

Naval War College , Newport, RI

Oral History Program

A History of the WAVES

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Nona Baldwin Brown

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THE HISTORY OF THE WAVES

INTERVIEWEE: NONA BALDWIN BROWN

SUBJECT: THE HISTORY OF THE WAVES

DATE: 27 SEPTEMBER 1997

Q: Where were you born and when?

B: I was born on May 11th, 1918, in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

Q: What did your father do for a living?

B: My father was a chemical engineer. And my mother had at one time been a mathematics teacher, but was mostly a housewife.

Q: Did you have brothers and sisters?

B: I have one brother and one sister. My brother also served in the Navy. He's younger than I.

Q: Where did you spend your growing up years?

B: I grew up in Montclair, New Jersey and attended Montclair High School.

Q: When did you graduate from high school?

B: I graduated from high school in 1935 and then went on to

Vassar College from which I then graduated in 1939.

Q: Did your family have any Navy connections?

B: My family had no Navy connections what so ever.

Q: Were any of your friends or relatives in the service and did this influence you to join?

B: By the time I joined, I knew many people in the service, mostly men. In fact, all men at that point, in 1941-42, but I don't think that influenced me as you'll find out as I go on with my story.

Q: Where were you when Pearl Harbor was attacked and what was your reaction?

B: When Pearl Harbor was attacked, I was working in the City room of The New York Times, on a Sunday afternoon. My reaction was as horrified as everyone else's. The other reporters were just undone by the news and then there was a scramble for people to get there, to send reporters out to the Pacific, to send people everywhere. It was just a very tense, very exciting, very exhilarating almost, although it was also depressing and frightening.

Q: Obviously you kept up with the news of the war before you enlisted?

B: Yes, I certainly did. That was my business. My business was

the newspaper business.

Q: How did you hear about the WAVES? What was attractive about the Navy versus the other services? Why did you select the Navy, instead of the WACs or the SPARs?

B: I knew about all of the women services because as a journalist in Washington, I was specifically assigned to cover, among other things, the development of the women's military services. So I was quite familiar with all of it and knew that the Navy was taking women directly into the Naval Reserve rather than in a separate corps like the Women's Army Corps. I did not select the Navy, to be absolutely clear about it. I was asked if I would accept a commission, because of my professional background, to handle newsroom press releases and other such press matters for the new women's service in the regular Navy press office. And that was the offer I accepted.

Q: When was that?

B: That was in October of 1942. Now wait a minute. I have a piece of paper here. October 14th, 1942, was the date of my original commission.

Q: What procedures did you have to go through in your enlistment, or in your joining? Were there tests and physicals?

B: The thing I remember most distinctly was the physical exam

which had to be done at the Navy recruiting station on G street, here in Washington, just a few doors from my newspaper office. And I went down there to go through with my papers and the doctor was quite nonplussed, should I say, because, of course, all the physical exams for the Naval Reserve were designed for men. He had to do some rapid adjusting to clear me and draw some curtains here and there because there wasn't another woman in the place. So I just closed my eyes and went on my way. When I came though I was just amused and so was the doctor. Even my commission has all-masculine USNR terminology.

Q: Where were you sworn in?

B: As best I can remember, I was probably sworn in, in the office of Captain Leland Lovett because he was the Head of the Office of Public Relations to which I was being directly assigned.

Q: How did your parents feel about your decision to go into the Navy? Were they supportive?

B: Oh, my parents were quite supportive. The request that I accept a commission, as I remember, came to me on a Friday. I went home that weekend, discussed it with my parents, and I think they did nothing but be supportive. They understood my feeling that just because I wore a skirt, I had no right to say "No." And so I said, "Yes."

Q: How did you travel to your basic training or indoctrination?
Were you alone or with a group?

B: I traveled to Northampton alone, I believe. It was for indoctrination. By this time I was already commissioned, and went to Northampton a week or so later for indoctrination. I was there overall for four weeks, two weeks at Smith and two weeks at Mount Holyoke, and then came directly to my assigned position in the press office of Navy Public Relations.

Q: Describe your living conditions and roommates during the training period.

B: My training period was rather brief and in two different locations. We lived, particularly at Smith, in, as I remember it, sort of a large faculty house, and had, more or less, personal bedrooms. I don't remember that I had a roommate, but we all lived together very congenially. We were among the first of the precommissioned members of the women's reserve.

Q: During this training period, how was your day structured?

B: I guess there were a whole series of class assignments and there was a certain amount of drilling and marching. We learned a lot of basic Navy lore, Navy language and Navy structure. We had to know the whole organization of the Navy-its mission, and alot of

its parts, how to identify a battleship, how to know what a sailor looked like, how to read insignia.

Q: Did you find the classes challenging? Easy? Difficult?

B: They were not challenging, no. They were interesting and when there were memory tests, they were not hard. Most of it was memorizing.

Q: How did you feel about marching and drilling?

B: I did it. It wasn't anything I was overly pleased with.

Q: Did you adjust easily to the discipline of military life?

B: That question, if it applies to the training period, it was just so short there wasn't really any adjustment required. In Washington, there was no major adjustment because I worked in uniform, at the Navy, very much as I had previously worked in civilian clothes for the New York Times. I had my own apartment, I commuted to and from the Navy Department, and I lived with my friends I had had prior to going into the service.

Q: Did you participate in any extra curricular activities during your training period?

B: No, nothing like that.

Q: Comment on the Navy uniform.

B: Everybody liked the Navy uniform when Mainbocher came up with it. It was really considered very smart for its purpose, very well designed. Everybody seemed to like it, even the hat. In fact, everybody liked it so much that most of the other women's military services eventually copied it in many ways. The winter uniform was fine. The only real uniform problem we had was that most of us didn't get winter overcoats until later that year because the supply wasn't ready. So there were a lot of very cold young ladies running around.

Q: Did anything amusing or noteworthy happen during your training period?

B: Amusing or noteworthy, not that I can think of really, no.

Q: What did you do on your limited time off?

B: Didn't have time off up there. Well, I had a friend whose husband was on the faculty and I did go see her one time.

Q: Did you express a preference for the kind of billet you wanted or were you just assigned?

B: I think it's clear I was specifically selected for a particular post.

Q: Did you need additional training? Where did you go for that?

B: I did not need additional training.

Q: Where were you stationed eventually?

B: Navy Press, zero wing of the Navy Building, which has now been torn down, but was Navy Headquarters during World War II.

Q: And what were your duties?

B: My principle duties were to handle all press matters that came through, in the course of ordinary business, dealing with the assignment of women, the enlargement of the responsibilities that could be given to women, occasionally there were uniform questions or there was somebody who was promoted who was important. Various things like that. The news was really rather heavy at first, when the WAVES were first getting ready to be known, but eventually that kind of just straight news release work diminished, and I was doing totally different things like hometown news stories about officers and enlisted men who had survived accidents, or sinkings in the Pacific, and handling the information desk, and other general run of the mill news room work.

Q: What were your work days like? Did you have to work rotating shifts and Saturdays?

B: Yes, rotating shifts, including Saturdays and Sundays, and 4pm to 12, midnight to 8 AM shifts.

Q: How were you treated? Was there any discrimination or

harassment or ill treatment?

B: There was certainly no harassment or ill treatment.

Discrimination only in the sense, that I was there and there was absolutely no way I could move up, down, or sideways. A man in that position would not have remained in Navy press for three years.

Q: What did you like about the assignment? What didn't you like about it? Did anything exciting, amusing or interesting happen to you during this time frame?

B: I liked the assignment because it was so familiar. In fact, it was so easy to do for me that it was not a challenge in that sense. But yes, there were some interesting things. One thing that I should mention, is that occasionally I would serve as the Navy press representative at press conferences at the White House or the Pentagon. I did, on one occasion, stand around the oval office in the White House with Roosevelt in his chair. He looked at me with a slightly startled look on his face because he was not use to having women of any nature in there except for maybe a secretary of some sort. I don't remember that he said anything, any pearly prose that I can recall. Several times I made the trip across to the Pentagon to Secretary Stimson's press conferences. I always had fun when I got there, because Hanson Baldwin would always show up at all of these. And since my maiden name was Baldwin, there were a lot of people who thought that some how or

another I was related to him. He didn't like to have people think that because he thought he was too young to look like my father and too old to be my husband. He had a perfectly good wife else where. I did get to know Hanson quite well and we became good friends, but there a couple of times there was some slightly rough joking on this issue. Hanson had a favorite remark when he would come into the Navy press. He'd stop by my desk and say, " Well there, Miss Baldwin, why don't you get back into the kitchen where you belong?," with a twinkle in his eye. My husband and I entertained him in our home after we were married and I did cook the meal.

Q: Where were you billeted? Describe.

A: I was not billeted. I lived in my own apartment. The one I had been living in when I went into the Navy and remained there throughout the war.

Q: Did you like those living arrangements?

B: Yes, indeed.

Q: Were you able to survive on your pay?

B: Yes, indeed. I had no problem.

Q: Did you date Navy men? And if so where did you go? Did you socialize with other WAVES?

B: Yes, I socialized with some of the other women in the Navy and one or two became very close friends over a long period of time. The Public Relations office was interesting, they had one woman in each section. It stayed that way through the whole war. Same ladies, same jobs, all through the whole war. One of them became one of my closest friends. She's still alive and living in England. She married an RAF officer. She and her husband were very kind. I was not married then. Another good friend, whom I correspond with still, married a U.S. naval officer who ultimately became a vice admiral. For years after the war, we saw them frequently. She was widowed and now lives in San Diego. The woman who was in the photo division was also a social friend as well as a personal friend. But yes, I dated Navy men. I dated Army men. I had a good time. Socially, I had a very good time.

Q: Did you have any contact with civilians? How did they react and treat the WAVES?

B: Oh, I had constant contact with civilians. I lived with two of them, females.

Q: Did you keep up with news about the war?

B: I worked on the news of the war. So, yes, of course.

Q: Did you write to your parents and friends regarding your WAVE experiences? Do you have any of these letters today?

B: I don't think I have any of the letters. I'm in the process of discarding things so I probably threw out a lot, but I may have written to my mother. I don't consider what I had were experiences in the WAVES. Let me stop and say that right here. I was in the Navy. I did not consort, particularly, with other women just because they were in the Navy, and I didn't belong to the kind of an organization where there were many other women with whom I dealt, except in a totally professional matter. If I had to go up to the CNO's office there would be a yeomen or a chief yeomen up there who was a woman. I would deal with her, but I didn't have any kind of constant day by day dealings with other women in the Navy.

Q: How did you celebrate on VJ day?

B: By jumping up and down on the street in front of the White House and then going around the corner to Les Trois Mousquetaires for a very nice supper.

Q: How did you feel about the end of the war?

B: By this time, I should inject the fact that I was married, my husband had returned. He had been involved on D-Day with landing of troops on Omaha Beach and returned to Washington, so we were in a very celebratory mood when the war ended. Both of us.

Q: Did you ever meet Mildred McAfee? If so, when, where and give your impression.

B: It was Miss McAfee who called and offered me the commission that brought me into the Navy. Yes, I had met her before that. I had met her at Vassar College a year or two before when she was the Commencement speaker and I was covering the Commencement for The New York Times, so that was my first personal meeting with her. I saw her many times during the course of the war, at various gatherings of one kind or another. There may have been times when I went to her office on some personal or professional matter, but I don't specifically remember that.

Q: What was the highest rank you achieved and the pay scale?

B: I started as an Ensign and ended as a senior Lieutenant. I don't remember the pay scale frankly. Can't help.

Q: Where and when were you discharged from the Navy and what was the process?

B: I resigned from the Navy for what were considered, sort of, medical reasons for a series of severe and unending headaches. It was a decision based on medical examinations at the Naval Hospital and the final conclusion by a Navy psychiatrist, believe it or not, that I was absolutely stable, well organized, nothing wrong with me except that I was not being allowed to work up to my capacity, and this was so frustrating it was giving me headaches. The Navy offered me a discharge with some strange language in it "for the

good of the service" and I protested and said, "What does that mean?" The men at BUPERS with whom I raised this question, (men mind you, there's no women's chain of command to which I turned in this process), said that was the language they were using for pilots who were being released really for battle fatigue. They thought that was a phrase that would be helpful for reemployment, otherwise employers would wonder why they had been booted out of the Navy. I said I didn't think it was very descriptive or very accurate. They said, we agree with you 100%. May we use you as an example to get this language changed? I said certainly. They went through some sort of bureaucratic exchanges all over in BUPERS and ultimately came back with a direct Honorable Discharge. No for the good of the service sentence in there. And I have a letter from Forrestal and all the rest regretting my resignation and so on. I, in fact, resigned just as the war was ending. The date of my resignation is September 1945.

Q: Did you receive any medals?

B: No.

Q: Were you happy or sad to leave the Navy? Would you have stayed in if you could?

B: At that point and under those circumstances, no. Later when it became clearer that women were going to be treated as human beings

and given an opportunity to use their talents, I might have been more interested, but by this time, I'd gone off on an entirely different direction and wouldn't have been.

Q: Did the WAVES have a strong strong sense of esprit de corps?

B: I can't answer that because I didn't see them as a corps. And I don't know who did except maybe those who taught at the training school.

Q: Did you have any preconceived expectations when you joined the WAVES?

B: No, just to do my duty. I almost said for God, for country, and for Yale, which doesn't fit in here particularly.

Q: Was the WAVES a smoothly run program?

B: From everything I know, yes. I think it was very well, very sensitively run program. I think Miss McAfee did a wonderful job of expanding and expanding the role for women in an atmosphere where this expansion was not encouraged by a lot of the high command.

Q: Do you know of anyone who was discharged for disciplinary reasons?

B: No.

Q: Did the WAVES experience change or redirect your life in any way? Did the war make you more independent and self reliant? Did it broaden your horizons? Did you have any career ambitions as a result?

B: Sorry, my career had already started before I went into the Navy and I just went back to it after the war. With veterans preference, I was entitled to return to my job and I did in the Washington bureau of The New York Times.

Q: Did you feel that what women were expected to do and be changed when the war was over?

B: I don't know if that means in society in general or just in the Navy. I think in society, in general, yes. I think the war blew the lid off a lot of jobs and a lot of opportunities for women. Although there was such a scramble, and so much joking about Rosie the riveter going back to her ironing board that I don't know how it changed. I think it did open job opportunities for a great many women who did not wish to give them up.

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

B: In particular, yes. This one friend whose husband died, a little before my husband did, and has lived in England most of her life and I still keep in touch with her as best I can, and also the one now living in San Diego.

Q: Did you attend WAVE reunions?

B: No

Q: Did you belong to any WAVE organizations?

B: No. I have not belonged to any military organizations, WAVES or otherwise.

Q: What was the significance of your naval career for you and your life?

B: The flip answer is that it is when I met my husband, under circumstances which I will not describe here. But we were both in uniform when we met and I think that had something to do with it.

Q: Where did you settle after the war? Did you work?

B: We stayed in Washington.

Q: Did you marry someone you met while you were in the Navy?

B: I've just answered that, yes.

Q: Did you take advantage of the GI Bill?

B: Yes. I did indeed. I didn't do it educationally because I had already been through graduate school. So I took advantage of the real estate, the veterans special deal. I forgot how it worked now,

but anyway I borrowed money to buy a house.

Q: Any other comments in general?

B: No, I think not because as I have talked I have made a number of the points that reflect my basic thinking about the whole experience. I'm certainly glad I went in. I would have under no circumstances have said "no" when Miss McAfee called and asked me. I think on the whole it was a good experience for me because I learned that I couldn't push further, faster, than someone else was going to allow me to do, but even The New York Times was more open than the Navy as far as that kind of advancement was concerned. So that was the one thing. I felt in the long run was that I was put in a job, stayed there and just peddled the same water all through the war, but I met a lot of nice people and enjoyed myself and did my bit to help. OK, now you've learned all about me.

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