

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE, NEWPORT, RI

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

HISTORY OF THE WAVES

HISTORY
OF THE
WAVES

NO. 69
DE ETTE UNRUH ELLIS

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
1998

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

INTERVIEWEE: DE ETTE UNRUH ELLIS

INTERVIEWER: EVELYN M. CHERPAK

SUBJECT: THE HISTORY OF THE WAVES

DATE: OCTOBER 14, 1998

EMC: This is the first oral history interview with De Ellis of Newport, Rhode Island. She was a Yeoman in the WAVES in World War II. The interview is being conducted at the Naval War College in Mahan Hall. Today's date is October 14, 1998. Mrs. Ellis, I'm very pleased that you consented to be interviewed for this program on your time in the WAVES in World War II, and I'd like to begin the interview by asking you a few background questions about your life before the military. Number one, where were you born and when were you born?

DE: I was born February 12, 1924, in Pretty Prairie, Kansas.

EMC: What did your father do for a living there?

DE: He was a farmer.

EMC: And your mother?

DE: She was a farmer's wife.

EMC: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

DE: I had four sisters and three brothers.

EMC: It was a large family!

DE: It was a large family.

EMC: Did you spend your growing up years in Kansas?

DE: I did until I was 17. And then I left and went to Michigan.

EMC: Did you graduate from high school?

DE: Yes.

EMC: And where was that?

DE: In Pretty Prairie, Kansas.

EMC: And what year was that?

DE: 1941.

EMC: Right. Just before the war started. Why did you decide to go to Michigan?

DE: I had two sisters there. And so I went up there and started going to school up there and then when my brother was missing in action, I wanted to-- My oldest brother had been in the Navy before I was born then. And it was very romantic to me, the Navy. So I wanted to join the Navy.

EMC: Oh, that's great. You said you were going to school in Pontiac. What kind of schooling were you taking?

DE: It was--I think just probably a secretarial school of some sort.

EMC: Did you work after you completed that?

DE: Yes. I worked at General Motors.

EMC: Right. They're big in Michigan.

DE: Oh, yes!

EMC: Big in Pontiac, anyway. You mentioned your brother was in

the service in missing in action. What branch was he in?

DE: He was in the Army Air Corps. He was a pilot in B-24's in the Pacific.

EMC: And you mentioned a sister when we were talking. What did she do?

DE: She was a WAC. And I think she joined before I did because she was older than I and she was mostly in California, I think.

EMC: That sounds familiar. So you had relatives in the service. Was that an influence? Or did that influence you in any way to join. The fact that your brother was in the Army?

DE: Oh, yes. It had a great thing to do with it.

EMC: Strong influence. Where were you when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

DE: I was in Pontiac. I came out of a movie theater when we got the news. It was stunning.

EMC: I'm sure it was. Did you keep up with news about the War before you enlisted?

DE: Oh, yes. Because my brother was in the service so we kept up very--

EMC: I'm sure.

DE: Yes.

EMC: How did you hear about the WAVES? Was it just general knowledge?

DE: Just general knowledge, I think.

EMC: And you chose them over the WACS and the SPARS and the WASPS?

DE: Yes, I did.

EMC: Why did you pick on the Navy or select the Navy?

DE: Because my eldest brother had been in the Navy when he was 17. And I was I think, a gleam in my father's eye, probably. And it had been a very romantic thing for me, the Navy. Because he sent me presents when I was tiny from Holland and different places and I don't know. It seemed the right thing to do.

EMC: Good. Was patriotism at all a factor in your joining?

DE: Oh, I think so. Yes.

EMC: When did you decide to enlist? What year?

DE: Well, I think when we found out my brother was missing was when I really decided I wanted to do it. But I had to wait until I was 20 and you had to get your parent's permission, so I had to have them sign papers for me to get in.

EMC: How did they feel about it?

DE: They seemed to feel fine about it. I don't remember that there was ever any question about whether I wanted to do that. That was fine.

EMC: No objections to it then?

DE: No, no.

EMC: Okay. Well, you joined and then when you were 20 and that would've been in--

DE: 1944.

EMC: Good. Were you sworn in in Pontiac?

DE: Yes.

EMC: Was there any publicity about your joining the WAVES?

DE: Yes, there was a little bit. It was a pretty small town then.

EMC: Right. We have a newspaper clipping: "Brother and Sister WAVE Are Already in U.S. Service." They did publicize those?

DE: Yes. They did.

EMC: In those days.

DE: As a matter of fact, when I first went into the service, I wrote back to the paper, The Pontiac Paper, and they published articles that I sent to them that I wrote while I was in the service. Now, I don't know where those are. Someplace.

EMC: Oh! So they published your article! Well, what kinds of articles did you write?

DE: Oh, just my experiences that I was having in the Navy and where I was. And that sort of thing.

EMC: Oh, that sounds great!

DE: Now they were quite long, as a matter of fact. They seemed to like to get them and they published all that I sent to them. Then I got busy and sort of stopped.

EMC: Do you remember how many you did, about?

DE: Probably three or four.

EMC: Oh, that sounds fantastic. Well, they're probably in the newspaper archives for 1944.

DE: Yes.

EMC: They must be.

DE: I went in and joined in February. I don't think I came to New York until March or April. And it was after that that I started writing.

EMC: So, was it basically about your training at Hunter or was it even beyond that?

DE: Oh, it was beyond that. I think I was at Stillwater, too. I believe I was.

EMC: Oh, that would be very interesting. Personal interest to the readers, I think.

DE: It's been so long ago I have no idea what I said!

EMC: Too bad you didn't keep a copy.

DE: Well, I think I do have some copies but I don't--As I say, I--

EMC: Don't know where they are?!

DE: Don't know where they are.

EMC: Oh, well, that's kind of unique because nobody else that I've interviewed did anything like that, wrote articles and had them published in the newspaper, which is great. Well, you said you were sent for basic training, boot camp so to speak, to Hunter College in, perhaps March of '44?

DE: Probably was March.

EMC: How did you get there? How did you travel there?

DE: Train.

EMC: Did you go with a group?

DE: I flew from Pontiac to Wichita to visit my parents and then from Wichita to New York I went by train. And I was picked up in Kansas City; other women were also going to New York. So by the time we got there, there was a group of us. I've forgotten how many.

EMC: You didn't have any chaperon or anything, did you? You just went by yourself?

DE: No.

EMC: Oh, that's great. Well, you landed in New York. Had you ever visited there before?

DE: Never.

EMC: How did you find it? Overwhelming?

DE: Just the most exciting place I'd ever been. Just a wonderful experience.

EMC: Well, you were at Hunter, which is in the Bronx, and do you remember how long you spent in basic training?

DE: Six weeks, I think.

EMC: Six weeks, yes. And what were your living conditions like?

DE: Well, they were great, really. I think there were maybe eight of us in a dorm and I certainly didn't feel it was anything to complain about. I had eight great girls that I was living with and it was, you know, super.

EMC: Fantastic. Do you remember anything about your training? What exactly you studied and the classes you took?

DE: Not really. We studied, I think, airplane spotting and the history of the Navy. And it was pretty basic I would say.

EMC: Yes. But you did have to spend some time marching and drilling.

DE: Did a lot of that. Yes.

EMC: How did you react to that?

DE: I liked it. Except for when, you know, we get these shots and I've forgotten even what they were for. But so many of us would really react to them. And boy, everyone would be marching

and they'd faint and--

EMC: Keel over.

DE: Keel over.

EMC: Oh! But you didn't mind it that much. What did you think of the Navy uniform?

DE: I thought it was pretty nice.

EMC: Yes. It was very nice. Did you adjust easily to the discipline of military life?

DE: Oh, yes.

EMC: Did you have an opportunity to participate in any extracurricular activities at Hunter? I know some people did.

DE: No, I don't.

EMC: They had a singing platoon, a newspaper, and some people did that. I know you had some limited time off when you were at Hunter on the weekends, basically.

DE: Yes.

EMC: Did you get out and go into New York City at that time?

DE: Oh, yes. We saw "Oklahoma." The first stage theater I ever saw was "Oklahoma."

EMC: Yes. That was popular then. That was just coming out. That's great. Did anything amusing or noteworthy happen during this training period that you can remember?

DE: No. I don't think so.

EMC: Did you ever have a chance to meet Mildred MacAffee Horton who was the Director of the WAVES at that time? Did she ever come to Hunter?

DE: I think she came to Hunter, and I think I saw her. I certainly didn't meet her, but I think she came to Hunter. I think I did see her. Yes.

EMC: Did the Navy sponsor any concerts or activities for you at Hunter?

DE: Not that I recall.

EMC: Okay. Well, at the end of your training you were graduated,

so to speak. You had a ceremony, and you had to go on for additional training. Did you select the kind of work that you wanted to do or did they assign you to a billet?

DE: Well, I really was hoping to go into a flight--What they'd call it when you do assimilated--?

EMC: Link training?

DE: Yes, Link Trainer. That's really what I had wanted to get into because my family had a history of flying. But for some reason, I didn't get that and I was sent to Stillwater 'cause I had secretarial experience. I think they figured, "Hey, we got one that's not going to be hard to train," or something.

EMC: Right! I think you're right! So, you basically were in the Yeoman rating!

DE: I was.

EMC: And went out to Stillwater, Oklahoma. Did you get there by train, as well?

DE: Yes.

EMC: With a whole group of WAVES?

DE: Yes.

EMC: Yes. That's how they usually sent them. How long were you at Stillwater, Oklahoma?

DE: Three months.

EMC: That was kind of a long training period. And what kinds of classes and what did you learn there?

DE: Oh, I think it was mostly just the general secretarial-type of training: typing, and shorthand, and just general--

EMC: Yes, that kind of thing. Did you make any lasting friendships there?

DE: Oh, I did. Well, the girls that I met at Hunter, and I'm not sure how many went out to Stillwater with me. But I really did have some wonderful friends at Hunter. And I'm not sure whether they all went to Stillwater or not. But it was a great experience and they were just nifty gals.

EMC: Oh, that's good to know because a lot of people say they didn't keep up with people who they met at Hunter or at their advanced training.

DE: We did for quite a long time in the last say, fifteen years. It sort of dwindled. But we did for a long time.

EMC: Oh, that's great! That's very good.

DE: And I'd still like to find--go back and find some of these girls.

EMC: Yes. They may be members of 'The State Associations of The WAVES National'. Or they may be, you know, enrolled in WIMSA. Anyway, did you have any time for recreation in Stillwater? Did you ever get off?

DE: Oh, yes.

EMC: The campus, so to speak.

DE: We met a lot of the Air Corps guys from Oklahoma City and, we were pretty free to do or go where we wanted to go. And then being near Kansas I still had family there and they came down to visit me in Oklahoma, so that was nice.

EMC: Oh, yes. That's right. You weren't that far away.

DE: No.

EMC: Well, you finished that segment of training and where did they decide to send you? Where were you stationed?

DE: I was sent back to New York and I really don't remember what the name of the--

EMC: Command was?

DE: The Command was that I was with. It was downtown someplace. And I remember on a Saturday morning being at work and when that airplane went into the Empire State Building. Remember that? The 78th floor? Oh, that was just a monumental thing, and we were all just aghast. What was interesting though was years later, I worked on that same floor for a dress designer.

EMC: Oh! Oh, for heaven's sakes.

DE: Isn't that--

EMC: In New York?

DE: In New York. Yes.

EMC: Yes. Same building.

DE: Same floor.

EMC: Amazing.

DE: Yes. It was.

EMC: So anyway, you were doing some sort of--

DE: It was secretarial work of some kind.

EMC: Secretarial.

DE: And then from New York we-- My friend Virginia Scandrolli was with me, and the two of us were sent to Bremerton, Washington, with two lieutenant commanders. And our job in Bremerton was to take inventory of the--I wouldn't want to say the Navy yard, but inventory of--must've been because we were measuring things like anchors and we never had anything to do with that before. So this was rather an interesting experience.

EMC: Yes. I think it was a yard of sorts.

DE: Well, it was a Navy yard because the IDAHO came in and the SARATOGA, the first one. I guess this was the first one that came into Newport just recently.

EMC: I don't know. I don't think so.

DE: No. That was the second one. But the first one came into there, and that was just an amazing experience to have those guys come in off that ship. What they've been through was incredible.

EMC: Yes. It had been.

DE: Yes. Bombed.

EMC: Bombed quite a bit. How long were you in Bremerton?

DE: I would say five months.

EMC: And that sounds like kind of a special assignment.

DE: It was a special assignment. Yes.

EMC: So you were measuring things. Basically.

DE: Yes. Taking inventory.

EMC: Taking inventory. Yes. Where did you live in Bremerton?

DE: In barracks.

EMC: In WAVES barracks?

DE: Right.

EMC: And I assume you had to work Saturdays? Or did you work just during the week?

DE: We probably did work Saturdays. I don't honestly remember.

EMC: Did you have any unusual experiences there or?

DE: Nothing unusual really. We would get to visit some of the ships that came in from the Pacific and that sort of thing. But nothing unusual.

EMC: Did you find your duties challenging or routine?

DE: Well, that one was challenging because I didn't know what I doing half the time.

EMC: Oh!

DE: I didn't know how to measure the screws and nuts and anchors and things. But we did.

EMC: Yes. You got through that anyway.

DE: Yes.

EMC: And after that short five-month assignment, where were you sent back to?

DE: Then I was sent back to New York and that was down on Pine Street. We were at the separation office where we separated officers that were coming back and getting out of the Navy.

EMC: That must've been in '45 then, wasn't it?

DE: It was in '45.

EMC: By that time. Did you relish the idea of going back to New York?

DE: Oh, yes. Yes. I love New York. It was very exciting to me.

EMC: Yes. In those days. And safer, too.

DE: Yes.

EMC: Where did you live at this now third assignment?

DE: Where'd we live?

EMC: Did you live with the WAVES or independently?

DE: No. Lived with the WAVES. I think there was 72nd Street. There was a--it used to be a hotel, and they made it into a WAVES barracks and I think that's where we lived. I know I was there part of the time. It was on 72nd and Broadway.

EMC: Yes. That sounds logical because I know they did take over hotels.

DE: Yes. I think that's where it was.

EMC: And you had Masters of Arms there and sergeants and the like.

DE: Yes. Yes.

EMC: Did you like this assignment?

DE: Yes. I liked it a lot.

EMC: Did anything exciting, amusing, or interesting happen to you at work during this time frame?

DE: No. I don't think so. I just met a lot of interesting people

and I loved being in New York and being able to go to the theater and the symphony. And it was just a wonderful, wonderful period of time.

EMC: Did you meet anybody famous or important who was being mustered out?

DE: No. I've seen people who'd be movie stars. I didn't.

EMC: Was there any pressure in this billet? Or was it just kind of a routine?

DE: I would say it was pretty much routine.

EMC: Were you able to survive on your pay?

DE: Oh, yes.

EMC: The Navy pay.

DE: Oh, yes.

EMC: Yes. Did you date Navy men in New York?

DE: Yes. Yes, I did.

EMC: How did you meet them? Did you meet them at work?

DE: Well, working at a separation office was a pretty nice place to meet men!

EMC: Oh, as they were going out anyway, right. Did you socialize with other WAVES as well in New York?

DE: Oh, yes. Yes.

EMC: Did you ever have any contact with any civilians?

DE: Not too much.

EMC: During this whole experience?

DE: I remember once, as a matter of fact, that we did have several interesting experiences because we went--there was, I think, about six WAVES. It wasn't, I think, New Years Eve, but it was some big night. And we went to the Commodore Hotel, I think. And we met Bill Paley.

EMC: Who was he?

DE: Bill Paley.

EMC: Oh! William Paley.

DE: William Paley. That's it. That's right, not Bob. And he and his wife took us to their--

EMC: Apartment?

DE: Yes. And it was glorious! It was a wonderful experience. And to tell you the truth, I don't remember too much about it. But I do remember being there and I remember the apartment which was-- They made out two or three floors. It was a wonderful thing for them to do.

EMC: Well, yes! How did you meet them?

DE: I don't know how. I really do not remember how we met them.

EMC: Oh, isn't that something that they would--

DE: Would open up and take us, you know?

EMC: Yes. Literally.

DE: Because that's what they really did.

EMC: Yes. I guess he was a--

DE: Pretty big important person.

EMC: Important person is right. And in CBS and in New York. So that was kind of interesting. During your WAVE experience, did you write letters to your parents or friends about your experiences?

DE: Oh, yes. I wrote to my friends, my folks, a lot.

EMC: Do you have any of these letters?

DE: I doubt it.

EMC: Yes. A lot of them disappear. Well, VJ Day occurred on August 15th, 1945 and I assume you were in New York.

DE: I was in New York and I remember that very well.

EMC: What was your reaction and how did you celebrated?

DE: Oh, it was unbelievable because we were on 42nd Street and along with 50 million other people. And everybody was happy and singing and it was just--It was an experience that you couldn't forget, really.

EMC: Yes. A thrill. And I assume you were very happy that the war was over.

DE: Oh, yes. That was really something.

EMC: Yes. Everybody was. What was the highest rate that you achieved?

DE: Yeoman, First Class.

EMC: Yeoman, First Class. Okay. And how long did you stay in the Navy after the war was over?

DE: I was out of the Navy in, I think, August of '46.

EMC: Oh, so you stayed almost a full year?

DE: After. Yes.

EMC: After that.

DE: I was in almost two and a half years.

EMC: Were you still working in the Separation Center?

DE: I was.

EMC: Yes. Because there'd be an awful lot of work to do, I would imagine.

DE: Yes. It was.

EMC: Getting people out. When you were discharged, did they prepare you in any way for civilian life? Do you remember?

DE: I don't think so. I mean, they did to a certain extent. You know, told us about the GI Bill of Rights and etcetera, etcetera. But not in any particular way. I don't think.

EMC: Do you remember if you received any medals for your service?

DE: What was it? The medal of honor or something that everybody got.

EMC: Probably the Victory Medal or--

DE: Work something--

EMC: American Service Medal.

DE: Which I have someplace.

EMC: Oh, that's good! How did you feel about leaving the Navy in August '46?

DE: Well, it was an interesting feeling because it had been a safe thing to be doing and so I was entering in a new phase in my life. And so it was interesting, exciting, challenging, sort of scary. Because I was in New York and I wanted to stay in New York. So I had to find a job and a place to live and all that stuff. It was a challenge in a way.

EMC: Oh, that's very interesting. Would you have stayed in the Navy if you could have? Do you think?

DE: I doubt it.

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

DE: Oh, yes. They did.

EMC: Did you feel that they were a smoothly run organization as far as you could detect?

DE: As far as I was concerned they were. Yes.

EMC: Recently organized in '42.

DE: Right.

EMC: Did you ever know of anyone who was discharged for disciplinary reasons?

DE: No.

EMC: Did the WAVES experience change or redirect your life in any way?

DE: Oh, it redirected my life because I probably never would've gone to New York.

EMC: Absolutely. Did you feel that that experience made you more independent and self reliant?

DE: Very much so.

EMC: Did you have any career ambitions as a result?

DE: As a result?

EMC: Of serving in the WAVES? Did you want to continue what you were doing before or--?

DE: No. I was really interested in the theater and the fashion theater and that sort of venue.

EMC: Which was entirely different than what you had been doing.

DE: My sister, though, was a dress designer in Dallas. And so that sort of influenced me I think, along those lines. But I was always interested in that.

EMC: Oh, that's fantastic. Did you maintain any serious friendships when the war was over?

DE: Yes.

EMC: And were these gals you had met in boot camp or in training?

DE: Some back in boot camp.

EMC: And in your various jobs?

DE: Right.

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

DE: I never have.

EMC: I know there were several they organized in Boston or New York before they got these organizations going. Do you belong to any WAVE organizations now?

DE: No.

EMC: No. But you do belong to Women in Military Service for America?

DE: Oh, the Memorial.

EMC: Right. You're registered with WIMSA in Arlington.

DE: Right. Yes.

EMC: Well, just to kind of wrap up and find out what you did after August '46. Did you settle in New York?

DE: Yes, I did.

EMC: After the war. And what did you do there?

DE: Well, I first got a job on Wall Street working for an analyst in a stock brokerage firm. Well, I was going to a

theatrical school, a drama school, and I did a little bit of that. But I was sort of discouraged and started working then for a dress designer and then became her fabric buyer. And then I met my husband in New York.

EMC: Oh, you did?

DE: Yes.

EMC: Oh, I see.

DE: He was an art director in an advertising agency. And we met and we were married in 1950.

EMC: Oh, that's great. So you stayed there for a good long time after the war?

DE: Oh, yes. Yes. Until we moved out to Darien, Connecticut. And he commuted into New York, and we were there 35 years, and we retired and came to Newport.

EMC: Oh! And when did you come to Newport?

DE: In 1985.

EMC: Oh, okay. So you've been here about 13 years. Oh, that's

great. So you maintained rather close contact with New York City during this time--?

DE: Oh, yes. Yes.

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

DE: I think I did. Yes. About being in the Navy. And of course, with my brother in the service and my sister in the WACS, I think. Yes. We talked about it.

EMC: Yes. That's good. Did any of your children join the Navy as a result?

DE: No.

EMC: Just to sum up and wrap up, what would you say was the significance of your naval career for you and your life?

DE: Well, I think it helped me to grow up and helped to give me independence and confidence in myself that I could do what I wanted to do. And that was really wonderful.

EMC: And you felt, I'm sure, it was a very positive experience?

DE: Oh, it was a very positive experience and I loved it. The

people that I met were just wonderful. It was really a great experience. I would do it all over again if I were 20!

EMC: Well, that's great! Well, thank you very much. That was a very good interview. I've enjoyed it very much. Thank you.

[End of Interview]

INDEX

Oral History 69 – De Ette Unruh Ellis

Hunter College, New York, *see* WAVES, Hunter College, training at
Paley, William, 24-26

Pretty Prairie, Kansas, 1-2

Pearl Harbor, attack on, reaction to, 4

Pontiac, Michigan, 2-3, 4, 6-8

Pontiac Paper, The, 7-9

Post-war work, 32-33

WAVES

 dating, 23-24

 effect of serving in, 30, 34-35

 esprit de corps, 29

 Hunter College, training at, 9-12

 impression of the organization, 30

 living in Bremerton, Washington, 20

 living in New York, 21-22

 parental reaction to joining, 6

 pay, 23

 reasons for joining, 4-6

 time off, 12-13, 16, 22-23

 uniform, 12

 working in New York, 17-18

 working in Bremerton, Washington, 18-20

 VJ day, 26

 Yeoman training, 14-15