

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE, NEWPORT, RI

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

HISTORY OF THE WAVES

HISTORY  
OF THE  
WAVES

NO. 272

BARBARA GALE WHEELER

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE

2001

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEWEE: BARBARA GALE WHEELER

INTERVIEWER: EVELYN M. CHERPAK

DATE: AUGUST 3, 2001

EMC: This is the first oral history interview with Barbara Gale Wheeler of Brooklyn, Connecticut. The interview is taking place at her home at 246 Church Street in Brooklyn, Connecticut.

Barbara is a member of the Ocean State WAVES Group. Today's date is August 3, 2001. My name is Evelyn Cherpak. Barbara, I am very pleased that you were able to spare some time from your very busy schedule and consent to the interview on your career in the WAVES in World War II. I would like to begin the interview by asking you where and when you were born.

BGW: I was born in Danielson, Connecticut, February 17, 1924.

EMC: What did your father do for a living?

BGW: He was a newspaper editor.

EMC: What newspaper? You mentioned that when we chatted.

BGW: Windham County Transcript.

EMC: And your mother, did she stay at home or did she work?

BGW: Oh yes, she was a stay at home Mom.

EMC: Most women were in those days. Did you have any brothers or sisters?

BGW: Yes, I did. I had a brother five years younger and a sister ten years younger.

EMC: So you were the oldest in the group.

BGW: Yes.

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

BGW: In Danielson.

EMC: In Danielson, okay. Did you go to high school there?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: When did you graduate?

BGW: 1941.

EMC: Just before the war began?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Did you have any plans to attend college when you graduated?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Where did you go and what did you want to be?

BGW: Well, it's a long story.

EMC: That's all right.

BGW: Well, I thought that I would like to be what was called an air hostess. I found that in those days one had to be an RN. I had never taken chemistry. I was only seventeen years old, and I believe you had to be eighteen to go into training. And you had to have chemistry. So I went back for a postgraduate course in chemistry, so that I could become an RN, so that I could become an air hostess. I had no interest in being an RN, just a means to an end.

EMC: Right.

BGW: So, well let's see. So while I was taking chemistry, I decided to take a few other courses. So I took, not to waste that year, shorthand and typing and business practice, that kind of thing. And I hated the chemistry. Just hated it. So I decided to drop that, and I thought, well, shorthand and typing felt like a game. It's such a cinch after taking a college course. This is fun, I think I'd like to do this. So that's how I ended up going to secretarial school.

EMC: And where did you go to secretarial school?

BGW: Berkeley School of Secretarial Training in East Orange, New Jersey.

EMC: Right in a very busy area.

BGW: Yes.

EMC: And how long was that course?

BGW: That was a year.

EMC: So you must have been around twenty or so when you finished?

BGW: I was nineteen.

EMC: When you finished.

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Did you join the workforce after that?

BGW: Yes. Our school had a placement service.

EMC: And where were you placed?

BGW: Well, fortunately, I was one of two who were the top graduates, and we got first choice of available positions before the rest of the class.

EMC: Good.

BGW: So I chose to work for General Foods, in the food research lab. I thought that would be interesting.

EMC: Sounds interesting.

BGW: Well, I thought it was going to be.

EMC: How long did you stay there?

BGW: I stayed there for about--all summer into November, six months or so.

EMC: Would this have been '42?

BGW: 'Forty-three.

EMC: Okay, '43. Well, how did you hear about the WAVES?

BGW: Well, on my way to work every day, which was quite a commute, train and then a bus, it was in Hoboken, New Jersey.

EMC: Where were you living then?

BGW: I was living in Clifton, New Jersey, and it was a bit of a commute. On my way the bus I took to work went by a recruiting poster for the WAVES. My boss, bosses, I had two, Dr. Kerner and Mr. Bender, they were chemists, and they were doing the research on the soybean and it was very particular work. I took the dictation, and then I had to type everything up to be sent to Washington. Everything had to be just so, and I was becoming bored with it. I wasn't interested in it, so I thought I would be interested in the Navy. The war was raging on two fronts by then, and I thought it would be a good thing to be part of it.



EMC: Great.

BGW: My brother was too young to go. My Dad had told me that there had been someone in his family who had served in every war since the Revolution.

EMC: Yes.

BGW: So I thought, well, this is my turn.

EMC: So did you enlist?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Where did you enlist?

BGW: I came home to where my folks were in Rhode Island and I enlisted from Providence.

EMC: So you left your job in New Jersey.

BGW: Yes.

EMC: And enlisted here. Do you remember what time of year you enlisted and what year you did enlist in?

BGW: Yes, that's easy. I enlisted on my twentieth birthday in 1944. Twenty was the minimum age.

EMC: Okay. You mentioned while we were chatting that you came home and got yourself in shape. How did you get yourself in shape?

BGW: Well, I had a lot of rest, a lot of fresh air and exercise. My mother and I went for long walks, ate well.

EMC: So you prepared yourself?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: And you had no trouble enlisting at all or being accepted?

BGW: No.

EMC: Into the WAVES. How did your parents feel about your joining? Your Mother?

BGW: They thought it was wonderful.

EMC: Oh, good.

BGW: Some of the girls I know had had problems with their

parents, but my parents were very proud of me. After training, when I arrived at Union Station in Providence, my Dad picked me up and took me to his office at the Providence Journal to introduce his daughter in her Navy uniform to his colleagues.

EMC: Oh that's great.

BGW: They thought it was a good thing to do.

EMC: That's good. Was there any publicity about your joining the WAVES in the local paper?

BGW: I don't remember. I remember there was something in the paper when I was sick in the hospital in Charleston, and they came in and took my picture and sent it home to the Providence Journal. And it was just, what would you call it then?

EMC: PR, I guess

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Were your parents living in Rhode Island at this time?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Where were they living?

BGW: North Scituate, RI.

EMC: Okay, that's not too far away. So you enlisted from Rhode Island. You're a Rhode Island WAVE.

BGW: Yes.

EMC: When did you set out for your basic training?

BGW: March of '44.

EMC: And where did you go for basic training?

BGW: Hunter College.

EMC: Good old Hunter College, U.S. Naval Training School.

BGW: Most of the girls went there.

EMC: Now when you first arrived in New York City, what was your impression of Hunter? Do you remember? And of the training school?

BGW: I don't remember. It wasn't a campus like I was use to seeing, pretty campuses and nice ivy covered buildings and so

forth. But I was used to New York, because I had worked right across the river. So that didn't impress me one way or another.

EMC: Right. You probably had been to New York many times before. Did you travel alone to basic training or did you go on a WAVE train from Providence?

BGW: I went with--they asked me to be in charge of the group that left from Providence. I don't know why.

EMC: Oh.

BGW: Maybe just because I had lived down there and would be somewhat familiar with the area.

EMC: How many girls were you in charge of?

BGW: I think there were about ten or twelve that came there from, well, from the Cape and different places to Providence and went in that group.

EMC: Well, I assume you didn't have any trouble with them?

BGW: No, I didn't have to do anything except make sure they were all there and all got out and went up to Hunter together.

EMC: Right. Did you go by subway to Hunter then all together?

BGW: Yes, I think so.

EMC: Most people did. Well, when you got there to Hunter College you were domiciled in apartments.

BGW: Yes.

EMC: How many roommates did you have when you were there? Do you remember?

BGW: Yes, the apartment had a living room, one bedroom and a kitchenette, so there were three of us in the living room and two in the bedroom. The two in the bedroom were from Tennessee and then one of my roommates was from Martha's Vineyard and the other was from Binghamton, New York. I remember that. But I haven't kept in touch with them.

EMC: Yes, because basic training

BGW: was hectic.

EMC: Was hectic. Now at that time was it six weeks or four weeks?

BGW: It was six.

EMC: Six weeks, okay, because at one point in time they decided to limit it to four.

BGW: Oh, I didn't know that.

EMC: Well, you were kind of being baptized by fire in Navy ways when you were at Hunter and quite regimented. Did you like the marching and drilling? How did you react to that?

BGW: I loved that.

EMC: Why did you love it?

BGW: I don't know. I just loved it. With the regimental review, I had a ball. My family came to see it.

EMC: Well that's great. Regimental reviews were on Saturdays, weren't they?

BGW: I think so.

EMC: Yes. Do you remember whether you had mandatory physical education?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Because there were four gyms there at Hunter.

BGW: Oh yes.

EMC: Calisthenics.

BGW: Yes.

EMC: And all that. You were there in the springtime then, more or less?

BGW: March and April.

EMC: Then in the winter and in the beginning of spring. Do you remember how you felt about the classes that you took? Did you find them challenging or boring, interesting, difficult?

BGW: I thought they were interesting. I liked learning about the ships and planes and things like that.

EMC: The ship and aircraft identification, I guess.

BGW: Yes.



EMC: And all the rest. Do you remember the white glove inspections on Saturdays?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Did you always pass?

BGW: Oh, yes.

EMC: So there was no problem. Was there an opportunity for you to participate in any extracurricular activities? I know there was a singing platoon and there was a newspaper?

BGW: Yes, I didn't, though. I don't know why I didn't go into that singing platoon, because I used to have a good voice, and I had been in church choir and glee club in school, I don't why I didn't, but I guess I felt as though I had enough to do.

EMC: Coping with the regimen, yes. What was your opinion of the Navy uniform?

BGW: Very nice.

EMC: That you were issued.

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Did you do any sightseeing in New York on your very limited time off, on Saturdays?

BGW: Not really, because I didn't need to. I was familiar with it anyway. But I do remember Easter Sunday. We went in a group, Protestants to Cathedral of St. John The Divine and the Catholics to St. Patrick's Cathedral. We went together, and then my mother, sister, aunt, uncle and friend picked me up at the church. The friend had a Rolls Royce and a chauffeur, so that made a little-

EMC: Special?

BGW: Impression on the girls that were looking. They took me to the Russian Tea Room for Easter Sunday dinner.

EMC: How interesting.

BGW: Which was a treat, because that's the place to go on Easter. Then we went to a museum on Riverside Drive, I can't think of the name. Do you know where it would be?

EMC: I actually don't, because the Metropolitan is downtown.

BGW: It was a different kind of museum.

EMC: Hispanic Society, maybe?

BGW: No. I can't remember, but at the time I thought it was very interesting, very beautiful. They managed to get me back to--I was going to say the base--to the school just in the nick of time.

EMC: No demerits then for lateness.

BGW: No, just barely.

EMC: Oh, well, that was most unique.

BGW: But that was my only faring away from the school, I think.

EMC: That was very, very nice. Do you remember if any outstanding visitors came to the school during your short stay, like Mildred McAffe, the WAVES Director?

BGW: I think she did, I think so. And a violinist, but which one, one of the famous violinists.

EMC: Heifetz, maybe?

BGW: Jascha Heifetz.

EMC: Because the Navy did provide you with entertainment.

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Famous entertainers at the time period. Were you tested when you were there? Given aptitude tests to determine what kind of job you should be placed in?

BGW: I don't remember. Probably were.

EMC: Did you express any preference to anyone for the type of job you wanted?

BGW: Yes, yes.

EMC: What did you want?

BGW: I didn't want to be a secretary.

EMC: Right, not a yeoman.

BGW: It would have been logical. I would have gone up in rank easily, but I had had enough. I didn't want that. I thought I wanted something more interesting. I felt the hospital corps would obviously be more interesting to me.

EMC: Oh, so you went into the hospital corps?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Now that's kind of a throwback to your interest in being an airline hostess, via chemistry.

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Oh, so were you placed in the hospital corps?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Oh, that's good.

BGW: I think they wanted only volunteers for the hospital corps, because not everybody could handle that.

EMC: Yes, right, dealing with sick people.

BGW: And I thought that I could.

EMC: Oh that's great, so that's where you were placed. Captain William Amsden was the head of the school, and he retired in Peace Dale, Rhode Island, outside of Kingston. Do you remember seeing him or meeting him at all?

BGW: I don't remember him at all.

EMC: Okay. Well, you finished your training in 1944 at the end of April, more or less. Did you have time to go home after that?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: And where were you assigned in the hospital corps?

BGW: The Corps School at Bethesda, Maryland, National Naval Medical Center.

EMC: Oh, so you went to Corps School, and how long was that?

BGW: I think it was eight weeks.

EMC: Well, that's a good length of time. What were they instructing you in or training you in?

BGW: I'm vague on that. Hospital nursing and first aid, I guess, emergency room, things like that.

EMC: Did you enjoy that training?

BGW: Yes, I liked the training, but I didn't think they prepared

us for going into a hospital.

EMC: Oh.

BGW: And taking care of somebody like I had to for the first time. I had never been in; they didn't take us into the hospital at school and let us do things.

EMC: They should have.

BGW: It was just--

EMC: Was it classes only?

BGW: It was just classes that I recall. I don't remember being in and taking care of patients or anything.

EMC: Nothing hands on then?

BGW: No, I don't really think that was the case. I don't remember it anyway.

EMC: Well, it's interesting that you felt you weren't prepared. You had the eight weeks there and then where was your assignment?

BGW: Again, we had a choice.

EMC: That's good.

BGW: Three, you could have, they told us of places that needed corpsmen, and you could put down three, which I did.

EMC: Oh, what did you put down?

BGW: I put down Charleston.

EMC: And why did you put Charleston down?

BGW: Because I had a next door neighbor, an elderly lady who I used to visit, and she had been to Charleston and spent some time there and told me all about it. Told me it was the garden spot of the South, historic and so forth. So I put Charleston down as first and then I think I put Corpus Christi, because I had never been to Texas and then somewhere else, but I don't remember where, San Diego maybe.

EMC: Did you get Charleston?

BGW: Yes, I got Charleston.

EMC: That's great. That's your first choice. That's unusual for the Navy.



BGW: I have no complaints, I got everything I wanted.

EMC: Oh that's great, because the Navy sometimes sends you where you don't want to go or some place right near your home.

BGW: I certainly didn't want to go to Quonset Point or some place in the northeast.

EMC: No, no, that would be too close to home. Well, you were sent down to Charleston. Did you travel independently there?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Did you go by train?

BGW: Yes. Atlantic Coastline Railroad.

EMC: And it wasn't a troop train, was it?

BGW: Well, it was full of troops, but I guess a lot of the other people rode it.

EMC: Yes, I just wondered, sometimes they had troop trains. You landed in Charleston and this must have been in the summer of '44 then?

BGW: Yes, June, I guess.

EMC: And where did they bailiwick you? Where were you domiciled?

BGW: Well, first I was at the hospital, and there was a hospital corps barracks there.

EMC: Oh, there was.

BGW: And then, some of us were transferred to the dispensary, the Navy Yard dispensary, and so we were put into another barracks where these girls were.

EMC: I see, the WAVES Noisette Creek Barracks.

BGW: The WAVES Noisette Creek Barracks. It was a lovely setting by the creek and across from the golf course.

EMC: But your first stop was at the hospital corps barracks. What was your rank at this time? Do you remember what you were?

BGW: Yes, Hospital Apprentice, First Class.

EMC: I see. I assume you worked in the Charleston Naval Hospital for a while?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: What exactly did they have you do?

BGW: Well, the first thing I had to do was change a dressing on an amputee. A young coastguardsman had his foot amputated near the ankle. And, you know, I wasn't prepared really for that. I did it, but I thought why didn't they show us this in corps school? But they hadn't shown us anything like that. I can remember it was the surgical floor.

EMC: That's where you were?

BGW: There were burn patients there, too.

EMC: Oh, dear. Were these people coming from abroad or were they shipped in?

BGW: Yes. I believe most of them had arrived on hospital ships. One patient had been, I can't remember the difference, between the burns now--

EMC: Yes, I understand.

BGW: --horribly burned, he was in a quiet room, that's a private

room in the ward, and his wife was there with him. He was in so much pain. He was unrecognizable. His wife showed us a picture of him before the war and that was...

EMC: Terrible.

BGW: It was hard to take care of him when it was hurting him so much to move him and everything. It took three of us. One day I went into his room and nobody was there; he had died during the night, so that has kind of affected me.

EMC: Yes, you had some tough days there.

BGW: A little bit, you know, so sad.

EMC: To deal with, real tough cases to deal with. I assume you didn't really feel that terribly prepared for this?

BGW: No. I was glad when I got transferred to the dispensary.

EMC: How long were you in the hospital? Do you know how long?

BGW: A couple of months.

EMC: A couple of months you were assigned there. Were the other corpsmen helpful, and were there other WAVES in there?

BGW: Yes, I don't think anybody else was any more prepared.

EMC: Did you work with the Navy nurses and doctors as well?

BGW: Yes, but we did everything the nurses did, except medications, I think.

EMC: So, you couldn't dispense medication?

BGW: No.

EMC: You didn't have that training. Could you give injections? Were you trained in injections?

BGW: I don't think so. I think that would have been along with medications.

EMC: The nurses, probably doing that.

BGW: Yes. But later on I drew blood.

EMC: Oh, really.

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Now that is probably something.

BGW: Things like that. Took medical histories. Later on when I was temporarily--they had people temporarily stationed outside the Navy yard at the civil service building where people came to apply for work, and they had to have physicals, so they rotated people for that job. So I did that for however many months they kept me there. That was interesting to find out how many of those people down in South Carolina had had gonorrhoea or syphilis.

EMC: Venereal diseases.

BGW: And the things that they called it, you know, that was interesting.

EMC: Because people didn't talk that much in those days about those kinds of things.

BGW: No, they had their own little names for it. Some of those who were applying for the menial jobs had a language of their own.

EMC: Oh, yes. How strange.

BGW: Just very interesting.

EMC: Eye opener. Anyway, so you dealt with the civilians who were applying for work.

BGW: Yes, at that point. And also in the dispensary the Navy Yard workers would come in with flash burns or injuries of some kind, you know.

EMC: Yes, because they had a big shipyard there, didn't they?

BGW: Yes, it was very busy.

EMC: So you took care of those people, the shipyard workers. Now what's the difference between a dispensary and a hospital?

BGW: Well, we didn't have patients stay overnight. We had some beds but just for temporary. No one stayed there overnight.

EMC: So it was more like an emergency room?

BGW: Yes. It was like an emergency room.

EMC: Did you work under the direction of doctors and nurses there as well?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: How large was this dispensary, I mean how many people do you remember? WAVES working there?

BGW: I don't remember how many, perhaps thirty or so, WAVES and corpsmen. Doris O'Toole was in there with me.

EMC: Oh, she was. She was a pharmacist's mate?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: And you were a hospital corpsman.

BGW: Yes, well, it is the same thing, only she was a higher rank. She was more interested in advancing and so forth.

EMC: Now did you like the dispensary work in comparison to the hospital work?

BGW: Yes, I liked it.

EMC: Was there anything about the hospital corps work that you didn't like?

BGW: I can't think of anything.

EMC: So you felt you were in your niche then?



BGW: Yes.

EMC: Oh, that's good. Well, I wanted to ask you about your living conditions. You said you transferred from the hospital corps barracks to the Noisette Creek Barracks.

BGW: Yes, the best thing that ever happened.

EMC: Why did you say that?

BGW: Well, I had the nicest roommates.

EMC: Oh, and who were they? Do you remember their names?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Where they were from?

BGW: They were all Southerners. Pearl was from Virginia, Nancy was from North Carolina, and Martha was from Iowa, so she was a Midwesterner. We got along great and had a wonderful time together.

EMC: Oh, that's good. What did you do for your social life?

BGW: Oh, we went on a lot of dates.

EMC: And you dated Navy men?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: I would assume.

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Who were there. Were there any that were coming off the ships?

BGW: Yes, yes. I was engaged when I went into the Navy.

EMC: Oh, you were? Oh how interesting.

BGW: To Paul, my husband.

EMC: And was Paul from the Brooklyn area or Rhode Island?

BGW: No, he was staying with his sister in Danielson, while he was waiting to get into the ski troops.

EMC: Oh, so you were very young when you were engaged?

BGW: Well, I think I was nineteen. I met him just before my eighteenth birthday.

EMC: Oh, how interesting.

BGW: We became engaged before I enlisted.

EMC: Oh, really.

BGW: So, I didn't go in looking for men. I had mine.

EMC: Right, but did you go out anyway?

BGW: Yes, we had decided that it could be a long war, which it was, that we would date other people if we wanted to. So we both did. And I decided, after I had dated for a while, if I could enjoy dating these other guys and liked going out with them, then I must not really be in love. Maybe that's not what love is, and maybe I should send his ring back. And I did.

EMC: Oh, you did?

BGW: But then later on, I became engaged to a Navy man.

EMC: Oh you did. Was it somebody you met in Charleston?

BGW: Yes, his ship was in there for repair, the light cruiser RENO.

EMC: Was he enlisted or an officer?

BGW: He was enlisted.

EMC: Yes, because you can't date the officers.

BGW: No, I don't think we were supposed to.

EMC: No.

BGW: He was a great guy. He came from Kansas. Oh, it's a long story. I went home on a 72-hour pass to be maid of honor for my best friend. Paul was home on a weekend pass, and somebody told him that I was there. He called me and asked me to go out. So I did, and, gee, that spark was still there.

EMC: Did you have somebody else's ring on at that time?

BGW: Yes, and I did the right thing. I broke off with Kansas and went back to Paul who was waiting for me, I guess. It turned out to be the best thing I ever did, although I think the other guy would have been very much okay, too, but this was perfect.

EMC: Oh, well, that's great. That's quite a wartime romance. You had two fiances, Army and Navy. Wartime romances. Did you write letters to Paul while you were in the service?

BGW: At first.

EMC: At first.

BGW: But not afterwards.

EMC: So all this transpired while you were in Charleston. Well, where did you people go on dates when you went out?

BGW: Petty officers' Club, Chiefs' Club, NCO Club, I guess, movies.

EMC: Did you go to the beaches?

BGW: Folly Beach, movies, and dinner.

EMC: Yes, normal things. Did you like Charleston?

BGW: Yes, I loved Charleston.

EMC: It's beautiful.

BGW: I've been back three times.

EMC: They closed the naval base a couple of years ago.

BGW: Oh, that was sad. We went out to visit the base. We went out to see where our barracks was, and there was nothing there. It had been torn down.

EMC: Yes.

BGW: Funny feeling.

EMC: Yes and the base is closed, too. So that's too bad. Well, you had a good time then in Charleston and you made some good friends. Back to your work just a little bit. Did you work rotating shifts and Saturdays, or did you have set hours?

BGW: We worked mostly in the daytime, but I can remember being there in the evenings, too. I don't remember just how it was.

EMC: So you had some night duty.

BGW: And I know I had to go in sometimes on weekends, because the other girls in my room went to Myrtle Beach or somewhere, and I couldn't go with them. My roommates were not pharmacist mates, they were storekeepers.

EMC: Oh, I see.

BGW: They worked with civilians and had civilian hours.

EMC: Yes.

BGW: They had a lot more time off.

EMC: Right. How do you feel you were treated by the superiors that you reported to in your work?

BGW: Fine, fine.

EMC: Was there any discrimination?

BGW: I don't think so.

EMC: Any harassment or ill treatment?

BGW: I don't think so.

EMC: What did you like about your work assignment? What did you feel very positively about it?

BGW: Well, I was always with people. I like that.

EMC: And did you feel you were doing some good?

BGW: Yes, yes. Well, you know, we replaced the poor guys who had to go in the Fleet Marines because I came in there, you know, things like that. They had to go aboard ship or go on landings with marines.

EMC: Did they express any resentment about that?

BGW: No, but I felt, gee, this is why we're here, I know, but I imagine some of them were killed.

EMC: Yes. Did anything exciting, amusing or interesting happen during this time frame?

BGW: We're going back fifty-nine years!

EMC: I know. I know. It's very difficult. If anything startling happened, you'd probably remember, in your work or otherwise.

BGW: I remember when I was on leave in New York, well, right after boot camp, I guess, no, no, because I had a cross on my sleeve, some of the time that I was there. And I thought, well I hope that nobody crashes into the Empire State Building, because I had read a short time before that that had happened, and the



Navy corpsmen who were on leave gave them first aid.

EMC: Oh.

BGW: And I thought I don't want to have to do something like that. I hope they don't notice my red cross.

EMC: Well, nothing happened then.

BGW: No, thank God.

EMC: Do you remember a smallpox scare in Charleston?

BGW: No I don't remember that.

EMC: Doris O'Toole mentioned that, and they had to inoculate everybody. Maybe that was--

BGW: Maybe she got there before I did.

EMC: A little earlier. Did you feel any pressure in this billet?

BGW: No.

EMC: Were you encouraged to buy war bonds as a WAVE?

BGW: I don't remember. I didn't have any money. I didn't buy anything.

EMC: Right, well your salary wasn't that high.

BGW: No, no.

EMC: Did you feel you were able to exist on it?

BGW: Oh, yes.

EMC: Yes.

BGW: I was never worried about money.

EMC: You were well taken care of. You know, you had your food.

BGW: We didn't really need money for anything, actually.

EMC: You had your food and you had your shelter. Did you have any contact with civilians at this time? And, if you did, how did they react and treat the WAVES?

BGW: The only civilians I had contact with were the girls who would work in the office of the dispensary. And I went home with a couple of them to spend the night met their families. They were

very nice. Southern hospitality.

EMC: Oh, so that was positive.

BGW: But I did have a couple of girls who had been ahead of me in high school. I knew them fairly well; we were in the Tri-Y together, which was like a sorority. They were both married by then and married to officers and living in Charleston. They never invited me over to their homes. And I thought, well, that's pretty selfish, because I am enlisted.

EMC: Yes, maybe so.

BGW: I didn't like that. That was the only thing.

EMC: But I wonder if any civilians that you ever met on the street made any comments about your service or expressed positive feelings about the WAVES?

BGW: I don't remember back then. I don't remember back then. People are very positive about it now, when we are in a parade or something, you know.

EMC: Yes. Did you write to your parents or your friends regarding your WAVE experiences?

BGW: No, not too many folks.

EMC: Do you have any of those letters?

BGW: No.

EMC: Oh that's too bad, because they're wonderful.

BGW: Yes.

EMC: You know, because they tell us what you did, how you felt.

BGW: Probably, I don't know what happened to them. My mother died. She was fairly young, sixty-four, and I don't know what happened to things like that. My father remarried.

EMC: Yes, who knows. Well, VJ Day came along in August 15, 1945, and were you still at Charleston then?

BGW: Yes, I was.

EMC: Do you remember that?

BGW: Yes, I do.

EMC: The announcement of the end of the war and how you felt and

how you celebrated?

BGW: Yes. At that time I was going with Kansas.

EMC: Oh, okay.

BGW: We went out to the beach with another couple, so they went to Folly Beach. We went downtown first, but it was too crowded, you couldn't move. Such excitement!

EMC: I guess.

BGW: But we were sure happy. We were happy. We were all so happy.

EMC: Oh, I bet people were thrilled at the end of the war. Did you ever have a chance to meet Mildred McAfee during your WAVE service?

BGW: I don't believe so.

EMC: Oh, I should have asked you also, this happened before VJ Day, the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Did that make an impact and an impression on you?

BGW: Yes. Some of the marines from our base went to be in the

color guard. I remember that.

EMC: So that was a big event, kind of a change in political event for us. Well, when were you finally discharged from the Navy?

BGW: February '46.

EMC: Oh, so you stayed in.

BGW: Two years.

EMC: A little bit beyond the signing of the truce in September 1945. Were you still at Charleston then?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Okay. Do you remember where you were discharged? Were you discharged in Charleston?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Or did you have to go to New York or some other city?

BGW: No, I think I was discharged there, I had my ruptured duck there.

EMC: Right.

BGW: So it must have been.

EMC: Did you receive any medals at all? Because the women could get two medals, the Victory Medal and the American Service Medal.

BGW: No, I never did.

EMC: But, you got your ruptured duck. How did you feel about leaving the Navy and the WAVES after serving for two solid years?

BGW: I decided that maybe it was a mistake to leave, so I went to see about changing my mind, and it was too late.

EMC: Oh, so you wanted to stay?

BGW: Well, I didn't know what I wanted. You know I was going to get married and then I wasn't.

EMC: Oh, so you were kind of in limbo?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: But you liked it enough to want to stay?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: You felt happy, but it was too late. So you would have stayed in if you could have?

BGW: Maybe, yes.

EMC: If the opportunity were there. Do you feel that during your two-year service, the WAVES had a strong sense of esprit de corps?

BGW: I think so. Maybe more so now, though.

EMC: Did you think that the WAVES were a smoothly run organization? Were there any glitches or any problems?

BGW: I don't think so.

EMC: Did you know anybody who was discharged for any disciplinary reasons?

BGW: I think there was one girl in our barracks who was pregnant. There was something about her, I don't know how she ever got into the service, she didn't seem quite-



EMC: All there?

BGW: With it, yes.

EMC: Oh, so she was discharged.

BGW: I think so.

EMC: Did the WAVES experience change or redirect your life and your goals?

BGW: [Pause]

EMC: Did you have any other ambitions as a result of your WAVES service?

BGW: I don't think so.

EMC: Do you think the WAVES service made you more independent or more self-reliant?

BGW: I imagine so, yes. My friend tells me I'm too independent.

EMC: Oh, oh, okay. Did it broaden your horizons at all?

BGW: I suppose so, yes.

EMC: Did you enjoy meeting women from all over the country?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: And men, too.

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Did you feel that after the war, what women were expected to do and to be changed at all? Or do you feel that women were more career oriented after the war? Or do you think they retreated to the home?

BGW: Well, I don't know. I worked for a couple of years and we decided we wanted a family, so we had a family. And I didn't work until my boys were a junior and a senior in high school. And I thought well, there will be two in college at one time, maybe I should get a job. So I did. I went back to secretarial work in a real estate office, and then I got my broker's license and sold real estate.

EMC: Oh, that's fabulous.

BGW: And that was nice while they were in college. When they got out of college, I didn't sell anymore. I mean it was just

temporary.

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

BGW: Yes.

EMC: And who did you maintain friends with?

BGW: My roommates.

EMC: All of them?

BGW: All three of them.

EMC: Do you still keep in contact with them?

BGW: Well, yes. Well, one died. But we always wrote at Christmas. All of us.

EMC: Yes.

BGW: One died, and then the one from North Carolina lives in Virginia now, her husband was a doctor, retired now, of course. I stopped to see them, stayed overnight with them on my way home one time. They lived right off of Route 81. I came north that

way. Stayed a couple of days with them and later they visited me in Florida. And then Pearl, of course, who lives in Fort Lauderdale, we've been on lots of trips together. Went to Europe three times. Went to the Deep South. Went to the Pacific Northwest. Did a lot of travelling together. She is also a widow.

EMC: Oh that's great. So you really have maintained a lot of contacts with the women from Charleston that you met. Do you belong to any WAVE organizations?

BGW: Just WAVES National.

EMC: How about the Ocean State Group?

BGW: That's part of WAVES National.

EMC: Right. So the two groups? Where did you settle after the war was over? Did you return to Connecticut?

BGW: Yes, I did.

EMC: Did you settle in Brooklyn?

BGW: No, Danielson.

EMC: Danielson.

BGW: Got married and lived in Danielson for a year and a half and then we moved to New Hampshire.

EMC: Oh.

BGW: Lived in New Hampshire for about four years and came back here.

EMC: Oh, so you've been here for quite a while then.

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Back in the Brooklyn area. You mentioned what you did as far as work was concerned. Did you ever talk to your children about your WAVE days?

BGW: Well, probably not enough, you know. Not much. My granddaughters are showing an interest now.

EMC: Oh, that's interesting. Did any of your sons join the service?

BGW: No, thank God. It was during the Vietnam era and my son Lee joined the National Guard. My son David is asthmatic, so we didn't worry about him having to go. It was so different from

World War II. There was no patriotic feeling.

EMC: Right.

BGW: To have him in.

EMC: Right, exactly. Have you registered with WIMSA?

BGW: Yes.

EMC: Did you go to the dedication?

BGW: No. I watched in on TV. It was very moving.

EMC: Just to sum things up, I want to ask a few more questions. Can you comment on the feeling of patriotism in the country at that time and your own patriotic feeling and support for the country. Do you feel it was at an all-time high?

BGW: Yes. I think so. I felt that way, especially with my family's history, serving in every war since the Revolution.

EMC: Was one of your reasons for joining the WAVES war patriotism?

BGW: Yes, definitely.

EMC: As well as your dissatisfaction with your occupation, seeking other avenues. What was the significance of your naval career for you and your life? What impact did it make on you, if any at all?

BGW: I didn't think much about it when I had my husband. I wasn't a person who joined. I wasn't an organization joiner. Our friends knew I was in the service. We had a group in New Hampshire. All the men were veterans. Another girl and myself were veterans. We knew that, but we didn't dwell on it.

EMC: How did you become involved in the Ocean State Group? How did you hear about that?

BGW: I knew about WAVES National because my girlfriend in Fort Lauderdale was a member, so I looked around for a group here and there wasn't any in this part of Connecticut. We tried to form one, but we didn't have a full quota. So I decided I would join the one that Dottie and Doris were in, and it wasn't that far away. It was closer than the one in New London. I already knew the people, so that's why I joined that one.

EMC: Great. Very good. You've been active in it, then.

BGW: Not as much as if I were in Rhode Island. A lot of things

they do, it's too early in the morning or too far.

EMC: But you've had them here. That's great. They mentioned that.

BGW: Yes, we've had a couple of pool parties here that were fun. I'm going to a picnic next week.

EMC: Where are they holding that?

BGW: North Providence. They sent directions. I have to figure out where. That's our yearly event.

EMC: Great. Do you have anything else to add about your WAVE days? Anything that you remember that's outstanding that I've missed, perhaps?

BGW: I don't think so. But if I were young, I'd do it all over again.

EMC: That's a great comment. Did you end up as a hospital corpsman?

BGW: Yes. I had a problem. I missed the train in Penn Station. I got to the gate just as the guard was closing the gate, and he would not let me in. I had to take a milk train and got in late.



It was horrible, too. It stopped at every little village, so that made me late--AOL.\* So I couldn't go up for rate for six months. So I didn't become a pharmacist's mate.

EMC: So you were still a hospital corpsman.

BGW: Yes. HAIC. Fortunately, I got the first class right out of Corps School. A lot of people were second class. At least I was first class.

EMC: That's good.

BGW: I never worried about it or was in it for the money.

EMC: You weren't in there for promotions. It was for the war and the duration. I want to thank you very much for the interview. We will get it transcribed, and then we'll edit it, and you will have a chance to look at it, too.

BGW: Thank you.

---

\*Absent Over Leave.

