

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE, NEWPORT, RI

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

HISTORY OF THE WAVES

HISTORY
OF THE
WAVES

NO. 23

ARLENE LINNE CHILSON

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE

1995

Naval War College
Newport, Rhode Island
Oral History Program

The History of the WAVES

Interviewee: Arlene Linne Chilson

Interviewer: Dr. Evelyn M. Cherpak

Subject: The History of the WAVES

Date: March 22, 1995

EC: This is the first Oral History interview with Arlene Chilson for our WAVES in World War II Oral History Project. My name is Evelyn Cherpak. I'm the curator of the Naval Historical Collection at the War College. Today's date is March 22, 1995, and the interview is being conducted in Mahan Hall at the War College.

Mrs. Chilson, I'm very pleased that you were able to come over from East Greenwich today for the interview on your career in the WAVES as a gunnery instructor in World War II. I'd like to begin the interview by asking you when and where you were born.

AC: I was born in Peru, Illinois, June 30, 1924.

EC: Did you spend your growing up years there?

AC: Yes, I did.

EC: What did your father do for a living?

AC: My father was a farmer and he also owned and operated a farm implement business.

EC: What did your mother do?

AC: My mother was a housewife.

EC: What kind of a farm did your father have?

AC: We raised livestock and crops.

EC: What kind of crops?

AC: Wheat, oats, soy beans, and corn.

EC: Was it a big spread that you had?

AC: One hundred and eighty (180) acres.

EC: That's quite large. Did you help on the farm?

AC: Yes.

EC: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

AC: I had two brothers and two sisters.

EC: Where were you in the ...

AC: I was number 4.

EC: So they all worked on the farm together.

AC: Yes, we did.

EC: Did you have any hired help or hired hands working?

AC: Yes, we did.

EC: Where did you go to elementary school?

AC: I went to a one-room country schoolhouse about a mile and a half away from my home.

EC: And how many grades were in that school?

AC: Eight.

EC: So you got instruction when the teacher had time to give it to you. And everybody, I guess, was in the same room reciting.

AC: Yes. You learned your lessons. Sometimes you learned a year ahead of time just sitting there listening.

EC: Absolutely, I would say.

AC: I don't think we impressed the people on the subway.

EC: They were displaced for a little bit. But that's very interesting that they did that. The Navy took right over. Well, I think people were a little bit more willing in those days to kind of step aside for the armed services.

AC: Not at five o'clock.

EC: What was your impression of New York when you first got there and got to Hunter?

AC: Well, when you're on the subway you don't see anything, or the railroad station. We went immediately to a huge armory and that's where we were processed, issued a hat which was glued to our head for the next six weeks and very late in the evening we were taken to a chow hall and then we were taken to the barracks.

EC: To your apartment so to speak, the apartment buildings with other people from the Midwest as you said. Did you make any lasting friendships from that group at Hunter, from that six weeks?

AC: Not from the boot group.

EC: Everybody was sent in different directions after. Well, you were enrolled in classes for the six week period. Do you remember the kinds of classes and instruction you had?

AC: I think most of the classes were to familiarize you with the Navy, what the rating structure was, what the command structure was, what was expected of you as a Navy person. We had physicals and shots. We had examinations, so they knew how to rate you for assignment. And a lot of drills and marching, also physical education.

EC: Yes, I was going to ask you about marching and drilling. Did you enjoy that aspect of it? Did you sing as you marched and drilled?

AC: Oh yes. Always. And we marched in formation to all our classes, the chow hall, church and to all scheduled activities.

EC: What did you sing?

AC: We sang all the current songs that were sung at the boot camp. They were good cadence songs, plus each unit would submit their own song. I remember the girl for our section did an original. I can recall the tune she did. I think Onward Christian Soldiers was the tune she used, but I don't have a copy of the song. And of course we sang the WAVES song.

EC: Do you remember the words to the WAVES song?

AC: Of course, you never forget this.

EC: I'll have to have you write those words down for me because I've heard of the song, but I've never seen it in any of the books and text that I have gone over regarding the WAVES.

AC: This song, you could sing it in harmony with Anchors Away which made it really impressive.

EC: So did you sing that while you were marching and drilling too.

AC: Oh, definitely!

EC: Oh, so that kind of gave you a lot of spirit during that time period. Did you find the classes that you took at Hunter challenging, interesting, stimulating?

AC: Yes, I did.

EC: Who were your instructors?

AC: They would be officers and enlisted women.

EC: Oh, women for the most part.

AC: We saw very few men at boot camp. They were a rare bird.

EC: Did you find the courses easy or difficult and the examinations for them?

AC: They were fair tests.

EC: Did you have any trouble adjusting to military life coming from the civilian sector?

AC: No.

EC: Did you like the discipline of military life?

AC: I had no problem with it.

EC: Because you had a very set schedule for the day, didn't you?

AC: Yes we did. You were up and going by 6:00 and every minute was accounted for. No, I had no problem with that at all.

EC: Did you get much homework in the evening?

AC: No, none at all.

EC: So your evenings were free to do what you wanted to?

AC: Yes.

EC: Did you have hours that you had to be in?

AC: Yes.

EC: And do you remember what time you had to be in at night.

AC: Well you weren't allowed off the station. I would say ... I know taps was at 10:00 and you could go, like I used to go for my newspaper, but I would say we probably had to be back in the barracks at 8:00. I'm not sure.

EC: But there were definite rules?

AC: But there were definite rules about when you had to be where or you operated on demerits.

EC: Did you ever get any demerits?

AC: I did not. Thanks to. . . I had a gym teacher in high school who was absolutely wonderful and she ran a tight ship and she taught me everything I knew about not getting demerits.

EC: That's great! You mentioned that you were involved in the newspaper. Could you tell us how you got involved in the newspaper for Hunter College.

AC: When you checked in, I believe that they asked your interests and they listed things that perhaps you would be interested in volunteering for. And that was one of the things that was on the list and I said, "yes, I would."

EC: So were you a staff editor of the newspaper?

AC: No, I was a contributor.

EC: A contributor. So you would write articles?

AC: Yes, but you only worked on one issue because it took you six weeks to produce this one issue.

EC: Oh I see, so every six weeks...

AC: So every time a new company or a new section came in they would immediately start on the next newspaper, so you were only involved with one issue.

EC: That's interesting. Do you remember what you wrote about?

AC: Yes, I wrote a column. I don't know what you'd call it today, I think it was a generalization of life in boot camp. A satire I should say, sort of. It used song titles.

EC: That's very clever. So that kept you busy. How many gals worked on it do you remember?

AC: Very small staff of volunteers and I think they probably had a permanent staff. When I went to the meetings I never saw more than maybe a half a dozen people.

EC: Well, that's very good and you've got some of the issues of this newspaper. Did you like wearing the Navy uniform?

AC: Yes, I did. Incidentally, it was created by Main Bocher, a top designer of that era.

EC: It was a very smart uniform. Did you like being on your own and being independent?

AC: Yes.

EC: You found that a positive experience. Did you have any time off during basic training, any liberty on weekends at all?

AC: We had one weekend liberty. About the fifth week we had a Saturday, after regimental review, until I think curfew was you had to be back at 8:00 and on Sunday I believe we had all day.

EC: Do you remember what you did? Where you went?

AC: Oh yes, we went to a Tea dance at one of the big hotels that was offered by a service organization. We went to the Statue of Liberty. We went to Rockefeller Center. We went to the Automat. We did all the things you're supposed to do in New York City, except we did not go to the Empire State building.

EC: Well, there's a lot to see there so you crammed a lot in. Did you have to wear your uniform when you were out?

AC: Yes. The only thing: they knew we were recruits because we wore the opposite hat cover of a ship's company WAVE. This was summer and the hat cover should have been seersucker and we wore white.

EC: Did anybody in New York on the street react to you in any way?

AC: No, because New York was pretty well covered with other service people. At these Tea dances there was every branch of the service represented.

EC: Did you ever meet Captain Amsden who was CO?

AC: No, I didn't.

EC: You mentioned the regimental review on Saturday. Now what exactly was that?

AC: That's when all the companies passed in review on the parade ground. It was a great feeling.

EC: I'm sure. Was there a prize for the best?

AC: No, it was just something you did and it was every Saturday and you were not on your own time until after regimental review was over.

EC: Do you remember what company you were in?

AC: I was in regiment 38 and I don't remember the company.

EC: Did you have a leader of the regimental review, or leader of your company?

AC: Of course.

EC: Someone who would march ahead I guess.

AC: Yes. It was all laid out. There was no possible mistake and it was hot that summer. It was the hottest summer that New York had had in twenty years and it was hot out on the parade ground. I remember we were told if anybody fainted, step over them please. There were a lot who keeled over and we had either nurses or corpsmen on steps leading down to the field. They would be on every step so that they could come out and assist these girls off the field.

EC: And no air conditioning in those days. So you suffered.

AC: Not really, when you're young you don't suffer that much.

EC: I guess the heat doesn't bother you. Did you have a graduation ceremony at the end of the six weeks?

AC: I don't think so. I think it was just our final "pass in review" and that was it. I don't remember.

EC: How were you selected for your specialty and what was the specialty you were going to go into?

AC: We took exams which evidently would point the way to what we were best suited to be trained for and we were called in one by one for interviews, and my interviewer told me that I was best suited to be a storekeeper or a yeoman according to my test

scores. I had put in for gunnery school, either aerial free gunnery or fixed gunnery. She just looked at me and I remember saying: "but I'd rather go to gunnery school". I was not interested in storekeeping or being a yeoman.

EC: How did you get switched into the aerial free gunnery school?

AC: I just applied for it and then when they went through the lists to prepare the list that they put up, they gave it to me. Why they did I don't know. It might have been the ordnance background that I had.

EC: That makes sense and you expressed preference for it, too.

AC: I don't know how much they paid attention to your expressed preference but whatever it was it worked.

EC: Where were you sent for additional training?

AC: I was sent to Naval Air Station, Pensacola, Florida.

EC: How long was this specialized training in time?

AC: I believe it was 10 weeks.

EC: Did you go to classes again?

AC: Yes.

EC: All day?

AC: All day and Saturday.

EC: And Saturday as well. It was a six day week. What kind of classes did you take in Pensacola?

AC: We had classes on guns, classes on the mathematics of gunnery; we had classes on the special devices that were featured at that time, like the trainers for aircrewmembers and cadets to use, to give them the knowledge that they needed to fire these guns either from an airplane or whatever. We also had actual training on the guns like .50 caliber and .30 caliber machine guns. We shot skeet and trap with shotguns.

EC: So you actually went out on the range and shot.

AC: Yes, we had training classes on being an instructor. Very intense training on some of the aspects of the special devices like a GUNAIRSTRUCTOR or a 3A2. There would be maybe a week or two weeks on just those devices.

EC: That's quite intensive. How many WAVES were being trained in this specialty?

AC: At one time I knew, but it was not a lot that were gunnery instructors. I think perhaps well under 1,000.

EC: It was a smallish group.

AC: It was a small group and we had some men training with us at the same time. I believe in the class picture there are six or eight.

EC: That's interesting. So they would have been Navy enlisted training to be gunnery instructors. Were your instructors all men at this point?

AC: No. Our sighting instructor was a male officer as was plane recognition. In this class he would put a slide in the viewer and he would snap it for a second on screen. He'd say "ready now -- what is it?". It was a real challenge. The WAVES who instructed us were enlisted and they did mostly the special devices, and then all our range instructors were enlisted sailors - men. We had male officer instructors in other classes as well.

EC: Were you intimidated at all by firing a gun?

AC: No, because I had fired guns on the farm.

EC: Oh, so you had some familiarity with that. Were you trained in aerial free gunnery? Was that going to be your subspecialty?

AC: No, it was all called aerial free gunnery. The course was called that. Then you had your specialties, like you could be a 3A2 operator, you could teach recognition; you could teach cycle of operation of a 50 caliber machine gun. You could run a GUN AIRSTRUCTOR. There were many little jobs that you could do.

EC: Okay, subspecialties.

AC: Subspecially and you didn't know when you went out in the field which one was going to be your specialty so they gave you a little bit of everything.

EC: Oh, I see. And the whole course was called aerial free gunnery. Did you live in a WAVES barracks then?

AC: Yes.

EC: Was that any different than the situation at Hunter?

AC: No, approximately the same. We were in rooms there, maybe four to a room.

EC: Do you remember who those gals were?

AC: Yes. One of them went to Corpus Christi with me which was my assignment when I left Pensacola.

EC: Did you make any lasting friendships at training or anybody you kept in contact with for awhile?

AC: Yes, one or two.

EC: What was the feeling of the WAVES at that particular training school? Was it very upbeat and positive?

AC: It was because we felt we were very special. We were a small number and the instructors let you know that you were special because you were chosen.

EC: Kind of an elite group.

AC: Well, they thought so and, of course, we thought so.

EC: Did you have any social life at Pensacola?

AC: Yes, we were allowed liberty. After we had been there a few weeks we were allowed all night liberty and once school was over on Saturday we had until Monday morning.

EC: Where did you go? Did you go out on dates?

AC: Yes.

EC: Because that was a naval air station.

AC: Yes.

EC: So there were lots of men there, I guess, training to be pilots in WWII.

AC: Yes, we lived by the cadet barracks and our barracks happened to be at one time a cadet barracks. That's why we had rooms instead of open areas.

EC: Where did you go on dates when you were in Pensacola?

AC: Oh, we would go to the movies, we would go to the USO, we'd just go out to eat, we'd go to the San Carlos Hotel which had a nice cocktail lounge. There was dancing and there were station dances and a lot of station entertainment. The entertainment in those days was fantastic.

EC: That sounds very nice. So the Navy provided a lot of recreation for you there. So you could have stayed on base in

other words and been very entertained. Did any of the big bands ever come down there?

AC: I don't remember any in Pensacola. We had a few when I left there at the other bases where I was stationed.

EC: Did anything unusual happen during this assignment, anything that's memorable or funny or amusing?

AC: Oh, we had a lot of amusing, funny, wonderful times. Not one really stands out except I can remember it was the first time I ever had to go to sick bay. I was in the sling firing a machine gun, a .50 caliber, and one of the rounds jumped out and jumped into my sock and burned my ankle so I had to go to sick bay and have that taken care of.

EC: Did it turn out alright?

AC: Oh yes.

EC: Was it a serious burn?

AC: Well, it was serious enough, but when you're young you heal quickly. I think probably the thing I loved most there was we had two days of range firing at a place called "Gulf Beach" which was out in the swamps. They had a circular railroad track and a

flat car that was your firing platform. As you circled on this car, there were houses on stilts all over--we called them birdhouses--and they would fling the clay pigeons out and you would fire as you went around at these different stations and when you weren't riding on the flat car, you were up in one of those houses loading and firing the clay pigeons. I thought that was a great two days. Very hot in those houses, but very rewarding and very satisfying. The men were allowed to have air-to-air firing. They would go up in the PBYS and fire at a tow target sleeve, but they didn't allow WAVES to go. I would have liked that, too.

EC: You're very adventuresome then; you like all that, guns and things. That's marvelous. That was an interesting experience. Were there any other accidents that occurred?

AC: No.

EC: That was good. Were there safety measures and precautions taken?

AC: Yes, all the time. You were very conscious that you were where you were with a gun.

EC: So they really paid attention to that, to your own safety and to prevention of any accidents. How did you find the male

instructors out on the ranges? How did they treat the women?
Fairly?

AC: Fairly. They were just great. I mean they were polite,
helpful and funny if the occasion called for it, and very strict
with safety regulations.

EC: So they accepted you as an equal?

AC: Yes.

EC: That's great. Well, you left Pensacola after your ten weeks
or so and where were you stationed after that?

AC: We were given leave and after that I reported to NAS Corpus
Christi, Texas.

EC: Did you go on leave back home?

AC: Yes, I did.

EC: How long was your leave?

AC: That's a murky question. I don't remember. I would think
it was maybe two or three weeks. I was home over Thanksgiving
and I remember that. I didn't report into Corpus Christi until

maybe the second or third week in December so I would say I had quite a lengthy leave.

EC: How were you received back home by the home folk?

AC: They were great.

EC: Lots of support then?

AC: Of course.

EC: Your actual teaching responsibilities then began in Corpus Christi, Texas?

AC: Not yet.

EC: Not yet? What happened when you went to Corpus Christi at first?

AC: We checked aboard the station and I will have to say that was an eye opener because when I reported in, you're dressed in high heels, your dress uniform and you're lugging all your suitcases. You walked for miles and miles and miles.

EC: There were no buses?

AC: Not where we were going. You went from the Admin building to the shack where they issued your linens, to the barracks and there's no way that the bus was going to get from here to there and we sort of made it straight, but it was excruciating. I was very glad to get rid of those suitcases. But they had no provisions, you just lugged them.

EC: That's tough, especially in, your dress uniform.

AC: After I checked in, I was there not even a week I don't think. I was not assigned and another girl and I--she also came from Pensacola--were reassigned to Chase Field at Beeville which was about thirty-nine miles from the main base--way out on the prairie.

EC: Was that where your first assignment as an instructor began?

AC: I was not an instructor there either and I can't remember what the two of us did there, but it wasn't instructing. We worked in the gunnery department, but I'm not sure--we were there a month, maybe a month and a half--and we were reassigned to Kingsville which was another P-field. That's where I took up my instruction duties.

EC: Where was Kingsville?

AC: Kingsville was another P-field, you know a satellite field, of the main base and it was about thirty-five miles from the main base.

EC: From Corpus?

AC: Yes.

EC: And that's where you finally took up your duties as a gunnery instructor? How many WAVES were gunnery instructors there? Was it a large contingent?

AC: I would say there was perhaps fifteen. None of them on the gunnery range. They were at a shed about midway between the gunnery building and the range and they were recognition and 3A2 instructors.

EC: What's a 3A2?

AC: This is where there were dual movie projectors and they had two films on. One showed the aircraft on the screen and the other one was showing how many rads to lead the plane to shoot it down. And there was a mock up gun in front where the aircrewman sat and as the movie was showing he would fire at the plane. If he missed, the instructor could always hit a switch (we called it the pickle switch) and she could show the rads on the screen of

how he should be leading that plane. This was a synchronization of the films that had to be done by the instructor. It was felt that the more the gunner practiced in a combat situation, the more likely he would automatically respond correctly in real combat.

EC: Oh, I see. What was your duty?

AC: The other girl and I were assigned to the gunnery range and I was assigned to teach the cycle of operation of the .50 caliber machine gun and how to break it down and put it back together.

EC: How to assemble it then really. That was fascinating.

AC: Right. They call it stripping.

EC: Stripping, yes. Taking it apart, putting it together. How large were your classes of instruction?

AC: We had a classroom. It was part of the armory and there were maybe eight rows of tables, maybe six guns on a table, and there were machine guns for them to strip and to put back together again. Six, eight, maybe 40.

EC: Well, you, Mrs. Chilson, and another gal, were the two instructors that were assigned to the range and also to classroom

instruction. You were talking about what you were doing in the classroom and that your job was stripping. Now when you went out on the range what did you do with the class?

AC: I didn't go on the range with them. When they left my class perhaps they went to machine gun butts, perhaps they went to pistol firing, or they went to some other activity and that was taught by someone else.

EC: So you were basically giving classroom instruction in the .50 caliber gun, the stripping of it. What was the attitude of your pupils when they saw a woman teaching this class?

AC: Well, they were a little incredible for a while, but they adjusted to it very rapidly and it didn't seem to bother them too much after the initial shock.

EC: You didn't get any razzing or any guff from them?

AC: No, never. They were great guys.

EC: Were they about your age or older, younger?

AC: I would say probably younger or the same age. The boys then were eighteen and nineteen.

EC: It was more or less your peer group that was going into that kind of training at that point in time. So you didn't really sense any hostility or resentment on their part.

AC: Not at all.

EC: Did you have to work on Saturdays? Did you have class on Saturdays?

AC: I don't believe we did. We usually had weekend liberty. It was a five day week.

EC: Where did you go for liberty since you were out in the boondocks?

AC: In Beeville there was nowhere to go. We used to go in town to the USO and they had the most wonderful older couple who ran that USO. They were just like a mother and a father. They took that much interest in you and we were not a lot of people there at that time. And that was the place to go if you went in town. On the base we went to the movies or we went to the E-Club, or if they had special entertainment we would go there.

EC: When you were in Kingsville did you ever go into Corpus?

AC: Oh, yes. We would go to Corpus perhaps on Saturday to go shopping because Kingsville did not have a lot of stores. It was a town that was originally built to service Kings Ranch. In fact, it was built on Kings Ranch, which was the largest ranch in the world. We would go in there to eat. Primarily that's about all we went into Kingsville for. Maybe a little shopping, but generally to eat. Otherwise we stayed on base and there was a swimming pool. We went to the E-Club, we played tennis.

EC: Was it hot there?

AC: Yes, very.

EC: What were your WAVES barracks like in Kingsville?

AC: They were open bay, no rooms, but you were in a cubicle with say eight girls. That's how the bunks were arranged with lockers. There was a head at one end of the barracks and at the other end was the recreation room. You had two floors and there were three barracks.

EC: Oh, so you had quite a contingent there of WAVES.

AC: Yes, we did.

EC: Did you make any friendships there?

AC: Yes, very much so.

EC: Anybody that you still keep in contact with?

AC: Yes, I had one girl who was a tower operator and I still keep in touch with her and I know of several more that we sort of follow, but not like I do this one friend, and my roommate that I had there. When we became so few that they closed the barracks down, this was after the war was over and the girls were getting out on points, then they moved us to the women officer's quarters and we stayed in a wing there and we had two to a room. This was my roommate I spoke about. She and I were great friends for years after. She left on points but I stayed in and I used to come to New England to visit her. She was from Brockton, Massachusetts.

EC: Is she still alive?

AC: No, she was killed in an automobile accident in 1963.

EC: That's unfortunate. Did you have a lot of dates in Kingsville?

AC: Oh yes. Somebody would always call you up to go to the movies or play tennis or....

EC: Did you date any of the fellows that you instructed?

AC: Not really. I think they were so busy with school, they didn't date very much. They had a lot of training to do.

EC: So it was the other individuals on base.

AC: Right. Usually ships company. Perhaps they felt intimidated about asking an instructor, I don't know. It wasn't that it was forbidden. The only thing forbidden, was that you were not supposed to date officers.

EC: That's right. There was a gulf between the officer and the enlisted. Did you keep up with news about the war during your time in Kingsville and in Texas in general?

AC: Not really. I had no radio and I don't think many of the WAVES had radios. Perhaps what they put in the station newspaper which wasn't much and I can remember the day that President Roosevelt died. Someone came steaming into the barracks announcing it from front to back so that's how I found that out.

EC: But you didn't have access then to a local newspaper?

AC: We probably did, but we were, I don't know, at that age I don't think you're that interested. They are now, but we weren't then.

EC: That's right. I think you're quite right about that. Did you work at all on the station newspaper in Kingsville?

AC: No, I did not.

EC: So you were very busy with your instruction of your students. Did you write letters home to your parents describing your experiences?

AC: Yes, I wrote weekly to my parents. My mother wrote weekly to me.

EC: Unfortunately, as you said, we don't have those letters because there would be a great deal of information in them that I'm sure that would be of interest to us. Where were you on VJ Day, August 1945?

AC: I was on the base.

EC: In Kingsville?

AC: Yes.

EC: What was your reaction to the end of the war?

AC: Wow! I think we all felt like that. I can remember we all hit the showers and went to the E-Club to celebrate. And then we had memorial services at the chapel, probably the next day. I don't think that announcement came very early. It was later in the day when we found out.

EC: Well, that was about August 15, 1945. As the war was winding down and after the war ended you were still in the Navy. The WAVES could stay in for the duration of the war and six months. When did you cease training on the .50 caliber guns?

AC: The aircrewmen stopped almost immediately and I then had aviation cadets for a short time, and then my classes ceased.

EC: What did they have you do after that? Do you remember?

AC: I went to the gunnery office because the girl who had been the Yeoman there left on points and they needed someone there, so I took over the gunnery office.

EC: What did that involve?

AC: It involved all the clerical work connected with the gunnery department.

EC: What was your rate at this point in time?

AC: I think by then I had made Chief Specialist (G).

EC: Did you have to take exams for each rate?

AC: Yes.

EC: Do you remember what your pay was?

AC: That I don't recall.

EC: I'm sure it wasn't too much. How long did you stay in the Navy after the war had ceased?

AC: I was discharged in February 1949.

EC: That was quite a long time after the war. How did your career progress after you were in charge of the administrative functions of the gunnery school in Kingsville? Did you stay there until 1949, or where did you go after that?

AC: Actually I did yeoman duty at the gunnery department until the base was closed.

EC: When did the base close? Do you remember?

AC: 1946. The WAVES were transferred out before the base closed and we were transferred to the main base. When I went to the main base I went to the gunnery department there, stayed there a very short time, went into navigation department which was wonderful. I was the yeoman in the navigation department.

EC: Now when you speak about the main base you mean Corpus Christi?

AC: Yes.

EC: Where was the navigation department? Was that at Corpus too?

AC: Yes. They still had cadet training and they had navigation as one of the phases of the cadet training there. So I went into that department. This was all officers and they were involved with teaching navigation to the cadets and examining them and teaching them sextants and all this kind of aid to navigation.

EC: Were you a yeoman there?

AC: Well I did yeoman work, yes.

EC: So it was not instructor work that you were doing.

AC: No. As soon as the war was over, instructor work was discontinued.

EC: You said you found this interesting and you liked it.

AC: Yes, I did. It was extremely interesting work.

EC: Why did you like it?

AC: You learned a lot about something different. About the navigation, about what these cadets went through to become pilots.

EC: That's fascinating. How long were you there as a yeoman? Was that for the duration?

AC: No, they must have wound down in size, and I was assigned to the personnel office, station personnel. I worked there for awhile and special devices found out they had a special device rate in the personnel office and the officer said, "she doesn't belong there, I want her in special devices." So I was transferred to special devices and that was my last assignment before I was discharged.

EC: Did you do yeoman work there?

AC: Right, with the special devices.

EC: That's fascinating because we've got a whole manuscript collection on an individual engineer who was involved in developing special devices for the Navy here at Quonset and also in Florida.

AC: In this timeframe, the specialist's rates disappeared. They restructured the ratings and I became a TD which is a tradesman and this encompassed special devices.

EC: What exactly did you do in that department?

AC: I did yeoman work for the special devices.

EC: Administrative work?

AC: Yes, administrative work.

EC: And you enjoyed that as well. You finally left the Navy in 1949, you said, so you had quite an extended service beyond the duration of the war and six months. How did you feel about leaving the Navy?

AC: I was sad. It was a wonderful way of life and I missed it.

EC: Would you have considered remaining in the Navy because by this time, by 1948, the Armed Service Integration Act had been passed where women could stay in? Did you ever consider that?

AC: Oh yes, I would have if they would have stationed my husband and I on the same base, which they now do insofar as possible. But all those rules were not in effect at that time and so I didn't have much choice.

EC: Let's get back to your marriage because I didn't even realize you were married then. Did you meet your husband in the service.

AC: Yes, I did.

EC: Where did you meet him.

AC: In Corpus Christi during the last part of my career.

EC: The tail end of your career after Kingsville. What did he do in the Navy?

AC: He was an aircraft mechanic.

EC: Where was he from?

AC: Oklahoma.

EC: And so you had a wartime romance, so to speak. Post wartime romance. Was he in the Navy as a career?

AC: Yes.

EC: So this kind of impeded your continuing in the Navy because of the fact that they didn't station people on the same base. So you were sad to leave. Where did you have to demobilize or muster out?

AC: In Corpus Christi.

EC: Did you ever have a chance to meet Mildred MacAfee, the WAVES director or to see her because she had quite a reputation as an inspiration?

AC: No, I didn't.

EC: Did you ever meet Joy Hancock Bright?

AC: Yes. She came to Kingsville and we had a tea for her and she talked to us and was a lovely lady.

EC: She was quite an inspiration, too. She's written a book.

AC: She had been a yeomanette in World War I.

EC: That's right. She rose right up.

AC: And we didn't see many high ranking officers in those days and we didn't have many high ranking officers. When I went to the 50th anniversary convention in Norfolk two years ago, I saw my first woman admiral.

EC: Well, there are a couple of more by now women admirals. Getting back to you, you got out of the WAVES in Corpus Christi and then I guess you continued Navy life for how many years longer?

AC: Yes, I did. My husband retired in 1975.

EC: Wow! So he was in for a long time.

AC: Almost 34 years.

EC: That's a long time. He joined postwar then.

AC: No, he joined in 1941 right after Pearl Harbor.

EC: Oh he did, and you said 1975? Okay my adding was a little off. You travelled, I guess, from base to base after that and you ended up in Rhode Island. Was this his last assignment?

AC: No, when Quonset closed down we went to Florida, to Cecil Field which is near Jacksonville, and he was retired there. My children, I have two children who just loved Rhode Island and they wanted to come back to go to school and he wanted to come back here and I voted for California and guess who lost.

EC: Yes, you're back in Rhode Island, the cold country.

AC: But the quality of life here is wonderful.

EC: You live in a beautiful community, too. Did you have any preconceived expectations when you entered the WAVES, about what you were getting into?

AC: No, I was just ready for the adventure.

EC: That's great. Did the WAVES meet your expectations of adventure and service?

AC: They sure did.

EC: Did you feel it was a smoothly run organization?

AC: It was. There were not many glitches.

EC: Were you aware that there were any discipline problems with any of the WAVES?

AC: There were some but not, by and large, a great many.

EC: Do you know of what kind in particular?

AC: I know we had one girl who was doing brig time and I don't know what for. That was very unusual. Perhaps she was just confined to base, but I suppose she broke a rule. They were strict.

EC: Oh yes, they were strict in those days. Did you know of anyone that was asked to leave because of pregnancy or disciplinary reasons?

AC: No, I don't. I know if you were married and became pregnant, you had to serve three months into your pregnancy before they would discharge you, but I don't know of any unmarried WAVE that was asked to leave for pregnancy or disciplinary action.

EC: Did the WAVES experience and the war change or redirect your life in any way?

AC: Well, it certainly redirected it because I left Illinois and did not return. I did not complete my journalism as I had wanted. But there were new things to do and other things to accomplish.

EC: Do you think that the war made you more independent and self-reliant and your experience in the WAVES make you more independent?

AC: Probably. I wouldn't know because I think perhaps the young people today find their independence by going away to college. I didn't go away to college, but I went away to the Navy and so I had the same experience.

EC: Do you find it broadened your horizons, meeting different people from different places?

AC: It certainly did. You met such a mixture of people. It was wonderful.

EC: I would think that would be a very big plus. Did you feel that what women were expected to do and be changed when the war was over--women were more or less confined to be homemakers before the war and then I think some people feel that the experiences of being independent, on their own and having a job, may have changed them in some way.

AC: I heard one observation Sunday at the program given by a Vietnam veteran woman and she said that women's lib started with women in the services. Probably that's true.

EC: I think that those changes helped to kind of spur women to become interested in working outside the home because many of them did work in industry and served in the military. They knew they could do jobs that formerly hadn't been opened to them. Were you aware of any racism at your duty station? Did you ever meet any black WAVES?

AC: We had no black WAVES at our station. We had black men in the gunnery department. We would have parties, you know gunnery division parties, and they would be there and they were accepted just like anyone else and you would talk to them and I can remember they used to get leave to go home to harvest the crops which was certainly different. I don't know if they even segregated them in quarters. I don't think so.

EC: I kind of think they might but...

AC: There were so few; they wouldn't have a whole barracks with just a few men, would they?

EC: No, I wouldn't think so.

AC: But anyway they were accepted in our department.

EC: Are you a member of the Ocean State WAVES and WAVES National?

AC: Yes, I am.

EC: Have you attended any of their meetings?

AC: Not yet.

EC: But you did attend the conference on the 50th anniversary of the WAVES in Norfolk?

AC: Yes.

EC: After the war was over and after your marriage which I assume was in what year?

AC: 1948.

EC: 1948. So you were married while you were still in the service. Did you pursue any occupation after you left the Navy in 1949?

AC: Yes, I became civil service. I worked at Westover Air Force Base in Massachusetts as a property and supply clerk for a few years. My husband was stationed there because they were trying to integrate the Navy and the Air Force at that time, the air part of it which didn't work, but we were there. And so I worked there. And then when we were transferred to Maguire Air Force Base I worked for the Air Force there in supply. After we got back on Navy bases again I worked as a clerk typist in California and in Hawaii until my children were born and then I no longer worked.

EC: How many children did you have?

AC; Two, a boy and a girl.

EC: So you had quite a period of work there after 1949. How would you sum up your WAVES experience and its significance for you and your life?

AC: I believe that it was an education in itself and, for me, it was a very positive experience. I met the greatest of people. I didn't experience any bad effect so to speak. It just was something that if I had had the choice I would have continued and I see the girls now with their array of uniforms and I see them in maternity clothes, I see them with children, and I think, I was born too soon.

EC: Times have changed.

AC: Yes, that's for sure.

EC: Do you have any other comments on your timeframe in the Navy and your work as a gunnery instructor?

AC: No. People always ask, would you do it over again--in a heartbeat.

EC: Can you comment at all on the friendships you made in the Navy and how you felt about them?

AC: I had the most wonderful friendships with the men and the women. Some of the them have continued and some of them will be wonderful memories.

EC: Great! Well, thank you very much for sharing your reminiscences with us of you career in the Navy during WWII. Thank you.

Index

Amsden, William, 22
Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, 12
Battle of the Bulge, 7
Beeville, Texas, 34, 38
Bright, Joy Hancock, 49
Brockton, Massachusetts, 40
Chicago, Illinois, 9, 11, 12
Corpus Christi, Texas, 28, 32, 33, 35, 38, 45, 48, 49
Germany, 7
Hickman Field, 8
Hunter College, 11, 14, 16, 19
Jacksonville, Florida, 51
Kings Ranch, 39
Kingsville, Texas, 34, 35, 38, 39, 41, 42, 44, 48, 49, 50
LaSalle, Illinois, 4
LaSalle-Peni-Olgelsby Junior College, 5
McAfee, Mildred, 49
New York City, 12, 13, 14, 21, 23
Ocean State WAVES, 55
Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, 8, 56
Pensacola, Florida, 24, 25, 28, 29, 30, 32
Peru, Illinois, 1
Rhode Island, 51
Roosevelt, Franklin D., 41

WAC, 8, 9

WAVES, 1, 8, 10, 11, 13, 15, 16, 28, 31, 39, 45, 50, 51, 52, 53,
54, 56

WAVES National, 55

Westover Air Force Base, 56

World War I, 50