

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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DONNA BEEBE de WILDT

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Interviewee: Donna Beebe de Wildt

Interviewer: Evelyn M. Cherpak

Subject: The History of the WAVES

Date: July 8, 1996

C: This is the first oral history interview with Donna de Wildt. The interview is for the WAVES in World War II oral history program. My name is Evelyn Cherpak. The interview is being conducted in my office in Mahan Hall at the Naval War College. Today's date is July 8, 1996. Donna, I'm very pleased that you came over from South County to be interviewed for our WAVES in World War II oral history program this morning. We appreciate this very much. I'd like to begin the interview by asking you where and when were you born?

D: I was born in Hibbing, Minnesota, on February 25, 1920.

C: That's cold country up there, isn't it? Way up in the northern part of Minnesota. What did your father do for a living?

D: My father was a locomotive engineer in the iron ore mines in northern Minnesota on the Mesabi range.

C: Right, that's what they are noted for up there. That sounds like hard work. What did your mother do?

D: My mother was mainly a homemaker, but she was a practical nurse and she worked mostly on maternity cases around the neighborhood and in the rural areas there.

C: Was Hibbing a little city?

D: Hibbing was a midsize city, yes, but the actual place I lived was Kerr Location. It was a mining location. The mining company owned the houses, owned the land, and when they found ore under your house they moved your house and dug a hole to get more ore.

C: Oh, I see, so you were in a mining camp situation.

D: Not a camp exactly. This was what was called a location. There were several of them. They had different names, the little towns like Mahoning location, Utica location, but they were all mining locations.

C: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

D: Yes, I had two brothers and five sisters.

C: You came from a big family. Where did you spend your growing up years?

D: In the Hibbing area. I lived in the Kerr Location as a child. I went to school, through grade four in the local Morton school, then I had to be bused to North Hibbing to the junior high, the Lincoln or Washington school. Then, for freshman through my senior year, I was at the Hibbing High School, from which I graduated.

C: What year did you graduate?

D: 1937.

C: What kind of courses did you take in high school?

D: I took what would be considered the college track today, with the whole bit, the sciences, history, mathematics, English, art and foreign languages.

C: Sure. Did you go to college once you graduated?

D: Yes, I went to two years of junior college in Hibbing and then I went to Duluth State Teacher's College where I earned my Bachelor of Science Degree in education.

C: And that must have been around 1942?

D: Yes, because there was one year in between that I worked. So two years of junior college, a space in between and then I went back.

C: So it must have been '42 then. June of '42 you probably graduated.

D: Yes.

C: Did you work at all after you graduated?

D: Yes. While I was going to junior college I worked in a Montgomery Ward store part of the time to earn money to go to school. Then, after I graduated from Duluth State, I taught in a high school up in Roseau, Minnesota. I was only there a short time when I enlisted in the WAVES. They said we couldn't leave our jobs, and I said, "yes, I can leave this job, because I'm going to join the WAVES," and I did.

C: Oh that's fantastic. What did you teach?

D: I taught English, science, and history. No mathematics, that's not my line.

C: Great. Did your family have any Navy connections at all ?

D: I had an uncle that was a Navy man. But he had died when I was only a child.

C: So your family really had no naval connections that would have inspired you to join the service. Were any of your friends or relatives joining the Navy at this time?

D: No. There was a girl from Grand Rapids, but I didn't know her at the time.

C: How did you hear about the WAVES?

D: I'd heard about it, I think, on the radio, and I read something about the recruiting in Minneapolis in the newspaper. I said "shoot, I can get to Minneapolis, I can take a bus from here to there, and I'll go to Minneapolis." First, I communicated with them, and they told me I'd have to go to the recruiting team in Minneapolis to enlist. And they sent me a list of the kind of documentation and information I needed to enlist and the proper

forms. I made an appointment, went down, and they gave me December 4th, 1942 as the date to enlist.

C: Why did you select the Navy over other services? What was attractive about it?

D: I don't know. I guess because I knew more about the WAVES organization than I did about the WACS. I had heard about the WACS and I guess I just decided the WAVES would be a better situation for me.

C: Oh, that's interesting. How did your parents feel about your decision to join the Navy?

D: They were surprised, but they supported my decision.

C: That's good, because that was a brave kind of thing to do for a young woman in 1942.

D: For that area of the country it was unusual.

C: Yes, it was. Women didn't travel that much.

D: Not just that. I was up there in the woods nine miles from the Canadian border in eight feet of snow, and I don't think it occurred to anybody that I would pack my little bag and leave to go serve my country.

C: Right. That was unusual. In fact, it was unusual for women to go to college at that time frame.

D: I don't know. But they all said if you went to college you were going to be a school teacher.

C: That's right.

D: I think that's where you were categorized. Right there.

C: Exactly.

D: School teachers were mostly women.

C: Yes, so you enlisted in December of 1942. Where did you go to enlist?

D: I went to the recruiting office in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

C: Do you remember what procedures you had to follow to enlist in the navy?

D: I had to fill out several forms and documents. I had to have a birth certificate and you were required to have three character recommendations.

C: Did you have to have physical exams?

D: They didn't do that then. It was very superficial, just the basics.

C: Were you sworn in there?

D: Yes.

C: You were sworn in and took your oath. Was there any publicity about your joining the WAVES in local newspapers?

D: My family had an article put in the hometown paper.

C: That's great. Too bad we don't have a copy of that. There was a lot of publicity about women joining at that time. Well, you were all set to go. When did you report to the training school at Iowa State, in Cedar Falls, Iowa?

D: On February 25, 1943. I was sent to Cedar Falls, Iowa. That's where I went for indoctrination.

C: Right, you did your training and indoctrination there. How did you get there from Hibbing?

D: I had to go by bus.

C: Did you go by yourself?

D: Yes, I was the only one in the area.

C: Oh, okay, some gals went on troop trains, but you did it by yourself. Do you remember what your initial impression was of Cedar Falls and the training school there at Iowa State?

D: Cedar Falls was a very nice place. It was like a college to me, and I thought it was. I just accepted it as a normal dormitory, but then we went through all the boot training and then reality set in!!

C: Right. Can you tell me how your day was structured when you were at Cedar Falls?

D: First, we were given uniforms, and then basic daily routine instructions, Navy rules and regulations, military protocol and all that sort of thing. Then we went to classes. First, you had to jump out of bed at reveille; you had to muster in full uniform at a certain time, at a certain place; and then we went to chow as a group.

C: Marching, I assume.

D: Then we went to classes; we had different assignments. We were divided into groups and went through a rotation of classes. They had a program schedule to make sure that we all completed the whole system.

C: Can you describe your living conditions there, and do you remember any of your roommates?

D: We lived in very close quarters, but they were neat and clean, and warm. It was college dormitory style. There was more than one building.

C: I just wondered if you had a separate room with, let's say, four roommates.

D: I don't remember.

C: Do you remember what type of classes you took at Cedar Falls, Iowa?

D: We had to learn Navy rules and regulations, barracks rules and regulations, how to stand watches, Navy protocol, marching orders, assembly orders, and procedures for reveille and taps. You had to be in your quarters at lights out. If something happened and you weren't ready when the lights went out, you were in the dark. The only place that there was any light was in the head, so if you had to pin up your hair, or do something you had to learn to do it in the dark.

C: Did you find the routine there and the classes challenging?

D: Not challenging, but busy. You had a great deal to learn in a specific manner in a short space of time.

C: Right. Were you tested on what you learned eventually?

D: I don't remember being tested there. You learned it and you memorized it. If there were questions, you could get them answered. I don't remember taking tests though.

C: Did you like the marching and the drilling?

D: There I did; it was all a part of the military organization. It was cold as blazes marching outside, but it didn't bother me.

C: Did you like the discipline of military life, the regime and the routine?

D: Yes, in fact, I think that it is a sort of salvation, the military's rigid regime. It helps keep you out of trouble, keeps you on the mark, and gets the job done. You have a sort of mentor system; the clock and the date help you keep doing what you are supposed to be doing.

C: That's a good comment. Did you find that the other recruits in Iowa State had a sense of camaraderie? Did the girls work together?

D: Yes, we moved as a group. We were all working toward the same goal. But like any organization, civilian or military, there are a couple of rebels in every outfit that will either get the whole outfit in trouble or get themselves in trouble.

C: Was there anybody that did that for you or your outfit?

D: Oh, I can think of a couple. I think they forgot in what organization they had enlisted. They wanted to be "Queen of the May" and still have their way, and it doesn't work!

C: Yes, you really have to pull together. Did you ever discuss with the other gals there why they joined the WAVES?

D: No, I don't think I ever did.

C: Because motivation is important. Can you tell me why you joined? What were your motives for joining?

D: After Pearl Harbor, I guess, I felt, here I am teaching at a little old high school with all kids. I better get involved and do something to help my country. And I really think I felt at that time that I better get out there and do something useful.

C: Right, that's a good motivation, patriotism, I think, was at an all time high.

D: Yes. To me it was a reality; there's something hands on I can do; it's some way I can help. Now maybe that wasn't the answer, but I thought it was, which was probably why I did it in the first place.

C: Right, very good. What did you think of the Navy uniform? Did you like it?

D: I liked most of it. I disliked those first white top hats we had. Ninety-nine percent of the WAVES didn't like those hats.

C: The bucket hats?

D: Those with the white tops. Those were not very attractive.

C: You liked the garrison cap though?

D: I liked the garrison cap better. Most of the girls did. And those unique havelocks that we wore for rain were a good idea, but a problem when you were in a hurry to get them on.

C: They certainly were. You couldn't carry an umbrella as a WAVE.

D: No. I thought the uniforms were quite nice, except for those white top hats. They didn't do anything to enhance your appearance.

C: What did you think of the Navy cuisine, the food that you were served at Iowa State?

D: We had good food. It was not like a restaurant performance but was good Navy chow there.

C: Did you have regimental reviews on Saturdays when everybody got out and marched?

D: We reviewed and we drilled and we marched and we marched and we reviewed and we drilled. Whether we did it on Saturday or not, I don't remember. But we did it enough of the days so that we made up for them all.

C: Did you have white glove inspection of your quarters?

D: Yes. We had white glove inspections, and you jolly well better make sure everything was ship shape and clean.

C: And you passed those?

D: The only way you had a problem there was if an individual didn't make her bunk taut, or didn't put her clothes or her gear away. They usually didn't look in the lockers. They looked at bunks and they ran white glove fingers across everything. You knew your deck had to be clean, your bunk made, and your locker ship shape. Everything had to be prim and proper. But I don't remember them looking in the lockers very often; maybe to them what's inside wasn't important at that point.

C: Did you ever have any time off, any liberty, when you were in Cedar Falls for that six weeks period?

D: Not much. We didn't have time really.

C: They kept you very busy.

D: Yes, and I don't think they wanted to give us liberty while we were there. That wasn't the name of the game in boot camp.

C: I was just wondering if you ever had a Saturday afternoon off.

D: If we did, I don't recall ever leaving and going anywhere. In many of these places transportation was a problem.

C: Yes, I guess it would be in some of these areas. Was there ever any time for any extra curricular activities, like a singing platoon?

D: I don't remember any organizations like that at this station.

C: Maybe that came later at Hunter.

D: We were too busy learning to be WAVES and how to do our tasks and preparing to go to the next assignment. You asked me about tests. I know what tests we took there. If you knew what kind of work you wanted to do, or thought you wanted to do, near the end of the group training we took exams, and that was when they decided you were going to be a storekeeper, a mechanic, a yeoman or something else. If you could tell the difference between a screwdriver, a pair of pliers, and a hammer, they decided you were going to be a mechanic. I remember that, I said, "How do I know if I have any mechanical ability?" But I knew the difference, checking off the sheet, between a screwdriver, a hammer and a pair of pliers. I went to mechanics school.

C: Oh, isn't it interesting that that's the way they did that.

D: But I didn't take the other tests, so I don't know.

C: You took the aviation mechanics.

D: Well, that's what they told me to take. I think I did take one other test.

C: It's interesting that you signed up for the enlisted rates. Did you ever consider signing up for the officer candidates?

D: I think I thought I would be an officer with my education and all, but somewhere along the way somebody made a decision and the only time I think that came up was when I was in Livermore. They had a little conference. Somebody said I was to come to a meeting. I was summoned, and I went. A WAVE officer, the chief, a lieutenant, and some other officer asked me if there was a problem of planes coming in, what I would do in the tower. It was a pattern problem, and these planes couldn't land. What would I do? I said, "I'd close the field for a minute". And I guess I gave the wrong answer. What I was supposed to say was I'd give an orange light. But see, I'd had no training in flight control instruction. With that statement, I stayed an enlisted person.

C: Do you remember if there were any discipline problems, or if anyone was discharged when you were at boot camp?

D: I was not aware of any in boot camp.

C: Did anything amusing, or outstanding happen in this time frame, the winter of 42 when you were there?

D: Well, I don't know if it's amusing or not, but if you walked and your shoes got wet enough in the snow and the rain, and then you had to march, you had a real problem with your feet. That's the only thing I can remember there. We didn't have much time to go off and do much else, I don't even remember ever going off the base. We didn't have entertainment programs or musicals or movies. I don't remember anything like that in boot camp.

C: Did you have time to keep up with news about the war?

D: Well, they clued us in. If anything dramatic happened we'd be notified, just basic statements so we'd know. But I don't think we received any detailed reports.

C: Well, that would be the way they would do it, I would assume. You said at the end of the six weeks, you took your tests for your rating, and you were then sent to aviation mechanics school. Where were you sent for that?

D: Memphis, Tennessee. The air station was in Millington, right outside of Memphis. You know, the military never puts an air station anywhere near civilized territory, so it was in Memphis that we had transportation problems. In Millington there wasn't much. There was a bus that left the base maybe once in the morning, and came back in the afternoon. It was hard to get off the base unless you knew someone that owned an automobile.

C: How did you get to Memphis from Cedar Falls?

D: We got there by bus, a whole contingent of us.

C: Were you pleased that you were accepted for this rating? Were you enthusiastic about it?

D: Well, not necessarily, because I said to myself, "what makes them think I'm mechanically inclined? If this is what they want me to do, then this is what I'll do."

C: Great.

D: No time to be jumping ship.

C: Exactly. You went to Memphis, and how long were you there for your training?

D: Twenty one weeks.

C: That's a long time. Can you tell me the types of classes and the kinds of training you had to go through to do this specialty?

D: We went to classes in aircraft identification, construction, maintenance and repair, design, power, engines and we had to learn all this about airplanes of different classes. In aircraft identification, they would throw a little silhouette up on the screen, and in the blink of an eye you had to tell them what kind

of a plane it was, and if you didn't know, you're done. I was thinking afterward about silhouette identification. It was for people working in the tower or there in battle so they could identify what type of plane was approaching. It could be friend or foe. It could be the enemy.

C: Right, that was important to know.

D: And then we went to classes to learn all about the mechanical parts, what was expected of us, how we would operate it, what we were going to do, and we were being taught hands on in the hanger training. We worked in groups of four or six. They would call crews in and, after you watched for a couple of days, then you actually worked with the men taking something apart and putting it back together, or changing the oil in an aircraft. Most of the planes in Memphis were used as training planes, and those were called prop jobs. You had to change the oil and you were involved in all the maintenance and the inspection. Every plane had to be inspected. They had 30 hour, 60 hour, 90 hour, and 120 hour inspections. By the time you got to the 120 hour inspection, the plane went to major overhaul. It was out of our hands then, and if

there were any major mechanical problems or questions, they had to make sure it was done for safety sake. We were in the process of learning; we could do the minor jobs and we had every day hands on training. We'd have four people in a crew. You had to work hands on, doing this repair work. You had to inflate tires, check tire pressures, inspect the fabric of the whole plane, prop to tail, to see if there were any holes or damage to the fabric. The fabric on those planes was nothing but muslin fabric coated with a colorless liquid that looked just like glue. The coating was toxic so we had to wear masks when we were doing that work, and it was very flammable so our department would only do a minor fabric repair. If there was any major damage, that plane had to go to a special shop for repairs.

C: After you went through this twenty-one week training, with lots of it being hands on, did you feel competent and prepared to do the repair work?

D: What we were expected to do, yes. First, we learned that we would have two WAVES and two sailors in the crew. The men would stand there and watch the girls do the work to make sure that you

followed proper procedures, that the job was done correctly, and after the oil was changed and the rockers were put back, that everything was fastened down. You had to rev up the plane and run the engine to make sure there were no oil leaks. Now all this was a safety factor. You had to make sure that a plane was safe to fly.

C: Oh, absolutely.

D: And if you didn't do the job right, you had to do it over again. Also, you had to check the propellers. These stearmen were the training planes they used for cadets instruction.

C: So you had to check propellers, too.

D: We did. We had to check to see if the propeller was cracked or the tip was scraped. That had to be taken to another shop and repaired or replaced.

C: And did you have to put it on?

D: Yes. The inspection was exactly that. Tip to tail for any problems or damage. If the damage was extensive that plane had to be sent to overhaul. Even if it had only 30 hours and someone did damage to it, we didn't deal with that. That plane went to overhaul. They had to do it and make sure that plane was safe to fly. So we really had a responsibility.

C: Absolutely. That was quite intensive training then.

D: We learned a great deal in a short space of time. A few of the guys sat there and laughed, watching a girl work, letting her do all of the job, thinking, they were going to get her on an error but we did our job, it was done right, and the plane checked out. Down in Memphis some sailors would goof off while the girls would be working. I think the crew chiefs should have seen that. It was very hot in Memphis and we could only work so long. You needed to take a break in order to do the job right. But we did get coffee breaks. The only place to have a coffee break was out on the hangar apron or up in the head. The girls would smoke their cigarettes and drink their coffee and the guys would go smoke

their cigarettes and drink their coffee. You could not smoke in the hangars or around the planes for safety reasons.

C: It must have been hot in those hangars.

D: It was as hot as Hades in those hangars. When you finished a plane you pushed it out onto what was called the apron; the space just outside the hangar. That's where you revved it up for inspection so you could make sure there were no oil leaks or problems. Then, of course, every time we finished a shift we had to meticulously clean sweep down our hangar. We had to dispose of our oily rags and scrap materials in metal barrels, a safety factor again, and everything had to be ship shape. Every single shift we cleaned.

This was where I worked with one fellow who was the most conscientious, nicest sailor I ever met in my life who cared as much about everybody else as he cared about himself. And I can't remember that fellow's name. I may have it written down somewhere. It never occurred to me, but I never kept a diary or a log or anything. I guess I assumed I could keep all of this in my head. I wouldn't forget.

C: Did the guys treat the gals well, do you think?

D: We had some good times, alot of camaraderie, but like I said, there were times when I wanted to tell some of those sailors to go enlist in the Army. I didn't, but I wanted to.

C: Did they give you a hard time?

D: Oh yes! Oh they harassed us. Girl mechanics! Wearing those foolish denim jumpsuits. Down in Memphis we were issued dungarees.

C: The blue dungarees and the blue shirts?

D: Then we were allowed to wear dungarees. I think, because of the kind of work we were doing. We were better off wearing dungarees; if hot oil spilled we were better protected.

C: When you say the guys harassed you, how did they harass you?

D: Oh, they kidded us about being women sailors and that we couldn't do the work, and why did we join this man's Navy? Some of them figured we joined up to find a good looking sailor to marry. You asked if there were ever any WAVES discharged. In Memphis we had a gal who set up shop in the parachute loft. She was making a bit of money on the side. I guess somebody on a night watch must have seen her, or else one of the sailors finally got smart and turned her in. She was doing business there for about three or four weeks before they discharged her. But I was glad they caught her, because that was the kind of person who could ruin the reputation of every good girl in the service.

C: Did you live in barracks there?

D: Oh yes, we lived in barracks there. One thing they did to us I really didn't like it. We marched to classes in the morning. They marched the WAVES right past the brig every morning on the way to class. Sailors and Marines were in there, and they were yelling nasty remarks at us. I don't think we should have been subjected to that, but really I gave them the benefit of the doubt. I don't think anyone ever thought about that then.

C: No. They didn't, not in those days. You know, people just took it.

D: I don't mean that. I don't think they even thought about the brig there and what could happen.

C: Right.

D: But we put up with alot of nonsense from those boys.

C: I'm sure you did.

D: And finally we complained and said, "you just march us somewhere else; we're not going to go past them." It took awhile for things to sink in, for somebody to realize that technically that was an illegal harassment. We shouldn't have had to put up with that nonsense.

C: Did they change the route after you complained?

D: They did. We didn't march past the brig on our way to class anymore.

C: That's good, at least the girls got together.

D: You know, you had to be a little careful if you griped about anything. Because you were female of the species, and you can't take this man's Navy. You know you think twice before you act or react sometimes, or if somebody superior decided you shouldn't have been griping about that, you could have a problem. In almost every large military group, there are a few wearing gold braid that shouldn't be.

C: Do you remember any of the gals that you worked with at the aviation mechanics school? Did you make any special friends there?

D: We had some pretty good times. Nell Boyer was my closest friend. Virginia Hanaford Evans and I remained good friends and we still correspond.

C: Are these gals still alive?

D: Yes. The only one I've lost track of is Nell Boyer. She did not communicate after she left Hillfield.

C: Well, you had two special friends.

D: There were several girls I considered good friends. Nell Boyer and Virginia Hanaford Evans were my closest buddy-friends that I communicated with long after the war. Then I had other friends like Dot Doran, Dorothy DeHaun and Betty Gleason. Gina lives in California. Dorothy Doran Best lives in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, not very far from where I grew up.

C: What kinds of good times did you have during those twenty-one weeks there?

D: Down in Memphis, we could take some liberty. The problem was lack of good transportation. You had to catch the one daily bus to town. We'd go into Memphis. They warned us, especially the WAVES, that there were a couple of parts of town that they said: "Do not go into that area of the city." One was Beal Street.

C: Right, the famous Beal Street.

D: They just said: "Be overly cautious, and be careful." They didn't tell us we couldn't. They just warned us, they said: "We are telling you for your own benefit, stay out. Even if you go with the fellows, don't go in that territory."

C: Did you date any Navy men during that time frame?

D: I went with a couple of people at that time. We more or less, at that point, didn't have steady friends. The kids we crewed with would say: "Look, we have liberty today. Let's go do something." We'd go to town, we'd eat and go shopping or sightseeing. In California, we went to a great college football game one day.

C: So you went as a group?

D: Well, we did more in Memphis. We went with the crew people and it was in Otumwa that we really began to go steady.

C: When you were in aviation mechanics school in Memphis, did you have to work on Saturdays, or was it a five day week?

D: We didn't work Saturdays there, unless there was a problem. Then one crew had to go down and solve it. But as a regular routine, no, we didn't work on Saturday, and we had Sunday free practically all the time.

C: Do you have anything more to say about your training in Memphis? It sounded very interesting.

D: Well, it was mostly the book learning and the basics, and it was hands on, which was the only way we were going to learn this maintenance and repair job.

C: Absolutely. Did you have any final tests of the book work?

D: No, you were supposed to learn by osmosis and just absorb it all as fast as you could, and then go do the job. I don't remember taking any tests. If we did, I don't know why we would have taken

it unless we were going for an advanced rate or changing into another program.

C: When you finished your training, what was your rate?

D: I was an AMM2C.

C: Aviation Mechanics Mate second class. Where were you stationed after you left Memphis?

D: I was transferred to Livermore, California.

C: Was that a Navy base? Air base?

D: That was a Naval Air station. There they trained Naval cadets to fly. Livermore was the best duty base I had.

C: Why do you say that?

D: The climate was good and it was a good duty assignment. We went out to Livermore by train. There were many service people on

this train and there weren't enough seats to go around. The Marines that came aboard were so tired they would take the luggage out of the luggage racks at the end of the cars and go to sleep in there. We didn't have any sleep, we traveled all night, and in the middle of the night we went over the Rocky Mountains. I know we went over the Rocky Mountains but I never saw them because it was dark out. On the way out we had some SPs on board in charge of some prisoners. How they wound up in the car with us we don't know. We boarded the train, and wherever we could find a place we took it. Nell and I were there, Gina was there and we hadn't had any sleep and we hadn't had any food. We got into Utah and they stopped the train. The SPs had to check in somewhere about these prisoners, and here they were with these guys handcuffed to them, and we didn't know they had prisoners with them until we saw them getting up and ready to hop off the train. Nell and Gina and I were right behind them. I told these SP's that we had not had any food. They were serving sandwiches or something somewhere back up the line on the train but they never got to us. He said: "Come with me." So the three of us hopped off the train with these prisoners and the SP's and we went into this station. They had to telegraph a report to some military official about where they

were, that they still had the prisoners, and where they were headed. And those fellows got us some sandwiches and some coffee. I don't think we were off that train fifteen minutes. We all hopped back on, prisoners and all, and continued to Livermore.

C: What a journey; it sounds remarkable.

D: Yes, when we got to Oakland, they had a bus there to meet the train to take the WAVES to Livermore.

C: Was it a big air station at Livermore?

D: No, it wasn't. It was a small naval cadet flight training station. It was a small airstrip. We had mountains around us, we had Stockton inland and Oakland and San Francisco in the other direction. We had a couple of instances where there were cadets who crashed into the mountains. We only had two or three casualties in all the time I was there.

C: Now what time frame were you there? Do you remember the years when you first arrived? Sometime in '43?

D: It must have been.

C: Well, it was a small naval air training station as you said. Where were you billeted there?

D: We were all in barracks, but when I arrived there, I was assigned as a Master of Arms in the main WAVE quarters. Some barracks weren't ready. They hadn't finished them yet, and they had more WAVES coming, so I was made a Master at Arms in this building.

C: That didn't relate to your specialty as an aviation mechanics mate.

D: No, it didn't. I wondered how I ended up in this. I was assigned a Master of Arms there. I don't know if someone read my sheet, or thought I was qualified or what they did, but anyhow this is where I was temporarily assigned.

C: What did a Master of Arms do?

D: They were still remodeling and repairing the building so there were workmen in the WAVES' building all during the day time. I had to answer the phones, check in the repairmen, and then alert the girls every time the workmen were around with the standard "Men on board" phrase. So you didn't run around in your shimmy shirt when the men were on the premises. This went on about three weeks. Finally they finished the job and the workmen left. Then the WAVE officer in charge talked to me and asked me what was I going to do? I said I was sent out here as a mechanic, so then they sent me to the flight line, and that's where I worked on the flight line crew. The planes that the cadets and instructors flew for the cadets flight instruction would be lined up on the flight line and the crews had to do a preflight inspection of a plane before a student or instructor could take it. That meant you had to do what was called a ground inspection: check the fuel, make sure there was no damage to the fabric or tires, that the prop was all right, and you warmed up the engine to make sure there was fuel pressure and that the plane was ready to fly. If everything was okay and the plane was safe to fly, you, as the mechanic, signed the check sheet and dated it. Then the instructor and the

student came down, took the plane and flew. If the plane had not been checked, you temporarily grounded it. Well, I temporarily grounded a plane one day. I was all alone on the line. I guess I was the first one out. I only had one plane completely checked by the time the instructor came down. Lt. Tierney, a Marine pilot, wanted plane number 43, and I said: "I'm sorry sir, you can not take that plane; it has not been pre-flight inspected." He replied: "Well, I'm going to fly that plane!" This is one of those times I wonder that I didn't end up in the brig. I said: "Sir, that plane has not been checked. I don't even know if there is fuel in it. If you wish to fly that plane, you can sign the check sheet, initial it and you can fly it. If anything happens, it's your responsibility." He said he was going to put me on report. I suggested that we go up to the tower and talk to Lt. Morgan. He was my boss. So we went to the tower and I told Lt. Morgan what the problem was and said: "Lt. Tierney wants to fly plane #43, and #43 has not been line inspected, and I would not sign the check sheet, and he's upset with me, and he is going to put me on report." Lt. Morgan said: "Tierney, Beebe is right. You know navy rules and regulations. If she said the plane can't fly, it can't fly." Lt. Tierney flew a different plane.

C: Good for you. You stood up to him.

D: But if I'd signed for that plane and it went up, and something went wrong, I'd have been in serious trouble.

C: Oh, sure.

D: But he should have known Navy rules and regs. He should have known flight line procedures. Most of the instructors were wonderful. We had several instructors from Hollywood at Livermore. They were very good pilots. We had some wonderful pilots, but we had a few over-confident "fly boys". Some of the civilian instructors flew better than the academy pilots. They didn't like that.

C: So there was a rivalry between academy and non-academy.

D: But they needed every talented body they could find. We only had a few accidents during my tour out there. Twice they brought

cadets' bodies back in a basket, and once a pilot flew into the mountain. To this day, they don't know if it was accidental or intentional.

C: But you normally worked in a crew of four, correct?

D: Yes, when we had cadets coming out to fly you had to have the planes ready for an instructor or a cadet to go take their training flights so those cadets or tarmac could learn to be pilots.

C: So that they could fly off a ship or something, or off a carrier.

D: Yes, after much more advanced flight training.

C: Absolutely. How were you treated there by the other men in your crew or your navy officers?

D: Most people out there were great. Lt. Morgan who was in charge of the tower was an excellent officer. And Chief Hazel was

a character first class, but a good chief. The Navy needs more people just like him. If you did something wrong, he told you it was wrong, and why. He said, "These are the rules, and this is what you have to do" and that's that!!

C: Oh, sure, but you were well treated, in other words, and not harassed?

D: No, the crew out there was a good group. We'd go on picnics and one of the older sailors out there, Pop Almond, owned a fruit ranch in Walnut Grove. We used to go on liberty, go out to his grove, pick fruit, picnic, and have fun. He lived about a stone's throw from the base.

C: When you were in Livermore, did you date Navy men?

D: Yes, sometimes. It seemed like I always wound up on the night duty no matter where I went to work. I worked days part of the time, but I always wound up on the late shift roster. Sometimes after duty was over we'd go into San Francisco or Oakland. Transportation from Livermore wasn't very good. Many of the

sailors and Marines owned cars there. We'd go out to eat or sightseeing, go into town and shop, or go to Fisherman's Wharf or the "Top of the Mark".

C: How nice. Did you meet your future husband there?

D: When I was in Livermore, I usually went into Oakland on liberty. Gina and I went into San Francisco one night to an arena and went ice skating. I told you we had to wear our uniforms. We couldn't wear civvies. A few sailors were in there skating and one of them happened to be Hugo. We were in skirts, in uniform, and we couldn't skate like we ordinarily would. We were having fun; we were relaxing. So Hugo came over and sat on the railing of the skating rink, and when I stopped for a rest we started shooting the breeze and one thing led to another. He wanted to know if we could go out for coffee. So we took off our skates and we went out for coffee. We talked, and then I had to go back to the base.

C: Was he in the Navy, too?

D: He was in the Navy. He was on temporary shore patrol duty. He'd just come off a ship and he was waiting for orders to his next ship. He was stationed at Treasure Island on shore patrol, and he just happened to have liberty.

C: Did you have an opportunity to see him very often then?

D: I didn't see him very often at that point. I was supposed to go down to Los Angeles to meet him. We were going to do some sightseeing and make some plans. One day I received a phone call via Lt. Morgan in the tower. I'm surprised they even let a call through. He says "Beebe you have a phone call". It was Hugo. He said, "Sorry, I have to go to sea now. I can't meet. Cancel everything. Plans are changed." Well, I found out afterward that they'd put new armor on their ship and they were testing the armament around the wheel house with the crew still aboard while they fired the big guns.

C: Where was Hugo from?

D: He's from Saunderstown, Rhode Island.

C: So that's how you ended up here.

D: He was from Saunderstown, Rhode Island; I was from Hibbing, Minnesota. We met in California. He was stationed in Seattle at Sonar school, and I was in Otumwa when we decided to get married. While I was still at Livermore I was assigned to another job.

C: What was that?

D: As I said, every time I turned around, they gave me another assignment. I was transferred to the second deck of the tower, where Lt. Morgan worked in charge of cadet flight training.

C: What did you do there?

D: I was assigned to log the flights for the cadets in training. They had the right wing cadets and the left wing. They split them into groups, so I was given the responsibility of keeping the log of the flights for the left wing cadets. Cadets had four training flights. If they passed each flight, they were given an up arrow

by the instructor. After three flights, if they had all ups, they were given a fourth check flight, and, if they passed that, they were allowed to solo. If they made three flights, or got a down arrow they were given one more opportunity to re-fly that flight with a different pilot and if they could pass that down was changed to an up, and they were allowed to solo. I had to keep these records to make sure that all these cadets had flown the proper flights, that any downs that had been reversed were recorded, and if they didn't pass on the second try, they were washed out! We didn't wash out very many cadets. We also had a limited number of tarmacs in flight training. These were enlisted sailors who worked up in rating to be cadets. They were called tarmacs, because they worked on the tarmac on the flight line, went to school, and trained to be pilots. They marched, and they drilled, and they went to school, and they marched and they drilled.

C: Oh, I'm sure, to get them ready.

D: Then if they passed, they were given the opportunity to take flight training. And some of the tarmacs were better than some of

the Academy men. While we were at Livermore, if you worked on the flight line, you could get flight skins once every three months. Some of the sailors didn't like it that the WAVES who worked on aircraft could receive flight skins, too.

C: What is that?

D: You get to fly, and you get paid for flying. Some of the men didn't like that.

C: If you were a WAVE?

D: Well, the guys got them period! But when they started letting the WAVES get them, some of the sailors didn't like that. They didn't think we deserved it. Oh, I had a terrible time one time. There was a Marine pilot who thought he'd wring me out. He looped the loop, he turned, he buzzed and he did barrel rolls. He wanted to wring me out. He did! I had two flights like that. Most of the pilots were very good. Periodically some of the pilots would have to take military records and government reports up to Sacramento. While there they would practice touch and go landings at a small

airfield there. One of the instructors asked, "Do you want to go Beebe?" Sure I'll go, I'll fly up to Sacramento. There is a routine: you do some touch and goes, you check in the hanger up there, then you turn around and fly back to Livermore.

C: That sounds interesting. Did you like this job better up in the tower than being on the line?

D: That's a hard one to answer because I had tried so hard to learn to be an aircraft mechanic, worked at it, and felt that I did it right, but on the other hand, working in the tower was a totally different and interesting job and I enjoyed that and the many different types of people I met along the way.

C: Did you stay in the tower until you left Livermore?

D: Yes, I stayed in there. Then we heard the scuttlebutt that they were going to close Livermore and make it something else. The end of the war was coming.

C: Oh, so this was in '45?

D: Yes, so then they said that they were going to send us, the WAVES, elsewhere, so I was sent back to Otumwa, Iowa, because that was a naval air station and I could go back to ground crew there.

C: And that was in Iowa?

D: Yes, in the corn fields. Back to the corn fields.

C: Oh no, and that was far away from your beau. Were you on the ground crew in Otumwa?

D: Yes, I went back to the ground crew in Otumwa, and worked on the line and in the hangar.

C: Was it a large naval air station?

D: Not large, but bigger than Livermore, and there were other planes besides training planes. We were required to put in a fixed number of hours of physical fitness activities each week.

C: Well, that's interesting that they wanted you to keep physically fit. What other things did you have to do?

D: We used to play badminton with the tarmacs. Some of the people played tennis. We hiked around an area, some played volleyball and we went swimming. We had to do physical fitness in Memphis, too. Of course, you did enough marching there to keep you physically fit for the next hundred years.

C: Did you have to keep track of the time you spent doing this?

D: We had to report that we did our hours of physical fitness. We liked California. Swimming was fun because the temperature was mild out there. When we had liberty, we would go to Fisherman's Wharf, shopping or sightseeing. If we had a real liberty, we could go to San Francisco and go to "The Top of the Mark" and watch the world go by, have dinner and live like we thought we were civilians.

C: Otumwa must have been quite different then.

D: Otumwa was the least desirable of them. Of course, it was colder than blazes when I first went there, and we marched in the cold, and we worked in the cold and all that.

C: How long were you at Otumwa? Were you there until the war ended?

D: I signed out of Otumwa November first, and I was released November second.

C: Did anything interesting happen at Otumwa? Anything unusual or exciting?

D: The only thing different in this tour at Otumwa was the fact that we were allowed to live off base and a couple of us rented a little apartment in Otumwa. Going into Otumwa presented a transportation challenge because the air station was out in the boonies. We got a little apartment so when we were on liberty we didn't have to figure out how we were going to get back unless we were on duty. So we would eat there, or just sleep there, and go to movies or go where ever we wanted to go. That's where we had

boyfriends. I didn't, but several of the girls had boy friends there that they eventually married. I didn't go with anybody then. I was part of the group that rented the apartment.

C: Were you engaged to be married then?

D: Yes.

C: Were you restricted with ration cards and the like?

D: I didn't deal with that until I became a civilian. When I was released from military duty I had to deal with ration cards, gas rationing and all that.

C: While you were in the navy you didn't?

D: No. They fed us three times a day if we were on the premises. If you didn't like the chow, you could go to the enlisted club and eat.

C: You must have been in Otumwa, Iowa on V-J day in August 1945.

Do you remember what your reaction was, and how you celebrated the end of the war?

D: Yes, my reaction was: I told the Japanese to surrender, and they did, so we're going to get married. And we did.

C: When did you get married?

D: August 20th, 1945.

C: That was only five days after.

D: When V-J day came, we knew that Hugo was going to get out of the Navy.

C: Where was your fiancé stationed at this point?

D: He was in Seattle at Sonar school.

C: So where were you married?

D: In Wheaton, Illinois. I had a sister that lived in Enfield, Illinois. We were married in Wheaton, in a church by a minister. We had the reception at her home in Enfield.

C: Did you get married in your uniform?

D: No, I wore a bridal gown, but Hugo and the attendants were all in uniform.

C: So you went back to Otumwa, and he went back to Seattle?

D: No, he had come from Seattle to Illinois to get married. He was on his way back east. He was going to be released. He was sent back to Norfolk on his way to be discharged. We had to do some quick last minute changing of plans because the military didn't listen very well, but everything worked out fine. So he came to Chicago. I stayed at my sisters and Knell stayed with me. The best man, Carl San Hamlet, was from Chicago.

C: Were you happy that the war was over?

D: Yes, I was happy that the war was over.

C: What was the highest rate you achieved in the navy?

D: Aviation Machinist's Mate, Second Class. Just before I left Livermore, when they said they were going to close the base, I was given the opportunity to work toward First Class and they were going to send me to Hawaii. I asked myself, "Do I want to do this?" That was the point where I said, "I think I might go to Hawaii," and my mother said "you've got two brothers fighting this war; I think you've done enough." My oldest brother, Neil, was a railroad engineer running supplies through India to keep the Burma Road open for the airlift. My other brother, Wayne, was at Fort Bragg for awhile. They never sent him overseas. He was a mining engineer. They were both Army men.

C: That's interesting, so there was three of you in the service from your family.

D: Yes, and I had two sisters who worked in Washington D.C. My sister Jeanette and my younger sister Amy worked for the Federal Bureau of Investigation in fingerprinting during the war.

C: So there was five of you somehow involved one way or another in the military or government.

D: Somehow we got involved.

C: Right, you certainly did. When and where were you discharged from the Navy?

D: November 2nd, 1945 is the date on my Great Lakes of Illinois separation paper.

C: Did you feel, when you were in the service, that the WAVES had a strong sense of esprit-de-corps?

D: As a group, yes, I think they did.

C: Did you feel that the WAVES was a smoothly run organization?

D: Yes. In some cases, they were better organized than the men. The men had been doing it for so long they took things for granted.

C: Did you ever have a chance to meet or to see Mildred McAfee who was the director?

D: Yes. Once she came to our quarters when I was in basic training in Cedar Falls. She was there for some big inspection. She was not able to come by the first scheduled date, but she came another day. She was looking over the whole big picture, I guess.

C: Do you feel the WAVES experience changed or redirected your life in any way?

D: Yes, I think it made me a better person and broadened my horizons. I felt that I had done something very worthwhile. It probably helped me along the way to do a better job at whatever else I did. I consider it a valuable experience. I'm glad I did it. I never had a negative thought about the concept of the WAVE

organization, but there were a few times when I personally questioned some of the methods and procedures.

C: Did the war make you more independent and self reliant?

D: Oh, yes, it had to. Because you were on your own in a wide, wide world. You took care of yourself, got yourself up and at 'em, knew where you were going and what you were doing, tended to business, and paid attention.

C: Did you enjoy meeting people from other parts of the country and broadening your horizons in that way?

D: Oh, yes, I think that was an important part of it. Different lifestyles, different climates, various ways of doing things, different speech patterns, sometimes you wondered if you spoke proper English.

C: It was a great opportunity to meet other people from other parts of the country. Did you feel that what women were expected to do and be changed when the war was over? Do you think

opportunities opened for women? Because you were in such a unique specialty.

D: I think so, because a great many of those women in the WAVES went on to find jobs in civilian life by virtue of their military training and experience.

C: Did you maintain any service friendships when the war was over?

D: Several. I corresponded with and sent Christmas cards to Dott DeHaun, Dot Doran, Gina, Nell, Betty Gleason, Alice Todd, and others. Over time I've lost contact with several of these friends.

C: Did you attend any WAVE reunions after the war? Because there were some in Boston and New York.

D: I did not get to those. In fact, I did not even know about WAVES National until last December when a group of WAVES were having a Christmas party at the Larchwood Inn in Wakefield, Rhode Island in the room right next to where my group was meeting. A

Navy friend of mine introduced me to the WAVES president who sent me an application to join their association.

C: Ocean State WAVES. Oh great, because you can probably link up with some of your friends who are in their state units. So now you're a member of the Ocean State WAVES, and the WAVES National as well; that's a great organization. That's where I've gotten alot of names for my interviews, from their membership list.

D: I was surprised that I didn't know anybody on that membership list. Many are from Massachusetts and Connecticut. I thought there would be someone I knew. Most of my really good friends weren't from around here. They were from Massachusetts, Minnesota, California, the Midwest and the West Coast. If you look at the homebase residency of the military when World War II began, many people in the Midwest went and joined the Navy, and the people on the coasts joined the Army.

C: That was odd.

D: That used to throw me a curve.

C: Well, I guess the people in the Midwest wanted to see the ocean. Where did you settle after the war?

D: When I had my discharge, I went East. We lived in a little house in Wickford, Rhode Island. That was the first place we lived, right across the street from the high school. I was busy at home one day when there was a knock on the door. It was the principal from the high school. Someone had told him I was a retired school teacher, and he had come over to see if he could hire me to work at the school.

C: And did you?

D: I did. I went to teach there for awhile. We could not find housing in that area. Housing was in very short supply with Quonset and all their military personnel, so I left the school job. Then I went back to college.

C: Where did you go?

D: I went to the University of Rhode Island. That is where I took my library training.

C: When did you finally get your degree from U.R.I.?

D: October 3, 1968. I finally got my master's degree in library science at the university.

C: Where did you teach after that?

D: I taught at Narragansett, R.I. I worked at the elementary school, and the middle school. I organized the first school libraries at the elementary school and at the middle school; they didn't have a high school then. But they finally built a high school. I organized the high school library and I was the librarian there until I retired.

C: So you were involved in school librarianship in Narragansett for your career. How long did you work there?

D: I worked there until 1984, I organized three libraries in the Narragansett school system.

C: Donna, can you tell me what the significance of your naval career was for you and for your life? What was it's importance, it's significance, it's impact on your life?

D: I feel that I did something worthwhile for my country. I think I put my talents to use in a positive way, and I believe it made me a better person. It certainly broadened my horizons.

C: Well, that's a wonderful comment.

D: I also think it made it easier for me to lead my life in this big world. I have no idea of what I may have done had I stayed in a small town in the Midwest.

C: Do you have any comments you would like to make on your career in the service? You spent a good three years in the navy in a very unique specialty.

D: I think if I had not married, I would have stayed in naval service awhile longer.

C: And why would you have stayed in longer if you had not married?

D: I would have felt I was doing a good enough job where I was, and living a good life, and I had no attachments elsewhere, except my personal family to be concerned about. After I was married, I had other obligations elsewhere.

C: But the service was important for you because it did change your life and you met someone there.

D: Yes, I met someone in the Navy, and he is a really nice person. My husband was at Pearl Harbor on the hospital ship USS Solace. His job was picking dead people and burning bodies out of the water for two days.

C: A horrible experience. It would be good if he would write up his reminiscences if he would want to.

D: He has given presentations to fraternal groups and other organizations. He just did one at the Davisville elementary school.

C: Do you have any other comments to make on your naval career?

D: I do not wish to march, at high noon to a recording of the Washington Post March playing over and over again on a public address system, while it is pouring rain and my shoes are shrinking on my feet!!

C: I want to thank you very much for your reminiscences of an aviation mechanics mate. This is the first interview I've done with someone who had this rating and this specialty, and you spoke very well about your duties and activities. I want to thank you very much.

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