

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE, NEWPORT, RI

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

HISTORY OF THE SPARS

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OF THE
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NO. 72
WINNIFRED ARMITAGE

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NAVAL WAR COLLEGE

1999

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NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND
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THE HISTORY OF THE SPARS

INTERVIEWEE: WINNIFRED ARMITAGE

INTERVIEWER: EVELYN M. CHERPAK

SUBJECT: THE HISTORY OF THE SPARS

DATE: JANUARY 28, 1999

EMC: This is the first oral history interview with Winnifred Armitage of Pawtucket, Rhode Island. The interview is being conducted at her home at 48 Whittier Street in Pawtucket.

WA: Whittier Road.

EMC: Whittier Road, pardon me. Today's date is January 28, 1999. And Winnifred was a SPAR in World War II, a member of the Coast Guard. And, Winnifred, I'm pleased that we finally got together after the weather problems, and I'm here to interview you on your career in the Coast Guard. I wanted to begin by asking you where and when you were born.

WA: I was born right here in the city of Pawtucket--in a house, not in a hospital--in Pawtucket, and I've lived here all my life.

EMC: Can you give me your birth date?

WA: April 14, 1921.

EMC: And what did your father do for a living here?

WA: My father worked for Hemple Company which made hosiery machines to make men's hosiery. He was like a research engineer.

EMC: Oh, interesting. Well, this is the area for mills and factories of that sort. And did your mother work at all?

WA: Not exactly. My mother was never too well. She may take a little job for six months, and then she couldn't keep it up.

EMC: Was she primarily a homemaker then?

WA: She was--yes.

EMC: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

WA: I have a brother, and he's two years younger than I. He lives out in Oregon now.

EMC: Oh. That's a long way. I assume you spent your growing up years in Pawtucket.

WA: Yes.

EMC: Did you graduate from high school here?

WA: I graduated from senior high here. Yes.

EMC: And in what year?

WA: In 1939.

EMC: That's before the war started.

WA: During the Depression.

EMC: Right--the height of the Depression, or toward the end of it. What did you do immediately after you graduated from high school?

WA: I went to work in the telephone company, and I was down there for three years, a little over three years.

EMC: Were you a telephone operator?

WA: Yes. I trained to be a telephone operator.

EMC: And that was the old switchboard system?

WA: That's when the operators did all the work, not the customers.

EMC: Right, exactly--plugging people in, I guess. Did your family have any military connections at all?

WA: None at all. Mother and Dad were not born here. They came from Great Britain.

EMC: Oh, they did?

WA: Yes.

EMC: Oh, how interesting. So they immigrated here.

WA: My grandparents brought them over when they were children.

EMC: Oh, how interesting. Because Armitage sounds French to me.

WA: No. It's really English, and it's pronounced Armitage.

EMC: Oh, sorry.

WA: Armitage is the French pronunciation.

EMC: Right--yes. I guess I was doing that.

WA: But it's really an English name.

EMC: Oh, interesting.

WA: Yes.

EMC: Well, where were you when Pearl Harbor was attacked on December 7, 1941? Do you remember where you were and what your reaction was?

WA: Yes. I was working for the telephone company, but I was home that Sunday morning. I had that Sunday off. We used to have every other Sunday off. And I was home when it happened. We had the radio going when it came over--President Roosevelt. I called up right away down at the office to see if they needed me, and they said no. So I didn't go down to work that day.

EMC: What was your reaction to the news of the bombing?

WA: Very surprised, I think, very surprised. It's so long ago it's hard to remember. There wasn't much we could do. To think that previous to that, just shortly before that, I know I got a little upset over the Italians. Because they, you know, tried to

drag us in the war with Great Britain. I was upset, naturally, at someone.

EMC: Yes. Right. It was a shock I'm sure.

WA: Yes.

EMC: Did you keep up with news about the war before you enlisted in the Coast Guard and the SPARS?

WA: Yes. Yes, I kept up with it. Because they kept us very busy down the telephone company too at the time. We were practically working seven days a week down there.

EMC: Oh, really?

WA: Yes.

EMC: Why was it seven days a week? Why was it so?

WA: Well, that is one of the reasons why I wanted to leave the telephone company. They had us working seven days a week, all kinds of hours, you know, and they were very, very strict with us at the time. I just wasn't too happy down there.

EMC: Yes.

WA: I wasn't too happy down there.

EMC: So how did you hear about the SPARS?

WA: Well, you're going to get a big kick out of this, I guess.

EMC: It's alright.

WA: One day there was another girl I worked with down there, and we decided we were going to go into the Navy, the WAVES. We went into Providence to sign up. We got the day off together and we signed up. We got into Providence, and they weren't recruiting girls. So one of the fellows said, "Go into Boston." Well, the next day I went into work. The chief operator must have found out that I had gone into Providence, and she gave me the devil.

EMC: Oh, dear.

WA: Told me that I could not leave the telephone company--I had to stay with them the duration of the war--and she upset me. But she didn't get after the other girl. Her name was Duxbury. She was in the WAVES. She didn't get after her. So a couple of weeks later Duck says to me, "I'm going into Boston and sign up." So she went into Boston and signed up. That was in around October, because the war had broke out--

EMC: Probably October '42--yes.

WA: Forty-two. So Christmas came around, and I almost had a nervous breakdown. And so my mother says to me, "Why don't you go into Boston. Don't say anything to anybody, and use an address-- my aunt's address who lived in Braintree."

EMC: Oh, I see.

WA: So I went up there. I called my Aunt Bertha. She met me down in Boston. We went over to North Depot, the recruiting office, and I used her address to sign up in the Coast Guard.

EMC: Why did you pick the Coast Guard?

WA: Well, I'm sitting there, and I'm making out my forms. This young fellow walked by me with a poster and put it on the wall, and I looked at it and it said, "We are now signing up SPARS for the Coast Guard." So I took my papers up to him, and I said, "It's a woman's privilege to change her mind." I said, "Could I join the Coast Guard instead of the WAVES?" And he said, "God, yes." He said, "You're the first one." So they sent me into an office for an interview, and I was the first SPAR to sign up in Massachusetts.

EMC: Oh, isn't that something.

WA: Yes.

EMC: Now did you use your aunt's address because you didn't want your supervisor to know?

WA: I didn't want them to know down here that I was going in the service.

EMC: Yes.

WA: And this was--oh, towards the end of January, beginning of February--or around February, I guess.

EMC: 'Forty-three.

WA: Yes. Forty-three. So they gave me a physical that day. They told me I was underweight.

EMC: Oh, for heaven sakes.

WA: I weighed 106 pounds. And they said I had to put on ten pounds. They sent me home. Then two weeks after they called me back, and I'd been eating ice cream and chocolates and everything to put on weight. I got myself up to 114. March 18th it was I

went in and took my oath of office.

EMC: Oh, for heaven sakes. Up in Boston?

WA: Up in Boston. Yes.

EMC: Oh, that's great. Well, you joined, I guess, the SPARS on, well, not a whim, but it was kind of a very quick decision.

WA: Yes. It was a quick decision.

EMC: Yes.

WA: You see I live in Rhode Island, which is a Navy state.

EMC: Oh, yes.

WA: And we used to go down to Narragansett and Newport quite a lot--Mother and Dad and I and my brother. In fact, we used to spend summers down at Narragansett.

EMC: Oh, that's nice.

WA: And we'd go to Galilee, and we'd go over to Point Judith, and I admired the Coast Guard down there. I used to watch them, and I used to admire them. So I think that's why I changed my

mind because I could see those Coast Guard boys down there working.

EMC: Right. Right. You had some familiarity then with the Coast Guard, as well as the Navy.

WA: Yes.

EMC: So that's great. So you were sworn in in Boston. And when did you finally report for duty or for training?

WA: In the beginning of May.

EMC: Forty-three.

WA: Forty-three.

EMC: How did your supervisor take it when you told her you were leaving?

WA: Oh, they were mad. Oh, not very good. Not very good.

EMC: Yes. Right.

WA: I was just glad to get out of there.

EMC: Yes, after the pressure.

WA: Yes. See the telephone company at the time there were a bunch of unmarried women. You couldn't get married at the time. They wanted single girls.

EMC: Right.

WA: And there were a bunch of frustrated old maids down there.

EMC: Oh, great.

WA: That's all I can say.

EMC: Was there any publicity in the papers about your joining the SPARS?

WA: No, none.

EMC: How did your parents feel about your decision to join the SPARS?

WA: They went along with everything. In fact, it was Mother that suggested I go in and get away from work.

EMC: Right. Oh, so they were happy about it. How did you travel

WA: Two weeks.

EMC: That was short.

WA: It was cut short.

EMC: And why?

WA: Because they were opening a hotel down in Palm Beach to train the SPARS.

EMC: Oh.

WA: And see I took my training with the WAVES.

EMC: Right. Exactly.

WA: And they were opening this hotel down in Palm Beach called the Biltmore in Palm Beach.

EMC: It's still there.

WA: Yes--the Biltmore.

EMC: Beautiful.

WA: Yes. Oh, I could write a book about that.

EMC: Oh. So did you transfer down to this--

WA: They transferred me down to Palm Beach.

EMC: For the rest of your training?

WA: No. I never finished it. I was sent down there with only half my uniform and half of my training.

EMC: Oh.

WA: Yes.

EMC: Did they issue you a uniform at Hunter, a SPAR uniform?

WA: It was a Navy uniform but with the-- We used the Coast Guard--

EMC: Oh, emblem.

WA: Emblems--yes.

EMC: Oh, I see. So it was just the same as the Navy.

WA: It was exactly the same as the Navy.

EMC: Oh, I see.

WA: Yes.

EMC: So you were sent immediately almost to Palm Beach.

WA: Palm Beach. And they opened the switchboard down there.

EMC: In this hotel?

WA: Yes. It was a four position board, and I was put in charge of it. My job was a 24-hour job. I was on call 24 hours, but I had five operators working for me down there.

EMC: Oh. So you immediately catapulted into a supervisory position with the Coast Guard.

WA: Yes.

EMC: Now you were on call twenty-four hours a day.

WA: Yes.

EMC: But did you work more or less an eight-hour day when you

were there?

WA: No. I was always on call. If I decided to go out say to the movies or something like that, I had to tell them where I was going--that I was going to the theater or something like that.

EMC: Did you live in the hotel?

WA: Yes. I lived in the hotel. Do you want that story?

EMC: Oh, yes. That sounds exciting. And did the other SPARS live there too?

WA: Oh, yes. When we first got down there, they had taken out all the beds and put bunks in the rooms. When we first got down there, we didn't have mattresses on the bed. We had to go to sleep on the springs on the bed.

EMC: Oh, how awful.

WA: Yes, really. We were the first group down there.

EMC: Oh, interesting.

WA: Then I was in one room for about three weeks I guess. And then I got friendly with these girls, and I moved in with them.

We moved into what is part of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor's suite of rooms.

EMC: Fabulous.

WA: I was in the Duke's bedroom. Of course, they had taken the bed out, but there was the bureau and his writing desk in there. Then another room--there was a hallway. And then you went into another room which was the living room. It was beautiful in there.

EMC: Oh, I can imagine.

WA: They didn't change anything. And then the Duchess's room--bedroom--was off that. And I was in there for a year.

EMC: And you had the use of these rooms, the living room and the bedroom.

WA: Yes.

EMC: Oh, that must have been marvelous.

WA: Yes. I took a shower in the same bathroom that the Duke took his showers in. Yes.

EMC: Were you alone in this room?

WA: No. There were three other girls.

EMC: Oh. So there were four of you.

WA: They put two bunks in there.

EMC: Yes.

WA: Yes.

EMC: Oh, that's fabulous.

WA: Oh, we had a beautiful room. It looked out over the lake, you know. The Biltmore Hotel is the long building with wings on.

EMC: Yes.

WA: And it looked out over the lake, Lake Worth, yes.

EMC: Oh, Lake Worth. Yes. Right. Oh, isn't that marvelous.

WA: Yes.

EMC: And did you work in the very same building?

WA: Oh, yes. The operating room was downstairs off the first floor.

EMC: So were the SPARS only located in this hotel? Were there any men there?

WA: There was the men that were maintenance crew. Nobody training but just the maintenance men and the officers.

EMC: So they lived there too.

WA: Yes.

EMC: It was basically a training base.

WA: It was a training for the boots, for storekeepers, for Yeomen, for cook and dietician work, you know.

EMC: And do you remember or have any idea of how many women were probably there being trained?

WA: You know, I was trying to think of that the other day. I bet there was anywhere between five, six, seven hundred girls in that station at one time.

EMC: Yes. That was big.

WA: Yes.

EMC: Quite big. I didn't know that the SPARS were in Palm Beach and that's where they trained.

WA: Yes. Palm Beach at the Biltmore. Yes.

EMC: Yes. That is fabulous.

WA: Yes.

EMC: What did you think of the climate? How did you adjust to the heat?

WA: I enjoyed the climate down there. I enjoyed the climate. It was always cool in that hotel-- Well, we weren't supposed to say hotel. It was the SPAR ship.

EMC: Oh. SPAR ship--okay.

WA: And the Coast Guard it being the ship. But it was always cool in there. The rooms were never hot. I never felt the heat down there or the humidity.

EMC: Yes. I wondered. Because it's a drastic change from New England.

WA: Yes.

EMC: And you must have arrived there in--

WA: In May.

EMC: In May. It just started to get hot.

WA: Yes.

EMC: Were there any problems with your job? Any stresses with your job?

WA: No. I loved it. I loved it.

EMC: Your supervision.

WA: As I said, I met some wonderful people when I was down there, a lot of well-known people.

EMC: Oh. Like who? Can you remember any?

WA: Well, I could write a book. Well, I'm thinking of one-- One

day my roommate and I had been over to the theater in West Palm. And we stopped in the George Washington Hotel down there to have lunch. The Count D'Orsay came over and made himself known to us, and he was the one that made that perfume "Intoxication." So he asked me to go out and find the most beautiful girl in the station. So I'm running around. Finally I picked out a little-- she was tall and lanky--Swedish girl, and I thought she was beautiful. So when I introduced them, he didn't say anything. He had told me he would get me a bottle of perfume if I picked out the right girl. So he gave me the bottle of perfume and told me I picked out the wrong girl, that--

EMC: The wrong girl?

WA: The wrong girl. He says, "You're the most beautiful person on the station." He says, "Your beauty comes from within, not from without."

EMC: Oh.

WA: And I thought that was the nicest and most beautiful compliment any girl, any woman could have.

EMC: Oh, yes.

WA: You know?

EMC: Oh, certainly. Oh, he was quite a charmer.

WA: Oh, yes. Yes. He married an American heiress. He told me point blank he married her for her money. She married him for his title.

EMC: Right. Oh, how interesting. And just a chance meeting.

WA: Yes.

EMC: Any other celebrities that you ran into down there?

WA: Oh, Victor Mature. They decided to make a musical. And they put Victor Mature in the lead. I thought he was very egotistical. He was a good looking fellow but very egotistical, I felt.

EMC: How did you manage to meet him or to know that he was there? Was it taking place at the Breakers?

WA: He come flying into the office one day. This girl came flying in the office screaming. He was always chasing women all around. He was always chasing them around. She come flying in the office one evening about ten o'clock, and he came flying in after her. So I told him off in no uncertain terms. But the tenors and SPARS were practicing for a--like a U.S. show.

EMC: Yes.

WA: I think they made a movie of it afterwards, and he was in it. He asked me to marry him.

EMC: Oh, for heaven sakes.

WA: Yes. I told him no. So he told me to go to hell.

EMC: Oh, how strange. So you actually met him.

WA: In that show was Sid Caesar, and I don't even remember him in that. Sid was the nicest boy. Oh, he was a peach. He used to stand down at the end of the corridor there, and I'd be up at the other end, and teach me semaphore.

EMC: Oh. Isn't that interesting.

WA: And Dick Dale. He was on the Lawrence Welk show. And Dick was a peach of a fellow. Oh, Jack Dempsey came aboard one day, and he knocked me out. I was taking a telegram up to the exec's office. I turned around the corner quick as he come around, and I walked right into his shoulder and knocked me out. I blacked right out.

EMC: Oh, for heaven sakes.

WA: Yes. But he sent me roses the next day. He was so nice--
yes.

EMC: Oh, isn't that something.

WA: Yes. Jack Dempsey, and he was in Coast Guard Auxiliary--
Jack. Sid and Dick had been put on "Lucky Chase," I think it was
called--a cutter they had been on.

EMC: Oh, so they were in the Coast Guard, too.

WA: They were all in the Coast Guard. Yes.

EMC: Oh, for heaven sakes. See, we didn't know that.

WA: Yes. Yes. They were all in the Coast Guard.

EMC: Isn't that something. Well, you met quite a few interesting
people.

WA: Oh, I met a lot of them.

EMC: Celebrities--

WA: And lovely people. They were nice people, you know. Nice people.

EMC: What did you do for recreation there with the other girls, with the other SPARS?

WA: I never had too much time for recreation because I was always-- I worked on the twenty? I was always on the go working.

EMC: Did you actually work the switchboard yourself as well?

WA: Yes. Some of the girls--sometimes they were sick or something. But we'd go down to the beach. I used to like to go bicycling up and down the island.

EMC: Oh.

WA: And I was never athletically inclined.

EMC: Yes. So that's what you did. Did you go to movies--USO shows or canteens, or anything like that?

WA: Yes. I'd go to the movies once in awhile. Sometimes there was another fellow. I called him Ollie. He was under his regular name. But he became a very big movie star at one time. I'm not going to mention his name.

EMC: Oh.

WA: And we'd bicycle down to Lake Worth where Mrs. Whitney, Whitney Vanderbilt, had a USO down there, and we'd go down to her place quite often. We'd go down there. There was a couple of pools over there that we could go swimming in right by the ocean. We'd spend the day down there.

EMC: Oh, that's nice.

WA: Yes.

EMC: That's great. So did you have a chance to date any Coast Guard men? I assume there must have been a base nearby, or at least a port.

WA: No. You know where the Breakers Hotel is down there?

EMC: I'm not quite sure.

WA: There's a golf course. Then the Breakers is over on the beach on the ocean side. That was an Army hospital. I used to go over there once or twice a week and sit with the boys coming back, you know, from overseas that were wounded. And some of the cases were very pathetic. I did that. I was transferred after a

year up to Atlantic City. And I spent the next ten months or so up in Atlantic City. And that was for--a big hotel all turned over to--into hospitals up there. The Coast Guard had taken South Virginia Avenue over, and they used to do the radio training-- young men for radio training. I took over the board there.

EMC: Can I just double back a little bit about your work in the hospital in Palm Beach?

WA: Yes.

EMC: Was this volunteer work would you say?

WA: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

EMC: Did you write letters for them? Or did you just talk to them, or what?

WA: Write letters for them. Yes. Talked to them. And I don't like to think back too much on those because there were so many pathetic cases. I saw the war in those hospitals--down there at the Breakers and when I was up in Atlantic City.

EMC: Let me just ask you a little--a few more questions about your duties down in Palm Beach. Did you find the work challenging there, your supervisory work of the operators?

WA: No. No. It was interesting. I knew what I was doing. I knew what I was doing. Everybody was very cooperative, and I enjoyed it--yes.

EMC: Did you have a supervisor above you?

WA: Yes. The first girl down there--Barbara Morgan. She was there for about, oh, I should say six months. And then she got transferred to Washington as aide to Admiral Waesche, who was the Commandant of the Coast Guard. And Barbara Morgan came. Barbara Morgan got transferred to Washington. Thelma Riggs came. Riggs was her maiden name. Then she married a fellow who was the head of the War College down here at Quonset during the war. His name was Owensley. And her father owned a newspaper. I don't know if it was in Baltimore or Philadelphia. They were rich, very wealthy people, personal friends of Franklin Roosevelt. And that's how I got to know the President. And I became very good friends with President Roosevelt.

EMC: Oh, for heaven sakes. Did you actually meet him?

WA: I never met him personally. But he would call me at least once a week, sometimes twice a week.

EMC: In Palm Beach?

WA: In Palm Beach. Yes.

EMC: Oh, for heaven sakes. And what kind of a call was it--a social call or what?

WA: Social. Social call. He'd call to check on me and whatnot. He called up one day down on the board. He wanted to speak to his wife. She was socializing over--

EMC: Eleanor.

WA: Eleanor, yes. And so he asked me to find her. So I got in touch with my communications officer, who was Mrs. Owensley--or Lieutenant Owensley--and she located her. Eleanor liked her liquor. I don't know if you know that or not. And anyways, the President says, "Don't cut me off the line." He says, "I want to stay on the line. I want to hear everything." He also asked me what my name was, and I said Armitage, sir. He says, "What is the Army doing in the Coast Guard?" And I says, "I come from Rhode Island, sir." I said, "We're proud of our Coast Guard--Navy up there." So from then on I was always called Army. I was never called by my last name or my first name.

EMC: He made a joke out of it.

WA: He did. So then he called me up that night and he apologized. But he thanked me for locating his wife, and we had a nice little conversation. This was around ten or eleven o'clock at night. And after that he started calling me up every week.

EMC: Oh, for heaven sakes.

WA: And he'd check up on me. Perfect gentleman.

EMC: Oh, isn't that amazing.

WA: He was no William Clinton.

EMC: Oh, good God. I hope not.

WA: He was no William Clinton, believe me. He was a perfect gentleman.

EMC: Isn't that something.

WA: He was like a--

EMC: Father figure maybe?

WA: He was just like a father figure to me. Yes, he was. He wanted to know all about my family, and what church I went to. We

went to the same church.

EMC: It's amazing.

WA: My father was very deeply religious. He was a great worker in the church. And so we got along fine. We liked the same literature, books. And he'd tell me about his family and asked about my family--and every week. "Did you hear from your Mother?" "Did you hear from your boyfriend?" I got engaged while I was in there. But it--

EMC: Oh, you did.

WA: Yes. But it didn't--

EMC: Now was that to a Coast Guard person?

WA: No. It was Army.

EMC: Oh, an Army-- Was it somebody you met in the hospital may I ask?

WA: No. It was somebody I met at a USO dance.

EMC: Oh, I see. Okay.

WA: And then after the war--well, just before the war, we broke up--

EMC: Just before the end of the war.

WA: Yes.

EMC: Oh, well you-- You had quite a time down there.

WA: I'm telling you, I never had a dull moment.

EMC: I guess not.

WA: In Palm Beach and Atlantic City.

EMC: Well, that's amazing that President Roosevelt would call once a week.

WA: Every week. He called me up. I was up in AC at the time, and it was in April. He says, "Army," he says, "you know, I don't feel too good. I'm tired." He says, "I'm going away for a week or so." He says, "I need the rest." He says, "So I won't be calling you next week." He said, "But I want you to understand why." So I said, "Okay." This is what he said to me now. He says, "They want me to do something, to make a decision, and I don't want to make it." He says, "And I want to think about it."

EMC: I'll bet that was dropping the atomic bomb on Japan.

WA: It was dropping the bomb.

EMC: Oh.

WA: And he died while he was there--away. He died that week.

EMC: Warm Springs, yes.

WA: Yes. He died--passed away. They were very good to me at the station. When they had the regiment, you know, for the day of the funeral, Skipper says, "Now you stay right here." They put one of the boys beside me. I was heartbroken. I was heartbroken. It was like losing a father to me. Because we had been close, you know, for a year or a year and a half.

EMC: Isn't that amazing that he would call.

WA: Yes.

EMC: So you never met him. But you talked.

WA: I never met him face to face. Just talked to him on the telephone. He'd call me up and we'd chit chat just like my own

father would.

EMC: That's an incredible story.

WA: Yes.

EMC: And I don't think people know that story.

WA: Well, you know, sometimes I get a little embarrassed. When I see this case of William Clinton--that man must be very embarrassed. But like President Roosevelt--I think he liked to talk to somebody younger.

EMC: Yes.

WA: And he wanted to hear what was going on in the outside world.

EMC: That's right. Right. In the military.

WA: But it was entirely different. And I don't want anybody to think that I had an affair with him, because it was absolutely-- He was old enough to be my father, my grandfather.

EMC: Right. Exactly. But that's most unique and unusual. Well, you were in Palm Beach for about how long?

WA: Just a year.

EMC: And then did you ask to be transferred to Atlantic City?

WA: No. There was a couple of cases of typhus broke out on the station. They had water rats down there, and oh, God, they're big.

EMC: Yes.

WA: And a case broke out just a couple of rooms down from where my room was. So when F.D. called me up, I told him about it. They sent down an inspection doctor from Washington and whatnot. They lift up my carpet, and sure enough under my carpet was all these little white mice. So when President Roosevelt called me back a couple of days afterwards and I told him next day I went down to the office, and I was called into the exec's office and they told me I was being transferred to Atlantic City. I think the President wanted me off the station because of the typhus--see. He didn't want me to come down with it. I was very upset. I didn't want to go up to Atlantic City. I was having a ball down there in Palm Beach.

EMC: I'm sure.

WA: But I got transferred up to AC.

EMC: And that was in 1944, I guess, wasn't it?

WA: Yes.

EMC: Must have been 1944.

WA: Yes. Went in '43-- Forty-four--May, June.

EMC: Yes. Forty-four. Because you were down in Palm Beach about May '43.

WA: Yes.

EMC: How did you get to Atlantic City from Palm Beach?

WA: By train.

EMC: By yourself?

WA: Yes. Yes, by myself.

EMC: Did you have any leave during this time frame in between assignments?

WA: No. No. I was shipped right up to AC.

EMC: And where did you live in Atlantic City?

WA: In the Claridge. I was put up in the Claridge Hotel. The Coast Guard had taken over South Virginia Avenue. Now have you been down to Atlantic City?

EMC: No.

WA: Well, the Steel Pier was down at the bottom on the boardwalk, and South Virginia Avenue came up from there. The main building was the Morton Hotel, or the Morton, where the boys were training for radio. It must have been, oh, almost a thousand boys down there--Coast Guardsmen training. Then they decided to train the SPARS on radio.

EMC: Oh.

WA: And F.D. wanted me to go to radio school for six months and then go to officer's school at Groton, Connecticut for six months. That's the only argument we had, the President and I. I did not want to go to radio school, and I did not want to be an officer.

EMC: So what were your options when you were in Atlantic City?

What did you do?

WA: Well, I had sort of another little nervous breakdown. I'd been there about a month, and they realized that I wanted to work. I wanted to do something. I didn't want to be going to school, and then the war's over, and what good is it to me, you know.

EMC: Yes.

WA: And because that was in '44, you know. So what good was it to me going to all that school? I wanted to work with the boys. I used to go to the hospital, as I said, at least twice a week and sit with those boys in the hospital and talk to them, write to them, even played poker with them sometimes.

EMC: Sure.

WA: And I saw some pathetic cases, believe me.

EMC: So what was your job in Atlantic City?

WA: I was in charge of the board up there, the switchboard up there.

EMC: Oh, yes.

WA: Yes.

EMC: What was your rate?

WA: I was Specialist. I was a Specialist.

EMC: Was it a Specialist X, did you say?

WA: Yes, Specialist X. Yes.

EMC: And how many girls were on the board?

WA: Up in Atlantic City it wasn't like the board down at the Biltmore. It was just a one position board.

EMC: Oh.

WA: And so I would work from eight to five on that board. Then I'd have other girls come in and work until midnight, and then we'd put the cords up and secure the board for the night.

EMC: Oh, I see.

WA: But they had pay phones. They had taken up the Morton Hotel, the Franklin Hotel, the Claridge Hotel. There was what used to be

the Elks building. That's where I worked, in the Elks building. And there was another building, all along South Virginia Avenue, and there was all pay phones. But I handled the board for all the main lines to each hotel.

EMC: Oh.

WA: But, yes. It was a busy job.

EMC: Busy job is right. Yes. Do you remember what your pay was at that time?

WA: I don't remember. I don't remember.

EMC: But did you have any trouble living on what you got?

WA: No. I had no trouble at all. And I sent money home to my mother and dad while I was there.

EMC: Yes. I wondered about that.

WA: I had them take so much out of my pay, and I sent it to make sure that they-- Of course, Dad worked. And, in fact, during the war he was put in charge of the whole factory. He was in production, and he was put in charge of the whole factory over there. And they were making something for airplanes besides their

hosiery machines. They were doing war work.

EMC: Yes. They did war work.

WA: Dad was kept busy. I sent something home to Mother and Dad. I always made sure they--

EMC: Oh, that's great. Now did you write to your parents during this time, write letters?

WA: Oh-- Oh, yes. Yes.

EMC: Do you have any of these letters?

WA: I threw everything away, honey. I threw everything away.

EMC: It would have been a wonderful record of your experiences.

WA: I know. I should say about 45 years ago-- You know, when problems come they don't come one at a time. They come in bunches, and we were going through a crisis here. I decided to go out to California because my brother and his wife was living out there in California, in LA. I was going to go and settle down out in California. I was out there for a month, and I said the heck with it. I'm coming home. I can't take it out there anymore. I came home. But during that period I threw everything away.

EMC: Yes. Did you make any good friends, any good women friends in the SPARS during the time in Atlantic City?

WA: Yes. My roommates. I had beautiful roommates. But you must understand, I'm one of these people that I get along beautiful with everybody. But then when I transferred to another job or another place, I can't keep up all the-- If I had to sit down and like Christmastime write Christmas cards to everybody I've known and met, I'd be writing about 500 of them out, you know. So I just had to cut it out. I can't do it.

EMC: But you did meet some good friends there.

WA: I did. I had some wonderful roommates and good friends.

EMC: What did you do for recreation and social life in Atlantic City?

WA: Well, of course, we always had the boardwalk that we could walk up and down there. And it was a station, primarily, mostly men. They would have their basketball teams. And oh, I forgot all about the baseball team. When I was down in Palm Beach, all the baseball teams were practicing down there at West Palm Beach. Then when I got transferred the following year up to Atlantic City, they decided not to practice down at Palm Beach. They

decided to come up to AC and practice. I knew every baseball player.

EMC: Yes. That was fun watching.

WA: All of them. Yes. And so I used to enjoy that.

EMC: Did you get any time off, any leave? And did you go home at all from Atlantic City?

WA: Yes. In Atlantic City we had a 24-hour leave. One week I had 48, the next 72, the next. And on my 72 I'd always come home.

EMC: Oh, sure. Take the train up?

WA: Yes. I'd take the train up.

EMC: Oh, that's good. So you were able to see your family.

WA: Family--yes.

EMC: Did you ever meet the head of the SPARS, the Director of the SPARS?

WA: Oh, it's funny you ask me that. Yes. Dorothy Stratton.

EMC: Exactly. She's still around. I met her about four years ago.

WA: Really?

EMC: Yes.

WA: Oh, God. If you ever see her again, say hello to her for me. Dorothy Stratton. She was inspecting the station down in Palm Beach. Now she come up to my room because everybody always come up to--

EMC: The suite.

WA: And she stood there and she says, "Those shoes you have on," she says, "they're not GI." And I says, "No," I says, "I bought them just before I went in the service." And she says, "Where-- Jettick?" That was a shoe store. And I says, "Yes, I did." She says, "Well, I bought mine there, too." So I turned my head, and I looked at her, you know. I'm standing at attention, and I looked at her. And she didn't say anymore. She went out. And I'm thinking about it. Finally I said Dotty Stratton, Dotty Stratton. Holy smokes. She lived up the street from me when I was a youngster.

EMC: Was she from Rhode Island?

WA: She's from Pawtucket.

EMC: For heaven sakes. I didn't know that.

WA: Yes. Her father owned a drugstore up on the other side of the city on Wheaton Street.

EMC: For heaven sakes.

WA: Yes.

EMC: She was at a conference that I was at about four years ago in Washington, DC. In fact, she spoke at the conference. Isn't that something?

WA: She must be getting on now.

EMC: Well, yes. She looked pretty good four years ago.

WA: Yes. I'm 77. And Dotty must be six or seven or eight years older than I am.

EMC: Yes. Oh, that's interesting.

WA: Yes.

EMC: But anyway, so you did have a chance to meet Dotty Stratton.

WA: Oh, yes.

EMC: The Director.

WA: Yes. When she come down to Atlantic City she'd always come right over to me.

EMC: Good. I assume you had white glove inspections of your rooms and regimental reviews.

WA: Yes. If you ever come in this house and took an inspection-

EMC: Get a demerit?

WA: I sure would.

EMC: Well, what was the highest rate that you received in the Coast Guard?

WA: I was a Specialist X--Specialist X-- I'd have to look that-

EMC: Well, whatever.

WA: The war was over, and they were going to send me up to Alaska because I said I would like to go to Alaska.

EMC: Oh, really.

WA: And Commander Babbitt, who was in charge up there--and he came from Pawtucket.

EMC: For heaven sakes.

WA: He asked if I would like to go back with them, and I said yes. Because the war was over. Then Dad called up one night and said that Mother was in the hospital. She was bleeding to death, and she had cancer.

EMC: Oh, dear.

WA: And so I went right up to the skipper and told him I wanted my discharge. And he said, "Are you jumping out of the frying pan into the fire?" I said no. I said, "I've given my time. I think I'd better go home and stay with my mother and take care of my mother." That's how I came out of the service.

EMC: Oh, that's--yes, interesting. I wanted to just double back. You mentioned the end of the war, and that was, of course, August

1945--VJ day. Do you remember how you celebrated and how you felt about the announcement of the end of the war?

WA: Oh, God. If you've ever been down at Atlantic City--it was a madhouse down there. I was told earlier in the day around ten o'clock that the war was over, and I had to keep that secret and sit on my hands all day long and keep it secret. I couldn't say anything until seven o'clock. At seven o'clock I got some of the girls up to what we called the poop deck. Gabriel Heater came on with the announcement. I'm looking out the window and I saw a boy sitting--a young soldier sitting across the way on a bench minus a leg--two crutches. So then I said to my roommate, "Let's go to church." She was a Roman Catholic, and I was Episcopalian. So we went. I went with her to the Roman church and she come with me on to my church. Then we decided to go down to our officers' club. Because it was such a mad house down there, it was terrific. I was with another young fellow who was a very dear friend.

EMC: I'm going to turn the tape over. So you mentioned you were going to the officers' club with a dear friend.

WA: We were going to the noncommissioned officers' club. But everybody, all the officers, everybody of importance on the station ended up there. And I was sort of semi going with one. And he was an amazing young man. He was really amazing young man. And I liked him. He was very nice.

EMC: Coast Guard person.

WA: He was Coast Guard auxiliary at the time. And his name was Rockefeller.

EMC: Any relation to THE Rockefellers?

WA: He became Vice President of the United States.

EMC: Oh, Nelson.

WA: Yes.

EMC: For heaven sakes. Isn't that amazing.

WA: Yes. And he was with me that night.

EMC: Oh, that's--that is some--that's something. Wow! You've really met quite a few prominent people.

WA: Yes.

EMC: So that's how you celebrated. You went to church and then you went to the club.

WA: Went to the club. Yes.

EMC: How did you feel about the end of the war? Were you happy?

WA: Well, I wasn't in agreement about the bomb dropping. And I knew that F.D. was unhappy about it. And that's what really killed him, I guess. And I really think if they had waited longer they would have won the war. But to drop that bomb and kill thousands of people--that upset me. That upset me.

EMC: Were you happy or were you sad when you had to make the decision to leave the SPARS?

WA: I was too upset to know. I was too upset to know, because I was losing my mother at the time.

EMC: Yes.

WA: And it was a struggle. I kept her alive for a few years. But nobody knows the struggle I went through to keep her alive. Yes.

EMC: And what month did you leave the Coast Guard?

WA: In December.

EMC: December. So you stayed in a few months after the end of

the war.

WA: Yes.

EMC: Did you think that the SPARS had a strong sense of *esprit de corps*, of unity?

WA: Yes.

EMC: Did you think that the SPARS were a smoothly run organization?

WA: Yes.

EMC: Because they were new.

WA: They were new. Of course, don't forget, as I said, I was very fortunate. I was very, very fortunate. I was at the Biltmore Hotel in Palm Beach, and I was up there at the Claridge in Atlantic City. In my job I was very, very fortunate.

EMC: You were lucky.

WA: And so I can't complain about anything. I can't complain about anything. I had the best.

EMC: You had royal treatment.

WA: Yes, I did.

EMC: Did you know anyone who was discharged for disciplinary reasons at all from the SPARS?

WA: No, I can't say I do. There was one girl-- I think she was discharged for being--I call them queers, you know. But outside of that, no.

EMC: Did the war and your service in the SPARS make you more independent and self-reliant?

WA: Yes. Yes. It brought me out. It brought my personality out. I was very, very quiet until I went in the service. Now I talk your ear off. I talk, talk, talk.

EMC: Do you think it broadened your horizons?

WA: Yes.

EMC: Did you want to go back to the same kind of work that you did after you left the SPARS? You were a telephone operator before you went in.

WA: Yes.

EMC: And that was basically what you did during the war.

WA: Yes, that's basically-- And I did. I went back on the board with the, in Providence, Federal Board, for three years. And then I decided I just wanted a change. It was affecting my health. It affected my health.

EMC: Yes. It must have been stressful.

WA: It was very stressful. I'd come home with terrific headaches and backaches, and whatnot. Yes.

EMC: Did you maintain any service friendships with the women when the war was over?

WA: No. No.

EMC: Do you know if there were any SPAR reunions after the war?

WA: Yes, there were. But I never went because I always wanted to stay here with my mother.

EMC: Yes. You had commitments.

WA: Yes. And Dad always stayed with me.

EMC: Did you feel that what women were expected to do and to be changed when the war was over? Do you think there were opportunities for careers and for working outside the home when the war was over? Do you think that that was more acceptable?

WA: Not so much service girls. Not the girls that were in the service. It was the girls that husbands and fathers and boyfriends went into the war, and they had to go to work. They're the ones that have changed a woman's role today. It wasn't the service girls. It was those that had to go to work in factories and whatnot and make money to support themselves.

EMC: Do you now belong to any military organizations of women?

WA: No. Just the Ocean State Girls.

EMC: The Ocean State WAVES.

WA: WAVES, yes.

EMC: Right. That's what you belong to.

WA: I joined the American Legion for awhile, and I was fairly active in that. Then I quit. And, of course, I was active down at

church. I was teaching Sunday school and whatnot. Then they got me active in Eastern Star, and for 20 years they had me traveling all over the state of Massachusetts doing that. Then when Dad died I decided that I wanted to just be left alone--relax. I didn't want any--

EMC: More commitments.

WA: Commitments.

EMC: Yes. No.

WA: At all. And I don't. I just stay here and enjoy myself.

EMC: What was the significance of your Coast Guard career for you in your life? If you had to tell me what its significance and its importance was, what would you say?

WA: All the wonderful people I met. The wonderful people I met. I don't sit and think about the going to the hospital boys. I put that out of my mind. I try to think of all the wonderful things that happened to me when I was in. I could write a book about a lot of friends and people and whatnot.

EMC: That you made. Well, that's good. You said when we talked prior to turning on the tape that you settled in Pawtucket after

the war, and you mentioned you went back to working as a telephone operator with the Federal Board in Providence. You said you wanted a change. Can we just pick up and tell me what you did after you left the Federal Board to complete the interview.

WA: Well, I went to school for a year.

EMC: Did you take advantage of the GI Bill?

WA: I took advantage of the GI Bill and went to school. And I got my diploma for stenography and accounting.

EMC: And that was here in Pawtucket.

WA: In Pawtucket, yes. And I had some very nice jobs.

EMC: And what were they? Can you briefly describe them?

WA: Well, I went to work at J&P Coates in their purchasing department, and I worked over there for about three years when they went down south. They closed the factory up here. Then about three days later, I was asked if I would go to work over at Hemple where my father was. I worked over there for five years in billing and credit--secretary to the billing and credit manager. And then they liquidated--were sold out. Oh, I took a summer off. Took a trip out to California, and came back, and I was offered

this job. I never went looking for work. Work always came to me.

EMC: That's great.

WA: I never had to go and look for a job. Over at Technor Apex, they were wonderful people to work for--Jewish people. But they're wonderful people to work for. And I enjoyed every minute of it. I grew up with making PVC plastics. I was in the beginning of the plastics.

EMC: And how long were you there at Apex?

WA: Almost 28 years.

EMC: That's great.

WA: Yes.

EMC: Wonderful.

WA: Brilliant, brilliant men--these chemists were there. Why they kept me on I don't know. Because I didn't have the brains they had.

EMC: But you worked for the chemists.

WA: Yes.

EMC: Oh, that's fantastic. And then you retired you said about 15--

WA: I had to retire when I was 62. I would have liked to work until I was 65. But Mother had passed away, and then Dad took sick.

EMC: Oh.

WA: And he had a brain tumor. So I thought to myself--I've got to stay out. I didn't want to put him in a nursing home. I didn't want to put him in a nursing home. So I thought I'll retire at 62, and I'll stay home with him and try to give him as little comfort as I could in his last days. I have a little pension that I live on, too. Apex has given me a little pension, too.

EMC: So that was why you retired early.

WA: Yes. My Mother and Dad. Yes, and the reason why I left the Coast Guard was because of Mother and Dad. I had two of the most wonderful parents you could hope to know.

EMC: Oh, well that's great. Well, that was very good of you to do that.

WA: Yes. I was very fortunate. I've been very fortunate all my life, very fortunate all my life.

EMC: Well, that's great. You had some wonderful experiences in World War II.

WA: Yes.

EMC: Travel, and meeting people, and things that would never have happened to you if you stayed here.

WA: I've been very fortunate. I've had a happy, happy home life. I had wonderful parents. Outside of the few years I worked in the telephone company before the war--I wasn't happy then. But then in the service everything was beautiful. After the service I've always had good jobs. I've never saved any money. I've been too busy spending it on other people. And my father was the same way--doing--always doing for other people. But I'm content and happy. If it wasn't for this foot, and I do have trouble with my feet.

EMC: Then you're in pretty good shape though.

WA: Yes.

EMC: Well, thank you very, very much, Winnifred, for sharing

your experiences in the SPARS. As I said, this is the first interview I've had with a SPAR. And I'll have to locate some others in town and find out about their experiences, too.

WA: Yes.

EMC: Thank you very much.

[END OF TAPE]

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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