

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE, NEWPORT, RI

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

HISTORY OF THE WAVES

HISTORY
OF THE
WAVES

NO. 47

MARGARET EBBITT WINTERS

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE

1997

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
THE HISTORY OF THE WAVES

INTERVIEWEE: MARGARET EBBITT WINTERS

INTERVIEWER: EVELYN M. CHERPAK

SUBJECT: THE HISTORY OF THE WAVES

DATE: JANUARY 24, 1997

C: This is the first oral history interview with Margaret Ebbitt Winters of Newport, Rhode Island. I'm taping the interview at her home at 34 Roseneath Avenue in Newport. Today's date is January 24, 1997. Margaret, I'm so glad I saw your name in Len Panaggio's "Grist Mill" column as being a WAVE in World War II. You're one of several Newporters who did join the service. I'm very happy you consented to give me this interview about your time in the WAVES as a storekeeper. And I want to begin by asking you where you were born and when you were born.

W: I was born in Newport, Rhode Island.

C: Do you remember the date?

W: I'm trying to think. Wait a minute.

C: Was it 1923? I think that was on your

W: Nineteen twenty-three. August 1923. Yes.

C: What did your father do for a living?

W: He was one of the owners of the Newport Jitney Association.

C: Oh, how interesting! It was a bus company?

W: Yes.

C: And where did they run the buses to and from?

W: I guess they ran them on Warner Street downtown, on Marvin Road on top of Warner Street. And down Van Zandt and they went down Thames Street, and around town. It was a city bus.

C: So it was basically a city bus. I see. Did you mother work?

W: Not really, no. Women in those days didn't work.

C: So she was a homemaker.

W: Yes.

C: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

W: I had two brothers and two older sisters. I was the baby.

C: Oh. Did you spend your growing-up years in Newport?

W: Oh, yes.

C: Where did you live in Newport? What street?

W: Bedlow Avenue. We lived there. Then we sold Bedlow Avenue. Anyway, Bedlow Avenue and then I remember the fifth ward. When I married him, we were living in the fifth ward, so we built this house.

C: Here you are. Did you graduate from Rogers High?

W: Yes.

C: Do you remember what year that was? Did you graduate before or after the war began?

W: Oh, before, I guess.

C: Okay. So maybe around 1941?

W: 'Forty-one it was, '41. Yes.

C: Did your family have any Navy connections?

W: No. Of course my brother was drafted and went into the Navy.

C: Oh, he did.

W: My older brother.

C: Did your sisters serve at all in the war?

W: No, they were a lot older then.

C: Oh, okay. Where you when Pearl Harbor was bombed on December 7, 1941? Do you remember where you were, and what your initial reaction was to this bombing?

W: I don't. That's a long time ago.

C: Oh, okay. Do you remember, though, if you were horrified or shocked?

W: Oh, yes. I guess we all were. Yes.

C: Did you keep up with news about the war before you enlisted in the WAVES?

W: I guess. Sure. It was in the papers every night.

C: How did you hear about the WAVES?

W: Well, that's a good question.

C: Do you remember? Was it through newspapers or posters?

W: Gee, I really don't remember. There were several girls in Newport that went in. Probably I heard about it through them.

C: So you heard about it probably through other gals that joined.

W: Yes.

C: Why did you decide to join the Navy?

W: I don't know. I guess it was a patriotic thing to do. All the guys were enlisting now--some were in the Marine Corps. Oh, some of the girls around here went in the Marine Corps.

C: Yes, they probably did. So patriotism was your main motive for joining the Navy. What was attractive about the Navy, let's say, vis-à-vis the Army or the Coast Guard?

W: I don't know. I guess the Navy was always a kind of a presence here in Newport. We were brought up in the Navy.

C: Yes. I think the Navy presence was very strong here, obviously. So you felt exposed to the Navy?

W: Yes. And a lot of my friends in school, their fathers were Naval officers, who were stationed here in some way. It was a Navy town, really.

C: Oh, absolutely!

W: Yes.

C: So you felt more familiar, I think, is that it, with the Navy than with any other service? When did you enlist in the Navy?

W: I think it was '43. You had to be 20 years old. I was born in '23. So I think it was '43.

C: That you enlisted.

W: Yes.

C: Now, where did you have to go to enlist? Did you enlist in Newport, or did you have to go to Boston?

W: Gee, I really don't remember.

C: Do you remember if you had to take any tests in order to get in?

W: I don't know that they did.

C: No. Usually they did give you tests.

W: Did they? Probably. Because I graduated from Rogers in '41.

C: And then you enlisted in '43. What did you do before you enlisted?

W: I worked at the telephone company during the war on Spring Street.

C: That was your job before you enlisted. Was there any publicity about your joining the WAVES in the local newspapers?

W: Gee, it could be. That's a long time ago. You know you hear of one--like there were several girls around here that went in. I guess it was the thing to do.

C: How did your parents feel about your decision to join?

W: Well, they didn't really care.

C: They were positive?

W: Yes.

C: Well, that's good. So they were supportive of it. You initially had to go for training at the U.S. Naval Training School at Hunter College in the Bronx.

W: The Bronx, right.

C: Do you remember if you went alone, or if you went with a group?

W: I know we went by train, and we picked up people on the way from here. Maybe we went-- I know I was on a train in a group of them. But I don't know if that's when I left Georgia and went to Norfolk. Maybe that's when.

C: Well, it could be. But usually they went in a group.

W: Maybe it was.

C: Had you been to New York City before?

W: No.

C: Okay. Well, that was kind of a shock.

W: Yes.

C: Do you remember what your initial impression of the U.S. Naval Training School was?

W: Not really. I know, like, if they had parades, the City of Norfolk, they always made us march in them.

C: Well, we're talking about New York.

W: Oh, New York. Oh, that's what we were talking about.

C: Yes, this is in New York. When you went for boot camp, so to speak, you were at Hunter College in New York. Was New York overwhelming to you?

W: Gee, I don't know how long we were there, to tell you the truth.

C: You were probably there about six weeks.

W: Yes. It wasn't that long.

C: Do you remember where you lived? What your living conditions were like?

W: We lived in these apartment buildings. Maybe they were empty and they took them over. I remember we lived in apartment buildings.

C: And you must have had roommates.

W: Yes, yes.

C: Do you remember if you roomed with girls from New England or from other places?

W: Probably a mixture. I know this girl here was from New York; I know that. And these girls were all from different places.

C: Do you remember how your day was structured? What did you have to do during the day?

W: We went to school. I'm trying to think. Indoctrination, where you went for lectures and all that stuff.

C: Classes.

W: Classes, yes.

C: Did you find the material that you had to learn easy or difficult?

W: It wasn't difficult.

C: It was fairly easy for you. Did you like the marching and the drilling.

W: Yes, you know, it was fun. I remember when it came to the "WAVES March." And if you didn't go in the right direction, you all banged together.

C: Well, you had a platoon leader.

W: Yes, but still.

C: You had to practice. Now, did you march to classes, and did you march back home to the apartment?

W: Gee, I don't know if we just stayed in the same building or what. I don't really remember.

C: Did you like the Navy uniform?

W: Yes, it wasn't bad.

C: You enjoyed wearing it then.

W: Yes. We had to.

C: Yes, you had to. No choice about it.

W: No choice.

C: Because some of the gals said they joined because of the uniform.

W: Oh, no.

C: They liked that. Did you mind the discipline of military life?

W: No, it wasn't too bad.

C: So it was not a difficult transition for you then?

W: No.

C: From civilian to military life.

W: We were only there--I forget how many weeks.

C: Six weeks.

W: And then we were-- We took a long, long train ride down to Georgia. And then we came back, I think, to--

C: Well, let's finish with boot camp first before we get ahead of ourselves.

W: Yes. Right.

C: Do you remember any entertainments there? Did you have any entertainments--concerts, singers, comedy?

W: Yes, they used to bring in different people--singers and different things to entertain us. I forget who some of them were.

C: But they did provide you with extracurricular activities.

W: Oh, yes.

C: Was it mandatory that you had to attend church, and did you?

W: No, I guess that was--we didn't have to.

C: But it was up to the individual.

W: Yes.

C: Did you attend?

W: I think so.

C: Did you ever get any time off? Normally you would get from Saturday noon through Sunday off.

W: Could be.

C: Do you remember ever going into New York City and seeing the sights?

W: Yes, we used to go to town. There was a girl in our barracks that was sent somewhere else, and we had a long weekend. I remember we took a bus and went to visit her.

C: Oh, so you left.

W: Yes.

C: Do you remember any amusing or outstanding events that happened during your six weeks at boot camp at Hunter?

W: Oh, boy! Not really.

C: Did you have a graduation ceremony there?

W: I don't remember. That's over 50 years ago.

C: I know. It's a long time. Did you express a preference at all for the kind of job or rating you wanted? Or were you just assigned to one?

W: We were just assigned, I guess. They gave us some kind of tests in different things.

C: And you were just assigned after that.

W: Yes.

C: Well, did you get any leave after boot camp before your next assignment for advanced training? Did you ever get back to Newport before you went to Georgia?

W: I really don't know.

C: Well, when you found out you were selected to be a storekeeper, what was your reaction?

W: Well, I don't know. They just told you to go; that's where you're going.

C: And you went.

W: They put us on a train, and there we went.

C: Where did they send you to for advanced training in storekeeper school?

W: Georgia State College for Women.

C: And where was that?

W: Down in Milledgeville, Georgia. They told us at the time, one of our instructors said, that because of the war, the colleges were almost empty. They were begging for-- So that's why they had

this thing with the armed forces to send the people there for training, which made sense because they were empty, those colleges.

C: Oh, yes, yes. That would make sense.

W: And they said some senator or someone from Georgia, he got them to use that college down there. That's what they told them. That's how come we went there.

C: Right, right. Well, that's kind of out in the middle of nowhere, Milledgeville, Georgia.

W: I know it. It is.

C: And you went there by train. Do you remember the trip at all?

W: Oh, yes. It was a long trip.

C: Do you remember what time of year you were going there?

W: I don't know.

C: Well, you lived right in the confines of the college when you were in Milledgeville. How long was your storekeeper's training?

W: I don't know, but it was at least six weeks.

C: That you were there.

W: Yes.

C: Do you remember what kinds of things you had to study or learn to be a storekeeper?

W: Yes, we had to take accounting.

C: Because you were preparing to do what kind of work?

W: Office work, I guess. Because when I finished there, they assigned me to the Disbursing Office in Norfolk.

C: So it would be payroll.

W: Payroll.

C: Okay. Well, do you remember any friendships, making any friends, in Milledgeville?

W: Probably, you know.

C: But nobody long term that you kept in contact with?

W: Not really. After the war everybody just went their own way.

C: Dispersed. Did you ever have any time off in Milledgeville?
And if you did, what did you do?

W: There wasn't much to do down there. I know the people down there, they didn't like the Northerners at all.

C: Why--? How did you know that?

W: Well, they'd give us a hard time and different things, you know. We'd go in the shops in some place. They weren't too pleasant.

C: Oh, I see. So you noticed that there was animosity between the North and the South.

W: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

C: And they expressed this even to the WAVES who were serving their country. Interesting. Well, after you finished the school in Milledgeville, where were you stationed?

W: I think it was--was it Norfolk? Probably Norfolk.

C: The big Norfolk Navy Base. Did you have leave before you went to Norfolk?

W: I think so. I think so. I think we did. So you could go back home.

C: Did you go back to Newport to visit?

W: Yes, probably. Yes.

C: And then went to Norfolk from there. What office did you work in at Norfolk?

W: Disbursing Office. I could tell you what we had to do.

C: Sure.

W: I found this kind of-- Well, it was interesting. Because the fellows would be on these ships, they'd be out to sea for, oh, sometimes weeks and weeks at a time. So when the ship would come in, we'd know ahead of time it was coming in, we had to look up their records and see how much money was coming to them. We'd figure it out, and so we put it in a fat satchel. So I used to have to have an armed guard.

C: Oh, really!

W: Oh, yes. And they walked me down to the pier, and they'd carry the money. And they'd open up the satchel. I mean they'd have a table there set out on the pier. And the guys would come off the ship and come up to us, and give us their name, and we'd look it up and give them the money that was coming to them.

C: Oh, really! That's an interesting way of paying them. Were there other WAVES with you?

W: I just remember one fellow and myself.

C: Oh, you were the only ones doing this.

W: Well, just on that particular ship that was coming in. If another one came in a few hours later, then somebody else would go.

C: Yes. Somebody else would go. But just one WAVE and an armed guard did the payroll for a ship.

W: Right.

C: Well, that was quite a responsibility.

W: Yes, it really was. So the guys, oh, were they happy. They got their money, and they took off as fast as they could into town.

C: Well, that's quite something. But other than that, you were in the office then.

W: Yes.

C: Doing the payroll.

W: Yes.

C: Do you remember what you were paid?

W: No. So much a month. I don't remember how much it was.

C: And do you remember what your rate was? You were a storekeeper--?

W: I was Storekeeper Second Class.

C: Did you have to work on Saturdays?

W: I think we'd get weekends off. One girl that was with us was transferred to--oh, what was the name of that town outside of Norfolk?

C: Virginia Beach?

W: No. It was one-- I remember we went to visit her one weekend.

C: Oh, so you had weekends off.

W: I think it was Washington. Washington.

C: Oh, well, that's good. So your duties basically were figuring payroll and paying the payroll.

W: Yes.

C: Did you work in the office with many different WAVES?

W: Yes. There were quite a number of sailors and WAVES.

C: Were there any civilians in your office?

W: Yes. Yes, there were.

C: And was your boss a military person?

W: Yes.

C: How were you treated by the military men that you worked with, the sailors?

W: Well, for the most part all right. But I think there was a little bit of resentment because those guys had to go to sea, and we'd take over their jobs in the office. So I think there was a little bit of--

C: Oh, that's interesting, that they resented the fact that you were taking over their positions. Did you feel that you were discriminated against in any way?

W: Yes, they'd give us a hard time.

C: The sailors?

W: Yes, yes. I think they resented us a little bit.

C: Were you harassed at all?

W: Not really, no.

C: Well, that's interesting. What did you like about your assignment?

W: Well, I don't know. I always liked working with figures and bookkeeping. So I mean it was interesting. I liked that.

C: Was there anything you didn't like working in payroll as a storekeeper?

W: Not really.

C: So they were all good experiences for the most part, the work aspect of it anyway.

W: Yes.

C: Do you remember where you were billeted on the base and what the quarters were like for the WAVES?

W: Well, we had cubicles, you know. You didn't have much privacy.

C: Was it a wooden barrack?

W: Yes. And there were double beds, one on top of the other.

C: Bunks.

W: Bunks in each cubicle. Then you had that one shower room at the end of the hall.

C: And you had to store whatever you had in lockers.

W: In a little locker, yes.

C: In little lockers. Did you make any friends in that assignment in Norfolk?

W: Oh, yes.

C: That you kept up with?

W: We had-- After a while you lose track. This Lee Jacobs was from--she was a Jewish girl from New York City. She was our platoon leader. She was a big, tall girl.

C: In Norfolk?

W: Yes.

C: Oh. So did you have to march in Norfolk as well and drill?

W: Oh, yes. The city would have a parade on Armistice Day, and we'd have to go and march in it, and different things like that.

C: Oh, that's nice. So you had to be available for civic events.

W: Yes.

C: That's good. Did you feel that you were able to survive on your pay?

W: Oh, yes. Because they fed us and everything, and we got free medical care.

C: Did you save your money, or did you spend it?

W: It all depends. I forget how much it was. It was not much. Just enough to buy essentials. And of course we were in uniform.

C: Were you there in the summer at all, in Norfolk?

W: Yes, yes.

C: And then during the summer they changed the uniforms.

W: Yes. They had like a seersucker.

C: Was it gray and white?

W: Yes, yes. Because our winter uniforms were wool.

C: Yes, they're lovely. They're very nice, the Navy uniforms.

W: Yes.

C: Did you like the seersucker uniform?

W: Well, they were cooler.

C: And you had to wear the lisle stockings.

W: I guess we did.

C: They were kind of heavy. How did you survive in that hotter climate in the summer? Norfolk can be quite swampy.

W: I don't remember.

C: Did you feel the heat?

W: Probably.

C: You didn't have air-conditioning then.

W: No, no.

C: So you had to work--

W: You got used to it, you know.

C: Did you socialize with other WAVES when you were there?

W: Oh, yes.

C: Did you go out with them?

W: Oh, yes. Sure.

C: And, for example, what kinds of things would you do in your spare time? What kind of recreation did you engage in?

W: Just go out, I guess. Get something to eat, go to movies.

C: That kind of thing?

W: Yes.

C: Did you date Navy men there?

W: I'm trying to think. There was a fellow there, a sailor boy from Newport, that I used to date. We'd go out together. Just have fun, go to the movies. And what was that other fellow's name that--

C: Oh, you did date Navy men then?

W: Well, yes. We'd go out.

C: Somebody from Newport?

W: Yes. And we'd just go out, you know.

C: Did you ever have any contact with civilians at that time, either in the town or on the base?

W: Yes, I guess there were civilians that worked in the offices. They had a lot of civilians working in the Disbursing Office and different places.

C: How did they react to the WAVES?

W: Well, all right, I guess.

C: You didn't notice any hostility on their part?

W: No, no.

C: So they treated you fairly?

W: Yes.

C: Did anything interesting or amusing happen during your time in Norfolk? Anything outstanding that you can remember from your time there?

W: Not really. I do know that--I guess that's bound to happen anyway--a few girls got themselves pregnant and had to be discharged.

C: Oh, really? They did? That was probably a scandal.

W: Oh, yes.

C: At that time.

W: A couple from our barracks.

C: Oh, really?

W: Yes. So they discharged them right away and sent them back home.

C: Yes, yes, that happened. Did you keep up with news about the war when you were in Norfolk?

W: I don't know, really, to tell you the truth.

C: Did you write to your parents or friends regarding your WAVES experiences?

W: Probably. I had some letters. Oh, you have them now. A few letters.

C: Right. You have a few letters describing your life in the WAVES. Well, were you in Norfolk until the end of the war in August 1945?

W: Yes.

C: Where were you on V-J Day, do you remember?

W: Now, V-J Day was what date?

C: August 15, 1945, the surrender of the Japanese.

W: Yes.

C: And do you remember the celebrations in Norfolk?

W: I don't know if I was back in Newport or what?

C: Well, that was just about at the end of the war. You probably weren't discharged at that time. But there were great celebrations. Do you remember being involved in any celebrations at the end of the war?

W: Well, I don't know whether I was in Newport or what. I mean everybody, I guess, you know, was dancing in the streets and really happy as could be.

C: How did you feel personally about the end of the war?

W: Well, I guess everybody was happy. I don't know whether I was back home or not. I forget where I was.

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

W: I don't know if she ever came. We had so many lectures and people coming in. I don't know.

C: Do you remember when you were discharged from the Navy, what year?

W: 'Forty-five, I think. I got-- Yes, the war was over in 1945.

C: August '45.

W: Yes. It was around then.

C: Do you remember what process you had to go through?

W: Not really.

C: Did you receive any medals upon your discharge?

W: I don't think so.

C: A lot of the gals received something called the "ruptured duck," which isn't really a medal, but it's a little insignia that they got.

W: I don't know. Maybe I did. I don't know.

C: How did you feel about leaving the Navy? Were you happy? Were you sad?

W: I think everybody was happy that time because the war was over and everything.

C: Would you have stayed in if you had the opportunity to, and if they allowed it?

W: I don't think so. I think after a few years, I guess, I was anxious to get home.

C: Did you have any leave time during this two years in Norfolk?

W: Yes. We used to have weekends when we'd have off.

C: But I mean extended leave like two, three weeks' vacation where you could return home?

W: Gee, I don't remember.

C: Or take a trip or something like that?

W: Yes, I know we took a trip to-- A girl that was in our barracks was went to Baltimore. I remember we had a long weekend pass, and we went to visit her in Baltimore.

C: Did you feel that the WAVES had a strong sense of bonding?

W: Oh, yes, I do.

C: A strong sense of esprit de corps?

W: Especially in your own barracks you got close to everybody.

C: And everybody worked together?

W: Yes.

C: Were there any conflicts at all?

W: Well, I suppose there always is among some people. But I don't remember. I do remember that pregnancy was a problem. Several girls had to--

C: Yes, that's what you mentioned. Did you feel that the WAVES was a smoothly-run organization?

W: Yes.

C: It was a new organization. Did you have any preconceived expectations when you entered the WAVES? Did you have any ideas of what it would be like?

W: Not really.

C: Did the WAVES' experience change or redirect your life in any way? Do you think it made any impact on your life?

W: I don't know. When I went to storekeepers' school, of course, when I got out of the Navy, I could use that, the accounting and all that I got there.

C: So the skills that you learned in the Navy you were able to apply to another job.

W: Right.

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

W: I think so.

C: Did you enjoy meeting other women from all over the United States?

W: Oh, yes.

C: Did you feel that that broadened your horizons, got you out of a small town?

W: Oh, yes.

C: Did you feel that the war had any impact on what women were expected to do after the war?

W: I suppose it did.

C: In what ways?

W: Well, before the war, I mean, women just stayed home and took care of the home, and that was all. But when you went in the service like that, why, you were out and met all kinds of different people. And you were more independent.

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

W: Not really. Once it was over, everybody was scattered around to different places. And you just, you know....

C: Did you return to Newport after the war?

W: Yes.

C: And what did you do in Newport when you returned?

W: Oh, boy!

C: Did you work?

W: Oh, yes. I went to Bryant College.

C: Oh, you did!

W: Yes, on the GI Bill. Everybody did that.

C: Good for you.

W: I graduated from there.

C: Was that a two-year course or a four-year course?

W: Two, I think.

C: Well, that's great you took advantage of the GI Bill. Did you get a job?

W: Yes. I worked somewhere, but I can't remember.

C: Did you get married after the war, too?

W: Yes, I met my husband right after the war.

C: And you said he was in the Army.

W: Yes.

C: And he was a Newporter.

W: Yes.

C: Did you attend any WAVE reunions after the war?

W: I don't think we had any.

C: There were a couple in Boston and New York.

W: Were there? Yes. No, I didn't go to those.

C: Do you belong to any WAVE organizations?

W: No, not really. No.

C: Did any of your children join the Navy?

W: No.

C: Can you tell me what the significance of your Naval career was for you and for your life?

W: Well, it was a good experience. I got out and saw a different part of the world. You know when you come from a small city, a small place like Newport. It did broaden your horizons, really, getting out and seeing different people from different places.

C: And you found that useful and helpful.

W: Oh, yes.

C: Did you work at all after you came back? You said you went to college, which was a good thing.

W: Yes.

C: And that was on the GI Bill, which they offered the WAVES, which was great. So you took advantage of it. Did you work after you were married?

W: Let me think, what did I do? Oh, isn't that awful?

C: Mrs. Winters, do you have any other memories that you want to add to the interview about your service in the WAVES? Anything else that you want to comment on?

W: Oh, boy!

C: About your experiences, about your training in the Navy in World War II?

W: Well, not really. I mean I enjoyed it while I was there. I learned a lot. Coming from a small town, you meet a lot of people from different places. So it broadens your horizons, it really does.

C: Okay, great. Well, thank you very much for your memories of your time as a storekeeper in the Navy in World War II. Thank you.

INDEX

- Baltimore, Maryland, 35
Boston, Massachusetts, 7, 40
Bryant College, Smithfield,
Rhode Island, 39
- Georgia State College for
Women, Milledgeville,
Georgia, 16
GI Bill, 39, 41
- Hunter College, Bronx, New
York, 8, 9, 15
- McAfee, Mildred, 33
Milledgeville, Georgia, 16,
17, 18, 19
- Newport, Rhode Island, 1, 3,
6, 7, 16, 20, 30, 33, 38,
40, 41
New York City, 9, 14, 26, 40
- Norfolk, Virginia, 8, 9, 18,
19, 20, 23, 26, 27, 28, 31,
32, 33, 35
- Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, 4
- United States Marine Corps, 5
United States Naval Training
School, Bronx, New York, 8,
9
United States Navy, 4, 5, 6,
33, 34, 37, 40, 42
- Virginia Beach, Virginia, 23
V-J Day, 32
- Washington, D.C., 23
WAVES, 1, 5, 7, 19, 21, 23,
25, 29, 30, 32, 33, 35, 36,
37, 41, 42
World War II, 1, 42