

“Also They Served”

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For four months earlier this year, and again over this last month, I have had the privilege of traveling across this state, mountains to shore, to hear stories of women in service to their country, women working in or directly with the armed forces. Many of those stories were your stories. Most were from women who served during the Second World War. Many of the stories were of women who were graduates of this University. They are all the stories of women who volunteered their talents: none of the women I talked with had to make the choice for service

life which they made. For some, the stay in service was but a brief year. For others, it became a life's calling. During my travels people have responded generously with their hospitality, their intellect, and their hearts - having me in their homes, sharing their photographs and memories, and sharing of themselves for an hour or two, or sometimes three. I want to tell you a bit of what you have shared with me, and thus with the University, future scholars, and the people of North Carolina.

Perhaps you have heard the phrase “they also serve who stand and wait.” The line was written over three hundred years ago by the poet John Milton, who worried that his one great talent, writing, would be thwarted by his own imminent blindness. Milton wrote in Sonnet XIX,

...God doth not need
 Either man's work or his own gifts....
 They also serve who only stand and wait.

The story of women in the armed forces in our century, the stories of the sixty-three women I have interviewed for the Women Veterans Historical Project, is the story of individuals seeking to use their own talents for the greater good. Individual women, from places as small as Bennett and Montezuma, NC, to as large as Boston and New York. Those individuals remind us that, though “they also serve who only stand and wait,” also they serve, who serve.

A Brief History of Women in the American Military

The obstacles to women serving this century within the military were certainly more from tradition than necessity. Women had worked informally with military men from our country's earliest days.¹ It wasn't until the

¹ Information about the origins of American women in the service, and a fuller exposition of this overview, can be found in Jeanne Holm's *Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1992).

Civil War, though, that women worked with the military in a large and organized fashion. Dorothea Dix recruited six thousand women for the Union Army as Superintendent of Women Nurses. Clara Barton organized the American Red Cross. It was in a next crisis, the typhoid outbreaks of the Spanish-American War from 1898 to 1901, that nurses were recruited and sent overseas to work alongside hospital corpsmen in the Army. Their work was so valuable that Congress established the Nurse Corps as an auxiliary of the Army in 1901, despite protests over the women's furnishings necessary if nurses permanently associated with the service (rocking chairs and the like). In 1908 the Navy followed with its own Nurse Corps, though it would be 1944 before these Army and Navy Nurses were fully incorporated into their respective services.

Another crisis brought the need of new uses for women in the military. World War I threatened to create a manpower shortage in the clerical operations of military stateside and headquarters facilities. In 1917 North Carolinian Josephus Daniels, then Secretary of the Navy, authorized the enrollment of women in the Naval Reserve at the rank of yeoman, so that they might perform office tasks traditionally done in the service by male personnel. Increasingly mechanized office work had already become much more women's work outside the services. In August 1918 the Marine Corps made the same provision for women reserves.

By war's end, the 11th day of the 11th month at 11:11 a.m., the date we remember this week as Veteran's Day, 12,500 "yeomanettes" and some three hundred "marinettes" saw duty. In the Navy, whose Undersecretary

was a tall fellow by the name of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the clerical jobs had even expanded into some other technical work. But with the crisis over, the military demobilized what women it had; and in 1925, Congress took away the Navy's ability to enlist women without direct Congressional approval.

A Special Service Role for Woman's College

It is at this point in this country's experience with women in the military that this university - and the results of our oral history interviews - become important.

The North Carolina College for Women (NCCW) opened as the North Carolina State Normal and Industrial School in 1892.² The school was founded by Charles Duncan

McIver, a good friend of Josephus Daniels who quickly brought in quality staff and successfully expanded the mission of the school. By 1931, North Carolina State University in Raleigh, the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, and NCCW would consolidate into the University of North Carolina. In 1932 NCCW became known as the Woman's College (WC) of the University of North Carolina. In size and stature it ranked as one of the top women's colleges in the nation. It was a likely place to find leaders, if a next generation of women were called upon to serve their country.

The Dean of Women for the school at that time, Harriet Elliott, had earlier been an activist for women's suffrage. She remained a strong friend of the Roosevelt administration and Democratic politics. Mrs. Roosevelt was a guest of the University in 1938; and at the start of

² The story of the early history of the University can be found in Elisabeth Ann Bowles' *A Good Beginning: The First Four Decades of the U.N.C. at Greensboro* (Chapel Hill, NC: The UNC Press, 1967).

WWII, Harriet Elliott went to work with the Roosevelt administration as the only woman on the National Defense Council. When legislation passed Congress in May 1942 creating the WAAC, the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, it was Harriet Elliott who personally persuaded her friend Eleanor Roosevelt to lobby her husband for full military status – not auxiliary – for a Naval Reserve for women. She helped set the organizational model for the role of women in the service in the next great wartime effort.

A number of our interviewees helped us envision what it was like to be on this campus in the 1930s. Future WAC Edith Kimsey League (**'31**) remembered being here as a junior the day the market crashed in 1929.³ Everyone

³ In this article graduates of the University are noted by the printing of the year of their class in boldface following the first mention of their name. Quotes and comments about the women cited in this article are from the sixty-three interviews I had completed with women prior to this talk, and are stored in the Women Veterans Oral History Collection at the University Archives.

on campus went home or called home that day, she said. Not everyone came back. Throughout the thirties, there would be lots of day students here. And junior college transfers, like future WAVEs Mary Ellen West from Louisburg (**'43**) and Virginia Gardner Becker (**'40**) from Chowan. Social life was not easy as a transfer.

Yet physical education major and soon-to-be Red Cross Volunteer Margaret "Peg" Greene (**'39**) remembers Miss Elliott showing up to cheer at every home basketball game, always complimenting, always encouraging. Emily Harris Preyer (**'39**) recalls the formal reception Dean Elliott held for Mrs. Roosevelt on her visit here in 1938. An enraptured Miss Harris held out a teacup for the First Lady, never taking her eyes off her face, and told her she hoped she enjoyed the tea. "I'd enjoy it a lot more," Mrs. Roosevelt replied, "if you poured more of it in my cup."

Although most WC memories were decidedly apolitical in the 1930s, Martha Mendenhall ('41) remembers the dorm conversations turning in 1938 and 1939 to two topics: sex and Hitler. With the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939, the first peacetime selective service soon became law in the U.S. When dietitian grad Vera Rackley Jenkins ('39) joined the staff at the base hospital in Ft. Bragg in May of 1941, all the activity going on led her to know things were a lot more serious than she had let herself believe.

Limited to serving in two small nurse corps in 1941, women allowed to enlist elsewhere responded in impressive numbers. By the summer of 1945 there were nearly 100,000 WACs ("Women's Army Corps", which replaced the auxiliary WAAC in 1943); 86,000 WAVES ("Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service" –

women serving in the Navy); 18,000 in the Marine Corps Women Reserve; 11,000 SPARs ("Semper Paratus" – "Always Ready", the name for women in the Coast Guard); plus 57,000 nurses in the Army and another 11,000 in the Navy.

Although women volunteers would never exceed more than 2.3 percent of total military strength at any time during the War, and though they were first met with various degrees of apathy if not outright resistance by the military establishment and the general public, the variety of work they did made an important contribution to the war effort. Our Women Veterans Oral History Collection spells out the richness of the experience in the War by asking of a hundred women the same thirty-or-so questions, supplemented by follow-up questions pertinent to their work and life experience.

To “Free a Man to Fight”

Nearly everyone recalls where they were when they heard the news of Pearl Harbor. Mary Ellen West’s sister woke her up in her Woman’s College dorm room.

Future WAVE Frances Madden Hobbins had been listening to *The Shadow* on the radio when the news bulletin broke.

Soon-to-be Army Nurse Doris Wofford Armenaki (‘74) was at a soda shop in Dahlonega, GA. WAVE-to-be Carolyn Newby Finger (‘41) was taking in an afternoon movie with the man who would become her husband. The theater manager interrupted the show, the audience emptied the building, and the two spent a long afternoon together taking about the uncertain future.

At the end of 1942 there was but one service branch for non-medical women personnel. But the manpower

shortage forecast led the other branches of service to add women enlisted personnel to their ranks in 1943. The big difficulty for recruiters like WAVES officer Rama Blackwood Hillman (‘41) was not in convincing women to sign on, but to win over the women’s fathers to the idea. Second Lieutenant Hillman’s days would be half spent at recruiting stations and post offices, and half making speeches before men’s civic clubs, convincing dads of the merits of the idea. Women under the age of twenty-one could not join the service without a parent’s signature. For other women the biggest difficulty in joining the war effort was physical: gaining weight. The Red Cross’s Muriel Coykendall Kiser (‘39), as did WAC-to-be Emma Dale Love, spent no small amount of effort gorging on ice cream and sweets trying to gain enough weight to get themselves accepted into their areas of service. In the end, exasperated

recruiters passed each of the still-too-slim candidates on through.

Why did women join? For as many kinds of reasons as there were women, it seemed. Mary Haynsworth Mathews had been an actress in a performing troop in London before the war started in 1939. When the director of the troop went to New York, she followed. But after Pearl Harbor, the actors in the company were taken quickly into the service. By 1943 the company had given up and Miss Haynsworth returned home to Greenville, SC. It was in helping entertain the troops at the local air base that she decided to join the Red Cross.

Edna Andrews Weston was working at Davis Hospital in Statesville, NC, when a number of fellow nurses joined the Army Nurse Corps. But Edna prided herself on being different. She thought she'd like to join

the Navy Nurse Corps. Trouble was, there was no recruiter around for the Navy. She wrote Washington, DC, asking what to do, and they finally told her to report to Asheville, NC, for an interview. *Someone* would interview her there.

Elizabeth Jordan Hickox was fresh out of high school, working at a oil refinery in New Jersey whose products were deemed necessary for the war effort. Which meant, of course, that she had a secure job - and which also meant that she had to stay in that job and couldn't leave to join the service. When she finally got permission to leave to join the WAC, she *couldn't wait*. Frances Hobbins' dad worked at the shipyard in Boston, and he, too, was in a job vital for defense. But if he couldn't join the service as he wished, daughter Frances thought she should. She did join the WAVES and ended up stationed "on the shores of Salt Lake City" driving a jeep in the Motor Transport pool.

In upstate New York Mary Sabourin walked with her father to work every day, right past a Marine recruiter. After saying for the umpteenth-time that she might just join the Marines one day, one of her dad's friends bet her ten dollars she wouldn't. Ten dollars richer, Mary reported to basic training. Constance Cline Phillips ('47) was a student at WC in 1944, at a time, she says, when men were so scarce on campus, that one day she left her dormitory, heard a man's voice around the corner and got petrified, and went screaming back to her room. Constance wanted to do something with photography and heard the WAC was taking photographers. The recruiter told her that they weren't currently signing on photographers, but that, if she wanted to work with film, she might be interested in being an x-ray technician: "they develop film." In what

Constance admits was not her brightest moment, she said to herself, "well, film is film" and entered into hospital work.

Judith Bullock Nisbet ('41) wore a button that said "I Danced for Defense" whenever she and the girls from Red Springs, NC, went to dances for Ft. Bragg troops. But finally she decided she wanted to do more than just dance: she joined the WAVES. Many women like her mentioned the excitement of doing something new, even more mentioned the thought of traveling some place far away. A few found comfort in joining a new experience to get their minds off situations they could not control. Edith League joined the WAC after a painful divorce. Nurse Betty Berry Godin's boyfriend had volunteered in March 1942 to train fighter pilots. Within three months he had been killed in a training accident. Her hospital boss encouraged her to get away from things. She did, eventually becoming an Army

Air Corps Evacuation Nurse in India. Ruby Morgan Sheridan's ('40) love was a man from High Point College she met while she was a student at WC. When word came that he was missing in the Phillipines, she joined the Army Special Services as a civilian, running service clubs on bases for enlisted men. "I never went home holidays," she says, though she was close enough to. "The boys didn't get to go home, why should I?"

New roles for women in society

How accepted were those women in their new roles in the workplace? Most were well-received.

Bernice Moran Miller recalls only one negative incident in 1942, when she was out walking with a friend in Denver, CO, soon after coming to WAC photography school at nearby Fort Lowry. A civilian man came up behind them

and berated them about what "bad women" they were for being in the service. He refused to leave them alone in their walk, so they ducked into the lobby of a downtown hotel until he finally left. On the other hand, WAC Lucy McDaniel Smith had people come up to her on the street in her Dublin, VA, hometown the first time she wore her uniform home. "They just wanted to shake my hand and tell me what a good job I was doing – and they didn't even know me," she says.

Acceptance by boyfriends was sometimes another matter. SPAR Virginia Young Van Dongen's fiancé never wanted to see her in uniform. WAC Mildred Curtis Scott's away-in-the-service boyfriend – and future husband – was even more put off. "Well, when he heard I joined he wouldn't have a thing to do with me," she says. "He had heard a tale or two that those women [WACs] weren't what

they were supposed to be. I guess if it wasn't for his mother he never would have written me.”

Mary Cugini Necko had a wonderful heart-to-heart talk with her mother the day she left to join the Marines' Woman Reserve. Her mother sat her down, speaking in her native Italian, “Maria, never forget what you learned in this house.” “Ma!” Mary intoned, “Of course not!” On the way to the train station Mary was in tears, upset about leaving, worried what her mother thought of her. But when she got on the train headed to basic training, she saw a Woman Marine in uniform. She looked so beautiful, so strong. Mary said, through teary eyes, “Can I try on your hat?” And the understanding officer let her do it. Simple. “But,” Mary Necko says, “my life changed that day.”

Basic training did not linger in most people's minds, other than in drill and “the joys” of communal

living. I will say that not a few of you mentioned how good the food was at Northampton College, the WAVES officer training location. And if all of you had as much fun singing your marching songs as Helen Russell Allegrone still has today whenever she brings forth “WAVES of the Navy” - or as much pride as WAC Mildred Caroon Bailey ('40) when she sings “Duty is calling you and me” to the tune of the *Bridge over the River Kwai* march - then I know your time spent there was not in vain.

True, Jean Comins Mitchell ('43) was less than impressed with the seriousness with which her male drill instructors taught her group of Army Dietitians to march in basic at Ft. Meade, MD. But truth be told, she was also a little relieved about their good humor. WAVE Virginia Gardner Becker was more thrilled with the attention given to training at Supply School, held on no less a campus than

prestigious Radcliffe. My interview with her was not the only time I heard women testify to the first-class opportunities they felt they received in service.

A world at war, with women the world over

What kind of work did the women interviewed for this Project do in the service? Many did something quite different from what they did in civilian life, and not a few told me they preferred being an enlisted person as opposed to an officer because the work was more interesting and less supervisory. WAVE Mary Ellen West was disappointed that her office work was too much like what she had done before the service; but Edna Painter Searles left a job as a legal secretary to happily serve as legal secretary in the Marine Corps Women Reserve. “The only thing that was sad about the work,” she said, “was

seeing the foolish things young men would do to get a court martial discharge, and not be able to help them.”

Elizabeth Williams ('37) was turned down for the WAVES after her physical showed that she still walked with a limp from childhood polio. With Harriet Elliott's help in Washington, DC, she signed on with the Red Cross. When she heard her assignment was “clubmobile,” she honestly thought she was going to a club in Mobile, AL. She was sent to Morocco and then Italy to serve coffee and donuts to pilots returning from bomber missions. WAVE Andrée Wetzler Fifield aced her typing exam and was called to work in the Office of Naval Intelligence in Washington. Her first assignment (fortunately, not her everyday one): helping look up information about *Civil War* battles.

SPAR Lucy Phillips Pugh grew up a country girl in Chatham County and knew her way around machinery. But when a male supervisor saw her and other women covered with grease, he said, “that work’s not for ladies,” and switched her to office duties. Dorothy Jordan wanted to be a beat cop in New York but didn’t get on the force. Yet when she joined the WACs, women stationed at Ft. Oglethorpe, GA, called her, a young MP, “Warden Jordan” as she patrolled the night spots in nearby Chattanooga, TN, keeping decorum and public image up for the service.

A refreshing number of women found their professional training fully utilized by the service. Army Dietitians were hired for their professional knowledge and placed into some of the more responsible work at a young age, it seemed. Aimee Nott Moore (**‘39**) joined the service in February 1943, and at 22, she was in charge of nutrition

at a 2200 bed hospital. Marthalou “Lou” Hunter and Henrietta Clodfelter Lucke (**‘43**) both got to be practicing bacteriologists, one in the WAC and the other in the WAVES at Ft. Detrick, MD. Henrietta Lucke’s work with pathogenic organisms still haunts her a bit. “I don’t think anyone would come get me, but I won’t mention the names of the organisms,” she says. “When the women who work there get together, we never mention the organisms.... I can’t imagine anything worse than pathogens let loose in the world.”

Charlesanna Fox (**‘30**) was a librarian by training, so she joined the Naval Library Service, a civilian group working with servicemen in libraries on base and gathering reading materials for men at sea. Living in Washington, DC, at the time, the North Carolina native returned home to a swamp near Jacksonville, where engineers were carving

out a place called Camp Lejeune. Miss Fox was there from the beginning of Lejeune, setting up separate libraries for black men, white men, and women.

Ruth White ('43) and Peg Greene both got jobs with the Red Cross putting their physical education training to work. Miss White went to the Phillipines at the war's end, then to bombed-out Okinawa, where what wasn't blasted by ordnance had been obliterated by a typhoon. She and her buddies roughed it in tents until the Seabees could build them shelter and a recreation hall. Miss Greene was with the 386th Bomber Squadron in Norwich, England, coordinating their recreation events. She had the opposite housing accommodations of Miss White. She lived in Norwich Cathedral, whose walls were eleven feet thick in some places.

Army Nurses probably traveled as far from the States as anyone, though 18,000 WACs also spent time overseas during the war. The other branches of the service limited their recruits to continental U.S. duty, with the opportunity for service in Alaska and Hawaii late in the war. Army Nurses Janet Froome and Agnes Knull Cantwell ('48) saw more jungle rot and mosquitoes than they cared to think about during their tours of duty in New Guinea and the Phillipines, and they left the service after the war without lingering. Lillie Henson ('48) served as an Army Nurse in North Africa, and continued working in Veterans Hospitals upon her return at the end of the war. But all three were self-effacing in recalling their labors in conditions miserable at best and frightening at worst.

Most of those interviewed were not in situations that put them in particular danger or aroused fear. And

even those who were in danger or afraid often were too young or too distracted by other things to realize it fully at the time. WAVE Gladys Dimmick's buddies at the Naval Air Station in Norfolk, VA, appreciated her work in the flight tower as a traffic controller. They would give her free flights to her Durham, NC, home, buzzing her Dad's house and tipping the wings in the direction of the airport at which the folks should meet her. Yet one day her friends trashed a plane in the water - with her in it - while trying to show off their "touch and go" skills. WACs Nancy Riddle Hinchliffe, Lou Hunter, and Emma Love were all rattled by a more uncontrollable situation: the buzz bombs in England. Hinchliffe says, "You could hear the low hum of the motor coming and sometimes you could see them low in the sky, but when that motor went out you better look out." Worse for Emma Love was the time she was

desperate to get her hair done, had finally found someone in London to give her a perm, and then had herself rigged up to the hot curling machine. Then she heard a buzz bomb approach. "Well, I guess I'm just not gonna make it," she thought, "because I'm sure not getting up out of this chair now."

In Italy, Elizabeth Shamburger ('34) says, "the toughest part about what I did was the war," in a disarming answer that I think reveals more about the "get the job done" mentality that let young women do unusual things in unusual times. Shamburger was an Army Dietitian at Naples' 300th General Hospital, overlooking the Bay of Naples. For some time, she recalls, almost every night the hospital would come under aircraft fire. The whole bay would light up. Shamburger would put on her combat helmet and listen to the sounds from the psychiatric ward

above her dormitory floor in the hospital. Yet the hospital was never seriously damaged, at least not until the volcano blew up. Yes, that's right, for in the midst of the war in 1944, Naples' Mt. Vesuvius volcano erupted. A WC friend from across the bay in Aversa, fellow dietitian Marion Fisher ('40) said, "the night sky just turned to day." Shamburger's hospital was hit by a piece of ejected rock that put a ten-foot wide crater through the roof. She continued her dietitian duties throughout all the distraction.

The volcano would get a fly-over from Red Cross volunteer Elizabeth Williams and her bomber buddies in Manduria, Italy, for it put on quite a show for much of 1944. Yet Miss Williams may have caused more scares than suffered them, if her firearm experience is any indication. One day some Army buddies gave her a machine gun to try firing out over the ocean. The gun had

such a kick that she ended up spinning around and spraying lead all up and down the beach, forcing her friends to hit the sand. The story sounds like the worst fears of those men who ribbed WAVES like Eleanor Jackson Northcott ('41), Frances Barringer Bailey ('40) and Carolyn Finger, each of whom wore a side-arm because they carried payroll across their bases as part of their work. In the words of a popular song of the day, Mrs. Finger tells how everyone called her a "Pistol-Packing Mama."

New places, new attitudes for women at war

Listening to the stories of the individuals interviewed, you get not only details about their experiences, but also you develop a common language of the times, the grace notes that make reminiscences ring true for those who were there. The military is always awash in

abbreviations, as if SPAR and WAC and WAVES aren't enough. You can always check out the BOQ ("Bachelor Officers Quarters") or maybe the whole ETO ("European Theater of Operation") to make sure things aren't SNAFU ("situation normal – all "fouled" up"). And if some Marine calls Mary Sabourin a BAM ("broad 'posterior' Marine"), be ready for her to call him a HAM ("half 'posterior' Marine"). If a WWII vet has sufficient "fruit salad" from this time (the colorful ribbons and medals on the left chest), I'll tell you now they might well have a "ruptured duck" at home. (This is the circular lapel pin given to many WWII vets at the close of the war. An arc at the border of the heraldic eagle design overlaps the bird's wing and "ruptures" it.)

In those food-rationing days, WAVE Virginia Becker will tell you how popular she was as head of the

commissary at the Quonsett Point, R.I., Naval Air Station, when all her friends would greet her saying "come and bring meat." But even without extra efforts, the war brought many average Joes and Janes in contact with personalities they otherwise might have never met. WAVE Frances Bailey and her girlfriend sat one night with former North Carolina Governor Clyde Huey at the 1944 Democratic Convention in Chicago. WAVE Gladys Dimmick posed with Bob Hope in Norfolk. Virginia Becker danced a dance with Henry Fonda. Jane Wyman visited Lou Hunter's WACs in Wyoming. Red Cross volunteer Emily Preyer babysat for a cute kid named MacArthur in Australia, while his father Douglas recaptured the Phillipines. When Jean Mitchell worked at Walter Reed Hospital, she had a hard time living down being late with breakfast one morning for General John J.

Pershing, the hero of WWI. And what Peg Greene remembered most about General George Patton was not his pearl-handled revolvers but that when he showed up in church that morning in Belgium, he knew the words to every hymn by heart.

With the passing of time, more people seem to have remembered where they were on the day of President Roosevelt's death in April 1945 than where they were on either V-E ("Victory in Europe") or V-J ("Victory in Japan") Days the following May and August. It was such a shock, Peg Greene recalls. "He was the leader of the free world, you know. I guess one thing that taught me was that no one is indispensable, not you, not I, no one." Yet WAVE Judith Nisbet does remember singing in the choir in Peter Marshall's Washington church V-E night. Mary Mathews danced the jitterbug with whichever soldier

wanted to at every stop of her clubmobile route in conquered Germany. Photogenic WAC Emma Love had her picture published in papers back home, lounging around in summerwear on Hitler's captured private yacht.

As the war grew to a close in 1945, Army Nurse Anne Carter began taking special care for the welfare of a German prisoner of war with a throat wound at her hospital in Nashville, TN. She made sure he could see the weekly movies shown to all the patients, even when other corpsmen said he couldn't speak and wouldn't understand what was happening. She hoped someone might do the same for her brother if he had been captured somewhere in the Pacific. WAC Jane Brister was assigned to SHAEF, Eisenhower's headquarters in Germany, and was billeted in housing seized only hours before from factory workers of the I.G. Farben chemical factory in Leverkusen. When she

got to the home, the door was still open, the paste with the eviction notice still wet to the touch. She entered to find laundry folded, a checkbook being balanced, and letters to the family's sons in service stacked on the table. She realized in a new way that she had fought families, too, not just Germans. That winter she would organize a WAC Christmas party for the DPs ("displaced persons") crowding the streets.

For WAC Norma Martell, the end of the war meant revulsion at the way we ended it, with the use of the atomic bomb to kill tens of thousands of civilians in an instant. "We could have just dropped it over the ocean and shown what it could do – that would have been enough," she says. She spent her WAC career decoding transmissions in a top secret facility she could tell no one about, and was convinced by the violent end that there is no good war. She

became a Quaker and a committed pacifist the rest of her life.

Back home from war, and future challenges

How easy was the transition back in to civilian life? For Julia Hill Gunn ('45) it threatened to be too quick. The WC grad, who was in WAVES basic training her second week when the war ended in Japan, ended up working two years in the Navy's DC weather office. SPAR Virginia Van Dongen married her fiancée within six months of the war's end and went on to raise a family of eight children. SPAR Lucy Pugh and her Navy husband went home and raised a boy and a girl, both of whom would join the military. SPAR Jane Gould Morey's fatherly commanding officer wrote her after she left the service: she had left after becoming pregnant just before

her husband shipped overseas. He wrote her every week until her husband returned. Afterwards, she never received a letter from her commanding officer again.

Most women vets went back to civilian life before the “duration plus six” period was over (“duration of the war plus six months” – the standard service obligation during the war years), and many entered college on the G.I. Bill. WAC Violet Caudle welcomed the chance to get an education. But, at age twenty-four, she was exasperated when her Mars Hill College dorm counselors insisted that she get parental permission to smoke on campus. This after she had been overseas to Japan and out on her own for six years. Continuing education was obviously a new concept. But when it worked for someone, it really worked. WAVE Frances Hall ('40) got her education, signed on for an

extended tour of duty, and eventually got two masters degrees and a law degree thanks to the G.I. Bill.

Very few of the first large group of women in the services, the World War II generation, ever thought of making service life a career. Our interviews reflect that reality. All the services were demobilized quickly after the war, and women’s units – created just for the emergency of war – were dismantled more thoroughly than others. The rare interviewee like WC’s Mildred Bailey is distinct enough for having crafted a thirty-year service career beginning with a WAAC enlistment in 1943. That she served as the next-to-last head of an independent Women’s Army Corps in the 1970s makes her contributions of national significance.

It took three years for Congress to acknowledge what the war had proven: that women were both capable

and needed by the military. In 1948 Congress approved the full and permanent integration of women into the armed forces. Our Women Veterans Historical Project's first hundred interviews have focused on the Second World War years, but there are interesting glimpses at the different worlds experienced by succeeding generations of women in the military.

Jane Heins Escher was a teenager in Sanford, NC, the day the war ended. She remembers the date because she entered a jitterbug contest held in celebration that day and won a \$50 first prize. She later served in intelligence work during the height of the communist scares of the 1950s. Joan Gerichten remembers reading about the war in the newspapers as a child and wanting to be a Marine when she grew up. She did join the Marine Corps, serving in the mid-1950s and early 1960s – a time when the fledgling

presence of women in uniform seemed almost to evaporate. Gretchen Davis ('65) was a twenty-year veteran of the Army, having witnessed in the 1970s the last days of a WAC independent from the regular Army, then serving in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War. "You don't have to find combat anymore," she says of today's warfare. "It will find you."

The expansion of women's work in the military has not always been easy or uniformly accepted. Though most veterans I talked with thought that all jobs in the service ought to be open to women, except for perhaps combat, WAC Jane Council let me know there are differing opinions. "I joined because there was an emergency, dear," she says. "There was a war going on. She (the modern Air Force pilot) is just out there showing her stuff – to prove she can do it." I hope the University will continue to

expand the Women Veterans Historical Project, allowing women of succeeding generations to share their stories of the special challenges and opportunities their generations faced in uniform.

A closing personal word: in talking with many of you, I began to realize that I guess I have had an affinity for the story of women in uniform ever since I played the role of Luther Billis in a high school production of *South Pacific*. Luther took a shine to nurse Nellie Forbush, and I think I have taken one to you. On behalf of the other interviewers for this project, Hermann Trojanowski and Janis Pardue, I want to thank each of you for your contribution, your heart, and your gift to our country.

“My only regret,” Martha Mendenhall says, “is that I had such a wonderful time, while for so many of the boys it was the worst time of their lives.” They started out to

“free a man to fight.” Yet in the end, World War II women veterans made it possible for women everywhere to be freer to choose the kinds of work and roles in society they would have.

Many interviews by Hermann Trojanowski and Janis Pardue are also part of this Project, yet were not referenced in my remarks. They remain a valuable resource for the school, academics, and the public, to use and to enjoy. For further information about the Women Veterans Historical Project, contact Betty Carter, University Archivist, at (336) 334-4045 or by email at betty_carter@uncg.edu. Visit the Project’s web site at www.library.uncg.edu/depts/archives/msspapers/womvets.html.