Just to double back, when you got out of the WAVES did you settle in Rhode Island again?

M: Well, we lived in Virginia for awhile, in Williamsburg. I worked for Williamsburg Restoration, and Bob did too, but then we came back.

C: So you came north to this neck of the woods, to Providence.

B: Came home to mama.

C: Came home to mama, right, in Providence. Well, you could do worse. And then here you took the courses in hairdressing and travel agent work. You mentioned you're very active in the Ocean State WAVES. How did you learn about this WAVE organization?

M: Well, as I told you, when we were having coffee, that I met this gal in Nova Scotia from Pennsylvania and we got to talking , and she mentioned about WAVES National which I was not even aware existed. She gave me the information and I pursued it and I became a member at large.

C: When was this? Do you know the year or the time frame?

M: When did we go to Nova Scotia, Bob?

B: I'd say it was somewhere around 1986.

M: I think it was about 1987 when I joined.

B: The WAVES National was only formed in 1981.

C: So you joined the WAVES National as a member at large. Did you go to their conferences and conventions?

M: I went to a Hershey Convention when I was a member at large in 1988.

C: And when did the Ocean State WAVES begin?

M: I think they've been in existence for three or four years.

C: So it's very, very recently then that they started. Were you the guiding spirit behind the formation of the Ocean State WAVES?

M: No, it was a Connecticut State Director who came up to Rhode Island. I guess she was asked by the National to do that, to form a unit here, and I was not able to make the first meeting because Bob and I had scheduled to go to Cape Cod and we had already made our arrangements, so I wrote a note to her and I asked her to let me know about the second meeting. So I went to the second meeting that they had and that was when I became a member. A director can stay in for two years and I'm in my second tour of duty, and she can do two terms so I'm into my second; I just got reelected again.

C: So you're director of the Ocean State unit. What does that entail?

M: Well, it entails whatever the president needs to be done, I do. I got to all the regional meetings, conventions and if there were more than one unit I would have to visit the units to make sure everything is going well. Basically, that's it and assist the president in any way that I can.

C: Can you tell us about the Ocean State Unit? How large is it? How many meetings do they have?

M: Well, it has forty-two members at the present time and we started with sixteen, so we've built it up. We're still recruiting wherever we can. We send out literature but some women choose not to join, and then some women join and they never show up at the meetings. But they're still members and they still get our newspaper. We have a newspaper.

C: Great. How often is that issued?

M: Monthly.

C: That's quite a bit. Does the president do that?

M: No, we have two people. Rosetta Deroshiers and Dot Midgley. One is the East Bay editor and one is the West Bay Editor. She does a very good job.

C: I think I was sent one copy by Ginny Smith. What is the purpose of the Ocean State WAVES? Is it merely social or?

M: Originally, when the WAVES were formed, it was to form a camaraderie among the women that served in World War II and now it's gotten so big that what we do, not only do we have companionship and everything, but we try to raise some money to give gifts to the Bristol Women Veterans at Christmas time and we have pennies for patients which we give to the women patients, or

we give to the gentleman who is in charge to buy them toiletries, if they need them or whatever. We're doing that and we're saving soup labels to defray some expenses. We have a pot of gold to raise funds for our unit because we don't have that much money.

C: Are there dues?

M: We do have dues. We pay \$8.00 a year. If you're an associate member, it's \$5.00, and \$10.00 for the National, so it's \$18.00 a year dues.

C: So you're a member of both the Ocean State WAVES and the WAVES National.

M: In order to belong to Ocean State, you have to be a National member so you have to pay both dues. Double duty.

C: Now you go to the conferences of the WAVES National and also the regional you mentioned.

M: Well, ones called convention. When it's convention, it's for all the country. When it's conference, it's for just your area. Now we have a New England Conference that we're going to at Woodstock in April.

C: And that will discuss common issues and common problems?

M: Oh yes, you bring your concerns. They wanted to change our name at the National Convention this year and we voted it down.

C: Why did they want to change the name?

M: They want to encompass the new ladies coming in.

C: Okay, let me clarify this for the record. It's not merely for the women who served in WWII; it's for all military women.

M: Any sea service veterans--past and present.

C: Okay.

M: And the sea service is Marine, Coast Guard and Navy.

C: Exactly. Because I know you had a SPAR, Rosetta Deroschiers.

M: We have several.

C: That's great. So any recent veteran can join, but the name...

M: They wanted to change the name. But the majority of the women, I would venture to say 80-85%, are WWII veterans, and so that's how it was started so we chose to keep it that way.

C: Yes, it's a readily identifiable name.

M: That's why they voted it down. It was a resounding "NO." Another one that was brought up at convention is to change the president to commander and vice commander and we voted that down.

C: That sound very military.

M: Doesn't it though?

C: So you had the more neutral name of president and vice president. So you're very involved and you have been for the last seven years in this organization, both national and regional, which is very, very good.

Do you have anything more to say about your involvement, your current involvement in the Ocean State WAVES?

M: Nothing, other than we are making a bid for a New England Conference to be held in Rhode Island and the ladies are looking into whether to have it in Providence or Newport. Those are the only two places that I can see that you could have it.

C: Oh, absolutely.

M: You have the Convention Center and now they have the Westin Hotel, but I would think that would be very expensive. Anyway

Ginny Hanson and Bernadette Farina are co-chairmen of the event. They're looking up all this

C: Oh sure, they have to do a lot of leg work before they have a National Convention.

M: We have to present a bid when we go to conference, so they have to have a little format to go by. That's the way you do it. You present your bid for the next two years at the conference before that, so we're presenting the bid to go up to Woodstock.

C: Sounds very, very interesting.

C: Back to the WAVES National Convention.

M: That includes the whole country. It'll be in Boston in 1996.

C: Do husbands go or is it just women only?

M: No, a lot of women bring their husbands. There were about twenty husbands in Milwaukee.

C: That's the one you recently went to. And National is held every two years, isn't it?

M: National is held every two years and so is the Conference. The National is on the even years, the conferences are on the odd years.

C: I see. Well, that makes sense. Any other comments on your current activity?

M: No, I just think that we have a very wonderful unit. The women are all willing to participate. We 're going to march in the North Kingston Parade for Veterans Day. We marched in the Memorial Day parade in Smithfield. A neighbor of mine went to the Italian festivities up on Federal Hill and they had a parade and she said, "Why wasn't your group marching in that?" So I called Buddy Cianci's office and I haven't had a return reply yet.

C: Well, what's wrong with Buddy? He's not up to snuff, I guess.

M: So we were going to march in the Bristol Parade, but a lot of the ladies turned it down because they thought it was too long a march. Unless we can get a vehicle that we can ride in, and that hasn't come to pass. If you know of anything, I'd be happy to take any If you know of anything that we can ride in, it'd be great.

C: I don't know if the Navy would loan you a car.

M: A lot of the ladies would want to, so it would have to be more like a truck.

C: Yes, I would think a truck, a lorry of some kind. Do you still have your uniform?

M: No, but what we do is we do have a uniform *per se*. We have our hats and I do have a new tie that I purchased from Ginny Hanson from the ship's store at your base and we wear white shirts with our tie and we have either a navy blue skirt or slacks and a navy blue jacket. So it's very similar. So we do have a uniform, to answer your question.

C: Well, that's a great idea, to march in the parades. I think that's wonderful. It lets people know about your group.

M: I thought we did a real good job in the memorial, didn't you, Bob?

B: Two miles was it?

M: Two miles. Ginny Smith was there. She's not able to march; she has emphysema and so she was able to get a truck. It handled about five or six ladies, a pickup truck. About seven of us marched.

C: Oh, that's good. I was going to ask you how many marched.

M: We marched the whole distance which I was very pleased with myself for doing. But I walk up and down stairs a lot so it keeps me in shape. But I'm hoping to do the same for this North Kingston parade in November.

C: Bundle up. You never know what it'll be on November 11th. But that's great. So you're making your organization known. Are you aware that there is a project afoot for a women's memorial in Arlington Cemetery? A women's war memorial.

M: WIMSA. Yes, I've donated to it. I'm a member of that.

C: I wondered about that. I thought you were because you're very involved. Some of the women officers at the War College have mentioned that to me.

M: A lot of our ladies are members, have donated money and then you can send your picture and a little description and they'll put it in the archives there.

C: That's great. You should do that.

M: I did. I sent a picture already.

B: Did you tell her we were at the christening of the *USS Rhode Island*?

M: I told her about that.

C: Yes, you were invited to the christening of the *USS Rhode Island* in July, which was great.

M: Yes. We went to the reception afterward; we were invited to the reception and saw all the dignitaries, Pell and all of them, Machtley, Chaffee.

C: I was saying to your wife that I was invited to see the ship, but not to the festivities, the christening, but some of the people from the War College went over by bus to the other side of the Base to tour it before the christening. We saw the bleachers all set up. It must have been late June when we did this or early July. So that's nice that you have the recognition and that your president put forth your names to go.

M: We did, and Bob and I were there. We had a D-Day celebration in Smithfield.

C: Oh you did!

M: Yes, and we were proud of that. I was in charge of the music, the sing along. We participated in that.

C: Was that a town venture?

B: We had quite a thing at the Elks Club here, so we were invited to do the music.

C: Of the period? Was the music of the period of 1945?

B: That's all we can do; we can't do anything else.

M: That's what our group sings.

C: Oh, I see. That's what your foursome, your quartet sings.

B: I tell people when they call us that if you're not fifty, we're not for you. Fifty and up. We do big bands.

C: That's the best music. It absolutely is.

M: And they gave us a ruptured duck. They had a "grateful nation remembers" on it.

C: That's lovely. Kind of like the Andrews Sisters songs. I love their songs.

M: The people, weren't they singing, Bob? They enjoyed it. They want to have another one next year.

C: Oh right, 1995. That will be a great celebration--50 years after.

B: We're also (I don't know if she had told you or not or I don't know if you want me to get in on this or not..)

C&M: Sure, that's fine, absolutely. But come closer so the machine can pick it up. I don't know if the machine is picking you up.

M: Sit right there, Bob.

B: There's a new senior center being built in Smithfield and it's just about finished now and Tina and I have been in on it for about five years, looking for land, looking for this and so on. So we were invited last week, among about ten people, to come over to kind of program out the future and see what we're going to do, so we were invited over to the Smithfield Library last week by the ~~town~~ recreation director. It will be finished in a month and a half. It's strictly a senior center.

M: Now this is one. We marched in the Memorial Day Parade there.

C: Oh, let me see that. Oh yes, that looks very, very nice, the outfits; it looks very neat.

M: And our installation of officers, when Jane Gefvert came down to install them.

C: Great, that looks fantastic. Did you ever have a chance to meet Mildred McAfee?

M: I saw her, but I had not personally met her.

C: Where did you see her when you were in the WAVES?

M: I think it was at Hunter College.

C: Maybe she came to visit or something to see the boot camp.

M: I think so.

C: And you mentioned that she just died recently.

M: She just passed away.

C: I'll have to look that up because she was such an important leader.

M: I had that information, but I gave it to our historian because they like to keep that on file.

C: Do you have any other comments on your Navy experience, Mrs. McNiel?

M: No, I just think it was a very positive experience in my life. I think it was, you know, one of the better choices that I made, shall we say. And, as I said to you earlier, to me that was the most patriotic time of our country. I don't think it will ever be duplicated.

C: No. I know.

M: Everybody was very patriotic and gung ho about their country, and it's gone downhill since then.

C: Yes. And they were very supportive of the war effort.

M: Yes. They were.

C: People readily joined up, like you, in an unknown organization that was just recently formed, and you didn't know what you were getting into, literally.

M: And no one said anything negative about anything. We get a lot of that today.

C: Thank you very, very much for your reminiscences. I will have this transcribed and will send you a copy for your records.

M: Thank you. That'll be neat. They did have, at the convention, I'd like to mention this, I don't know if you want to put it on, but they gave us a report on who are we about the WAVES. It tells the whole story. I thought the ladies did a very nice job on that.

C: That's fantastic. I'll have to get a xerox copy of that.

M: I'll xerox it for you and send it to you.

C: Thank you very, very much!

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