

Beyond Kinship: Constructing Family Through Military Service

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During World War II, the United States government asked women to behave in an untraditional manner. Young women were encouraged to leave home and enlist in the military. Each military branch had its own female force, including the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard, which fell under Naval jurisdiction during the war. This article will analyse oral history interviews with female veterans, discussing why the women chose to enlist and how that enlistment transformed their lives. The Great Depression strengthened “kinship ties,” which were then disrupted by World War II, as men and women were pulled into unfamiliar circumstances far away from home. Women enlisted in the Navy and Coast Guard to help the war effort. But service offered an additional motivation: a sense of belonging to a sorority of similarly-minded women who were somehow different or “better” than those in other branches. Women, many of whom came from working-class homes, aspired to a better way of life that could be obtained only through Naval military service. This sense of elitism, as this article demonstrates, extended beyond the women’s enlistment and into their civilian postwar lives. In a sense, the women moved from the comfort of their familial kinship ties into a new family, which transcended blood relations.

Beyond Kinship

SEVEN UP! -- Her six brothers are serving in the armed forces, but Mary Marovich, 22 [...] decided that wasn’t enough. Enlisting in the WAVES she takes the oath from Lt. Margaret Harding Cecil.¹

In 1943, a young woman from Chicago followed her brothers into the military, signing up for the United States Navy’s new women’s branch, the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES). Military service would take Mary Marovich far from her working-class home. She first shipped off to the Bronx, New York. There she got a health check-up, took aptitude tests and then began basic training. She also received a snazzy uniform created by the New York haute couture designer Mainbocher. Next stop was 3,000 miles away in Oakland, California, where she received specialist training before moving again, this time to her “permanent” post in San Francisco. This young woman was

¹ “SEVEN UP!” *Chicago Tribune*, circa August 1943, newspaper clipping from the collection of Mary M. Ryan, now in the possession of the author.

my mother, and her experiences as a Naval reservist during World War II were both unique and universal, echoing the experiences of the more than 100,000 women who served in the Navy during the war, a full two percent of its force.²

My mother's notice of separation from the WAVES tracks her time in the service, from July 1943 through November 1945, showing where she served and what positions she held.

NOTICE OF SEPARATION FROM THE U. S. NAVAL SERVICE
NAVSUPFORM 1047-10

1. NAME AND GRADE 2. NAME (LAST, FIRST, MIDDLE) 3. RATE AND CLASS (OR GRADE AND CLASSIFICATION) 4. PERMANENT ADDRESS FOR MAILING PURPOSES

764 11 59 RYAN, Mary Marovich PHM2c V-10
184 DuBois St., Newburgh, New York

5. PLACE OF SEPARATION
USN, PSU Balboa Park
San Francisco, California

6. CHARACTER OF SEPARATION
Discharged - Honorable

7. ADDRESS FROM WHICH EMPLOYMENT WILL BE REPORTED
Same as #4.

8. RACE 9. SEX 10. MARITAL STATUS 11. U. S. CITIZEN (YES OR NO)

W F Married Yes

12. DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH
3-2-21 Chicago, Illinois

13. HOME ADDRESS AT TIME OF ENTRY INTO SERVICE
Chicago, Illinois

14. BOARD OF ENTRY INDICATED BY CHECK OR APPROPRIATE MARK

RECORDED INDEXED SERIALIZED FILED CONTINGENT

15. DATE OF ENTRY INTO ACTIVE SERVICE 16. ANY SERVICE USE PAY PURPOSES (YES, NO, DATES)

7-15-43 2 4 4

17. PLACE OF ENTRY INTO ACTIVE SERVICE
Chicago, Illinois

18. BOARD OF ENTRY INDICATED BY CHECK OR APPROPRIATE MARK

RECORDED INDEXED SERIALIZED FILED CONTINGENT

19. NATIONALITY 20. GRADE OR RATE 21. PAY GRADE (OR GRADE AND CLASSIFICATION)

AS HALE Hale PHM2c PHM2c

22. SERVICE (VARIABLE AND SERVICE CODES) USE

HTS (NR) Bronx, New York
MTC Treasure Island California
ComNavTra Dist Cen. S.F., Cal.

23. SERVICE RECORDS COMPLETED 24. WEEKS

USNHCN Oakland, California 4

25. IMPORTANCE OF PREMIUM IS NOT PAID WHEN DUE OR WITHIN THIRTY-DAY DATE THEREAFTER INSURANCE WILL LAPSE. MAKE CHECKS OR MONEY ORDERS PAYABLE TO THE TREASURER OF THE U. S. AND FORWARD TO COLLECTOR'S SUBDIVISION VETERANS ADMINISTRATION, WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

26. AMOUNT OF PREMIUM DUE EACH MONTH 27. MONTHLY RATE OF PREMIUM DUE

6.60 6.60

28. INTENTION OF VETERAN TO CONTINUE INSURANCE 29. NAME OF DISBURSING OFFICER

Yes M. T. BENNETT

30. TOTAL PAYMENT DUE ON SEPARATION 31. NAME OR GRADE (OR GRADE AND CLASSIFICATION) OF DISBURSING OFFICER

207.40 113.15

32. SIGNATURE (BY DIRECTOR OF COMMANDING OFFICER)

Cora May HANCOCK, Lt. (jg) USNR

33. NAME AND ADDRESS OF LAST EMPLOYER 34. DATE OF LAST EMPLOYMENT

ILLINOIS BELL TELEPHONE CO. CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
FROM: Mar 1940 TO: May 1943

35. JOB PREFERENCE (LAST TYPE, LOCALITY, AND GENERAL AREA) 36. PREFERENCE FOR ADDITIONAL TRAINING (TYPE OF TRAINING)

None at present Interior Decorating-Commercial Art

37. EDUCATIONAL OR TRADE COURSES (GRADE AND LENGTH OF COURSE)

Topographical Drafting - 5 Mo.

38. MEDICAL PREPARATION (YEAR) 39. SERVICE

6 1 4 4

40. DATE OF SEPARATION 41. SIGNATURE OF PERSON BEING SEPARATED

18 Nov 1945

CHAS. P. PALLITTIN
CHIEF OF POLICE, CHICAGO, ILL.

Image 1. Mary Marovich Ryan's Notice of Separation from the United States Navy, 1945. Box 24 notes where she served and box 23 indicates where she received specialty training.³

² The Navy's official tally is only 86,000 WAVES; however, in subsequent years many scholars have determined that at least 100,000 served. See Jean Ebbert and Mary Beth Hall, *Crossed Currents: Navy Women from WWI to Tailhook* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1993).

³ Mary Marovich Ryan's Notice of Separation, from the collection of Mary M. Ryan, now in the possession of the author.

Aside from this source, much of her experiences remain a mystery to me. I knew her military service was important to her: she asked that her tombstone be a military marker when she died. She was entitled to this as a World War II veteran. But while she was alive, she rarely discussed the details of her experiences in the Navy. Instead, she revealed the “official” family history, which focused, for the most part, on her relationship with my father, a dashing Army Air Corps pilot: how they met and married in San Francisco, and their celebration of VJ Day together at a local pub where they met celebrated photographer Joe Rosenthal. Rosenthal was handing out copies of his Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of the raising of the flag at Iwo Jima to veterans; the yellowed image is still in my family. In comparison, other details of her experiences were completely ignored. She never talked about her friends who were WAVES, her time training at Hunter College in the Bronx, New York, or about her request for a “six-star pin” to honour her six brothers in the service, which she relayed to a newspaper reporter. I have a copy of her WAVE portrait, but this tells me little about *who* the glamorous woman really was.⁴



Image 2. Mary Marovich, circa 1943.⁵

⁴ The term “WAVES” is an acronym for Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service. In conversations with women who served in the military as well as in personal letters, diaries, memoirs, etc., they use the term only to refer to a group of women in the Navy. Individual women are referred to as a “WAVE.” I will follow their usage.

⁵ Photograph of Mary Marovich, from the collection of Mary M. Ryan, now in the possession of the author.

That was until I decided to delve into the stories of women who enlisted in the Navy WAVES and Coast Guard SPARs (the nickname is drawn from the first letters of the four-word Coast Guard motto *Semper Paratus, Always Ready*).⁶ Both groups served, for the most part, in state-side positions during World War II. According to Navy propaganda, their service would “free a man to fight.”⁷ This article will use oral history to look at the reasons women chose to enlist in the Navy and Coast Guard, rather than join other service branches or do war work as civilians. It will demonstrate how the Navy constructed an identity for WAVES and SPARs that resonated with the recruits. The women experienced the support of their extended families, known as “kinship ties,” during the Depression years. During the war, they would supplant these familial relationships with a new sisterhood found in the Navy and Coast Guard. This sisterhood, according to recruits, was more refined than other military branches due to a mix of factors that included the enlistment standards, the uniform the women wore, affiliation with and training at colleges, and the character of the women who served. Military regimentation, such as the fish-out-of-water experience of boot camp, would cement these new ties through social cohesion. In effect, the Navy would become a wartime family for the women, characterized by a shared military experience. This new “family” extended beyond the women’s enlistment and into their civilian post-war lives. In it, the women found a kinship bond constructed by their Navy experiences, outside of those they formed with their blood relatives.

Oral History and Historiography

I interviewed fifty-one women for this project and followed human subjects protocol. Women volunteered to participate and were informed of their rights to decline to be interviewed, to keep their name private, or to rescind the permission for their interviews to be used in the project. They were provided with general questions beforehand, and were allowed to edit their interview transcripts. Only one woman in the project asked that her name remain confidential; all others allowed their names to be used and asked that their interviews be placed in a national archive at the completion of the project; they will be placed in the Women In Military Service for America Memorial, or WIMSA, which shares its

⁶ Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, “The Wartime History of the WAVES, SPARs, Women Marines, Army and Navy Nurses, and WASPs,” in *A Woman's War Too: U.S. Women in the Military in World War II*, eds. Pauline N. Poulos and United States National Archives and Records Administration (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 1996), 48.

⁷ Department of the Navy, “Women in the U.S. Navy,” Naval Historical Center, <http://www.history.navy.mil/>, last accessed on 3 December 2006.

oral histories with the U.S. Library of Congress. The interviews were supplemented by oral histories held in archival collections.⁸

To a large degree, the narrators were found through the organization WAVES National; I met others through these interviewees. Seven of the women were interviewed during the biennial convention of the women's sea services organization.⁹ The WAVES National convention was held in 2006, sixty-five years after the U.S. entered World War II, aboard a cruise ship in the Caribbean. Approximately 500 women, and their families, attended. The women came from all regions of the United States, but the vast majority interviewed for this project settled on the West Coast. One woman was African American and one other woman was of Korean ancestry. The remaining forty-nine women were white, but descended from a wide variety of ethnic groups (German, Irish, Greek, Italian, etc.). They came from a variety of socio-economic groups as well, from working poor and dust-bowl farmers to those who were relatively well-to-do. Six served as Coast Guard SPARs and the rest as WAVES.

As it turns out, my mother was not the only woman who kept the details of her wartime military service quiet. Despite their willingness to be interviewed, it was only recently that this group of women began to talk about their wartime experiences. As WAVE Eileen Horner told me during our interview in 2006, "[over] the years, I didn't talk about my military service;" see the attached video link entitled: Eileen Horner Blakely 2.¹⁰ Certainly, other women echoed this statement. They too had remained silent; but they, like my mother, had saved memorabilia and did consider wartime service an important part of their identities. In fact, in our interviews they argued that the story of their service has been ignored by mainstream history and bypassed by popular U.S. television works such as Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation* or Ken Burns' *The War*. This was often given as a reason for why they decided to talk now: it was crucial that their story be added to World War II history while the women were still living.

Historians disagree about the exact effect of women's war service and wartime work on America's post-war society. Maureen Honey is among the scholars who dismiss the societal impact of female war workers. She argues that women workers were fulfilling their "civic and moral responsibilities as good citizens," rather than developing any special independence and power, a message

⁸ Personal interviews were supplemented by oral histories from the Veteran's History Project (<http://www.loc.gov/vets/>) at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, as well as by oral histories with Navy and Coast Guard officers conducted by the Naval Historical Center (<http://www.history.navy.mil/>).

⁹ WAVES National is an organization for female sea service veterans of all eras and as such is not limited solely to World War II women.

¹⁰ Ethel Eileen Horner Blakely, interview by author, Grants Pass, OR, 17 May 2006. Please note that the women in this article are referred to by the names under which they served while in the military; their full names, if different, are listed in the footnotes.

conveyed most clearly by the image of Rosie the Riveter.¹¹ As wartime work was supposed to be temporary, Honey argues, it offered little real or substantial change to women's roles. After the war an antifeminist backlash further "undermined the war's potential for challenging sex-role behaviour and attitudes."¹² By contrast, Sherna Berger Gluck argues that while individual "Rosies" may have willingly moved back into the roles of wives and mothers at war's end, their presence in the wartime workforce planted the seeds for change that germinated in subsequent generations.¹³ Neither of these viewpoints fully reflects the perspectives of military women, who moved away from home and family and, unlike factory workers, were obligated to serve for the duration of the war.

Oral history helps to close this historical gap, providing an insight into the legacy of World War II female Navy and Coast Guard veterans. As Gary Y. Okihiro notes, oral history is "a theory of history which maintains that the common folk and the dispossessed have a history and that history must be written."¹⁴ It offers Eileen Horner, and other veterans like her, a way to insert their stories into the historical narrative. As my interviewees often pointed out, popular oral history narratives – crafted by Studs Terkel, Tom Brokaw and documentarian Ken Burns, among others – have all but ignored the role of women in the military.¹⁵ Excellent historical accounts of the WAVES and SPARs, meanwhile, do not offer a space for the voices of rank and file volunteers.¹⁶ Luisa Passerini talks about "deafening silences" which occur when historiography does

¹¹ Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda During World War II* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 6.

¹² Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 216. See also Ruth Roach Pierson, *They're Still Women After All: The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986); Lois Scharf, *To Work and to Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980).

¹³ Sherna Berger Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, the War, and Social Change* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 269.

¹⁴ Gary Y. Okihiro, "Oral History and the Writing of Ethnic History," in *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, eds. David King Dunaway and Willa K. Baum (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1996), 209.

¹⁵ See Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998); Studs Terkel, *The Good War": an Oral History of World War Two* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *The War: An Intimate History, 1941-1945* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

¹⁶ See D'Ann Campbell, "Servicewomen and the American Military Experiment," in *A Woman's War Too*, 15-25; Ebbert and Hall, *Crossed Currents*; Major General Jeanne Holm (ret., USAF), *Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982); Litoff and Smith, "The Wartime History."

not “allow” certain voices to speak.¹⁷ Oral history helps fill those silences and gives scholars a method to “ground theory contextually in the concrete reality of women’s everyday lives.”¹⁸ It considers the role of memory, and the interpretations allowed by memory, as part of the process, seeing personal storytelling as a tool to understand the past.¹⁹

Within the oral history interview, it is possible to record ignored histories, and understand how individual narrators negotiated and challenged cultural norms. Alessandro Portelli has demonstrated this quite elegantly in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, where he argued that a town’s misremembering of a historic event served an important function in the group’s collective identity, questioning the “official” record.²⁰ The challenge manifests itself within the conversation between interviewer and interviewee, which includes “forms, genres, which carry implicit meanings, expectations and associations” that are understood by the narrator and mediated by the interviewer.²¹ The interpretation of an interview has much in common with the critical analysis of a media message: the creator (in this case the narrator) encodes texts (interviews) with certain messages in mind, usually culturally understood mores. The interviewer receives the text and then decodes it using these cultural conventions.²² Of course, this decoding is being done from the perspective of historical hindsight. In my interviews, I have no way of knowing whether the women interpreted the cultural norms the same way during wartime as they are interpreting them now. However, for oral history this potential complication is not problematic, as long as I follow the guidance offered by Portelli (and others) and use the women’s contemporary interpretations (and contemporary silences) as a form of insight into their pasts.

Through the oral histories collected for this project it became evident that these women had common experiences. They chafed against expectations of their era and believed that there was something more they could do in their lives. They

¹⁷ Ronald Grele, et. al., “Oral History as a Discipline: The Globalization of a Field and a Movement,” roundtable discussion, “Women’s Narratives, Women’s Lives,” Columbia University, New York, 7 June 2006. See also Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

¹⁸ Judith Stacey, “Can There be a Feminist Ethnography?,” in *Women’s Words*, 111.

¹⁹ See Alessandro Portelli, “Oral History as Genre,” in *Narrative and Genre*, eds. Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), 25; Ron Grele, “Oral History as Evidence,” in *Handbook of Oral History*, eds. Thomas L. Charlton, et. al., (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2006), 46-69; Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited*.

²⁰ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 26.

²¹ Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson, eds., *Narrative and Genre* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), 13.

²² See Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks*, eds. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 166-176.

selected a service branch distinguished not only by its uniform (the only branch to have couture-designed clothes) and its strict standards, but also by its association with higher education, specifically women's colleges.²³ Military service in the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard (the Coast Guard fell under Navy jurisdiction during the war),²⁴ provided the women with a sense of identity – an indoctrination into a second family which transcended their wartime service and extended into their postwar lives.

Before World War II – Women, Work and the Family

The group of women interviewed for this project seem vastly different from the stereotypical portrait of Depression-era American women seen in popular culture, such as the struggling migrant mother found in Dorothea Lange's famous 1936 photograph.



Image 3. Destitute Pea Pickers in California; a 32-year-old mother with seven children, circa 1936.²⁵

²³ Ebbert and Hall, *Crossed Currents*; Joy Bright Hancock, *Lady in the Navy: A Personal Reminiscence* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1972).

²⁴ Ebbert and Hall, *Crossed Currents*.

²⁵ Photograph of "Migrant Mother" by Dorothea Lange. U.S. Farm Security Administration Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Reading Room, http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/128_migm.html, last accessed on 7 October 2009.

The women interviewed talked of having aspirations to attend college (and, in some cases, of family expectations that they would attend college) in a time when high school graduation was often difficult.²⁶ They described the challenges of non-traditional families, created due to parental death, separation, or divorce. They expressed a restlessness with the “expectations” for their lives. These circumstances help explain why the women may have sought, and eventually discovered, a secondary family through their military service. SPAR Jane Ashcraft spoke of this struggle in our 2006 interview; see the attached video link entitled: Jane Ashcraft Fisher 1:

Well, I grew up during the Depression and I thought that because we were living on a farm, my dad was a farmer, that’s why we didn’t have any money. I realize now the whole nation was suffering like that. But our communications weren’t like they are now, and I didn’t have any idea. And I thought, “I’m not going to have anything to do with a farm. If I stay around here you end up marrying a farmer. I’m going to get a long ways away and I’m going see this world.”²⁷

So Ashcraft worked at the local newspaper, writing an occasional column and setting type, in order to save money so she could move away from the small Nebraska town where she grew up and go away to school. Between that and other occasional labour (baby sitting and school-sponsored farm projects), she was able to afford the tuition and board at business college.²⁸

The women’s recollections of growing up during the Depression years vividly bring the era to life.²⁹ They described experiencing what scholars call

²⁶ Sixty-nine percent of U.S. women sixteen to seventeen years old were enrolled in school in 1940 those numbers were slightly higher for urban women and slightly lower for rural and farm women. The median amount of education for women 25 and older was 8.7 years and 10.3 years for women 25-34. By contrast, in 1930, fifty-eight percent of women sixteen to seventeen years old were enrolled in school and twenty percent of eighteen to twenty year old women were enrolled. See U.S. Census Bureau, *School Enrollment of the Civilian Population: October 1946*, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/school/p20-001.html>, last accessed on 17 January, 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, *Years of School Completed by People 25 Years and Over, by Age and Sex, Selected Years 1940-2008*, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/educ-attn.html>, last accessed on 22 August, 2009; U.S. Department of Commerce, *Fifteenth Census of the United States - 1930 - Population Volume II* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1933), 1095.

²⁷ Jane Ashcraft Fisher, interview by author, Albany, OR, 26 May 2006.

²⁸ Fisher, interview by author, Albany, OR, 23 July 2007.

²⁹ David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear the American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York, Oxford University Press: 1999); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Times Books, 1984); Robert

“kinship ties,” family members pitching in to help each other during times of economic need. In their stories they spoke of generations living together under one roof or of being shipped off as a child to live with a grandparent, aunt, uncle or other relative while their parents were seeking work. Other economic hardships, such as the difficulty of life on farms, and an inability to find satisfactory work are all evident in the women’s stories.³⁰ WAVE Violet Strom talked about how everyone “banded together” during her childhood in Wisconsin and Minnesota,³¹ while Jane Ashcraft recalled how, as a child, she blamed her family’s economic woes on farm life; others moved directly into office work after high school because their families did not have the money to send them to college. With the benefit of hindsight, these women attributed many of these family struggles to the Depression, but they did not recall being aware of the economic difficulties of the time. They described their younger selves, instead, as thinking the limits they faced were due to where they lived, or to their individual family’s values.

By twenty-first century standards, many of the women’s families were poor. But they rarely acknowledged this directly. Instead, like WAVE Eileen Horner, they talked about living on what initially seemed to be the proverbial “wrong side of the tracks,” in a house so close to its neighbours that you could see the food on the dining room table next door through the windows; see the attached video link entitled: Eileen Horner Blakeley 1.³² But when Horner used the phrase “the wrong side of the tracks,” she was not using it as a code word for poverty or a rough neighbourhood. She instead described living in a house that was so close to the railroad line that pictures on the walls would tilt when the trains rolled by. The “wrong side” was due to proximity: in her Canton, Ohio, neighbourhood the houses were directly next to the train line whereas on the other side homes were farther away from the tracks. When asked if she ever felt deprived as a child, she casually stated that “everyone was in the same boat” before mentioning how her mother and grandmother would give food to strangers who stopped by their back porch. This rhetorical statement was echoed in other interviews. Jane Ashcraft, for instance, recalled wearing dresses made of flour sacks as a child, just like the children of other farmers in her home state of Nebraska. Despite such stories, the women rarely declared that their families were poor; there were always others who were worse off than them. Even in childhood memories, the women were

H. Wiebe, *The Segmented Society: An Introduction to the Meaning of America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

³⁰ Winifred D. Wandersee, *Women's Work and Family Values, 1920-1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 28.

³¹ Violet Strom Kloth, interview by author, Gulf of Mexico aboard the Carnival Cruise Ship *Conquest*, 26 September 2006.

³² Blakely, interview by author, Grants Pass, OR, 23 December 2006.

engaging in a type of social positioning, which would be echoed in their later decision to enlist in the military.

Many of the women, like Eileen Horner, came from what would have been described as “broken homes.” In Horner’s case, her father and mother were separated but not divorced. Other women spoke of divorce, desertion by one parent, or death as breaking their families apart. “My father, who had left by the time I was two, was a vice president of a bank in downtown Los Angeles” Liane Rose said. “My mother had never worked until he left [...]. She had the three of us to support.”³³ Rose and her sisters were raised by their mother alone; other families, like Horner’s, got help from grandparents. Women in the project were orphaned and raised by their extended families, others lost a parent to death and experienced the remarriage of the surviving parent. In families where the parental marriage remained intact, some of the women described the death of a non-infant sibling. Several others who came from more traditional and “intact” families, lived for a portion of their childhoods with single, female relatives, such as grandmothers or aunts. These disruptions of “normal” family life, and the subsequent repercussions, such as Rose’s mother being forced into the workplace, can offer explanations as to why the women sought out, and found satisfaction in, a non-traditional life path.

My mother came from a similarly broken home; both her parents had died by the time she reached age fifteen and her eldest brother and his wife helped raise her. As these stories make evident, to experience the death of a family member as a child was not terribly unusual for this generation. Life expectancy in the Depression era was fifty-seven years for men and fifty-nine years for women; infant mortality in the same era was sixty per one thousand live births (two of my mother’s younger siblings also died before the age of six).³⁴ Such struggles could explain why women may have been shipped off to live with other family members. Doing so could ease the strain on Depression-era finances or offer a break from a family reeling from a death. Divorce, however, was unusual during the Depression. Divorce rates for American women in the 1930s hovered around eight per thousand.³⁵ Of the fifty-one women I interviewed, two came from divorced homes, a rate higher than the national average for the era.

³³ Liane Rose Galvin, interview by author, North Bend, OR, 26 July 2007.

³⁴ The Center for Disease Control charts life expectancy over selective years from 1900-1999. From 1919-21 the life expectancy for men was 55.5 years and for women 57.4 years. By 1929-31 that figure had increased to 57.71 for men and 60.9 for women. See Center for Disease Control, *National Vital Statistics Reports* 54, 14 (19 April 2006); National Center for Health Statistics, *Monthly Vital Statistics Report, Final Mortality Statistics, 1969* 22, 10 (17 January 1974), <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/mvsr.htm>, last accessed on 22 August 2009.

³⁵ Divorce rates hit a low of 6 per thousand in 1933-34, the lowest rate in the modern era. By contrast, immediately after the war in 1946 the divorce rate for married women was 17.9 per thousand, a rate which would not be exceeded until 1973. Even in the 1950s, a time of presumed

In addition, the women in this study often came from homes where their mothers worked. Prior to the Depression, married and single women moved rapidly into the workforce in a variety of professional, clerical and sales jobs, including those in middle management, raising the possibility that marriage and work were not mutually exclusive.³⁶ The U.S. Census reports women in professional jobs doubled between 1910 and 1930; women working in clerical and sales jobs rose from just over half a million in 1910 to nearly two million in 1930.³⁷ While the proportion of men in the workforce declined during this period, “the proportion of females gainfully occupied increased considerably.”³⁸ Some women (particularly those who were married) were criticized as working only for “pin money” (non-essentials), however, during this era a working mother could also help fill a family’s “needs” by earning wages in jobs such as a teaching or nursing, as well as in what could be considered unusual fields, such as editing and publishing, photography, and social work.³⁹ At the same time, the very notion of “need” was being transformed for average American families from the basics such as food, clothing or shelter, to what a family was unwilling to go without, such as the “new” necessities of an automobile or a radio.⁴⁰

The Depression began to stem some of these workplace gains by women, with fewer women working in professional fields by 1940.⁴¹ Historians are at odds when discussing whether the Depression helped or hindered women in the workplace; women either were able to take jobs men did not want, or were forced out of work altogether.⁴² Nonetheless, women who remained in the workforce were often criticized for taking jobs from able-bodied men. Married women especially faced scorn for working and were viewed as “bad” role models for children.⁴³ But divorce, death or desertion all gave the surviving parent, especially mothers, a legitimate reason for working outside of the home to improve living

strong nuclear families, the divorce rate for women was higher than during the Depression, hovering around 10 per thousand. See National Center for Health Statistics, *Monthly Vital Statistics Report, Final Divorce Statistics 1975* 26, 2 (19 May 1977), <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/pubs/pubd/mvsvr/mvsvr.htm>, last accessed on 17 January 2008.

³⁶ Wandersee, *Women's Work*, 77.

³⁷ Department of Commerce, *Fifteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1930 - Population - Volume V* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1933), 39.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 38.

³⁹ Wandersee, *Women's Work*, 77. See also *Fifteenth Census*, 47-48.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 26.

⁴¹ Department of Commerce, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940 - Population - Volume II* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943), 15.

⁴² Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*; Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*; McElvaine, *The Great Depression*; Wiebe, *The Segmented Society*.

⁴³ Sheila Rowbotham, *A Century of Women: The History of Women in Britain and the United States* (London: Viking, 1997), 203. See also Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*; Scharf, *To Work and To Wed*.

conditions for her family.⁴⁴ This was seen in the women interviewed. For instance, Liane Rose's mother began working as a seamstress after her husband deserted her and their three young daughters; she also pursued educational opportunities for her girls so that they might have better work choices than she did.⁴⁵ This trend may have had profound societal implications. Strong female role models and specifically the dynamic of a "broken" home and working mother, as June Sochen notes, may have led women who grew up during the Depression to pursue and find success in non-traditional work paths.⁴⁶ As young women, many WAVES and SPARs learned it was acceptable, and even desirable, for them to act independently of men in order to ensure their families' survival.

Other patterns also emerge from the women's memories of growing up during economically challenging times. WAVE Billye Grimwood's family moved from rural Southeast Missouri to industrialized Flint, Michigan, after her family lost their farm during the Depression.⁴⁷ Other women described moving from New York to California, from Nebraska to Oregon, from Washington State to Alberta, Canada, and then back again. Much of the migration that took place in the United States during the Depression (perhaps most famously due to farm devastation in the Dust Bowl) is evident in this group of women.⁴⁸ However, they rarely attributed moving directly to Depression-era financial difficulties. Rather, the women believed their families moved in search of better weather conditions or because they did not like where they lived. In Grimwood's story, her family moved because the town's mayor opened a dairy which undercut prices charged by her father's dairy; see the attached audio link entitled: Billye Grimwood Grymwade 1. She recalled, in detail, the circumstances surrounding her family's move, but then noted she was only three years old and thus did not "remember any of it."⁴⁹ Even if other factors contributed to the move and her father's search for steady employment in the auto industry, she was too young to know any of it. Instead, she recalled a well-trod *family* history as a way to provide an understanding of her *personal* history. Other women similarly told stories of their family experiences which happened when they were young girls or even before they were born, such as Violet Strom, who told of how much better her family's quality of life was after moving from Minnesota to Wisconsin, before admitting

⁴⁴ See Honey, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited*; June Sochen, *From Mae to Madonna: Women Entertainers in Twentieth Century America* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999).

⁴⁵ Galvin, interview.

⁴⁶ Sochen, *From Mae to Madonna*, 91.

⁴⁷ Billye Grimwood Grymwade, interview by author, Ventura, CA, 3 August 2007. Grymwade changed her name to the traditional English spelling after getting divorced in the 1970s.

⁴⁸ See Wiebe, *The Segmented Society*.

⁴⁹ Grymwade, interview.

she did not really remember living in Minnesota at all.⁵⁰ This sort of structure is not uncommon in the oral history process. In his study on the battle for Valle Giulia, Alessandro Portelli found some narrators told stories about their early childhoods and mentioned ancestors who died before they were born.⁵¹ Grimwood is signalling to the interviewer (and audience) that in order to understand her life choices we must understand her family's situation. In her case, she used her family's relocation as a tool for the listener to understand her sense of being out of place in her new community, and her desire to depart for another locale where she could feel more at home.

This became clear when Grimwood described an itching to see something other than the factory town where she lived, which she described as "dullsville."⁵² Again, this is a recurrent theme with the women I interviewed. Even those who did not move as children or who grew up in "intact" homes described a desire to see something beyond where they grew up. They talked of challenging expectations, of wanting to experience something different before moving on to the next stage of their lives. According to Irean Gartman, a WAVE during wartime: "[A profession] wasn't the right thing for a girl to do. It was men's work. And in those days men did their work and women did their work. Mostly their work was getting married on graduation night and having children. That's all they were good for, they thought;"⁵³ see the attached audio link entitled: Edna Gartman Bednekoff. The "they" she refers to is other people in society (generally men) who conformed to traditional mores, and pressured others to do the same. When talking about their goals the women positioned themselves, through either their desires or through their families' actions, as somehow different from others at the time. They sought to sever the kinship ties they had forged during the Depression, sometimes by physically leaving home and thereby distancing themselves from familial pressures. Gartman, for instance, moved to San Francisco from a small town in Alabama to work for International Harvester before enlisting in the WAVES. WAVE Margaret Gay did not want to get married, so she went into the workforce in central Massachusetts.⁵⁴ WAVE Josette Dermody wanted to get away from the Detroit Irish-Catholic neighbourhood where she grew up and the expected life track of being "a mother

⁵⁰ Kloth, interview. It is important to note that many of the women interviewed were born between 1920 and 1924, and so would have been as young as five when the U.S. Stock Market crashed in 1929.

⁵¹ See Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle for Valle Giulia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).

⁵² Grymwade, interview.

⁵³ Edna Irean Gartman Bednekoff, interview by author, Gulf of Mexico aboard the Carnival Cruise Ship *Conquest*, 23 September 2006.

⁵⁴ Margaret Gay, interview by author, San Leandro, CA, 24 May 2007.

with a dozen kids and a drunken husband.”⁵⁵ WAVE Margaret Anderson wanted to be a journalist in Southern California, but was unsure as to how to go about it.⁵⁶ The women all spoke about wanting to do something other than what was “allowed” for women at that time.

Most of the women were pressured to take certain lines of work. This included typing, book-keeping and home economics courses in high school, and “business college” afterward where they learned advanced business skills such as stenography, accounting, or the use of office machinery such as the addressograph (a mechanized system for addressing envelopes). My mother took a short training class in fashion design in such a college before accepting a job with the local telephone company. Women, like my mother, expected the jobs to be temporary, filling time before their next role: motherhood. With one exception, WAVE Margaret Gay, the women said they anticipated getting married and having children, eventually. This may seem a contradiction, but to the women it made sense. They did not (except for Gay) reject having a family, they simply wanted additional options beyond only raising children.

The simple explanation for the pressures the women faced is that women were marginalized and denied access to options, such as alternative work choices or higher education, which may have offered them more personal and professional fulfilment. They were directed, by either their parents, or school counsellors, or some other authority, to behave in a certain way and as a result, they did so.⁵⁷ These women seem to be living examples of historian Lois Scharf’s contention that high school girls were directed into less-prestigious, skill-based, temporary jobs during the Great Depression.⁵⁸ But this explanation ignores the complexities of lived experience. It fails to explain why some women, such as Gay, ignored the “normal” direction and instead chose a path that led her away from marriage and motherhood. It fails to explain why some women openly chafed at the (limited) options that were available to them. It fails to explain why married women chose to serve and therefore abandon their expected roles as wives and mothers; it must be noted that four of the women interviewed were married at the time of enlistment.

It is important to consider *how* women who became WAVES describe their motivations. “I was an adventurer,” Margaret Anderson proclaimed.⁵⁹ The statement demands that the researcher recognize “the continuum of experience,

⁵⁵ Josette Dermody Wingo, interview by author, Oxnard, CA, 2 August 2 2007.

⁵⁶ Margaret Anderson Thorngate, interview by author, Florence, OR, 21 April 21 2006.

⁵⁷ This dovetails with employment trends reported in the 1940 Census. Fewer women worked in professional jobs than in 1930, but the number of female clerical workers *increased* by 1.2 million. See *Fifteen Census*, 39; *Sixteenth Census*, 15.

⁵⁸ Scharf, *To Work and to Wed*.

⁵⁹ Thorngate, interview by author, Florence, OR, 25 July 2007.

knowledge, values and praxis.”⁶⁰ In other words, how does the statement play out when examined in relation to the individual’s life trajectory? Though she came from a two-parent home, married, raised children and was not her family’s primary breadwinner, Anderson nonetheless considered herself as someone who operated against the grain, beginning with her enlistment in the WAVES and continuing throughout her life. She, like other women interviewed, felt she challenged the norm. It is the responsibility of the oral historian to look outside the conventional standards of society in an attempt to understand why.

The Lure of Higher Education

Education offered women of this generation a way to operate outside of conventional standards. A third, eighteen of the fifty-one women I interviewed, did not attend business college or move directly into the workforce after high school, but instead opted for two or four year university programs. According to Census Bureau data, this was an unusual choice for the era: in 1940, 40.1% of women between the ages of 25 to 29 had attended at least four years of high school, while 4.9% had attended at least four years of college.⁶¹ Most were studying to be teachers; in rural states, an individual could obtain teaching credentials after attending a two year collegiate program. Others attended four year programs at colleges, including prestigious schools like the University of California, Los Angeles, Purdue University in Indiana, and Newcomb College, the woman’s college affiliated with Tulane University in New Orleans.

These were not necessarily women from wealthy homes. WAVE Jeanette Shaffer said her family had to take out a mortgage on their Indiana farm in order to pay for her tuition at Purdue University.⁶² But despite the financial struggle, the women sensed that college attendance was an important way to distinguish oneself from one’s peers. SPAR Roberta Moore explained that her mother was the one pushing her into higher education: “Everybody said, ‘Why are you sending her to college? She’ll just get married.’ And my mother said, ‘Every woman needs to be educated.’ When my mother said, ‘Every woman needs to be educated,’ you knew you didn’t argue with Louise! [laughs];”⁶³ see the attached

⁶⁰ Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 260.

⁶¹ By 1950 that number had increased to 55.0 percent of women 25-29 years of age who had at least four years of high school, and 5.9 percent who had at least four years of college. U.S. Census Bureau, *Percent of People 25 Years and Older Who Have Completed High School or College by Race, Hispanic Origin and Sex: Selected Years 1940 to 2008*, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/educ-attn.html>, last accessed on 22 August 2009.

⁶² Jeanette Shaffer Alpaugh, interview by author, Gresham, OR, 3 April 2007.

⁶³ Robert Moore Hockett, interview by author, Portland, OR, 5 January 2007.

audio link entitled: Roberta Moore Hockett. While Moore described her mother bucking the trend of “everyone” in her rural Oregon town thinking college was a waste of time, another woman, WAVE Mary Ferry, said her father actively discouraged her collegiate plans. He refused to pay for higher education because her future job would be “boiling baby bottles.”⁶⁴ Ferry’s experiences were not typical for women in this study, many of whom were openly encouraged to go to school. One woman talked about being left money in her mother’s estate to pay for college. WAVE Jean Byrd, who was from Hackensack, New Jersey (just across the Hudson River from New York City), said her family assumed she would go to college because, as an African -American woman, it was the only way she could earn a competitive wage.⁶⁵ WAVE Laura Patton’s father told her a college education was “something they can’t take away from you.”⁶⁶

This pre-war push for higher education by certain families, including those from less-than-affluent homes, indicates that, for some, there was an understanding that the cost of a college education would be offset by other benefits like higher earning potential and a better lifestyle. It complicates the notion that women were “programmed” into certain roles. Granted, most of the women expected to become teachers after receiving their college degrees, as this was an acceptable job for women. But a number went to college just because their families thought they ought to go, with no real career direction in mind. A college education was seen as a way to better oneself and aspire to a more refined way of life. While the war interrupted most of their studies, these reasons for collegiate attendance echoed, as we shall see, their reasons for joining the WAVES and SPARs

Two interesting points emerge from my conversations with these women. First, while some of them spoke about others who went to college to get an “MRS.” degree, none of the women with whom I spoke said they attended school to find a husband. They were fascinated by math (WAVE Dorothy Turnbull), wanted to teach (WAVE Liane Rose), or hoped to develop academically (WAVE Laura Patton). Second, many of the women who attended business college or moved directly into the workforce expressed a desire to attend a two or four year program. Those who were college graduates talked about wanting to go on to graduate school, and some did just that after the war. Even in conversations more than sixty years after the end of the war, the women in this study described their younger selves as a challenge to societal norms. They associated themselves with the powerful lure of higher education; they believed that they were not average women.

⁶⁴ Mary Ferry Bingham, interview by author, Eugene, OR, 15 July 2007.

⁶⁵ Jean Byrd Stewart, interview by author, Gulf of Mexico aboard the Carnival Cruise Ship *Conquest*, 20 September 2006.

⁶⁶ Laura Patton, interview by author, Burlingame, CA, 24 May 2007.

The women knew that these interviews were being conducted as part of my Ph.D. dissertation, so it is possible that they voiced these educational desires as a way to connect with me. They may have thought that I wanted to hear that they hoped to attend school. As Wendy Rickard has observed, both the interviewer and interviewee impact the content and process of recollection.⁶⁷ The oral history interview is based upon a relationship between the two, with topics pursued as a result of the interests of both participants. However, I believe, in this instance, that the women's mention of attending college (or a desire to attend college) goes deeper than merely wanting to provide me with the answers that I sought. The women who talked about college often brought up their desires unprompted, when asked about goals they had after high school. In addition, in oral histories found in the U.S. Library of Congress Veterans' History Project, women mentioned college attendance or expressed regret that they did not utilize the academic benefits available to World War II veterans via a federal government program known as the GI Bill.⁶⁸ It seems likely that the WAVES (and later the SPARs), with collegiate campus training and leadership drawn from prestigious women's colleges, attracted women who were intrigued by the idea of attending a university.⁶⁹ The benefits of higher education and the collegiality of a campus lifestyle (such as the sisterhood promised by joining a sorority) were tied to the identity of the WAVES, through both the leadership of the organization and the places where the women would be trained in Naval duties and protocol.

Recruits to Boots

Even before the bombing of Pearl Harbour, the U.S. government began thinking about female war workers, but in non-military jobs. Pre-war estimates suggested that two million new workers would be needed in the labour market, and, because of the military draft for men, the assumption was that most of those new workers would have to be women.⁷⁰ This began to play out in the workforce by mid-1941.⁷¹ As conscription increased, the jobs shortage of the 1930s transformed into a labour shortage. The majority of available workers were women, and as they entered what were traditionally male civilian jobs, the old boundaries between "men's" and "women's" work began to shift.⁷²

⁶⁷ Wendy Rickard, "Oral History - 'More Dangerous than Therapy?' Interviewees' Reflections on Recording Traumatic or Taboo Issues," *The Journal of the Oral History Society* 26, 2 (1998), 40.

⁶⁸ The GI Bill takes its name from the nickname for U.S. Armed forces, commonly called GIs, and is still in existence today, providing education benefits, low-interest loans, and other assistance for veterans; see <http://www.gibill.va.gov/>.

⁶⁹ Ebbert and Hall, *Crossed Currents*.

⁷⁰ Thelma McKelvey, *Women in War Production* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942), 7.

⁷¹ Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*.

⁷² Milkman, *Gender at Work*, 49.

It took the Pearl Harbour attack for the military to begin to officially assess how, or if, women could be used as something other than civilian workers. This assessment was, in part, prompted by lobbying on the part of women in higher education, mostly those at women's colleges. In early 1942, Barnard College Dean, Virginia Gildersleeve, spoke to her student body about how the college could help win the war, focusing on *Naval* service. Gildersleeve spearheaded an advisory council, made up of fellow female college deans and administrators.⁷³ They began lobbying members of Congress, and President Roosevelt via his wife Eleanor, about a women's Naval reserve (on the request of certain key officers in the Navy), emphasizing the security and discipline the women would have.⁷⁴ The council's existence linked the Navy, in the minds of the public at least, with collegiate education, and thus respectability. It was a powerful public relations tool, reassuring the public that the Navy was a "safe" place for women.⁷⁵

This strategy contrasted with the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, (WAAC) which was headed by Texas newspaper woman and socialite Oveta Culp Hobby. "Hobby cultivated and maintained a co-operative relationship with prominent women's groups throughout the war,"⁷⁶ but she did not have the connections to higher education that the Navy was establishing. As a result, the Army's incorporation of women was "threatening because of the military's cultural function as one of the rites of passage to manhood."⁷⁷ WAACs were infringing on a masculine space that had no obvious allowances for women. Their uniforms seemed to be designed for a man's body, they trained at formerly male-only Army camps, and initially were an auxiliary outside of the command the "regular" (i.e. male) troops followed.

By contrast, WAVES were fully integrated into the Navy from the start as part of the Naval reserve. The organization was tightly associated with, and promoted by, higher education. The first WAVES director was Wellesley College

⁷³ The group included women from Radcliffe, the University of North Carolina, the University of Michigan, and the University of California, Los Angeles. See "History of the Naval Reserve Midshipman's School (WR) Northampton MA" in *The History of Representative Field Activities of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, World War II*, Operational Archives of the Department of Navy (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, n.d.), Sophia Smith Collection, 12.WS Box 2 16G3 180.1, General: Naval Records 1945, Smith College Archives.

⁷⁴ Ebbert and Hall, *Crossed Currents*; Gildersleeve, *Many a Good Crusade*.

⁷⁵ Mildred McAfee Horton, "Oral History," in *Recollections of Women Officers who served in the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Coast Guard in World War II, including WAVES Director Mildred McAfee, Joy B. Hancock, Jean Palmer, Dorothy Stratton, Elizabeth Crandall, Etta Belle Kitchen, Frances Rich, Eleanor Rigby, Louise Wilde, Tova Wiley and Senator Margaret C. Smith*, eds. John Mason and Etta Belle Kitchen (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute, 1979).

⁷⁶ Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps during World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 18.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

Dean Mildred McAfee; the initial SPAR director was the former Dean of Women at Purdue University, Dorothy Stratton; Stratton was a WAVE officer when she was picked to lead the SPARs.⁷⁸ As a result, the women recruits themselves became linked to a different cultural function: college attendance as a rite of passage to adulthood. Many recruits picked up on this, describing the WAVES as similar to going away to school. The fraternity of military life had been transformed into a sorority of WAVES and SPARs. The fact that the women were initially trained and housed on college campuses only served to further this illusion.

It should be noted that this idea could be controversial and certainly some women, like Billye Grimwood, had difficulty convincing their parents about the appropriateness of WAVES: "My father refused. Of course, he was dead set against it. My mother was dead set against it as well. They were thinking I was going to be going to the dogs [laughs]. Cussing and swearing, smoking and drinking and what else. It took me six months to break down my mother to sign for me. Six months. I was twenty and a half when I went in;"⁷⁹ see the attached audio link entitled Billye Grimwood Grymwade 2. The battle over the appropriateness of military service for women was something the Navy would fight throughout the war. For the Navy, that battle began in the home. McAfee and others in Navy leadership believed that by promoting high standards for the Navy women, they would be able to assuage worried parents and loved ones. Parents were told the Navy provided fine housing, religious and moral guidance, a chance at a good career and constant supervision of volunteers.⁸⁰ Women college graduates were actively courted as officer recruits, through stories in both mainstream media as well as in speciality alumnae magazines.⁸¹ Standards were strict: officers were required to have, as a minimum, two years of college and two years of professional work experience; many women had four year degrees and significantly more work experience.⁸² Enlisted women needed to have had some college or work experience. Women had to be at least twenty years old to

⁷⁸ Mildred McAfee Horton and Helene K. Sargeant. "Reminiscences of Mildred McAfee Horton: Oral History" (Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, 1982), 237 leaves.

⁷⁹ Grymwade, interview.

⁸⁰ Winifred Quick Collins, *More Than a Uniform* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1997), 66.

⁸¹ "The Navy Comes to Smith" was part of a newsletter sent to twelve thousand members of the Smith College Alumnae Association. See "The Navy Comes to Smith," *Alumnae Association Newsletter* Summer (1942), n.p., Sophia Smith Collection 12.WS, Box Two 16G3 180.1, General: History (1942-80), Smith College Archives.

⁸² The U.S. Naval Institute's Oral History project cites many examples of the extensive experience WAVE officers had before going into the service; Winifred Quick Collins, for example, had taken post-baccalaureate classes at Harvard University and was a College Instructor for several years before enlisting. Other women had similar experiences.

volunteer; enlisted women could be no older than thirty-six years of age and officers no older than forty-nine at the time of entry.⁸³ The Navy selected Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, to use its facilities to train officers. Enlisted training schools were set up at several other colleges around the country.⁸⁴

As a result, opposition to Naval service was not universal. Some parents welcomed having their daughters serve in this military branch. Dot Forbes' father, himself a reservist, encouraged her, willingly signing the paperwork to allow her to enlist in the WAVES at twenty.⁸⁵ Others avoided potential parental disapproval by waiting until they were twenty-one to sign up; at that age women were considered "of age" to enlist without parental or, if married, spousal approval.

Potential WAVES and SPARs had identical application standards. Women needed to fill out a detailed application form, pass a test similar to contemporary college aptitude exams, and have at least three personal references.⁸⁶ Only certain applicants would be invited for an interview, and would then be assessed for both mental and physical fitness. Those who did not make the cut would be sent home. Margaret Gay, a member of the first WAVE class, remembers hearing about the WAAC, but waiting for the Navy to finally allow women in. She recalls thinking, "Well, if it's good the Navy will have it,"⁸⁷ a common sentiment. The Navy, in the minds of the recruits, echoed their own sense of self. Like them, it defied conventional expectations for both the civilian world (by allowing entrance into the traditionally male domain of the military) and other branches of the military such as the Army (by having stricter recruitment standards). SPARs were drawn by an additional bit of elitism: the smaller Coast Guard needed to fill fewer spots, so a SPAR was relatively rare in the military world. Only 13,000 women served in the Coast Guard during World War II.⁸⁸

The Navy and Coast Guard uniforms were also very appealing to the women. In every interview, the women mentioned the designer uniforms worn by WAVES and SPARs. Its dark blue colour was described as more attractive and its cut more flattering than the khaki green uniform of the Army women. There were actually several variations on the uniform; the main uniform featured a trim, dark

⁸³ This contrasted with the WAAC whose minimum age for enlistment was eighteen. Ebbert and Hall theorize that younger women may have been a source of some of the problems for the Army. Ebbert and Hall, *Crossed Currents*, 37.

⁸⁴ "History of Naval Reserve Midshipman's School," 4.

⁸⁵ Dorothy (Dot) Forbes Enes, interview by author, Ellington, CT, 18 August 2007.

⁸⁶ Jeanette F. Lissey and Edith Harvey, *Prepare for the Official Tests for WAACs, WAVES, SPARs and Marines!: A Complete Guide and Instruction Book for Women in Military Service* (New York: Capitol Publishing Company, 1943), 48.

⁸⁷ Gay, interview.

⁸⁸ Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, "The Wartime History of the WAVES, SPARs, Women Marines, Army and Navy Nurses, and WASPs," in *A Woman's War Too*, 48.

blue jacket and skirt, worn with either a white or blue shirt, a floppy tie, gloves and a hat; in Image 4, see below, the WAVE wears a light blue shirt with her uniform. In summer, women wore a seersucker short-sleeved blue and white striped dress with a tie, hat and gloves; the “dress” uniform was an all-white version of the navy blue suit. All variants of the uniform had “fouled anchors,” a symbol of the U.S. Navy, stitched onto the lapels. Scholars argue that fashion can be used to build identity and unity.⁸⁹ Even during the pre-war years, scholars saw fashion as a way for a woman to feel empowered and confident about herself and her place in the world.⁹⁰ McAfee recognized this and encouraged the Navy to reject uniform accoutrements that did not conform to a certain level of gendered sophistication.⁹¹

The Navy’s sartorial choice was a resounding success, as demonstrated by how the women position their fashionable selves in contrast to the Army’s “drab and dull” khaki.⁹² “Oh my God, they were gorgeous,” said WAVE Helen Edgar. “They were nice looking and we felt - they made us feel *good*. They made us feel worthy and like really distinguished women.”⁹³ The uniform, together with the training at college campuses, began to cement the fledgling familial bond between the women and their chosen military branch. The Navy and Coast Guard had an identity distinct from the WAAC or the Women Marines, evident to potential recruits.

⁸⁹ Jacqueline M. Atkins, *Wearing Propaganda: Textiles on the Home Front in Japan, Britain, and the United States, 1931-1945* (New Haven: Published for the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture by Yale University Press, 2005).

⁹⁰ Elizabeth Hawes, *Why is a Dress? Who? What? When? Where?* (New York: Viking Press, 1942).

⁹¹ Horton and Sargeant. “Reminiscences.”

⁹² Fisher, interview, 17 May 2006.

⁹³ Helen Edgar Gilbert, interview by author, Rancho Palos Verdes, CA, 6 August 2007.



Image 4. Seaman Anna Carlson at Milledgeville, Georgia, during World War II⁹⁴

Yet even while describing the desire for interesting work or a new life, or discussing the appeal of the uniform, the women return to the notion of patriotism in their interviews: serving the country in some way was something a woman *had* to do. The option came in how a woman might serve. For Navy and Coast Guard recruits, the WAVES and SPARs offered the right combination of adventure, respect, and challenge to cultural norms.

The Navy's concern with "respectability" and its attention to the uniform on one level can be seen as conforming to gender norms. But, as Elizabeth Hawes notes, the physical attraction of clothing is the most superficial element of its appeal. "The hard thing is to grasp how important it is to many people to get *psychological* protection from their clothes" she writes.⁹⁵ Part of that psychic protection would include the confidence that comes from looking good (or chic). Elegant clothing could, in essence, give the wearer the authority to act in a certain

⁹⁴ Photograph of Seaman Anna Carlson taken by U.S. Navy photographers, photo #80-G-K-13646, from <http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/prs-tpic/females/wave-ww2.htm>, last accessed on 7 October 2009.

⁹⁵ Hawes, *Why is a Dress?*, 37.

way. Conforming on one level to feminine stereotypes would give the women the courage to act in a non-stereotypical manner in other elements of their lives. As Oregon WAVE Jean Clark noted of the uniform, and of the WAVES' refined image: "It was right."⁹⁶

After the women enlisted, they travelled across the country to boot camp. Recruits were grouped together with others from the same region on what were called "troop trains" full of military personnel. The women ate, slept, and rode together. They said they rarely interacted with other military personnel or with civilians on their way to the Hunter College training facility. As a result, attending boot camp, at least initially, left many of the women with an intense sense of disorientation. The groups formed on the cross-country trek were broken up, and women were assigned to new battalions. They lived in converted apartments, six to eight to a room with as many as sixteen women sharing a single bathroom. WAVE Dot Forbes explained it most directly, saying she broke into tears while talking to her family on the telephone: "I remember feeling so lost at that point because you are with complete strangers;"⁹⁷ see the attached audio link entitled: Dot Forbes Enes. Others spoke of questioning their decision to serve, or of the strangeness of setting up rooms with a large group of women they did not know. Any comfort level the women had reached on the train trip across the country, travelling with women of a similar geographic background to a military adventure, was quickly erased.

For some of the women, this was the first time they had lived away from home. But Forbes, who broke into tears when she called home, was one who had spent some time away from her family before, living for several months with another family in the Midwest. Others had attended college, or had moved away from their families to a larger city to find work after graduating from high school. Yet they too expressed this feeling of disorientation when first attending boot camp.

Part of this could be the nature of military indoctrination itself, designed to mould individual recruits into a cohesive unit through rules and regimentation. Through boot camp and training, military recruits were essentially "reborn" into a military family.⁹⁸ Women were initially given "boot" caps, which they wore with their civilian clothing while marching or in the classroom. After a brief period of time (it varied from camp to camp), they would receive uniforms, visually transforming the mismatched strangers into a cohesive unit. A photograph from

⁹⁶ Edna Jean Clark, interview by author, Eugene, OR, 16 July 2007.

⁹⁷ Enes, interview by author, Gulf of Mexico aboard the Carnival Cruise Ship *Conquest*, 23 September 2006.

⁹⁸ Elizabeth Jean Wood, "Transformation of Social Networks," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008), 539-61.

my mother's collection demonstrates this in action; she is somewhere in a sea of perfectly matched WAVES marching in formation at Hunter College.

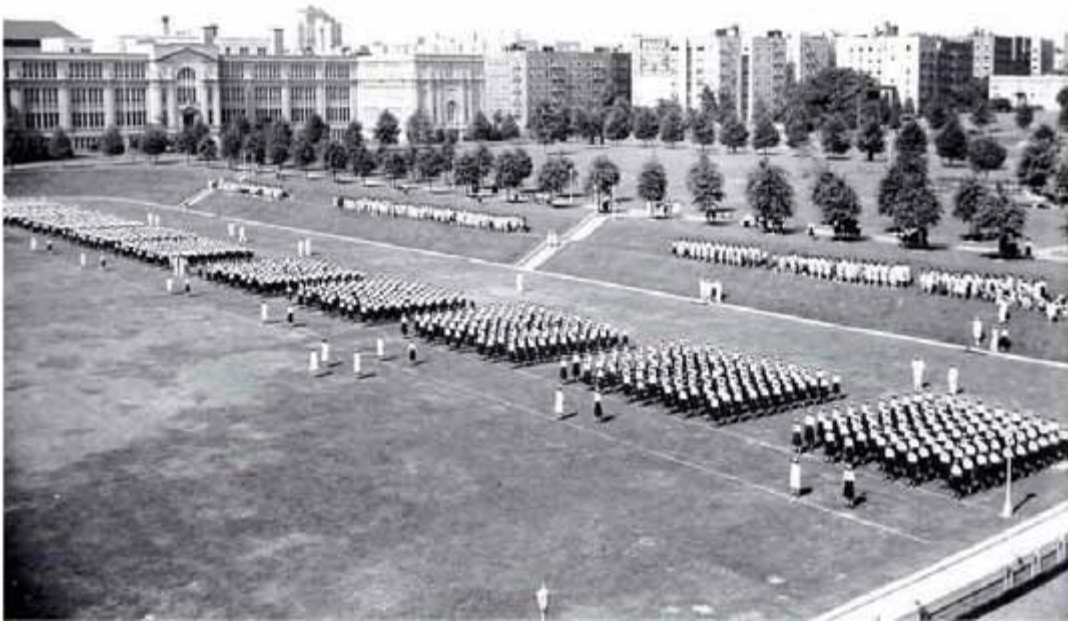


Image 5. Hunter College, circa August 1943.⁹⁹

WAVES and SPARs recruits reported not being allowed to leave the six-week boot camp until a short day-long leave the final weekend, or not being able to have visits from family or friends except at certain pre-determined times. The initial training may have been on college campuses, but the atmosphere was far from collegial, with tough classes and intense physical activity. The boot camp experience created connections between the women that did not exist when they first arrived. Even unpleasant “group-level conditions [...] [produced] positive membership attitudes and behaviours and [...] group members’ interpersonal interactions [...] [operated] to maintain these group level conditions.”¹⁰⁰ WAVE Anna Fogelman described boot camp as “hard work, not glamorized.”¹⁰¹ Despite this sentiment, the women established a sense of camaraderie through the difficulties of their shared experience and the compromises they made to adjust to the military. The social cohesion of these unpleasant group-level conditions living together in cramped quarters with prescribed times to wake up and go to sleep,

⁹⁹ Hunter College, U.S. Navy photograph, from the collection of Mary M. Ryan, now in the possession of the author.

¹⁰⁰ Noah E. Friedkin, “Social Cohesion,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (2004,) 408.

¹⁰¹ Anna Fogelman, interview by author, Gulf of Mexico aboard the Carnival Cruise Ship *Conquest*, 19 September 2006.

eating in a mess hall with fellow recruits and training in small groups of twenty to thirty boots enabled the women to become fully absorbed into Navy life.¹⁰² They were transformed from awkward stepping individual civilians into Mainbocher-clad battalions marching in lockstep.

The Navy Family

Boot camp lasted six weeks. Afterwards, most women were assigned to speciality training school, depending upon their abilities. While the official word was that all Navy and Coast Guard jobs were of equal importance, among the women a sort of pecking order developed. WAVE Violet Strom trained for what was considered a “glamorous” job at air traffic control tower school, and often wondered why. She stated: “I finally came to the decision that I didn’t have so much accredited knowledge, but I must have – someone saw some potential. That was it. Potential [...] I was so enthused. The lieutenant who was in charge, the woman lieutenant said, ‘Why do you want to go and be a controller?’ I said, ‘Because it’s so exciting!’ I left afterwards and I thought, ‘Oh, what a dumb thing to do;’”¹⁰³ see the attached audio link entitled: Violet Strom Kluth. In the interview, Strom initially questioned why she was selected, but she quickly asserted her place in the Naval pecking order. She had “potential,” and so she was rewarded with a desirable assignment. “Glamorous” jobs were those that allowed the women to perform untraditional duties: radio operations, control tower operations, coding and decoding messages, gunnery mates. These assignments were generally located at Naval Air Stations. “Non-glamorous” jobs were those that could be done in non-military life, such as the book-keeping work done by storekeepers or secretarial duties of yeomen. Hospital work, which my mother did at Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay, and parachute rigging were jobs that were considered glamorous or desirable by some and undesirable by others. Parachute rigging was rejected by some women because of an incorrect rumour that they would have to jump out of planes and test their chutes.

Women who were assigned non-traditional jobs in the WAVES revelled in the glamour that their out-of-the-ordinary status provided. “We were an elite group,” said WAVE Pat Connelly, a gunnery instructor.¹⁰⁴ The women describe the work as “interesting” and “exciting.” WAVES and SPAR officers were aware of this appeal to a degree. WAVE Commander Mildred McAfee and SPAR Commander Dorothy Stratton both spoke about how officers tried, with limited

¹⁰² From the first Hunter College boot camp in February of 1943 through to the end of the war in August 1945, 80,836 WAVES were trained there. An additional 1,844 SPARs and 3,190 Women Marines also received training there at some point. Ebbert and Hall, *Crossed Currents*. 75.

¹⁰³ Kloth, interview.

¹⁰⁴ Patricia Connelly, interview by author, Portland, OR, 20 March 2007

success, to advance the idea that any military job was of value, because it freed a man to fight on the front lines. But women were however attracted to jobs that they could not ordinarily do outside the navy.

Nonetheless, the vast majority of WAVES and SPARs served as yeomen and storekeepers, in the administrative headquarters of San Francisco and Washington, D.C. More than half of the uniformed personnel at the Navy Department in Washington during World War II were women; women filled seventy-five percent of the jobs in Radio Washington, the head of the Navy's communications system, and seventy percent of the jobs in the Navy's Bureau of Personnel, headquartered in D.C.¹⁰⁵ Eight of the women interviewed for this project were posted in Washington, while six were in San Francisco and six were in Seattle. But the postings were geographically diverse, including coastal cities like Jacksonville, Florida, Corpus Christi, Texas, or Newport, Rhode Island, as well as land-locked areas like Norman, Oklahoma, or Klamath Falls, Oregon.

Some military men were resistant to the idea of women entering their domain, even in the office-based jobs of yeoman and storekeepers.¹⁰⁶ What the commanders appeared to have forgotten was that office work was one area where young women of this era were able to find work as civilians, particularly given their high rates of training in stenography and accounting at high school or in business colleges. Despite this initial resistance, female yeomen and storekeepers found a way to develop a bond in the Navy, one that was related particularly to their workplace culture. Virginia Gillmore, a WAVE, spoke to this point:

I was the only WAVE in the whole building. There were lots of other women, but they weren't in service. And they were sort of envious of the fact that I was well regarded by both officers and enlisted people. In fact, the officers [...] they didn't know what to do. They knew that people should salute them, but they didn't know what to do for a WAVE. Were they supposed to take off their hats as a gentleman or was I supposed to salute them as an enlisted person? So, we sort of compromised. I was very much the enlisted person out in the halls, but as soon as the elevator doors closed they would take off their hats [laughs]. But they would always snap back on before the doors opened to reveal them again.¹⁰⁷

Gillmore, as the only WAVE in her office, occupied a special place; see the attached audio link entitled: Virginia Gillmore. Unlike the other women there, she was a part of the Navy. In her interview, she described an office where the

¹⁰⁵ Ebbert and Hall, *Crossed Currents*, 89.

¹⁰⁶ Horton, "Oral History," *Recollections of Women Officers*, 79.

¹⁰⁷ Virginia Gillmore, interview by author, Yachats, OR, 25 July 2007.

Naval personnel, who lived on base together and all wore similar uniforms, had a level of camaraderie not shared by the female civilian workers. It was only the Naval personnel who had to negotiate the etiquette of saluting. It was only Naval personnel who faced potential dismissal for inappropriate behaviour, and who had attended boot camp training. Civilian workers, who went home at night after the workday was over, were envious of the shared experiences of the Naval men and women.

With the introduction of women, the social cohesion of Naval life began to resemble the “extended kin network” of collegiate fraternity brothers and sorority sisters.¹⁰⁸ But unlike the sorority, which offers “a strategy for negotiating friendships among women as well as romantic relationships between women and men,”¹⁰⁹ acceptance into the WAVES and SPARs offered a way to both participate in the war effort and break free of the familial and occupational constraints of civilian life. For the most part, Naval men were seen as colleagues (or brothers), not romantic attachments (not one woman interviewed married a man she worked with). Gilmore’s story illustrates how this worked: for the civilian workers the base was a day job, by contrast, she was fully embraced by the Navy family as a little sister.

From all accounts, it appears that the women were able to win over even recalcitrant men. Gay directly addressed the problem: “It was a man’s Navy.”¹¹⁰ Gay, who ended up making a career of the Navy, said she was able to be successful by recognizing, early on, that she was moving into a new area, and by making sure to do the best work she could. By the end of the war, McAfee said even officers who still may have had reservations about women in the Navy in general, believed the WAVES under their command were well-qualified.¹¹¹ McAfee said it was widely believed that the more competent pilots were those who had received the bulk of their training from women, and that WAVE yeoman were often seen as better at their jobs than men.¹¹² Jean Clark concurred with this notion. A pilot told her, and others at Sand Point Naval Air Station in Seattle, that the flight training he received from her was so excellent it helped save his life.¹¹³ Virginia Gillmore spoke of the collegiality in her office between the officers and enlisted personnel, and how she was trusted with duties female civilian secretarial

¹⁰⁸ Lisa Handler, “In the Fraternal Sisterhood: Sororities as Gender Strategy,” *Gender and Society* 9, 2 (April, 1995), 244.

¹⁰⁹ Handler, “In the Fraternal Sisterhood,” 252.

¹¹⁰ Gay, interview.

¹¹¹ Joy Bright Hancock, “Oral History,” *Recollections of Women Officers*, 73-75; Jean Palmer, “Oral History,” *Recollections of Women Officers*, 35; and Tovah Wiley, “Oral History,” *Recollections of Women Officers*, 26.

¹¹² Horton and Sargeant. “Reminiscences.”

¹¹³ Clark, interview.

workers were not.¹¹⁴ The stories illustrate the success of the Naval plans. Women became so efficient at both their traditional (yeoman) and untraditional (link flight simulator instructors) jobs that their gender disappeared, to a degree. They were seen as competent members of the Naval family. The women were different, but equally capable as the men.

The camaraderie found in WAVES and SPARs during the war years became “the next best thing to family.”¹¹⁵ The women’s stories about this new family followed a standard narrative arc: a restlessness with pre-war life, an attraction to the Navy/Coast Guard, enlistment, an initial disorientation at boot camp, and finally a sense of being at home within the service, with military men accepting them as peers. These stories offer further evidence of the new family that the women found in the Navy. For them, the WAVES and SPARs filled a role similar to that of a collegiate sorority, increasing both their sense of belonging (meeting other “adventurists”) and their feeling of morale (helping the war effort). They developed an emotional attachment to the WAVES and to fellow recruits, just as sorority sisters develop an emotional attachment with both individuals and the sorority as a whole.¹¹⁶ But the Navy’s bonds ran deeper than the “fictive” kinship of a sorority, which uses the language of friendship to establish personal connections.¹¹⁷ Instead, by combining the social cohesion of military life with a sense of elitism and the snappy uniform, the Navy crafted a deep sense of unity in their recruits. The women were not just “in” in the Navy and Coast Guard, they *were* the Navy and Coast Guard.

War’s End

When women enlisted to serve in the WAVES and SPARs, they signed up for the duration of the war plus six months.¹¹⁸ The reality was that some women left military service just days after VJ Day on 2 September 1945. The women spoke of a Navy-instituted points system that enabled them to get out of the service early. These points were accrued based on how long one had served, one’s age, and if one was married or not. Married women, like my mother, who had been in the service for a while, were decommissioned almost immediately.¹¹⁹ But others stayed much longer. Jane Ashcraft, who was still in boot camp on VJ Day, ended

¹¹⁴ Gillmore, interview.

¹¹⁵ Reginald Stuart, “The Next Best Thing to Family,” *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education* 25, 16 (2008), <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=34372685&site=ehost-live>, last accessed on 5 February 2009.

¹¹⁶ Pamela Paxton and James Moody, “Structure and Sentiment: Explaining Emotional Attachment to Group,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 66, 1 (2003), 34-47.

¹¹⁷ Alexandra Robbins, *Pledged: The Secret Life of Sororities* (New York: Hyperion, 2004), 323.

¹¹⁸ Department of the Navy, “Women in the U.S. Navy.”

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

up serving eleven months after the end of the war. She says that they were going to send her class home without ever completing boot camp but instead they stayed to help with the decommissioning process.¹²⁰

At the end of the war, women found themselves at a crossroads. Some wanted to continue service in the WAVES or SPARs.¹²¹ Still others describe being ready to move on to the next stage of their lives. Many, like my mother, had married during the war and were eager to return home and start families. A majority of the women I spoke with wanted to take advantage of the GI Bill; provisions included guaranteed low-interest home loans and post-secondary education benefits.¹²² While the home purchase benefits were used by most, college attendance was not as universal; some women went to school for only a few months while others did not attend at all. But for a portion of the women, college was a desired goal, attainable because of the provisions of the G.I. Bill; this benefit was often mentioned in WAVES recruitment and decommissioning literature.

A small portion of women stayed in the military. About 1,800 women extended their active duty past 30 July 1946, the official end-date for women's service.¹²³ Eventually, these women either entered the Naval reserve or joined the military outright when the Navy decided to allow women into the service in mid-1948. Others rejoined the Navy as reservists at this time, at the same rank and pay scale they had during the war.¹²⁴ WAVE Margaret Gay ended up making a career in the military.¹²⁵ WAVE Billye Grimwood, a yeoman during World War II, worked as a flight attendant on naval air transport planes in the postwar years.¹²⁶ WAVES Eileen Horner, Dorothy Sudomir and Clara Van Roekel joined the reserves after the war and were recalled to service during the Korean War.¹²⁷ SPAR Vickie Burdick could not re-enlist in the Coast Guard, because it did not have a women's reserve during the postwar years, so she signed up for the Navy instead, and also served during the Korean War.¹²⁸

¹²⁰ Fisher, interview, 26 May 2006.

¹²¹ SPARs had no choice when it came to staying in the service. The women's branch of the Coast Guard was closed after the World War II emergency had ended.

¹²² United States Department of Veteran's Affairs, "GI-Bill History," http://www.gibill.va.gov/GI_Bill_Info/history.htm, last accessed on 22 August 2009.

¹²³ Ebbert and Hall, *Crossed Currents*, 102.

¹²⁴ The Coast Guard reserve began in 1950. For information on the Congressional wrangling over the Act's passage, see Jeanne Holm, *Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982).

¹²⁵ Gay, interview.

¹²⁶ Grymwade, interview.

¹²⁷ Blakely, interview, 23 December 2006; Dorothy Sudomir Budacki, interview by author, Gulf of Mexico aboard the Carnival Cruise Ship *Conquest*, 23 September 2006; Clara Van Roekel Moomey, interview by author, Junction City, OR, 18 July 2007.

¹²⁸ Leach, interview.

Mildred McAfee said that when she talked with women who had joined the Navy during World War II, they looked back on their service with pride.¹²⁹ Her observations may be true, but as the war ended, members told WAVES leadership they did not want a special memorial to honour the WAVES and SPARs as World War II came to a close.¹³⁰ Why? On the one hand, it seems like the women were willingly allowing their wartime service to disappear, reaffirming the message that they were simply “freeing a man to fight.” Like my mother, many did not talk about their military service with family or friends. Horner says even now she reads obituaries of women she knows who never told her that they served during World War II in the WAVES. “We did the job and went home,” she says. “You faded back into the woodwork.”¹³¹

And yet, paradoxically, they *refused* to fade. Much as they chafed in the pre-war years over the limited roles available to them as young women, after the war they chafed at the mandate that they had to fade back into the woodwork. Since they did not talk about it, the WAVES and SPARs did not realize that others felt similarly constrained by their limited career and life options. “I didn’t know until probably the last five years that all these other women felt the same way,” says SPAR Jane Ashcraft. “We realized we were getting short-changed;”¹³² see the attached video link entitled: Jane Ashcraft Fisher 2. These feelings boiling under the surface offer a key to understanding the strength of Navy sisterhood bonds developed among WAVES and SPARs. Their silence seems to embody the “happy housewife heroine” doomed by the feminine mystique.¹³³ But unlike Friedan’s upper middle-class housewives, every WAVE and SPAR interviewed worked outside the home after the war. While they did not talk about their experiences, the women did save mementoes of their time in the service such as pamphlets, photographs, and pieces of their uniforms. They internalized the messages of equality learned during the war, and passed their Navy family values along to their daughters (and sons). WAVE Josette Dermody called the WAVES “the hinges of history;” Ashcraft expounded on that idea, saying that the values WAVES and SPARs passed along to their children were the reason for the equal rights movement a generation later.¹³⁴ Women did not just “free a man to fight.” They learned that they could do what a man could, and be accepted for it.

¹²⁹ Mildred McAfee Horton, “Women in the United States Navy,” *The American Journal of Sociology* LI,5 (March, 1946), 450.

¹³⁰ “WAVES Survey Indicates Opinion of Majority,” *WAVES Newsletter* December (1945), n.p., Winifred Quick Collins Papers, C. 1913-2000 MC 541, Box 9 Folder 9.14, WAVES Newsletters Jul-Dec 1945, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

¹³¹ Blakely, interview, 17 May 2006.

¹³² Fisher, interview, 26 May 2006.

¹³³ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963/2001), 33-68.

¹³⁴ Fisher, interview, 26 May 2006; Wingo, interview.

Perhaps the women did not want a WAVES and SPARs memorial as World War II came to a close because they had been so *well integrated* into the wartime family and thus it would have seemed redundant to honour only women; instead a full Navy memorial would do. It was only after the war ended that they realized that their silence led their contributions to be overlooked. So they began to reassert their military family ties. They attended WAVES National conventions and successfully pushed for a memorial for female veterans in Washington, D.C.



Image 6. WAVES National Convention Group Shot, Caribbean Sea, 22 September 2006¹³⁵

The Memorial took over a decade to reach fruition: it was authorized by Congress in 1986, built with private funds raised by veterans on a plot of land in the Arlington National Cemetery, and finally opened to the public in 1997.¹³⁶ Those who died, like my mother, asked that they be buried with a headstone provided to World War II veterans by the U.S. government. And eventually, those who still lived began telling the story of “their” WAVES and SPARs’ experiences. In doing so, they began reclaiming history, using the potentially

¹³⁵ Photograph of WAVES National Convention Participants taken by Mel Kangleon.

¹³⁶ Women in Military Service for America Memorial, “History,” n.d., <http://www.womensmemorial.org/About/history.html>, last accessed on 16 August 2009.

transformative powers of communication to reinforce the group identity and sense of elitism they experienced during the war years.

As Wood argues, citing Dyer and Holmes, military bonds may in fact be stronger than familial ties.¹³⁷ The WAVES and SPARs filled an important role for the women. As Dot Forbes explained, being in the Navy helped her develop self-confidence.¹³⁸ In a time of significant national destabilization and movement, military service offered not only a valuable job, but also a form of support. The Navy's carefully crafted identity provided the women with a means through which they could validate ideas about their futures. As Steven High has observed, home and family and workplace are two important touchstones in modern American life, with a "family" becoming a metaphor for close workplace relations. Even a lost workplace can offer "an oasis of security, belonging and rootedness."¹³⁹

After the war, this sisterhood continued. It was evident at the WAVES National convention in 2006. The women decorated the doors of their cabins with copies of World War II-era posters and photographs of themselves during their service years. They brought scrapbooks and diaries, and used them to reminisce with both old friends and new acquaintances. And one day at sea, between stops in exotic ports of call such as Grand Cayman, Montego Bay, Jamaica, and Cozumel, Mexico, the women paused, and took time to honour those WAVES who had passed away. Inside a cavernous meeting hall, a memorial service was held. A bell rang one time for every member who had died since the last convention. Then the women moved to an outside deck, some in wheelchairs, or supported by canes and walkers. They each wore a remnant of their World War II uniform; a hat here, an insignia there. One woman wore her complete Mainbocher suit, which still fit perfectly. Red rose petals were passed out to the group, and each woman tossed petals overboard into the foam left in the ship's wake.

¹³⁷ Wood, citing Dyer and Holmes, argues that military bonds may in fact be stronger than familial ties, see Wood, "Transformation," 546.

¹³⁸ Enes, interview.

¹³⁹ Steven High, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rust Belt, 1969-1984* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 52.



Image 7. Memorial Ceremony, WAVES National Convention, Caribbean Sea, 22 September 2006¹⁴⁰

Dorothy Sudomir described the Navy succinctly. “It is my family,” she said as a way to explain why she would continue to be involved with both her local Cleveland, Ohio, American Legion unit (a veteran’s organization) as well as with WAVES National.¹⁴¹ Sudomir served as president of WAVES National twice, and helped to cut the ribbon at the opening of the WIMSA Memorial in Arlington National Cemetery. Jean Clark kept up a round robin letter with her service friends in the years after her military service and still corresponds with the one member who is still living.¹⁴² Other women participated in their local American Legion units as well as regional WAVES National units. The groups, and specifically the all-female WAVES National units, helped the women construct and maintain the identities that they developed during military service through a community of practice, where “personal identities are directly influenced by the social practices of the unique communities in which they

¹⁴⁰ Photograph of WAVES National Convention Participants taken by Mel Kangleon.

¹⁴¹ Sudomir, interview.

¹⁴² Clark, interview.

engage.”¹⁴³ By remembering their service with fellow members, the women continued to reinforce the uniqueness of their military work. “Through numerous linguistic practices such as sharing sea stories, commiserating, and affirming one another's transformed identities, these women not only reminisce and relate, they maintain and reproduce the atypical gender identities they constituted during their time of service.”¹⁴⁴ Their actions demonstrate how the WAVES remained a loose-knit family even after World War II ended, a bond that is as resilient as the kinship bonds of their formative years.

My Mother's War, Redux

This project was to a degree a personal search. During the course of the research and writing, I came to realize that my interpretations may have been partially influenced by my knowledge of my mother, who as a young woman attended fashion design school and later impressed upon her two daughters the need to be “ladies”. It was from her that we each got the message that college was not an option but a necessity, the notion that fine art and music were essential to life, and that one should always be “dressed” when out in public. My mother instilled both of her daughters with a notion of “culture.” But untangling where that notion came from has been complicated. Did my mother, or any of the women, join the Navy because it projected an image that they associated with themselves, of being different or deserving more than their pre-war life offered? Or did they adopt a notion of sophistication and develop aspirations because they were Navy women? In other words, did the women make the Navy or did the Navy make the women? The women certainly described themselves in ways that coincided with the Navy's description of the WAVES, an image reinforced by national conventions. By their actions they embraced the formation of identity and sisterhood that the WAVES offered.

But this identity often conflicted with postwar imagery and messages that speak to the need to “fade into the woodwork.” As a result, the women engaged in a struggle – they recognized their *individual* contributions, but also kept those contributions secret, even from women who were members of the same military sorority. WAVE Eileen Horner told me, “I didn't talk about my military service. And there were other women I knew for years before I ever found out they had been in the military;”¹⁴⁵ see the attached video link entitled: Eileen Horner Blakely 2. But the traces of the sisterhood remained: a respect for higher

¹⁴³ Elizabeth A. Suter, et. al., “Female Veterans' Identity Construction, Maintenance, and Reproduction” *Women and Language* 29, 1 (2006), 10.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 14.

¹⁴⁵ Blakely, interview, 17 May 2006.

education, a sense of refinement, and a belief in the ability of women to work in a variety of jobs at the same pay scale as men.

Initially I wondered who the woman staring out at me from a creased but still-glamorous portrait was? Through the course of my research I have obtained some answers. That glamorous woman contributed in previously ignored ways to our nation's history. She, like hundreds of thousands of others, participated in something new and different, changing the path of her life. She became part of an informal sisterhood. She was, in the words of Anna Fogelman, "where she was supposed to be" at that point in time in her life. That woman was my mother and she was a Navy WAVE.