

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE, NEWPORT, R.I.

Oral History Program

History of the WAVES

No. 56

Marguerite Sullivan Reynolds

Oral History Program

Naval War College

1997

Naval War College
Newport, Rhode Island
Oral History Program
The History of The WAVES

Interviewee: Marguerite Sullivan Reynolds

Interviewer: Evelyn M. Cherpak

Subject: The History of The WAVES

Date: July 22, 1997

C: This is the first oral history interview with Marguerite Sullivan Reynolds. She was a WAVE in World War II. The interview is being conducted at her home in East Greenwich, Rhode Island. Today's date is July 22, 1997. I'm very glad that you consented to be interviewed for our WAVES in World War II oral history project, Mrs. Reynolds. It's a pleasure to be here. And I'd like to begin the interview by asking you where and when you were born ?

R: I was born in Providence, Rhode Island, on February 5, 1922.

C: What did your father do for a living in Providence ?

R: After my father had completed his service in World War I, where he had been wounded in France, he returned to the United States and in 1919 established the Rhode Island Radio School, in Providence, Rhode Island. In later years, the name of the school

was changed to Rhode Island School of Electronics. The name change was dictated by the necessity to better reflect the focus of the curriculum, which was constantly being expanded and updated to keep pace with the exploding developments in the field of Electronics Technology. My father was the director of the school. It was his life's work. In addition, for about ten years in the 1920s, he was a state representative.

C: So he was in politics, too ?

R: Yes.

C: And your mother ?

R: My mother was born in Rhode Island also, as was my father. My mother was the private secretary for Senator Jesse H. Metcalf, who was the senator from the state of Rhode Island. She was the secretary of his Rhode Island office.

C: Did she work in that capacity after she was married ?

R: No, she did not.

C: Did you have any brothers or sisters ?

R: No, I did not.

C: Did you spend your growing up years in Providence ?

R: Yes, I did.

C: Where did you graduate from high school ?

R: From Classical High School.

C: That's college prep, isn't it ?

R: Yes, it is.

C: What year did you graduate in ?

R: 1939.

C: Did you decide to attend college ?

R: Yes, I did.

C: Where did you go ?

R: I enrolled in Trinity College in Washington, D.C. an all
women's college.

C: What did you major in there ?

R: I majored in English, and minored in history.

C: When did you graduate ?

R: 1943, the height of the war.

C: Right.

R: Because of the war, we had to have practice air-raid drills, take turns serving meals in the dining room, and since most of the men were away in military service, we didn't have our Senior Prom. These are just a few of the minor changes that the war had on our college life.

C: That's right. Nobody to invite. What did you do immediately after you got out of college ?

R: All through my last two years of college, I had been thinking I would like to join the WAVES. However, since I had been away from home and from my parents for four years, I decided that I would postpone applying for maybe a year. I expected that I would have

a great deal of objection to it from my parents. . My mother wasn't too especially keen on me going away from home again so soon. But my father was quite in favor of my joining. Actually, he really encouraged me to submit my application.

C: Why did he do that ?

R: Well, he was fiercely patriotic, and very proud of the fact that he had served his country when it was at war. He had said to me, "Marguerite, you will never be sorry that you have served your country in time of war. It is an opportunity that I think you should think seriously about doing." So with his affirmation, my mother's acquiescence, and my own inclination, I went forward with application process.

C: Oh, so you did right after you graduated or shortly after ?

R: Actually it was about ten months later. It took that long to convince my mother. In the interim, I went to work. I obtained a job at the Walsh-Kaiser shipyard. This job made me feel very much a

part of the war effort, because we were building Navy frigates and Navy combat-cargo ships right there.

C: And that's in Providence ?

R: That's in Providence, yes. However, Walsh Kaiser has long since gone and the area is no longer a ship yard. Some of the old buildings remain and new ones have been built, which are occupied by various industrial businesses and even a culinary arts school. Strangely enough, the whole area is still fondly know as "The Shipyard".

C: What did you do at Walsh Kaiser ?

R: I was a job analyst in the personnel department. Several other women and I would interview the department heads and several workers in every department, both craft and clerical.

On the basis of what we learned from these interviews and questionnaires, we wrote a job description for every job during the

year. We would assign points for the knowledge, experience and education required for the job, as well as for the social and/or leadership skills needed, the working conditions present where the job was being performed and the hazards of the job. This is called a merit rating system. The job descriptions with their merit ratings were collated into a booklet which was used by the employment department, the payroll department and the draft deferment department.

C: So you enjoyed that, I assume.

R:Yes, I did. Not only was it interesting, but I felt like I was part of the war effort. The Navy men who were assigned to the ships were already on hand in the yard, learning all about the workings of their ships while they were being built. So there was quite a Navy presence in the yard and a military atmosphere. As a matter of fact, I was even invited to a launching of one of these ships.

C: That's great, so you were contributing. Why did you select the WAVES, instead of the WACS or the SPARS or the WASPS ? What was attractive about the navy versus the other services ?

R: Well, to begin with, I live in Rhode Island, which is known as the "Ocean State", and where many navy installations are located.

Secondly, my parents had a cabin cruiser on which we spent much time during the summer, and I was an avid sailor on a small sail boat when I was growing up, so I had always had a great interest in nautical things, the water, and boats. Finally, in college, many of the girls who had graduated ahead of me had entered the WAVES.

Some had come back to speak to us undergraduates at assemblies.

They all seemed so enthusiastic about their work, telling us how interesting it was, and how proud they were to be wearing the WAVES uniform. All of these factors impressed me and influenced my decision to join the WAVES.

C: Can you comment at all about patriotism at this time, the patriotic fervor in this country, and your own feelings ?

R: Yes, among the people I was in contact with, it was very, very strong. Even people who had no thoughts of entering military service were going all out to do what they could. They were volunteering at blood donor banks, lets say, the USO canteens, knitting socks and sweaters for the Red Cross to be given to service men, and taking courses in First Aid and nutrition and at Trinity enrolling in physical fitness courses especially designed for women planning to enter the military after graduation.

Of course, everyone was buying U.S. Defense Bonds also.

C: So there was a great enthusiasm, and patriotic fervor. When did you enlist and where did you go to enlist ?

R: I finally enlisted in Northampton, Massachusetts, at Smith College.

C: Pardon me, that's where you went for training, but did you go to Boston to fill out your papers and take examinations in preparation for Northampton ?

R: Yes, I did go to Boston, to the office of Naval Officer Procurement to submit the paper work associated with my navy application for enlistment and for my physical examinations.

C: And then you went for your training at the U.S. Naval Midshipmen's school in Northampton. When did you go there ?

R: I went there in August of 1944.

C: So that was just about two years after the WAVES had been organized. Did you go there on your own, or did you travel with a group ?

R: No, my parents went with me, by train.

C: Very good. Was there any publicity about your joining the WAVES in the Providence Journal ?

R: No, by now, it had become pretty commonplace for women to be going into the services.

C: Oh, many smaller papers did that. Can you tell me about your experiences, your eight weeks, at the U.S. Naval Midshipmen's School at Smith College ? Where did you live when you were in training there ?

R: I lived at the hotel.

C: Oh, at the Northampton Hotel.

R: Yes, on the fourth floor, room 420.

C: Wow, that's great. Did you have roommates there ?

R: Yes, I did. I had three roommates. It was very interesting, and very different from anything I had ever experienced before, even in all my years in girl scouting. We would have room report every night. Each midshipman would have a turn doing it. When it was your turn, you would go to each room after lights out, and say "room number such and such, report." Bed one, and the occupant would

reply "here". Bed two and again the reply, " here", and so on for beds three and four. If for some reason, there was no answer, then you had to find out why. Perhaps the occupant had already fallen asleep, or was in the bathroom at the time. But that was really the only reason why. One would never think of not being there.

C: Right, so you had bed checks. That is interesting.

R: I remember, too, that we also had room inspections. And the very first room inspection we were to have, our room was spotless, perfect, we thought. There were no Irish pennants (sheet corners) hanging from the springs under the mattresses on our bunk beds. It and everything was dust free, even the fixtures in the bathroom shone. Things that were left over, we just shoved in the closet and closed the door tightly on it, so they wouldn't come flying out. So when the officer of the day came in to make her inspection, we

all stood at attention as she checked everything with her white gloves-- she really did have her white gloves on. To our dismay, she opened the closet door, and all the extra gear and luggage came tumbling out. Needless to say, that never happened again. We were told that this was not acceptable, and not to repeat the practice.

C: Did you get demerits for that ?

R: Well, yes, in a way. We had to do extra drill duty, that is, extra marching.

C: Oh, I see. Did you like the marching ?

R: Actually, I like it. It was kind of fun. Even to this day I can remember the commands. Dress right. By the left flank

Harch, double to the rear, harch, and so on. Those were some of the commands we would have to give when it was our turn to be the company commander, and to respond to, when someone else was having their turn. Sometimes two companies would be approaching each other on the drill field. As they got closer and closer together, each

commander (and every midshipman in her company) would be hoping she'd remember the correct command in time to keep them from colliding. There were occasional collisions. Then we'd laughingly reassemble and start practicing all over again.

C: Oh, there were ?

R: Yes, sure.

C: Did you have to march to class ?

R: Yes, we did.

C: So you were marching every place you went ?

R: Every place we went, exactly, that is, when we went as a group.

C: Did you adjust easily to military life at Northampton ?

R: Yes, I did. I really liked it. It was hard, but I liked the idea of it.

C: Good. Can you comment at all on the kinds of classes you took, and the kinds of instructions you received. Do you remember anything about what you learned ?

R: Well, I do have some recollection of the customs of the service course, which information came into good use several times when I was on active duty. I will tell you about these occasions a little bit later. In another course, we learned about the kinds and types of planes and ships, how to identify them by their shapes and silhouettes, and so on. I always remember the one that was the easiest to identify, because it looked like a flying coca cola bottle. The history of the navy was another course. Some of my notes went back to ancient naval history, but the course was primarily about the history of the United States Navy. Then there were classes and movies about the current war (World War II), about the bombings and sinking of U.S. ships, the horrors of war, and the atrocities committed by our enemies--even on poor defenseless civilians. This really ignited my sensibilities and made me more determined than ever to do all I could to help end the war.

C: That's good, so you got a good indoctrination into navy life. Was there any opportunity to participate in any extra curricular activities ?

R: Yes, we had choir, in which we learned Navy songs, hymns and marching chants and songs. Also, we had time off.

C: Oh, you did ? What did you do in that spare time ?

R: We would rent bicycles and ride over to a nearby little town. I I guess you could say it was local sightseeing. Because it was autumn in Northampton, I remember having mulled cider with cinnamon stick for the first time in my life. I can still remember how delicious it tasted in the clear, crisp air, with the beautiful fall foliage all around.

C: Yes, Northampton is a small town and there probably really wasn't to much to do during that time frame. Did anything amusing or noteworthy happen during your training period ? Any event that you can remember that was outstanding ?

R: I can't think of anything especially.

C: Did you keep in contact with your roommates you had at Northampton ?

R: Yes, I did.

C: Who did you keep in contact with, or did they go with you to your next assignment ?

R: You said roommates, I misunderstood. No, my roommates at the Northampton Hotel, were assigned to different naval posts and lost track of them after we graduated. However, I did keep in contact with some of the girls that who were in my Company and who were also assigned to Washington, D.C. In addition, on the very first day on which we had assembly in Northampton, I was delighted to discover that two of my Trinity classmates were also my classmates in the Naval Midshipmen's School. However, they were in different companies than mine. I have kept in touch with them even to this day.

C: Right. Well, after that you had a wonderful program there of your graduation from U.S. Naval Midshipmen's School. Do you remember ever meeting Captain Underwood who was the director of the Midshipmen's School.

R: I don't personally remember. I'm sure that I know that he had spoken to us in lectures.

C: Well, it was a he. Captain Herbert Underwood, oddly enough, was the director.

R: Oh, then no, I don't remember him at all. I was thinking of Captain McAfee.

C: Yes, she was the director of the WAVES, and she gave a speech. But you had no other opportunity to meet her I guess.

R: No, I didn't.

C: After you completed the course and graduated, you received the rank of ?

R: Ensign.

C: Ensign, when you finished.

R: Yes, and I lost quite a bit of weight doing it.

C: Oh, you did ? Why did you lose the weight ?

R: Well, I think all the marching to and fro, just the rigorous life, very scheduled, and I guess just because we felt under pressure because we were all so afraid that we were going to get bounced.

C: Oh, really ?

R: Yes, because you think, here I left my job, everyone at home knows I have come here, and if I don't make it, what will happen ? You know, what will be my reputation ? I think that was some little stress added into the circumstances too.

C: So, everybody toed the mark ?

R: Oh, yes, indeed.

C: And obeyed the rules, which is very good. After you graduated from the U.S. Naval Midshipmen's School, where were you assigned ?

R: I was assigned back to Washington D.C., to the Bureau of Ships.

C: And where was that located in Washington ?

R: Well, it was behind the White House, between Constitution and Independence Avenues, and practically on top of the Washington monument. They were temporary buildings that had been built, not air conditioned, and hot in the summer.

C: Oh, right on the mall then ?

S: Right on the mall.

C: Oh, so that's long since gone.

S: Yes, it is. It was sort of in the area of where the Vietnam Memorial is now located.

C: Oh, I see. You were assigned to the Bureau of Ships. Did you need any additional training for the type of work that you were going to do there ?

S: No, just to be taught the procedures in that particular office.

C: Did you travel there immediately after you left the Naval Midshipmen's School, or did you have some time off ?

S: I had a few days off which I spent at home.

C: And then you went down there ?

S: Yes.

C: Well, when you arrived, how did you make living arrangements ?

S: Well, that was a bit of a challenge, as we had two or three days to get our quarters set up before reporting to our duty station. We had to find something immediately for that night. There was a housing or placement officer at the Bureau of Ships, who had a listing of people who had rooms in their private homes which were available for rent to military people. We had to travel by taxi to look at these places, so we were limited by time and finances to inspect too many. Edna Coard, who had graduated from Northampton with me, split the list, and late in the afternoon we got together to compare notes. We decided upon a colonial type of house on 16th

Street, N.W. It had a stairway to the second floor that ran from the front door, right through the owner's living room. Our small single rooms were on the second floor and we had the use of a private bathroom. It was adequate, and we lived here for several months. Meanwhile, Ruth Warfel and Mona O'Connor, who had graduated from Northampton with us, were also living in private homes. We keep searching the newspaper advertisements for accommodations for the four of us, in which we could cook our meals. Fortunately, we located a furnished house for rent at 3526 Whitehaven Parkway. It was the end unit of a row house in Georgetown, with two bedrooms, a bath, living room, dining room, kitchen and an open deck off the dining room. We were delighted with it. It had a lovely narrow but deep back yard. Here, Mona, who was quite a gardener, developed a beautiful flower garden, and even grew tomatoes there. It was very cozy and homelike.

C: What did you call it ?

R: We called it WAVE Haven being located on Whitehaven Parkway, it seemed an appropriate name at the time.

C: Great. Now these three girls that you roomed with, did they graduate from Northampton at the same time as you ?

R: Yes.

C: Oh, they all did, and you just happened to meet up with them ?

R: Well, we all kind of knew each other. You'd know the people in the same company, especially if they had lived on the same floor.

C: So many WAVES were assigned to Washington in those days. Were any of them working in the Bureau of Ships with you ?

R: No. The other three worked in BuPers.

C: Can you tell us just what you did in the Bureau of Ships ?

R: I worked in this section that was called spare parts. All the

requisitions from ships for spare parts, probably to replace the original set that had been used to repair damage from battle or normal wear and tear, would be routed to our section.

We, in turn, would send the request to the proper Department having cognizance over the system on the ship for which the part was ordered. That department would order the part from the navy supplied depot nearest the port where the ship was docked, and ascertain the date of expected shipment. The Department involved would then return the requisition to us with the supply information noted on it. We would then prepare the TWX to be sent to the ship informing them when the part was shipped and from supply depot. The TWX would then be sent out by the BuShips communications room. It was our job to know where and what the status of the requisition was at all times it was in BuShips possession. However, at no time did we know where the ship was located or when it had come into port. That information was secret.

C: Did you ever know that ?

R: No.

C: You never knew where the ship was located ?

R: No. However, I remember on one occasion receiving a telephone call from an irate and exasperated ship's captain, saying "where are the parts I ordered on my requisition number such and such? We're having foul weather and my ship is hung up here in Hampton Roads, and I can't leave without those spare parts. So get them here, pronto. Our capable file room crew quickly found the requisition, noted where it had been sent for action in BuShips. That department was contacted and apprised of the problem. They, in turn, contacted the supply depot from which the parts had originally had been shipped. Within hours, another set of parts was on its way to Hampton Roads. Of course, the head of our spare parts section, the commander himself relayed this news to the ship's captain.

C: So that's basically what you were doing at the time, making the tickler files, and making the contacts, and responding.

R: Yes.

C: How many WAVES were in your office ?

R: I believe there were five officers and seven enlisted women.

Then we had a crew of about fifteen civilian workers.

C: Who was the head of the office ? Was it a military man ?

R: Yes, Captain McDowell was the head when I first arrived. Later there was a change of command when Captain McDowell received orders for sea duty. Commander Peterson then took over as chief of the department. There was a little bit of ceremony at the time of the changeover, to which the entire staff, military and civilians alike, were invited. It was held at commander Peterson's home.

C: Would you say there was a gulf between the enlisted WAVES, and the officer WAVES ?

R: No, there wasn't. We worked very well together in the office. However, outside the office, there wasn't an opportunity to socialize with them. They lived in their WAVE barracks, and we lived in our own private quarters in town, away from Navy property.

So our paths never crossed outside the Bureau of Ships.

C: How did the men treat you ? The naval officers who headed the office, how did they treat the WAVES and respond to them ?

R: They treated us very well, with respect, confidence in our work and with appreciation which they often voiced. We worked as a team with them--even though the working conditions were far from plush--the buildings were just temporary that had been hastily constructed at the beginning of the war.

C: No, I can imagine they weren't. Were they wooden buildings ?

R: Yes.

C: And not air conditioned in the heat of Washington ?

R: No, they were not.

C: How did you survive that ?

R: Well, I guess we were all in the same boat so we just did.

C: You just put up with it.

R: Yes. Of course, it was a big help that the Navy did some of our laundry for us.

C: Where did you have to bring your laundry to be done by them ?

R: There was a designated area in one part of the Bureau of Ships wings, where you could drop off your soiled laundry--your bed linens, towels, blue and white blouses and seersucker summer uniforms. The white blouses would be starched and ironed and the blues neatly ironed. When you picked them up, the laundry would be neatly folded and carefully boxed. Some of them you might want to touch up a little bit, but mostly it was done well. It certainly was very helpful to have it done, especially in the summer.

C: They did the uniforms for you ?

R: Just the washable things.

C: That is interesting, I didn't know that. How many days a week did you work ?

R: In the beginning, we would work six days a week.

C: Saturdays included ?

R: Yes.

C: How many hours a day did you work ?

R: From 8 to 5. But rarely did you get out at 5. We stayed until the work was finished. However, we always did get a full hour for lunch. Eventually, the work week schedule was shortened to 5 and one-half days. When that occurred, we were dismissed at noon on Saturdays.

C: They really worked you rather hard then.

R: Yes, we had a very large volume that passed through our office every day.

C: Was there any sense of pressure in this job ?

R: No, There was no pressure, because there was such a sense of

satisfaction.

C: Oh, that's good.

R: You were doing a job that was helping the navy, helping your country, helping the men at sea. It was a great feeling of accomplishment.

C: Did you ever find it routine and boring ?

R: No, I didn't, because each requisition that came in was different.

C: Was there anything that you didn't like about the job ?

R: No, I can honestly say there wasn't. I looked forward to going to work each day. One of the interesting things was you had to take the trolley car to work and at the corner, about two blocks from where I lived was where I had to take my trolley car. The lady that lived there was the former owner of the Hope Diamond. I don't remember her name.

C: Marjorie Merriwether maybe ?

R: Yes, that's who it was. She used to have one of her servants, her butler, I suppose, serve hot coffee to those who were waiting for the trolley. That was her contribution to the war effort, and one that was welcomed very much on a cold winter morning.

C: Oh, how nice. Well, were you still an ensign during this time frame ?

R: Yes, I was.

C: Did you get promoted as time went on ?

R: By the time I had accumulated sufficient points for length of service, I had already been released from the service. It was while I was on terminal leave, following my release date, that I was promoted to LTJG. Officially I am a LTJG, but I never served on active duty in that rank. About the time that our work schedule was shortened to 5 and one-half days a week, we were dismissed at noon on Saturdays. Taking advantage of this, about once a month, I would take the train home to Providence from Washington, to visit

my parents. It was a rush to catch the train, and even more of a challenge to find a seat. I would really hope to find one since it was a twelve hour ride to Providence. Sometimes another military person and I would share a seat, alternating turns at sitting down every few hours. The trains would be so crowded that some young serviceman would climb up and sleep in the baggage racks.

Occasionally, the MPs would come through the cars examining leave papers, at random. Around sunset, the train conductor would squeeze his way through all the people standing in the aisles, requesting those who were sitting at the windows to pull down the blackout curtains.

C: People were traveling, and I guess a lot of military were using the trains.

R: Yes.

C: And you said you had blackout curtains on the trains ?

R: Yes, because the route of travel of the train from Washington was right along the coast line. The blackout curtains would prevent the train from being a target for enemy submarines lurking in the waters off the coast. As a matter of fact, everyone whose home was located in the states along the coast had to draw their shades at night for the same purpose.

C: Right.

S: As a matter of fact, it was a very good precaution because an enemy submarine was sunk right off Block Island, during the war. and the day before the war ended another German submarine was captured. Aboard was found day old local newspapers and fresh bread and milk. Of course, our newspapers would play these stories up. It made us realize that the enemy was indeed in our own backyard and very real.

C: Oh, yes, I can imagine that. So you had a fine trip once a month to Rhode Island, and practically had to turn right around and return on Sunday.

R: Yes, I'd arrive at midnight Saturday, have a short sleep, attend church with my folks and have brunch at home. Then I'd catch the Sunday noon train back to Washington, arriving there at midnight. it was a marathon trip, but it was worth it.

C: Oh, yes, it's always nice to come home. When you were in Washington for the weekends, or after work, what kind of social life did you have ? What did you do ?

S: It was very pleasant. We would go to the Smithsonian Institute, the National Cathedral, and the Mellon or National Art Galleries. Actually, we visited the Mellon Gallery so frequently that they got to know us and invited us to their special receptions. At one of these I met senator Theodore Francis Green, who was the senator from Rhode Island, and, of course, when he found out I was from Rhode Island, he invited all four of us to go to the Senate and to have lunch with him in the Senate Dining Room. Because of our work schedules, we could not accept this great invitation, which, of

course, was quite a disappointment for us. By the way, T.F. Green airport is named after that senator.

C: Oh, yes. What else did you do with the other WAVES besides going to the art gallery ?

R: Frequently, we attended the concerts of the National Symphony Orchestra. On Sundays, we would often go out to eat in restaurants. I remember Mrs. Kay's Toll House, being one that we particularly liked. Besides the excellent food, it had lovely ground and gardens. Also, we did a lot of visiting with other WAVES, having each other over for lunch or dinner. We had to be very careful of the menu we chose on these occasions, however, because food rationing was in effect. Each person was limited to a certain number of food coupons per month. All during the war years, rationing was applied by the government to everyone, civilians and military alike.

C: Oh, yes, how did that affect you ?

R: Mostly we had a standard menu when we had guests. It was a tuna fish casserole, canned vegetables, rice and perhaps a salad. Dessert was always fruit, because sugar was rationed. None of the foods on this menu required points, so we could get by with that.

C: That's good. What kind of goods did they ration ?

R: I guess gasoline would be first on the list, because the amount allowed each driver limited driving to the barest essential minimum. Meat, butter, and sugar were all in limited supply also. It was at this time that margarine, as a substitute for butter, came in to existence. You would buy this pure white lump of something that looked like lard. In the package there would also be a yellow tablet. The two would have to be mixed together until the lard-like lump had a yellow color and looked like butter. it certainly did not taste like butter, however. After a while, most of us grew to tolerate the taste of the margarine. At least it was better than eating dry toast with nothing on it.

C: Oh, that is interesting. Did you have any opportunity to date any men during your stay in Washington ?

R: No, there wasn't that opportunity. Most of my few dates were with men whom I knew, who were just passing through Washington on their way to a new duty station.

C: Yes, passing through, so you didn't really have that much of an opportunity to meet other men.

R: No.

C: Your office was almost all women then. Did you keep up with news about the war during your time in Washington ? Did you read the newspapers ?

R: Oh, yes. We had the Washington Post delivered daily to our house. Also, the Navy put out a daily communiqué on the progress of the war, which was delivered to all departments. I mentioned earlier to you that I had several opportunities to put the information I had learned in my customs of the Service course at

Northampton, to practical use when I was on active duty . One of these occurred one noontime, on my lunch period. I was walking on the street paralleling the east wing of the White House and had just reached the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue, on my way to meet someone for lunch. At that moment I saw the President's black car approaching, with the presidential flags flying from its front bumper. It was preceded by a car full of Secret Service men and followed by another car full of Secret Service men. I had learned in my course that the only civilian a military person salutes is the president of the United States. Here was my opportunity! I came to a perfect standstill on the sidewalk and gave my best salute to the president as he passed by. Fortunately, he was looking out the window on my side of his car, and he saw me. He gave me a big smile, waved and then tipped his hat to me. This was President Truman! It was the probably the biggest thrill of my service career.

C: That was Truman ?

R: Yes.

C: Oh, isn't that interesting. You did the proper thing.

R: Yes, I was very glad that I knew the proper protocol to follow in this circumstance.

C: Oh, absolutely. Do you remember, speaking of Roosevelt, what your reaction was to his death, and how Washington responded to it?

R: Like the rest of the nation, I was shocked to learn that this great man had passed away. Everything in Washington was subdued. All the flags everywhere, even at the foreign embassy buildings, flew at half mast. There were services at all the churches, and I believe our offices were all closed on the day of his funeral. There was an air of mourning all over Washington.

C: Did you watch the funeral procession ?

R: No. I don't recall doing so. I just saw the newspaper pictures and read all about it.

C: Some of the WAVES I have talked to did. In fact, one of them marched in it, which was kind of interesting. That transition went on rather smoothly to President Truman. How did you celebrate on VJ Day, August 1945.

R: It was a time of exuberant celebration. Everybody was out in the downstreets, singing, dancing and shouting. Streamers were thrown from floor windows into the streets. Church bells were rung throughout the city for hours without ceasing. Some of us went to church services. It was just a day of complete euphoria and jubilation. And the four WAVES who lived at Whitehaven Parkway were out in the streets celebrating with all the rest of Washington.

C: I'm sure it was. How did you personally feel about the end of the war ?

R: I was delighted. I was happy, very happy we had won the war and that it was over. Most of all, I was glad that our fighting men could now come home.

C: Mrs. Reynolds, do you remember coming into contact with any civilians in Washington, either on the street or at work, and how did they react to or treat the WAVES ?

R: In general, very well. Really, they made no distinction between us and themselves. The civilians, with whom I had the most contact, were the women who worked in the spare parts office with me. They respected us, and we them. We were equals.

C: And the men? The civilian men?

R: I didn't have much contact with civilian men, except with the civilian engineers in the other departments in Buships, and that was mostly by phone, and was most cordial. Sometimes they would call me just to tease me about my New England accent--for example, the way I'd pronounce the word "parts" and like words. It was a

good working relationship. I did have one opportunity where I had to be a civilian, once while on active duty. Again, my customs of the service course came in handy. A dear friend asked me to be a bridesmaid at her wedding, for which I would have to wear a bridesmaid's gown identical to the gowns that were to be worn by the other bridesmaids. Before I could accept, however, I had to go through the proper chain of command to request the Secretary of the Navy's permission to wear civilian clothes and to have sufficient leave granted so that I could stay overnight the night before the wedding was to take place. Both my friend and I were relieved that the permission came through on time. The permit to wear civilian clothes was for the wedding day only. I was specifically required to wear my uniform while traveling and even to the wedding rehearsal and dinner, the night before the wedding. The wedding took place in the Lady Chapel of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City and the happy bride was delighted that her wedding album

has pictures of her bridal attendants all wearing identical civilian type bridesmaids gowns!

C: Oh, how interesting. You were always in uniform when you were on duty?

R: Oh, yes, and out on the street, always. We didn't even own civilian clothes, except for around the house, or sitting out in the back yard and sun tan and things like that, but, generally speaking, we didn't even own civilian clothes, except for those we wore at home.

C: Totally with the navy uniform, in both the summer and winter.

R: Yes. even after the war was over. I have another incident to tell you about when my Navy uniform was very beneficial even when I was not on duty. One time, another WAVE and I had leave. We and two civilian women friends went to Cuba for a vacation. The civilians flew by commercial air line to Miami, where one girl's parents were staying. We WAVES flew to Pensacola Naval Air Base on

a Navy plane. It was the first experience that either of us had had flying in a Navy plane. Because we had the lowest priority possible, we held our breaths all the way for fear that we might be bumped off the plane, somewhere halfway to our destination, by someone of higher rank or higher priority, needing our seats. We were very fortunate that that did not happen, and we arrived in Pensacola as planned. We stayed overnight in the Navy women's officers' quarters and the civilian girls parents came up and drove us back to Miami. From there, all four of us flew via Cuban commercial plane to Havana.

C: Why did you choose Cuba ?

R: None of us had ever been to Cuba and since it was February and very cold in Washington, we decided it would be a good warm destination. We stayed at the Hotel Nacional, a beautiful hotel right on the beach. At that time they had great, good relations between us and Cuba. This was really like a vacation trip. You

didn't feel like you were in the war at all. However, while we were there, the carrier PRINCETON came into port. It was a great celebration for Havana and the United States. It was kind of a celebration of the United States and Cuba's unity, that sort of thing. All of Havana was just open hospitality to all the navy people that were there, so we happened to be navy people and there. They meant primarily the staff of the PRINCETON, so everything was open to us. We were allowed to go to the Havana Yacht club. They had a country club. They had all these places that were usually quite exclusive primarily, and we did have a great time. And while we were there, we did meet some of the navy staff, ensigns, that were aboard the PRINCETON, and they invited us out to dinner aboard the ship, which was quite a thrill. So at a certain time, they sent the captain's gig, or the admiral's gig, I don't remember, but it was this boat with all these macramé lace curtains, with a little runabout motor, and we got out and walked up the gangway and at

that the top, the WAVES knew exactly what to say, "request permission to come aboard, sir" and permission granted and we went aboard. We were so thrilled that we remembered all this that we had been told in Northampton, and we had dinner aboard ship, and it was lovely. They took us on a tour of the ship, as much as they were allowed to show us. It was quite a thrill.

Our time in Cuba was all too short, but our leave permission required us to be back on duty, so regretfully we returned to Washington. This time, we flew back via commercial airline in order to be sure that we could arrive on time. It was a wonderful leave, the only extended vacation I had while serving on active duty and, therefore, it is all the more memorable.

C: Oh, that's great. That sounds like a very interesting experience. So you had a little time off.

R: Yes, that was in February of 1946.

C: So that was after the war was over. How long did you stay in the WAVES after the war was over ?

R: I was released in June and was on terminal leave until August. My roommates were released at different times in late May and June, depending on the work situations in their offices. Ruth Warfel and I were the last two left. Since we couldn't pay the entire rent without the other two, we had to find temporary quarters until we were released. I stayed at the Meridian Hill Hotel for two or three weeks until I was finally released. The Meridian Hotel had been converted into a military women's hotel early in the war.

C: You were released in August of 1946.

R: My actual release date was June 1946, and I was on Terminal (paid) leave until August 1946, when I was discharged. It was while I was on Terminal Leave that I received my promotion to LTJG.

C: Oh, I see. You got that rank just as you were getting out. Did you receive any medals for your service ?

R: Yes, the one for duty in the United States: the American Theater Ribbon.

C: Also, the World War II Victory Medal, probably.

R: World War II Victory, yes.

C: So you had a couple. Well, when you were discharged in the summer of 1946, were you happy or were you sad to leave the navy ?

R: Well, it was a feeling of mixed blessings. I was very glad that I had done what I had done. It was a great sense of pride and satisfaction. But the war was over, and it was time to move on.

In that respect I was happy to move on, resume my life, and pick up where I had left off. However, I was sad to leave the girls with whom I had lived so happily on Whitehaven Parkway--two of whom I was never to see again.

C: Would you have stayed in if you could have? Because women were not allowed to stay in the service until 1948.

R: I think I might have, yes.

C: Good. Did you feel that the WAVES had a strong sense of esprit de corps ?

R: Oh, absolutely.

C: Camaraderie ?

R: Yes, positively.

C: Did you feel that the WAVES were a smoothly run operation ?

R: Yes, it was a well run organization.

C: Despite the fact that they were established in a relatively short time. Did you ever know anyone that was discharged for any disciplinary reasons ?

R: No, not for disciplinary reasons. The only required discharge that I knew of was married WAVE who became pregnant and had to leave the service. That is all changed in today's Navy, I understand.

C: Yes, they did in those days. Did you feel that the WAVES experience changed or redirected your life in any way ? What was its impact on your life ?

R: I can't say that it changed my life in any way. I think if I hadn't been in the WAVES, my life would have been pretty much the same as it has turned out. I do think the WAVES helped me to become a much more mature individual than I was when I first entered.

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

R: In my case, definitely, yes. Having been an only child and rather conservative in nature, I think the war helped to make me more sure of myself and gave me confidence in myself that I had never had before.

C: Did you find that it broadened your horizons, meeting people from all over the country ?

R: Yes, to some degree, yes.

C: Did you find that what women were expected to do and to be changed when the war was over, or did they go back to the same type of situation and work ?

R: I think that was really the beginning of what we know as women's lib. I think that women realized that they could do things that men had formerly done, because we had done it during the war when the men were not here to do it. It raised their expectations of themselves, and gave them confidence in knowing there were no limits to what they could accomplish.

C: That's good. That is a very nice positive statement. Did you maintain any service friendships when the war was over ?

R: Yes.

C: Are you still in contact with these ladies, and who are they ?

R: Yes, one was my roommate in Whitehaven Parkway. She is Ruth Warfel, who became Dean of Students at Mount Holyoke College after

her discharge, and is now living in Maine. And another is Mary Elizabeth (Betty) Kirkley who was my classmate at Trinity College as well as being in my class at Northampton.

C: Oh, where does she live ?

R: She lives now in Florida. After she was discharged from the Navy, she stayed in the Naval Reserves and ultimately achieved the rank of captain. Fairly recently, she retired from the Reserves. However, she still retains close ties with the Navy and goes to Navy conventions and meetings held all over the country and it was just fairly recently that she has been discharged.

C: Oh, that's great. She might be interested in this project, too.

R: I think she might be.

C: And Mona, is she still alive ?

R: No, Mona has passed away. After her discharge from the WAVES,

she worked as the assistant to a man who ran Trader Vic's in California. Edna Coard was a writer for the Encyclopedia Britannica after she left the service.

C: Is she still alive ?

R: No, she has died.

C: Where did you settle after the war, and what did you do ?

R: While I was still in service, I had taken two semesters of evening courses at American University in personnel administration.

C: Why did you do that ?

R: Well, I thought that after the war, I might get my Master's Degree in Personnel Administration at Radcliffe University in Boston. Radcliffe is now an integral part of Harvard University. The name Radcliffe is no more. With the work I had done at Walsh-Kaiser shipyard, and my valuable experience in the WAVES in directing the enlisted WAVE personnel and civilian file room personnel, I thought personnel work would suit me. Of course, the

GI Bill was going to be available also, so that would have been a help, too. However, these tentative plans were changed when I finally was discharged. Instead, I went to work for my father at the R.I. Radio School which had been closed during the war. It was being reopened in September 1946, so my discharge in August was the perfect timing for me to assist my father in the re-establishment of the School. I was the recruitment officer and Dean of Students. Things went very smoothly and we were inundated with returning servicemen desiring to sue their G.I. Bill benefits to study at an accredited technical school whose job placement record had always been 100%, and which had been in existence since 1919, with the exception of the four years it had been closed during the war. The school was prospering when suddenly, in January 1947, just four months after it had reopened, my father had an acute coronary thrombosis attack and died instantly. My mother and I were faced with the weighty decision of what we would do about the school. I

had no knowledge of radio communications. However, on the positive side, my father had written the complete course, the instructional staff was in place, my mother had always been the school's financial officer, and fortunately I had had some indoctrination in its administration during the four months I had been working there, and also had some experience in personnel administration in the WAVES and at Walsh-Kaiser. So we decided to continue to operate it. I became the president and my mother the vice president and treasurer. We continued to run it for 27 years.

C: Wow, that is quite a record. That is amazing. You ran it until 1973 ?

R: Yes. In 1973 we sold it to Johnson and Wales University, located in Rhode Island. Although there were several potential buyers, we decided on Johnson & Wales, because of the quality of their reputation and also because as part of the transaction they promised to retain our entire staff of instructors and office

personnel and also to keep the memorial scholarship we had established in my father's name, following his death. So it was a very satisfactory conclusion to a very important part of our lives.

C: That's amazing.

R: In the mean time, I was married in 1950 to a dentist.

Eventually, we had four sons, one of whom is the executive vice president of a Rhode Island bank, another is a dentist and two are physicians.

C: I was going to ask you, and I ask many of the ladies, if they met their husband during the war, because many of them did.

R: No, I didn't. I met my husband through a mutual friend in the summer of 1949. It turns out that he was studying at the University of Maryland Dental School in Baltimore in 1940 and 1941 while I was in college in nearby Washington at the same time. But I did not know him then. We were married in June 1950.

C: Oh, so you were married in 1950 ?

R: Yes, 1950.

C: So you met him around 1949.

R: Right after he graduated from Dental School, he joined the Army in August 1942 and was assigned to the Army Dental Corps, where he served in the Pacific Theater and the Philippines. He was discharged in May 1946 and since he had not practiced before going into the service, he had to immediately find an office and establish his practice. Offices suitable for a dental office were very difficult to find, right after the war. However, eventually he did find an appropriate location in West Warwick, RI and he took it, although he had not ever lived in that town.

C: Was he from Rhode Island ?

R: Yes, he was. So he started his office in West Warwick in 1946.

After we were married in 1950, we lived with my mother in Providence which is about thirteen miles from West Warwick. In

1953, we moved into a house we had built in West Warwick and that is where our family grew up. Actually, I lived there forty four years.

C: Right. Then to the move here. Did you ever talk about your WAVE days to your children ?

R: Yes, occasionally.

C: Did any of your children join the navy.

R: No. They were all subject to the draft during the Vietnam War, but even though one of them had a very low draft number, they were not called.

C: Do you have any other comments on your service in the navy during World War II ? Any other outstanding events that we may have missed, or anything interesting or unusual, or anything ordinary that you wanted to mention about any of your friends or activities ? Anything about war time Washington that was different or unique.

R: Washington was unique in that there were so many individuals wearing military uniforms. The uniforms were everywhere--in the downtown stores and streets, in the churches, in restaurants, on the trolleys, in theaters, everywhere. The military seemed to far outnumber civilians. But that was because Washington itself was on duty for the war. Nonetheless, the gorgeous cherry blossoms bloomed on time along the Potomac River; the Washington, Lincoln and Jefferson monuments were as beautiful as ever, although not spotlighted at night; and at Whitehaven Parkway, four WAVES cooked dinner every night, prayed for the men who were fighting on the ships at sea, wrote letters to family members and friends who were in all the military services stationed in this country and abroad, had a Victory Garden and even had a small Christmas tree, decorated with hand-made decorations, but no lights, at Christmas time. So I guess it was just Washington's appearance that was unique during this time of war. It's heart was as warm as ever.

C: Well, I want to thank you very much for your reminiscences of your WAVE days during World War II, from 1944- 1946.

R: Thank you, too. This has been a very pleasant experience, reliving my WAVE days. I've always been very proud of the fact that I was a WAVE. Every opportunity I get, I mention it to people, because I think it is important for people to know that there were women in the military, and that we did something very valuable and vital for our country in WWII. We did make a difference, and I'm proud and grateful to have been a part of it.

C: Thank you.

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE, NEWPORT, R.I.

Oral History Program

History of the WAVES

No. 56

Marguerite Sullivan Reynolds

Oral History Program
Naval War College
1997