

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE, NEWPORT, RI

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

HISTORY OF THE WAVES

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BARBARA TANNER ALDRICH

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THE HISTORY OF THE WAVES

INTERVIEWEE: BARBARA TANNER ALDRICH

INTERVIEWER: EVELYN M. CHERPAK

SUBJECT: THE HISTORY OF THE WAVES

DATE: SEPTEMBER 17, 1997

C: This is the first oral history interview with Barbara Tanner Aldrich for the WAVES in World War II Oral History Program. The interview is being conducted at her home at 114 Sakonnet Point Road in Little Compton, Rhode Island. Today's date is September 17, 1997. I'm very glad we have the opportunity to get together, Barbara. And I want to begin the interview by asking you where you were born and when you were born.

A: I was born in Providence, Rhode Island, on the 20th of March in 1918.

C: And what did your father do for a living there?

A: He was a painting contractor.

C: And did your mother stay at home?

A: Yes.

C: People did in those days. Did you have any brothers or sisters?

A: I had one sister.

C: By the way, did she join any military?

A: No, she didn't.

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

A: Yes.

C: And where did you graduate from high school?

A: Hope Street High School.

C: And when was that?

A: In 1936.

c: You were 18 then. Did you decide to attend college after that?

A: Yes, I went to junior college.

C: And where was that?

A: It was in Bradford, Massachusetts.

C: Bradford College, I assume.

A: Yes.

C: And you graduated from there?

A: Yes.

C: And what did you decide to do after junior college?

A: After junior college I went to the School of Handicraft and Occupational Therapy in Boston.

C: Was that an independent school?

A: Yes.

C: And I assume you wanted to be an occupational therapist.

A: I wasn't sure what I wanted to be. But I liked the handicraft part.

C: And what did you do when you finished that school?

A: When I finished that school I volunteered at the Bureau for the Blind and did some work there. And then I was kind of at loose ends not knowing what to do. And then there was the Navy.

C: The war broke out in 1941 -- December 7th. And do you remember what your reaction was to the attack on Pearl Harbor and where you were?

A: Yes, I was listening to the radio actually. And I remember going out to the kitchen and announcing to my grandmother and mother who were there that it had happened. And what was I going to do? I thought I ought to do something.

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

A: Oh, yes.

C: How did you hear about the WAVES?

A: Well, first I noticed in my book there that I wrote to -- I'm

not sure what it was. But it was something that was spoken of to volunteer for the effort. And I don't know. I suppose it was in the newspaper, or over the radio, or whatever.

C: And you decided to enlist then in the WAVES?

A: Yes, a friend who I knew in Boston also wanted to go so we joined together.

C: Oh, that's fantastic. So you had some company. What did your parents think about your joining the WAVES? Were they pro or con?

A: Oh, yes, I think they were pro -- oh, absolutely.

C: You didn't have any problem with them?

A: No.

C: What was attractive about the Navy versus the other services -- the WACS, let's say, and the SPARS?

A: I was very much into sailing, so I liked the Navy. The Navy was just what I wanted.

C: Oh, okay. And being a Rhode Islander, being on the coast, I'm sure you would have that interest. When did you enlist and where

did you go to do so?

A: I enlisted in December of '42, the 8th of December, and in Boston, Massachusetts.

C: And you met your friend there I guess.

A: Oh, yes. She was from Boston.

C: And were you sworn in then?

A: Yes.

C: But I guess you had to wait a little bit until you were assigned to a training school.

A: Right, I had to wait until the 19th of February. I was then ordered to Hunter.

C: To Hunter College which was the U.S. Naval Training School, Women Reserve. How did you travel to basic training? Did you go with a group from Providence?

A: Yes. We went in parlor cars, what's more. And the train started in Boston and took the girls from there and then picked up the girls in Providence. And I think that's it. I think then

we went right to New York and we must have been bussed to Hunter because it was all set up for us.

C: What was your impression of Hunter College when you arrived?

A: We were tired and we really didn't have too much of an impression.

C: Do you remember what your first few days were like there?

A: Very hectic. Because being the first class, it wasn't all set up perfectly you know.

C: No, it wasn't that organized I guess. Because you did have the distinction of being the first class enrolled there which was marvelous. Captain Amsden was the CO of the Training School.

A: I think that's true.

C: I wondered if you had any contact with him. But anyway you were bailiwicked in apartments, weren't you?

A: Yes, I think there were six or eight of us in a room. It was not crowded. It was a fairly good sized room. So it was very nice. And we really had kind of a fun time.

C: Was your friend...

A: No, I missed her completely. So we weren't together at all. But I did see her once or twice while we were there.

C: Oh, so she was in the same class.

A: She was in the same class, but I missed being with her or anything.

C: Well, I guess there were hundreds being trained there. It was a large facility.

A: Yes, it was.

C: Do you remember the white glove inspections at all and what you had to do for them?

A: Not really. Not too much, except that it had to be done. And there were always some demerits somewhere.

C: Oh, really?

A: Oh, sure.

C: Do you remember how your day was structured, what you had to

do during the day?

A: No, I don't really remember Hunter. But I do remember later.

C: Oh, okay. I want to just ask you a few questions about Hunter then. You were there for I imagine six to eight weeks time frame.

A: Yes.

C: And you had to become indoctrinated into the Navy at this point in time. And one of the things you had to do was march and drill. What was your reaction to that? Did you like it?

A: Oh, yes. I think it was fun really. It was learning something with somebody else which was pretty...

C: Did you think that you adjusted easily to the discipline of military life and the routine which was very, very structured?

A: Yes.

C: Did you wear uniforms at that point in time? Did you have a uniform?

A: No. And I have a letter from my friend in Boston -- Dorothy her name was -- saying that she had trouble finding shoes before

she left. Now we had to bring our own shoes, I think.

C: Oh, I see.

A: And they had to be heeled a certain height and laced black shoes.

C: Right, that's what they wore.

A: So you had to bring them with you.

C: So they weren't thoroughly prepared. Did you have to have any shots when you went there?

A: No, I think we had them before we went.

C: Probably when you enlisted?

A: I think we were called to Boston for shots.

C: Right. I know you had to have a physical in Boston and you probably had the shots there. So you didn't have all the uniform at that point in time.

A: Oh, no.

C: So they weren't entirely prepared. What did you like about the uniform? Did you like the Navy uniform?

A: It was very neat, yes, certainly the wool one. We first had the cotton ones -- they weren't so marvelous.

C: Yes, but the wool ones were very nice.

A: Yes.

C: Did anything amusing or noteworthy happen during this eight week training period at Hunter? Anything that stands out?

A: I'd have to say I can't remember too well. I'm sorry.

C: When you finished your training did you express any preference for the kind of advanced training or billet that you wanted.

A: Yes, I think they did ask you for a list of what you might do. And I was hoping to go into cryptography. There was no call for any cryptographers at the moment, so finally they sent me to radio school. And my friend who hadn't any idea of anything about cryptography was sent to cryptography. Two days after I left they had a call for cryptographers.

C: Oh, so you just missed it.

A: Yes.

C: So you went to the radio school which was at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Did you have any time off before then?

A: Oh, yes, I think we did. But I can't remember too much or how much.

C: Did you travel to Wisconsin as a group?

A: Yes. We traveled in a very elegant parlor car I remember -- two or three of us to a little roomette. It was very nice.

C: So it was kind of plush. Did you have to go through Canada to get there?

A: No, but we did go some roundabout way. You didn't go directly to Wisconsin.

C: For some military reason I suppose. When did you report to the University of Wisconsin?

A: In March of '43. We were Division 7.

C: Division 7 -- so that must have been relatively recent too.  
How long were you there?

A: Until July.

C: So you were there almost four months.

A: Yes.

C: And where did they bailiwick you there -- where did they domicile you?

A: In Barnard Hall of the University itself. I don't know what happened to the people that were in Barnard Hall before that.

C: But they took it over.

A: The Navy took it over, yes.

C: And do you remember how many girls were in your class?

A: No, but there were 100 or so.

C: That was a goodly number. When you were there, what kind of instruction and classes did you take?

A: Can you stop that?

C: Barbara, we were just talking about the kinds of courses and your daily schedule at the radio school in Wisconsin. Could you give us just a brief outline of what you were doing during a day there?

A: On Monday at 0800 there was code. At 0900 there was procedure. At 1000 there was code. At 1100 there was drill. Then we ate on the first bell. We had a two minute warning. And at 1330 there was code. At 1430 there was typing. And 1530 seems to be free. At 1630 there was a lecture. And at 1900 there was code. So that was a busy day.

C: You were very busy. You were busy until 6:00, almost 7:00. That's incredible.

A: And we went on Saturday. We had physical education on Saturday and an exam and then code again. And then we were free in the afternoon.

C: And free Sunday, too.

A: Free Sunday.

C: Oh, so that was quite a busy schedule. And this went on daily

for a good four months.

A: Yes.

C: So you were well trained by the time you finished your course.

A: Indeed we were.

C: Do you remember if your instructors were WAVES or men.

A: I think most of them were men. I do remember going to a lecture once, having been up all night on watch, and falling asleep in the lecture. And the Navy man down below who was giving the lecture said, "Wake that WAVE up." I forget now whether I had to do another night watch or not.

C: Oh, so watches were something that you had to contend with as well as assigned duty. What did you do for recreation on your limited time off at the radio school?

A: Well, my roommate had a friend, a family there. And we used to go to dinner there once in awhile. And that was on a lake. So we could either row or sail. And there was a wonderful chocolate shop there which made the best chocolate sauce you ever had. So we used to walk down there. There wasn't much time anyway.

C: No, there wasn't much time. And you were there in the winter.

A: Yes, well spring -- but it did last. The winter lasted a long time.

C: Right it does -- till the beginning of spring, especially in Wisconsin. Did you make any lasting friendships from that time frame or anybody you've kept in contact with from the radio school?

A: No. Once in awhile I hear from this same roommate who had friends there -- but not really.

C: Did you have any opportunity for dating anyone at the University?

A: No.

C: You were pretty segregated then I guess from the University students. When you finished your training did you have a graduation ceremony?

A: Yes, indeed we did.

C: And from the program there were people who graduated with

honors and whatever. So it was quite an occasion.

A: Oh, yes, it must have been. I don't remember it too well.

C: After you finished your four months you were ready to be sent out into a regular billet all trained. And where did they decide to send you?

A: They sent me to New York City, the Eastern Sea Frontier.

C: And what were your duties there?

A: We monitored the radio for the Eastern Sea Frontier and we sent and received messages on teletypewriters which we had to learn to do actually.

C: Right there?

A: Right there.

C: Oh, you weren't trained in that?

A: We certainly had our typing, but we didn't know very much about the machines.

C: Right, the teletype machines. Did you find the work

challenging or interesting or did you find it boring and dull?

A: No, it wasn't boring. Because I think the messages were kind of interesting.

C: And what were the messages about?

A: They were about the orders given to the different ships and locations of ships. And then, of course, submarines -- any contacts with other submarines, etc.

C: The German submarines?

A: Yes.

C: In the Atlantic -- because they were doing a lot of damage. So you would know the location of these.

A: Yes, it would come over.

C: Of both the American ships and the German subs?

A: Yes.

C: Was your billet a classified one? Was the material you were dealing with, I would assume it was classified, top secret.

A: Yes.

C: You couldn't reveal anything at all that you were doing. I assume that a lot of this work was done by the WAVES or most of it in the office.

A: Yes. When we first went there, of course, there were men. And then gradually they left because we were there.

C: Yes. You were replacing men for sea duty. Did you work rotating shifts?

A: Yes. Three days 8:00-4:00, then three days 4:00-12:00 and three days 12:00-8:00. And then we had something like 72 hours off.

C: So you may have worked on weekends then, too.

A: Oh, yes.

C: Where were you living at this time frame in New York? Where did they put you?

A: When we first went we stayed in the Women's Military Services Club. And that was wonderful. Everybody was so nice to us there.

But you could only stay a few days until you found a place to live. And then this roommate that I stayed with who came to New York with me -- we moved to the Barbizon Hotel for Women. And we were there for nine months. And then they finally did get barracks. And so we had to move to that, unfortunately, because it was very nice where we were.

C: Oh, I'm sure. More private, instead of being in a barracks in New York City.

A: Yes.

C: Anyway, what were some of the perks of the Women's Military Services Club for the WAVES and SPARS and WACS?

A: They gave out free tickets for all the different plays. And we went to one almost -- every night we could we went to plays. And they gave free everything. The wonderful thing was that if you needed your suit pressed there was a man there who would press your suit for you while you waited. And all kinds of things. Let's see, what else.

C: All kinds of perks though.

A: Yes, free things for women.

C: They treated the service men and women very well I think.

A: Oh very, very well. Yes, much better I'm sure than now.

C: Right. Because of the patriotic feeling. And everyone was in support of this war.

A: Absolutely.

C: Did you have any contact with any civilians other than these organizations?

A: No. My cousin came to New York and we'd go out to dinner with him. But otherwise not too many.

C: Yes, your contacts were mainly the military.

A: Yes, there wasn't too much time -- I guess there was time, but I didn't...

C: Was your Commanding Officer or your immediate superior a Navy officer at Eastern Sea Frontier?

A: Our immediate superior was a Chief.

C: How did he treat you? Was there any discrimination, any ill

feeling against the women?

A: No.

C: No harassment?

A: No. That's why I'm always surprised now, because it must be quite different now.

C: Yes, I think so. Because women are entering the military service permanently, not just for the war effort -- the war and the duration -- six months as they used to say. What did you like about this assignment at the Eastern Sea Frontier?

A: It was in New York City. It was wonderful. And of course it was close to home, so that on my longer times off I could come home.

C: That's great. Was there anything that you didn't like about it?

A: No, I would say no.

C: Did anything exciting, amusing or interesting happen during this time frame at the Eastern Sea Frontier? Did you meet anybody outstanding?

A: I don't remember anything like that -- no.

C: It was just more or less a routine assignment.

A: Yes, I make it sound awfully dull, but it was really pretty nice.

C: It really was quite interesting. Was there any pressure in this billet? Was it a high pressure situation?

A: Not really, no. If we got a message that was urgent then yes, there was a little pressure. But, otherwise not, really.

C: Did you find it challenging?

A: Not really challenging.

C: What was your rank at this point in time?

A: When I first went there I was radioman third class. And then I progressed to second class. And when I left I was first class.

C: Oh, that's great. So you really went up the ranks quite rapidly. When you were in New York did you ever have a chance to socialize with naval officers or anyone else?

A: Oh, no. But enlisted people didn't socialize with officers.

C: Right, of course -- or other military men I should say. So you socialized mainly with other WAVES.

A: Yes, absolutely.

C: How long were you at the Eastern Sea Frontier?

A: Until October of '45.

C: Okay, so it was shortly after the war ended. During this time frame when you were at the Eastern Sea Frontier did you write to your parents or your friends regarding your daily routine and your life and your experiences?

A: Oh, I suppose I did. But I don't remember.

C: You don't have any of these letters?

A: I have some letters that were sent to me. And I'll let you look at them.

C: Those are marvelous because many people are very interested in collecting these letters and there are many books that have

been written based on the letters of women. In fact, Judith Barrett Litoff at Bryant College has written five books based on the letters of civilian women to their men folk. And there's one book on military women's letters. She's collected over 30,000 letters. You were in New York City on V.J. Day in August 1945.

A: And I do remember.

C: Good. Tell us about how you celebrated and what the situation was like.

A: I don't really remember much. But I do remember the first, and I suppose it was after -- no, it was the first European ones coming back. And I suppose it might not have been on V.J. Day and yet maybe it was, I can't quite remember.

C: V.J. Day was August '45. V.E. Day was May '45.

A: Right. So I remember the boats coming back and the fire boats sending their squirts of water and everybody blowing horns, bells ringing and all. And I suppose that was -- it must have been V.J. Day.

C: Yes, around August 15th, 1945. So that was a huge celebration. How did you feel about the end of the war personally?

A: Oh I was ready to leave. Indeed, I felt I had been in long enough so I was ready to leave.

C: So you weren't ready to continue on if you had the opportunity.

A: No, right.

C: Where and when were you discharged from the Navy?

A: I was discharged from the Navy the 3rd of October in '45 in New York.

C: In New York City. Do you remember anything about the discharge process -- what they told you or advice?

A: No, I don't really remember too much about it. I guess I was just ready to go.

C: Did you receive any medals at all for your service?

A: No, lots of papers that said, "Glad you did it," etc.

C: Right. You got something from the Secretary of the Navy Forrestal, commendations and that sort. From your experience in

the WAVES, did you feel that they had a strong sense of esprit de corps?

A: Yes, I did. Yes, I think so. Certainly during the war -- I would say, yes.

C: Can you comment on the patriotism that was apparent in this country and also among the WAVES? Do you feel part of your reason for joining was patriotism?

A: Oh, very much so. Yes. And I think patriotism was strong during the war.

C: It certainly was, more so than at any time. Did you ever know of anyone who was discharged for disciplinary reasons or infractions of any sort?

A: No.

C: Did the WAVES experience change or redirect your life in any way? Did it have any impact on your life?

A: After you left, the G.I. Bill of Rights gave you a college education. So I went back to school.

C: Great. Where did you go?

A: I went to the School of Design, Rhode Island School of Design, and studied landscape architecture.

C: Marvelous.

A: So I did do that and I think that was wonderful.

C: Yes, that's great. That was a great opportunity and many gals took advantage of it.

A: Oh, yes. The whole class at the School of Design I would say was ex-service men and women. And the teachers were all very pleased with them because, being older, they were much more interested in what they were doing.

C: Yes, they were I'm sure. Do you feel that your experience in the WAVES made you more independent and self-reliant?

A: Yes, probably. You grew up, you know.

C: Yes, that's true. That's what a lot of the gals said. They did grow up. Did you feel that the war made women more career oriented or not? Do you think it made them more interested in working outside the home?

A: Probably it did -- I'm sure it did.

C: Because they had a job and they could do things that they never thought they could.

A: Right, absolutely.

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

A: Not really, no.

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

A: No.

C: There were a couple in Boston, New York, kind of independently organized. Where did you settle after the war was over?

A: I went to Rhode Island School of Design so I was at home. And then after that, of course, I was a landscape architect in West Hartford, Connecticut.

C: How interesting. Who did you work for there?

A: I worked for Currier & Associates. And I worked there until I was married.

C: So you worked as a landscape architect until you were married.

A: Yes.

C: When were you married, may I ask?

A: I was married in February of 1952.

C: Was this somebody you met in the service?

A: No. Somebody I knew long before.

C: And was your husband in the service during WW II?

A: Yes, he was in the Army Air Force.

C: Did you ever talk about your WAVE days to your children?

A: I've talked a little bit. But they're not too interested. I think they're gradually getting more interested.

C: Right, it seems to be that way. Did any of your children join

the Navy?

A: No.

C: Could you sum up the significance of your naval career and add anything that we've missed. Is there anything significant about it for you in your life?

A: No, I think it was a growing up time. It was a time of feeling that you were doing something for something. I'm not very good at such things.

C: Was there anything else that you want to mention about this time frame, about these two years or so that you spent in the Navy? Anything that we've missed -- any event or occurrence?

A: I don't think so. I think we've covered it pretty well.

C: Thank you very much, Mrs. Aldrich, for your memories of your time in the service during World War II. We'll get this transcribed and have it edited and give it back to you. Thank you.

Just as an addendum -- when we were talking before we were taping I asked you if you had tried to enter the officer corps as many enlisted women did. Did you make any attempt to transition into the officer corps?

A: Yes, I did. I had been to junior college and that wasn't enough; it required four years of college, so I didn't make it.

C: All right, thank you.