

## Elsie Smith

**Interviewer:** It's Wednesday, November 1, 2006. We are interviewing Elsie Smith in Las Vegas, Nevada. My name is Shannon Berndt and our videographer is Ed Feldman. Thank you so much for doing this interview for us. We're really excited to find a woman that was in the Service and you were with the Waves. Before we talk about your Service career, um, let's talk about a little bit where you were born and raised.

**Elsie:** Well, I was born in the state of Washington, a little town called Kalama, across the Columbia River from Portland. But we went to Ohio when I was four years old, so I always call Ohio my home because I lived there until I went into the Service.

**Interviewer:** Uh, when you were in, when you were in high school, what were your dreams and aspirations?

**Elsie:** Well, uh, the usual that most girls do...were going to work in an office and (chuckle), and like I say that's usually the career. I'd never thought of medical or anything like that. I got two scholarships in our high school and, uh, I had to take the one that was in my home town in Women's College because my family couldn't afford to send me out of state to go to college. So I went to the college in my home town, worked part-time at the city hall for the city auditor and when it became a full-time job, I left college to take the job. This was depression years. You didn't turn down a job and I made the grand sum of eighty dollars a month.

**Interviewer:** Wow.

**Elsie:** And everybody thought at the time it was a marvelous salary.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Elsie:** I did too. And I worked there at the city hall until I enlisted in the Waves, and that was in '44.

**Interviewer:** Why did you decide to enlist in the Waves?

**Elsie:** Well, it was a kind of a crazy thing that I did. I had a boyfriend visiting me from the Army and I went into Cleveland. My home was in Painesville, Ohio by the way. And I went into Cleveland to see him off to go back to camp and I said I was thinking of joining the Service, because it seemed as if I had so much to do. I had a Brownie Scout troop and I sang in the choir in church and it just seemed as if there was just so much to do and I was really fascinated by women going into the Service. And he looked at me and he said, "Any woman who goes in the Service will no longer be a friend of mine." So we were at the...in Cleveland and I walked right across the street to the old post office and enlisted in the Navy. This was in...on Saint Patrick's Day of 1944 and, uh, I went in April, the following month. I think it was April 20<sup>th</sup>.

**Interviewer:** How old were you?

**Elsie:** I was twenty-four. No, I was twenty-three because I would have been twenty-four that fall.

**Interviewer:** And, um, so you reported in a month later?

**Elsie:** Yes. I enlisted on the seventeenth and I went in on April twentieth.

**Interviewer:** Where did you have to report to?

**Elsie:** Cleveland. And from Cleveland we had a trainload of Waves from all the areas, the Cleveland areas that went into Hunter College in New York.

**Interviewer:** Um, the transportation you took at the train, how did you get from your home town to Cleveland?

**Elsie:** On a bus, a Greyhound bus. (Chuckle)

**Interviewer:** You told me a story before about, um, when they sent you off they gave you...

**Elsie:** Oh, I belonged to the Business of Professional Women's Club in my home town and, uh, they sent me off with a huge corsage of orchids.

**Interviewer:** Did they all meet at, meet at the bus station to...

**Elsie:** Oh yes. They were all there to see me off along with my family. And my sister was crying and somebody said, "Oh, you mustn't cry that she's going. She's so happy to go." She said, "Yes, but I'm losing her food stamps." (Chuckle)

**Interviewer:** (Laugh) What did your mother and father think?

**Elsie:** I didn't have a mother. I lost my mother at the age of thirteen. My father was real proud because he had served with the British Merchant Marines. In fact, he had a...he had quite a life because at the age of fourteen he signed on as a cabin boy and he signed up, he sailed on clipper ships. And he was an apprentice to the ship's carpenter. And when the ship's carpenter died, he became the carpenter on this, uh, British ship. And the ship was in port in Portland, Oregon, and my mother had emigrated from Sweden all the way across the United States without speaking a word of English, to Portland where her sister was. And it was very romantic I thought because all the boys from the ship went to the amusement park and my mother and her sister was riding the carousel, which, of course, is a merry-go-round as we call it. They called it a carousel. And he told his buddies, "See that red-headed girl over there? I'm going to marry her." And they were married within two weeks.

**Interviewer:** Oh, my goodness. (Chuckle)

**Elsie:** And her...like I say, she was a domestic for this Jewish family who she dearly loved, and they had her wedding for her and, uh, everything. And, uh, she and my father sailed off to Washington. And he just, he just left the ship.

**Interviewer:** Wow. Well, the Navy was the natural choice for you then wasn't it?

**Elsie:** Oh yes. Oh yes. Yes, he was very proud because there were nine children in my family. I was the youngest of nine. And I had four older brothers and none of them could go into the military because they were all married with children, and the youngest, the younger of the brothers...they were all older than I was cause I was the baby of the family...the younger of the brothers had, uh, a handicap so he couldn't go into the military. So my father was quite patriotic. In fact, oh, the American flag to him was just...oh, that was a part of his life. And he was just so proud because I went in. My sisters didn't really want it, but (chuckle)...but they'd be a...like I say, they, they got used to it and saw how happy I was in the Service. Of course, that was until I went to boot camp.

**Interviewer:** Yes. Tell me about your first days in boot camp.

**Elsie:** Well, the first days in boot camp was getting fitted for clothing. And you wore your civilian clothes naturally. And this was April in New York. Well, we started out with a rain storm in the morning so we were soaked when we got to Hunter College to try on clothes, or be measured for clothes. We were still wet when we got to the chow hall. We were all wet, cold and hungry. And, uh...

**Interviewer:** How come you were wet?

**Elsie:** It was raining.

**Interviewer:** So you had to be outside in a line or something?

**Elsie:** Yeah. We all...we had to march in...

**Interviewer:** Oooh.

**Elsie:** Of course, our marching was some...(chuckle) something else! Believe me. Of course, we were beautiful. You know they made the movie with Bing Crosby, "Here Comes the Waves". You know, we were in it. Oh my goodness, you should have seen our marching then.

**Interviewer:** (Laugh)

**Elsie:** But anyway, we got our clothes within two or three days and we had to pack up everything and send it home. All we could have was military. And so, like I say, it was a crazy spring in New York. Like I say, one morning we got up and there was snow on the ground. The next day it was so hot that you perspired under your raincoat and everything else that you were wearing. But, uh, I think we just made jokes about it mostly so it turned out to be a lot of fun. The funniest person I think in our whole outfit was the girl that played the secretary on the Beverly Hillbillies. I can't remember her name. But she was in the Waves at the time and she was in our group, and I'm telling you, she kept us laughing. I think her name in the movie was Jane Hasselway or something like that. But I can't remember her name. But, uh, she was an absolute riot. And, like I say we... it wasn't easy, sharing a bathroom with twelve other people. Showering, you just stood in line to get into the shower. Uh, the food, well, you had beans for breakfast. Of course, you were in the Navy, which I thought was really crazy. But I'll tell you something right now. After you've hiked to Hunter College in the rain and the snow, you know those baked beans tasted real good. And corn meal mush...I wouldn't have eaten corn meal mush...we had it at home when I was a kid and I'd turn my nose up at it, but boy, did it taste good when you're hungry. (Chuckle) But, it was a case of having all these interviews all the time. You went to school and you were...you took tests for this and tests for that. All these aptitude tests that you had to take and I figured having worked for the city auditor, I would probably go to what was called storekeepers school, which was like bookkeeping. You know, and things like that. So when it was time for our interviews for our jobs, this gentleman officer looked at me and he kind of smiled and he said, "Boy, I've got three real good choices for you for school." And I said, "Oh, good." I said, "My bunkmate's going to Norridgeville, Georgia for storekeepers school. I hope I'll probably go with her." And he said...he just shook his head and he said, "No." I said, "No?" He said, "No." He said, "Your aptitude is for three things...radio operator; link trainer operator, that teaches pilots to fly blind; or control tower operator." And I just sat back because all the girls talked about was being a control tower operator. They hoped that they would get it. And here was me, this poor old farm girl from Ohio. And I looked at him and I said, "I hate to tell you this but I've never even been in an airplane." And he said, "Well, you're gonna learn." (Chuckle) He said, "First of all, you can't be a radio operator because," he said, "your parents were foreign born." Which they were. And he said, "Our policy is in the Navy that we don't put radio operators in these jobs who have foreign-born parents because pressure might be applied," he said, "to their relatives in Europe or other countries." Then he said, "You can be a link trainer operator," he says, "which would be nice," he says, "that's teaching pilots how to fly blind." And he said, "You have a choice between that and control tower." And I said, "Well I really don't know anything about either one of them." And he said, "I would suggest control tower." Which I took, and I'm glad I did because I was shipped to control tower operators' school in Atlanta.

**Interviewer:** What did you learn there?

**Elsie:** How to be a control tower operator.

**Interviewer:** What does that include?

**Elsie:** Well, first of all, the FAA rules and regulations book was this thick.

**Interviewer:** Wow.

**Elsie:** And you studied from this, all your aircraft rules, regulations, operations, uh, just everything was there. And then you went on your first plane flight.

**Interviewer:** That was part of the training?

**Elsie:** That was part of the training, and I loved it. All the other girls, they were crying and they didn't want to go on because they were afraid. Only a few of the girls had, uh, ever flown before and I just loved it. I, uh...

**Interviewer:** Did you go on different types of aircraft?

**Elsie:** Yes. Uh, well, there were...we didn't go on fighters. That came later. But, anyway, as you graduated from school, the persons with the highest grades got choices as to which openings were available. And I said I didn't go anywh...want to be anywhere north of the Mason-Dixon line because after freezing in Cleveland all those years I decided that I was going to be a southern girl. So, anyway, I took as far south as I could, which was Pensacola, Florida. And there was an opening at Corey Field in Pensacola, Florida. So everybody got their choices and I got mine. And then one of the instructors told me, she...he said, "I hate to tell you this, but you've gone to a place where they have two fields." He said, "You're going to have to watch both fields." And I looked at him and I said, "Oh, no." And he said, "Yes." But, anyway, I got to Pensacola, scared, of course. So there was a car waiting for me when I got there that took me out to the base and took me right to the...our woman commander's office, who's a fabulous woman. Her name was Schwartz, Miss Schwartz, and she had been in World War I as a Wave in the Navy. She was, they didn't call them Waves at the time, but she worked and was in the so-called Navy then. And she was telling me about the base and, uh, about the girls and, uh, all of this stuff. And she said, "You realize now that you're out of school and out of boot camp that you have freedom. You can stay out all night if you want. Just so you report for duty." And she said, "There's a lot of activities that go on on the base, and we have what is called the cattle wagon that takes people off of the base." She said, "And like I said, you can stay out all night. But you know what?" She said, "My girls always get in at midnight." And we did. We would break our necks to get that cattle car back to the base before midnight. And I don't remember the three years that I was on that base that any girl was ever late. Really, we thought so much of her because she was such a fabulous person, and I don't think we would have disappointed her, you know, if our life would've depended on it.

**Interviewer:** Well, that's nice. That's very nice. What were your quarters like there?

**Elsie:** Well, it was two stories. The Waves...the control tower operators had one section of the barracks that was right up front where we could come up the stairs and go quietly to our rooms while everybody else was sleeping because under FHA rules and

regulations we could only work six hours on and then twenty-four off. So we had different shifts every day. And, of course, some of us come in at one o'clock in the morning and some of us would be leaving at one o'clock in the morning. And so we had this one area that was ours. Uh, we had showers and, uh, we had a small kitchen and, uh, downstairs was like a, sort of a recreational area. We had radios. Of course, we didn't have TV naturally in those years. Uh, we played cards. Uh, we had writing desks and pay telephones if you wanted to call out at any time. And, uh, the woman in charge downstairs was called the Master at Arms. And if you got a phone call she'd yell in her voice up the stairs that so and so you've got a phone call and we would have to go downstairs to answer. There weren't any phones upstairs. And we had a sewing machine and, uh, we had a laundry downstairs. We did our own clothes. And, uh, it was all really very comfortable. And the best thing of all was the chow hall was right next door. (Chuckle) So in the middle of the night, the cooks were really good to us. In the middle of the night we'd go over there and they'd fix up snacks for us...sandwiches and, and leftover pies and cakes and everything. Uh, so, like I say...but the men's barracks weren't anywhere near us. I mean the chow hall was in between plus they had administration buildings. Then the men's barracks were at the other end. Damn it! (Chuckle)

**Interviewer:** (Laugh)

**Elsie:** And, uh, guards with dogs walked the fence behind us all the time. And, uh, like I say, it was all just very cozy really. I made many friends. Like I say, loved all the girls. I still...I have one friend left and she's down in Florida now. She and her husband retired to Florida. And, uh, like I say, we were all very close.

**Interviewer:** How many women were in a room? In a...

**Elsie:** Four. We had four in what we called a bay, uh, four bunks in them...and I had the upper right hand bunk.

**Interviewer:** Did the...how did the men treat you? Was there respect, resentment?

**Elsie:** Oh no. There was a lot of respect because you figure there were sixty Waves and about two thousand, five hundred men on the base. And, like I say, we were treated with a lot of respect. Boy, when you went to our dance, you didn't lack for partners. (Laugh)

**Interviewer:** (Laugh)

**Elsie:** And I met my husband there on the base. It was a funny thing, the way I met him. The doctor at the clinic and myself were putting on a bond show. In those days...of course, you wouldn't remember. You weren't even a gleam in your father's eye at that time probably. They had what they call bond rallies. If you will remember anything about history...Carole Lombard almost died after she left the bond rally to go back to California. She died here and, uh, so it was the sixth of July and we were having a bond rally with talent off the base, on our, off our base. And so I was in charge of getting this talent together and getting the

costumes from over at what we called main side. We had six out-lying fields. Corey Field was just one from this center of main side. All these other fields were off of it and, uh, the doctor called me one day and he said, uh, "When you go over to main side to pick up the costumes tonight, pick up a Spanish costume." And I said, "A Spanish?" He said, "Yeah." He said, "We've got a new Corps man on the base. He's a marvelous singer and he said he'd sing some Spanish songs, and, uh, so get him a costume, a Spanish costume." So I said, "What size is he?" He said, "Well, he's about six foot one or two and he's as skinny as a rail." And, uh, so I said, "Okay." So I put an ad in the daily paper...we had a little paper that came out every day...and I said, uh, everybody who needs a costume to meet at the gym at five o'clock and I'm handing out costumes. We had so much talent on that base. You know it was really pitiful to think that all this talent was going to waste. And finally I said, "I've got a Spanish costume for somebody." I said, uh, "Do we have a Spanish singer here?" And up stands this gorgeous, handsome guy. (Laugh)

**Interviewer:** (Laugh)

**Elsie:** And, uh, it was him. And one of the best looking men I've ever met in my whole life, really. And, uh, so we were kidding around and stuff and, then the costume fitted him and stuff and he was called back for several encores that night, that night. He really had a marvelous voice. And so after his singing was over he ran backstage where I was and he said, "How about going to the dance with me tonight?" And I said, "Oh, no." I said, "Us Waves never go on a date, a dance with a date. We dance with everybody." He says, "Well, will you dance with me?" And I said, "Sure." So we go to the dance and, my god, was he a good dancer besides.

**Interviewer:** (Laugh)

**Elsie:** And all the girls were telling me, "Make him dance with me, make him dance with me." And I said, "I can't make him dance with you," I said "because he's dancing with me."

**Interviewer:** (Laugh)

**Elsie:** Anyway, I went on tower duty at one o'clock that night and he asked me for a date and it was on. The romance was on.

**Interviewer:** Oh. And how long before you were married?

**Elsie:** We met, we met on July sixth and we were married December twenty-ninth. And we were still both in the Navy.

**Interviewer:** So he was a Corps man...

**Elsie:** A Medical Corps man.

**Interviewer:** A Corps man.

**Elsie:** So then he...we both got out for a year and he went back in. Things were really rough. He worked as a laboratory technician in a clinic in Tucson, Arizona. His folks lived in Tucson and we went there. And we had a baby and we lived on a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month.

**Interviewer:** Ho.

**Elsie:** And fifty of that was rent.

**Interviewer:** Man.

**Elsie:** And, uh, so we talked about it and he said, "I think I'll go back into the Navy," which he did. And he was sent to Camp Le Jeune in North Carolina. And he was with the fleet marines most of his career. And when he made Navy Chief he was an instructor at Navy Corps School in San Diego and then he retired from there. He was...he'd been to Vietnam twice and they were sending him back for the third time. And I said, "I've never interfered with your Navy career but this is one time," [I] said, "I think you should retire." I said, "I'm stuck at home with three teen-age kids and one younger, one ten years old," and I said, "the last time you went you were gone sixteen months." And I said, "I think it's time for you to retire," which he did. And he went to work for California State in the prison system. And after my kids grew, I went to nursing school. (Laugh)

**Interviewer:** (Laugh)

**Elsie:** At the age of forty-five. I was the oldest gal in the class.

**Interviewer:** (Laugh) Well, hey...

**Elsie:** And I got my I...my license vocational nurses training in college in San Diego. Worked for the University of San Diego until he retired and we moved to Paso Robles, California. And, in my career, like I say, then I went to work for the California Prison System because that was at the time when women could go to work in men's jobs. I can't remember what the law was that had come out.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Elsie:** Remember what it was where women could take...but anyway I was the first female medical technical assistant in a men's prison.

**Interviewer:** Oh.

**Elsie:** Which was quite an experience!



**Interviewer:** (Laugh) I bet it was.

**Elsie:** Tex Watson of the Vancenburgers was my clerk.

**Interviewer:** Oooh.

**Elsie:** And, uh, so, like I say, you talk about people being respected and taken care of. It was the most marvelous experience of my whole life. There was a story in the prison paper about the two most cared-for people on the base. And one of them was Elsie Smith and the other one was Biscuit the cat. (Laugh)

**Interviewer:** (Laugh) Um, when I talked to you before, you told me a story about prop wash.

**Elsie:** Oh, yes.

**Interviewer:** Would you tell them about that story?

**Elsie:** I'll never forget it. Prop wash is the air that is back of the propeller. When the propeller is...uh, spins, prop wash is the air that's behind it. But I didn't know what it was. So the first day I reported on duty, the man in charge handed me a bucket and he said, "Would you go down to hangar number one and get a bucket of prop wash?" So I said, "Sure." So I went down three flights of stairs and went over to hangar one and asked for a bucket of prop wash. Well, the chief in charge said, "You know what?" He said, "I just loaned my last bucket," he says, "to hangar number two." He said, "You're going to have to over there and get it." So I go over to hangar number two and they saw me comin'. So, a sailor walks up to me and says, "Can I help you, miss?" And I said, "Yeah. I was sent over here for a bucket of prop wash." He said, "You know, isn't that funny?" He said, "The guy from hangar number three just came over and asked for it." He said, "So you wanna go over there and get it?" So I thought, oh boy. So I went over to hangar number three to get the bucket of prop wash, and this little seaman comes up to me and he says, "Can I help you, miss?" And I said, "Yeah. They sent me over here for a bucket of prop wash." He says, "Come with me." And he took me over to the chow hall and he told the chief cook, he says, "Give her a bucket of prop wash." And he threw a bucket of garbage in the bucket. He says, "You take that up there to that damn tower and you give 'em their bucket of prop wash."

**Interviewer:** (Chuckle)

**Elsie:** Of course, I didn't know what was going on, so, of course, you know being new on the base. And, of course, you salute anything in a uniform anyway, you know, when you're a boot. So I took it up and handed it...I said...he said, "Boy, they got me this time." And everybody started to laugh and they explained to me but that they do that to everybody new that comes to work in the tower. But then I got my chances when the next person came. (chuckle)

**Interviewer:** (Laugh) Um, tell me about your nickname.

**Elsie:** My nickname was Burma. The reason it was Burma because while I was in control tower operator school in Atlanta, I dated a pilot whose name was Terry Lee. And at the time there was a comic strip that was out. There was Terry Lee and, uh, Terry and the Pirates was the name of it. And his girlfriend was an oriental girl named Burma. So they gave me the nickname of Burma because I was dating this Terry Lee. But I figured, oh well, they'll just forget it, you know, when I leave here. And I got to the control tower and everybody said, "Hi, Burma." And I couldn't imagine why. Well, one of the control tower operators was a friend of one of the instructors in, in a, Atlanta, and he had called and told. So, but Burma stuck and my husband called me Burma for years 'cause that's the only name he really knew me by.

**Interviewer:** Did a lot of people have nicknames like that?

**Elsie:** Oh yeah. You'd be surprised at the nicknames that people...Course, uh, like, uh, we had this gal named Sarah Williams that was in the Waves. And of course, she was Billy, (laugh) because of Williams. And just...they just picked up these crazy nicknames.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, that would seem to be popular then.

**Elsie:** Yeah. And of course my husband's was Smitty, you know.

**Interviewer:** That was Smith. Do you feel it took a special type of woman to join the Waves?

**Elsie:** Oh yes. Oh yes.

**Interviewer:** What type of woman would that be?

**Elsie:** Well, first, if you go into the Waves, you might as well forget everything you ever knew before about personalities. Uh, you're not real important when you go into the Waves. You're just one of the bunch. You don't get any sp...special privileges. Uh, you have to do your duty. Did a lot of griping, but, uh, you have to accept a lot of things that you don't have to when you're living in a private world. Well, for instance, uh, you run into all these different personalities. Some of them are loud and brash but really good at heart. And you have to excuse the loud and brash because they have other good things about them. Uh, some of them were a little bit handicapped as far as looks were concerned, but you know you got to look at all of them. And, uh, anybody who goes in that's real egotistical, you might as well forget it. I'm not...I sound as if I'm being real pompous and bragging about it, but I'm not. Like I say, here I was just a common old farm girl, like I say, from Ohio and, uh, who would I think that I was, you know, going into somebody like that...when the most beautiful girls there in our barracks was a girl that was a model from Dallas who modeled for Neiman Marcus. And she was the most gorgeous thing that you ever saw but she was so cute and so darling you just wanted to hug her all the time, she was so pretty. And the sweetest thing that you ever saw. And then we had

this gal that was just real, real brash and, and loud, and she'd make everybody laugh, and sometimes she'd use bad language. And, uh, that was one thing...nowadays, I've cringed sometimes when I go to the mall and I hear the language that's coming out of teenage kids. And I think about when I was in the Navy, you wouldn't ever think of cussing, you know, the way that people do nowadays. Uh, well, damn and stuff like that, uh, I mean you said words like that, but there was never any bad language. And, uh, sometimes when people got too loud and brash, I think somebody would kinda mention to them, you know, that they were kinda going overboard and they would sure quit in a hurry. But, uh, like I say, that is no place for an egotistical person. The Navy just isn't. Like I say, you met some of those girls, for instance, at the Waves group. Now, didn't they just look like a plain old, good old ordinary bunch?

**Interviewer:** They sure did.

**Elsie:** That's what I mean. That's what we were like. You accepted everybody. Uh, another thing, you helped everybody. If somebody grieved over a death, you grieved with them. You tried to help them, you know, in any way that you could. Somebody was short on cash, here, I'll give you a dollar. You know, and, uh, that's the way you were.

(Phone rings)

**Elsie:** Will you excuse me?

(**Elsie:** Hello. Well, he isn't in right now. Can I have him call you? Oh, okay. Okay, that'll be fine. Thank you. His medicine's in.)

**Interviewer:** Tell me about your most memorable moment.

**Elsie:** I think my most memorable moment as a control tower operator was...uh, at night when we worked in the tower, somebody worked in operations down below, on the floor right below us and one person worked in the tower because we never had any traffic at night. And I got a call from the area operations that there was a plane circling the area and every base was socked in except ours. And I would have to land him and it was a B-25. And I said "Well, we don't have a long enough runway really." He said, "Well, the plane's got to come down. It's running out of fuel." So the plane contacted me and I told him, I said, "To get you down I'm going to have get you right at the start of the runway." He said, "All right." And I said, uh, I had called the drive-in theater, which was what was called base leg. The plane comes around the field - this is base leg - as he turns to land right here. That's base leg and that was the drive-in theater. And I said, "Leave your lights on, would you please? Because I've got a plane coming in that I have to land." So the drive-in theater said they'd leave their lights on and I told the pilot, I said, "At the drive-in theater is the start of the runway." I says, "Try to get your wheels down right at the start of the runway," and I said, and I said, "I think you can make it." So he did. But he ran one yard over the, the end of the runway, which was all right because the tow trucks came in and pulled him out backwards, you know. And I think about how scared I was landing him. And, uh, of course the pilot came up to the tower to thank me for getting him

down. But I think the funny part of the whole thing was the next day because they had to tear down a bunch of the chain link fence to get the plane off the base because it couldn't take off. We didn't have enough runway for it to take off. So they had to haul it over to main side, but they, like I said, had to tear down all this chain link fence to get this plane out. And that was one of my most memorable experiences. Another one was...when the fighters came in at noon for a lunch break, the custom was they all had to circle the field before they landed. One right after the other they would circle the field. And they all had a bad habit of saying, "Come on Burma, give me a straight in, give me a straight in," because they wanted to get their lunch and probably call their girlfriends or what have you. And I said, "No, no straight ins," until this one plane called me and he says, "Burma, I need a straight in. Half my fuselage is missing." I said, "Well, I've heard everything," I said, "but I'll give you a straight in." So he landed and the side from the tower was fine and he turned around to circle in to the hangar and half of his plane was missing. It dropped into the ocean.

**Interviewer:** (Chuckle) My goodness, a good thing you gave him a straight in.

**Elsie:** And I was an, I was an absolute wreck. And I took my microscop...my microphone and I threw it to a guy and I said, "Take over." I said, "I can't...I can't handle this for about five minutes." (chuckling) But, you know, it, uh...crazy things happened. Uh, a new plane came out which we were dying to see. And it was called a Corsair and it had gull wings. And the Marine Corps got all the Corsairs. And we got orders from operations that we were getting a Corsair in from Cherry Point. So there were two of us on at supper duty and I told Stu, this guy that we worked with, I said, "Why don't you go on to chow and I says I'll handle this one Corsair that's coming in?" We didn't have any other planes coming in. Of course, you talk about planes, we had four big radios sitting right in the middle of the tower where you had to listen to everything going on. And when they said Corey tower you'd better perk up your ears because that was for you. But, anyway, Stu went to chow and, uh, all of a sudden I get this call. "This is so and so from Cherry Point. We have twenty-eight Corsairs coming in."

**Interviewer:** Twenty-eight! Whoa.

**Elsie:** I said, "Oh, boy." So I told them landing instructions and I said, "I can't land you with a microphone. I'll land you with the light." I had a big light there. I said, "As I give you the green light," I said, "you guys pull in one at a time, circle the field before you land." Here comes Stu running up three flights of stairs. "What the hell is going on?" I said, "You know the one Corsair that I was getting?" I says, "There they are," I says, "twenty-eight of 'em," I said, "from Cherry Point." (chuckling) So it's experience like that, like I say, that you think you're going to have a coronary while you're... (chuckling)

**Interviewer:** (Laugh)

**Elsie:** (Laughing) in the term(?) But the two fields worked out pretty good because one was for commercial and larger planes and the fighters were on the other field. And we used to

have a lot of fun at night because we taught, uh, aircraft landings. Uh, what am I trying to say, uh, how they land on the...

**Interviewer:** Aircraft carriers?

**Elsie:** Aircraft, uh, carrier...we were teaching carrier landings at night. And it was fun because they had just a certain amount of, uh, spot, you know, to land on, on a carrier. It was measured off there on the field, and uh, and that's where the cadets were learning to do, uh, carrier landings and that. And that was one time that we could really bawl those guys out... (chuckle)

**Interviewer:** (Laugh)

**Elsie:** ...if we wanted to. And, uh, but what was fun about it, was after the practice was all over with, everybody met at the chow hall. There were a certain few of us that would work carrier landings and we'd meet at the chow hall afterwards, pilots and all. And boy we had our piece of paper. Hey, Charlie So and so, you did so and so that you shouldn't have done and this and that. And we're bawling those guys out right and left. And meanwhile the cooks had prepared this great big breakfast, you know, for everybody. Green eggs, you know, you didn't get fresh eggs in the Navy. You got these powdered, scrambled eggs.

**Interviewer:** And they were green?

**Elsie:** They were usually green. They tasted pretty good when you're hungry. (Chuckle)

**Interviewer:** (Laugh)

**Elsie:** And, and they'd have all these goodies laid out for us. But we could sit there and lecture these guys for what they did wrong.

**Interviewer:** And they took it?

**Elsie:** And so, and they had to take it. We had French pilots, English pilots, cadet... French cadets, English cadets and American cadets on the base.

**Interviewer:** Oh.

**Elsie:** The French were cute. I can hear them now. "Corey field, Corey field, this is Charlie two-one," (chuckle) and they snapped out their little requests like that and, uh, like I say, we were...control tower operators, operators were...we were respected. You know what I mean, and they just thought that we were real important, which is good for your ego. I always remember going to a dance at this place called Paradise Beach and one of the pilots came up and he said, "I finally found you, Burma. You know I circled the whole damn field trying to find you to dance with." (Chuckle)

**Interviewer:** (Laugh)

**Elsie:** But, but, like I say, it was things like that that you remember...cute things that went on. Uh, things that the girls did, you know, little things we did for each other and, and, uh, like I say, we really loved each other. You know, I think about friendships and things...the friendships that we made there were permanent because we were all in the same boat. And, uh, like I say, we, we were away from home, a lot of us were homesick, and, uh, like I say, it was just such a great bunch that was there. And, of course, me being from Ohio, I went to school with blacks and, uh, and, uh, foreign language students, mostly from Eastern Europe. We had Slovenians and Polish and Hungarians and all of this in this little town that I lived in. And, uh, like I say, I could cook a mean Hungarian goulash and Hungarian cabbage rolls because we lived amongst all of these people. And, uh, we had one black student in my graduating class...Freddy Williams. And, uh, when it came time for the prom, we got special dispensation from the high school superintendent to find a black girl from the sophomore class to go to the dance with him. And I went to my fiftieth high school reunion and Freddy was there. And I went up to him and I threw my arms around him and I says, "Freddy Williams," I said, "am I ever glad to see you." And he said, "Now, how did you recognize me?"

**Interviewer:** (Laugh)

**Elsie:** I said, "By your curly hair, how do you suppose?" (Laughing)

**Interviewer:** (Laughing)

**Elsie:** But anyway, you forgot about your prejudices, like I say. And then we got a black Wave, the first one. And you know what? We babied and pampered her. We had her so spoiled (chuckling). And she was so cute. She was just darling. And she was a link trainer operator, and, uh, the cutest thing that you ever saw. And we were all so thrilled that they sent us a black girl because, like I say, we all hated this prejudice business and stuff, particularly being in Florida. You know, when you went into town, you, you noticed, you know, the prejudices in town.

**Interviewer:** Hmmm.

**Elsie:** And we just didn't have them in the Navy. And, uh, like I say, those are the things that impressed me so much with these people.

**Interviewer:** Did you have, um, in the Waves, were there different ranks?

**Elsie:** Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I went into the Navy as an Apprentice Seaman. I can remember a letter from my father that he wrote me, and he put...Elsie Grenich, that was my maiden name, AS...Apprentice Seaman. And he had put ASS behind my name. And this gal, like I said, from Beverly Hillbillies, had picked up the mail and she came down and she was just

howling. And she said, "Here's a letter," she says, "from your father. Boy, is it right. Look what he wrote on it...ASS." (Chuckle)

**Interviewer:** (Laughing)

**Elsie:** But we went in as Apprentice Seamen and then when we, uh, graduated from school, we became First Class, Navy First Class. And the first rank that we got was Third Class. And the control tower operators were called Specialist Y. We had a Y on our, uh, emblem on our shoulder. And everybody thought we were Yeomen because we had a Y, but a Yeoman has crossed feathers on theirs. And, uh, and you went up from First...Third Class, Second Class, First Class, and then Chief. My husband retired as a Chief. So, like I say, you went through the ranks. We didn't go into Officers ranks. Griff was an officer. He became a Warrant Officer.

**Interviewer:** Hmmm.

**Elsie:** Before he retired. But, uh, there isn't much more that I can tell you because like I say...but it was quite an experience for this little small town girl.

**Interviewer:** It sounds when like you had a wonderful, a wonderful time.

**Elsie:** Yes, and like I say, my husband and I were stationed all over the United States. We were in Cuba for three years at Guantanamo and, uh, we lived in officers' country in Guantanamo. There were two Quonset huts there. One was for the Head Mechanic and one was for the Corpsman. And my husband was the Corpsman for, uh, the, uh, air base and all we had to do was walk up the hill behind us and we were on the air base. And there were cannons there and, uh, from the Spanish American War.

**Interviewer:** Wow.

**Elsie:** And, uh, they had a cemetery that we loved to go to because they had, uh, men buried there that had died at sea and then they would bury them at Guantanamo. And, uh, they had graves there that were dated from...well, I think the oldest one we saw was 1863.

**Interviewer:** Wow.

**Elsie:** And, uh, I couldn't understand, uh, why there was from way back when because I don't think Guantanamo became part of the United States until after the Spanish American War. And that wasn't until, what was it...1890 or something like that? I think it was...but, like I say, the Navy to me was, uh, like I say, with my husband being in it and, uh, everything, it was ah, it was quite a life.

**Interviewer:** Tell me why you joined the National Waves Organization.

**Elsie:** Well, uh, I had belonged to one in Tucson years ago. In fact, shortly after my husband and I were married. I belonged to a Waves group there and, of course, we left there. And I never saw the organization again until there was an article in the, there was a note or something in the paper about a Waves meeting. And I called about it, and, uh, like I say, I didn't even know that there had been a Waves organization. So I, I joined it right away.

**Interviewer:** What, what do they do as an organization?

**Elsie:** Well, we do a lot of volunteer work. We do a lot of donating. (Chuckle) Like one of the things that we're going to donate for this year is for Thanksgiving dinners for the base, families on the base. And we send packages to Iran. In fact we sent doggy packages the last time for the, the guard dogs.

**Interviewer:** Oh.

**Elsie:** And, uh, there's a lot of the women that are over there, we send female packages to them. And, uh, well, I think it's going to be the seventeenth, there's going to be a health fair at the Elks Club. We will be there to, uh...well, first of all we have a raffle for a great big house plant or something like that. But just to let people know that we're there.

**Interviewer:** Then your organization that's local here...are all the women from World War II or are there other...

**Elsie:** Oh no, anyone that had been in the Waves, anyone. In fact we have one girl now that had just retired from the Navy after thirty years.

**Interviewer:** Oh. Are they still called the Waves? They're not, are they? Just in... if they were in the Navy.

**Elsie:** Yeah. We're still called Waves. Women of Sea Services is what we call them here in Las Vegas usually. But they're a great bunch, those gals. You know our president last year was blind. And she was quite a gal and the work she got done! Made me feel like a clod!

**Interviewer:** (Laugh)

**Elsie:** Didn't get anything done at all because she was so great.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, I saw her when I attended that meeting. Well, any other, um, memories you'd like to share with us?

**Elsie:** Well, you know, you can't really put your finger on a lot of things. Uh, it doesn't seem to me that all I think about is the fun we had or anything like that because we did have a lot of fun. I think, uh, accepting people the way they are, uh, has changed me in a lot of ways. You know, sometimes I was a little bit prejudiced about some people and then, uh, I thought,



you know, it was, it was quite a learning thing I think being in the Navy like that. Uh, you learned about other Services and the things that they did. Uh, you learned Navy history, a lot of that. Uh, it was a completely different life that you had at home. Of course they say that you were under military rule. I never felt that way. I never felt that I was under somebody's thumb or anything like that. I did my job and, uh, tried to do it well. I had several promotions. And it was a funny thing. When we were discharged, I had regrets about being discharged. Both my husband and I didn't know whether we wanted to get out or not. But, of course, everybody's enthusiasm about the war was over. I think of, uh, President Roosevelt's death, how we grieved and, uh, when we thought about things about the war that was going on, you know, it was all very painful, to think that these men were being killed. In fact, I think that the control tower operator that I relieved was killed shortly after he went into the South Pacific. And, uh, it was just so hard to think about those things. I lost...uh, I was engaged three times. And I lost all three of them in World War II.

**Interviewer:** Oh, man.

**Elsie:** And, uh, so, like I say, it was a terrible war. And do you know what I felt so badly about last December seventh? There was one small, small article in the back of the Review Journal about, oh, so and so outfit is remembered December seventh. It wasn't on the first page or anything like that and I thought to myself, how soon we forget. So I told Griff about his war experiences. I said you should tape a lot of this stuff that you had done. I said your grandchildren and your great-grandchildren...

**Interviewer:** Oh, yeah.

**Elsie:** ...would want to hear all about this. Because I remember all the things that my father did. How my nieces and nephews just love the stories about how him being in the British Merchant Marines, all these different countries that he went to. He spoke six different languages. He could, he could read and write three. And he said English (chuckle) was the worst language in the world. But all the kids, like I say, they want to hear all about his experiences. And I wish now that I would have taped or recorded a lot of the things that he did.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Elsie:** Because, well now I'm the matriarch of the family. I have no more brothers and sisters left. But I have a lot of nieces and nephews, who, by the way, keep in touch with me.

**Interviewer:** That's great.

**Elsie:** Like I say, I'm just real thankful for that.

**Interviewer:** Well, that's why this, this project, I feel, is so important and so wonderful. Even though you just talk for a few minutes, it's sharing a little bit of your experiences that will be

preserved for your posterity, you know, in the future. And, hopefully some good things will be done.

**Elsie:** I hope that the kids nowadays can look back and read a lot of the history, like I say, of World War II, the Korean War. The Vietnamese War was a terrible thing. I just don't want to ever tell you the things that my husband told me about being with the Marine Corps in the Vietnamese War. He was there twice and I always felt that if he had been...if he had been sent back the third time that he got orders for that he'd have never made it. But it was a terrible war.

**Interviewer:** So he would go out with the...

**Elsie:** The Marines.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, the...

**Elsie:** They would collect the bodies, take care of those who were injured on the battlefield.

**Interviewer:** Mmmm. Boy, he was, he was very lucky, wasn't he, that he didn't...

**Elsie:** Oh, yes. Like I say, uh, he never wanted to talk too much about it. He said, "I don't ever want to burden anybody with what we went through." And he had a lot of respect for the Marine Corps. Navy and Marine Corps, you know, they, uh, joke back and forth all the time, how terrible everybody is, you know. And, uh, like I say, they, they've always been natural enemies (chuckle). But, like I say, they have a lot of respect for each other and, uh, like I say, being in the service, it was a learning thing, an education, not only learning about other people or anything, the fact that you learn how your military works in a lot of ways. Uh, people nowadays don't really know what's going on, you know, in the military. They print what they wanna print, uh, like World War II. We didn't...I found out more about World War II after I got out of the Navy than I ever knew what was going on when I was in. First of all, newspapers were hard to come by.

**Interviewer:** Oh.

**Elsie:** You didn't get a daily paper. You could, uh, when you went downtown and you bought a paper, it might have been the last one that the paperboy had. They had paperboys, you know, in those days. Uh, he only got so many. So a lot of people were without...you didn't get a daily delivery of a paper. You had to go and buy one. But, of course, we did, like I say, as residents in Ohio we had a paperboy. Then they brought your paper every day. But we didn't know what went on during the war. They didn't print a lot of this stuff that was going on. We found out about it afterwards.

**Interviewer:** Um-hum.

**Elsie:** But, uh, like I say, I just feel sadly because the kids nowadays really aren't being told what went on in those days. War is terrible. It's a terrible thing. There's really no glamour or glory to it. And, uh, some day...of course, my father used to say, "There will be war as long as there are two men standing on earth." But we get things like the United Nations and, uh, things that are supposed to stop these wars and look at what's going on now.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

**Elsie:** Here we have brains. We have supposedly the most intelligent men in the world, our heads of states and stuff, and you mean to tell me they can't quit fighting?

**Interviewer:** Nope.

**Elsie:** Like I say, it's sad. And everybody says well, it's just politics. Well, sometimes a lot of money does some crazy things to people. And I think that has a lot of bearing on it.

**Interviewer:** Yep. I think you're right. Well, thank you so much for...

**Elsie:** Oh, you're welcome.

**Interviewer:** ...doing this. Doing it twice. (Laugh)

**Elsie:** I hope I didn't bore you to death.

**Interviewer:** Oh no, no, not at all.

**Elsie:** I'm glad you got Griff.

**Interviewer:** Oh, I'm so glad too. I'm really glad.

**Elsie:** Yeah. He has a lot of tales to tell.

**Interviewer:** I bet he does.

**Elsie:** He had quite an experience.

**Interviewer:** If he gets another opportunity, both of you, to record more, I would suggest that you do it because your families, um, you know, will just grasp onto it at some point in time. Maybe they don't want to know about it now or maybe they do but at some point they will.

**Elsie:** I feel so proud...my son has a big picture of me in the Waves in his living room.

**Interviewer:** Oh, he does?

**Elsie:** You know, I've had pictures taken since, but here's this picture in...and his father, and his father in his uniform.

**Interviewer:** Did you, did you have a picture you wanted to submit with your...

**Elsie:** No, no, I forgot to get one out because they've, they're all at my house.

**Interviewer:** Oh. Okay, okay.

**Elsie:** And so, like I say, uh, I don't really have one, you know, uh, with me.

**Interviewer:** All right. Well, thank you so much.

**Elsie:** Oh, you're welcome.

**Interviewer:** And I will...when I...I don't know how long it will take to get a DVD copy back. We send them off to have them made into DVD's so...but I will get you a copy.

**Elsie:** Well, I'm glad and one for Griff.

**Interviewer:** Yes. Okay, well thank you.

**Elsie:** Oh. You're welcome.