

Phyllis Paxton

Interviewer: It's Tuesday, November 28, 2006. We're interviewing Phyllis Paxton for the Veterans History Project at the Henderson District Public Library. My name is Shannon Berndt. Thank you so much for your willingness to be interviewed. The women are few and far between from...that we've been able to get, so thank you so much. Before we start talking about your military history, let's talk a little bit about where you were born and grew up and what you did before the service. You were born in Iowa?

Phyllis: Yes, Grinnell.

Interviewer: Grinnell, that's a...I haven't heard of that. Is it a little tiny town?

Phyllis: No. That was the biggest town I lived in when I was a kid. It was over five thousand. That's not little.

Interviewer: No, no, you're right. It's not.

Phyllis: And, uh, I was born there. My parents moved to, to a little town, Parkersburg, when...the year before, when I was supposed to start to kindergarten. Well, Parkersburg didn't have one so I stayed in Grinnell with my aunts and my grandparents and went to, went to kindergarten in Grinnell, and then moved to Parkersburg.

Interviewer: What did your father do for a living?

Phyllis: He had a...he owned a gas station up there then. And, uh, Parkersburg was wonderful to grow up in. You could...it was only a thousand and in those days you could do so many things. I mean we used to...in the winter there was a big hill and we'd slide, go down, belly flop down the hill on our sleds and you could play ball in the street and there weren't very many cars. You could climb trees. You could go hiking in the country and you weren't bothering anybody. You could swim in the creek.

Interviewer: So, um, you went through all, through your school years there?

Phyllis: Until I, I lived there until I was in seventh grade and we moved to a bigger town...five hundred more. Ackley, in Ackley, I only lived in Ackley for si...well, we moved there I think it was the second semester of seventh grade and then in the summer I was in Grinnell. Then I went back for the fall semester and we moved back, and then we moved again back to Grinnell. Ackley I was lucky. All the towns I lived in had big libraries and although I liked to play a lot, I also like to read. And I was lucky that way too. And then I had friends in Ackley who liked to read. And we used to... I remember trading books with the kids. I just...I had a good time. I liked it. And Grinnell I always loved until I moved back. It was, they were kinda staid. I was, it was in eighth grade and I don't know. It just wasn't the same as not living there.

Interviewer: Right.

Phyllis: Because you know I went there every vacation.

Interviewer: Um, and so you went to high school there then, right?

Phyllis: I went to high school in Grinnell. I had an aunt that was a teacher there. I had her for history and, uh, and then I went to Grinnell College. And then the war had just begun when I graduated. So I went to Chicago to get a job. I was going to be a sportswriter (ha ha).

Interviewer: (Chuckle) Did you like sports?

Phyllis: Oh, I loved it. I loved football and track and basketball.

Interviewer: Did you play any of those sports?

Phyllis: Well, I played football until my dad made me quit. (Chuckle) You know, when I lived in Parkersburg, we played...we'd play anything up there. We made up games. We played, we had a game we called "Cricket" and you had a broomstick, and a hunk of a broomstick and you whacked it.

Interviewer: (Chuckling)

Phyllis: And we played basketball in this one kid's garage and the attic. You took your life in your hands that you didn't fall down the...through the... But Grinnell, I never ever felt the same after I moved back and I didn't...and I always loved Grinnell College but I really didn't...I shouldn't have gone there. I made a mistake. I was one of these people that was real good at placement tests. Well I got in this high English class when I was a freshman. It was just horrible. The teacher was...I found out afterwards that nobody liked it. And everybody struggled with it. But I think I struggled harder because I used to argue with her. She, she wouldn't let you write. She'd tell you to write some, write a theme. And then if you wrote about something she didn't like she wouldn't give you any credit for it. I mean it was...and she'd say that, "Well, you don't want to write about that."

Interviewer: (Chuckle) Well, did you graduate from Grinnell College?

Phyllis: Yeah. I graduated.

Interviewer: And then you went to Chicago?

Phyllis: I got a BA in journalism.

Interviewer: Oh, you did.

Phyllis: And I went to Chicago and I was going to get a job on a paper but there weren't any that...right then, so I went to an employment agency and I got a job at the University of Chicago at the dep...at the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology and I worked in Chicago Wayne Hospital in the medical library, not the record library, the medical library. Well, I was so self-conscious about working in the maternity hospital, that when I first worked there I'd look around to see if anybody was watching when I went to work. That didn't last long. I loved it. We had medical students and we had doctors who were getting their specialty in OB. And they were way older and I was the youngest one there and everybody treated me like I was...it was really great. I loved it. And, uh, but I knew I couldn't stay there because you'd never...I mean you'd...there wasn't any future. I mean, you'd never make any money. So, I thought well, I stayed until the next spring. Then I decided to go into the Navy and see what that was.

Interviewer: Why did you ever think of going into the Navy?

Phyllis: Well, my dad hated the WACs. He worked in Des Moines. And famil, familiarity I think breeds contempt. Anyway, they had a bad reputation there. I don't think they deserved it but they did. Because you always judge by the bad, you never judge by the good. So I decided to go in the Navy. Well, I had a terrible time. I, I didn't look my...I looked so young. I had to take my birth certificate. I did that. The guy still didn't believe me. I took my mother and I don't know if anybody ever did believe me. But then there was this one girl that worked there that knew me.

Interviewer: Oh.

Phyllis: So that, you know, she was older than I was but she knew how old I was, or approximately. But you had to be twenty, twenty and I was, I was twenty-two. And I just thought that was terrible.

Interviewer: Um, um, tell me about your first days in the Service. Where did you go for training?

Phyllis: Smith, Northampton, Massachusetts, Smith College. And it was, it was kind of...I, I, it was kind of an adventure for me because it was like going away to college. And I never had. I had always lived at home. And, uh, first month we were apprentice seamen and we lived on the campus at Smith. And uh, it was okay. I mean I didn't, I didn't like living at the College very well. I just...but then I had to get used to it. And, uh, I could...we used to march downtown to the Hotel Northampton for our meals and I can remember one morning...I, I don't know, everybody used to trade food, you know, and everybody traded me their oranges and I had I don't know how many oranges. And I came back and we had to stand and I kept dropping oranges. (Chuckle) But it turned out all right. She didn't...then we, after a month we went to Midshipman School. You were a seaman for that month. Then you went to Midshipman School and it just depended. They sent...I went to...I stayed in Northampton and went to Communications School. Most of the younger ones did that. And then they...we lived at the hotel in Northampton, which they took over. And, uh, I should have brought, I had a little book about that hotel, about the prices then.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah.

Phyllis: But the, then of course they didn't have anything. I mean the Navy took the whole thing over. And, uh, I lived on the top floor. I had three roommates and we slept in bunk beds. And it was, it was very interesting. We had a captain of the place. He was a Navy captain who hated WAVES. I mean he felt it was a big mistake to let women in the Navy. And he didn't hesitate to let you know.

Interviewer: My goodness.

Phyllis: In fact, when he, he gave our graduation speech and told us what flops he expected us to be. And that's, that's how he was. But what he did was create a fear of real high officers in me. I was scared to death of anybody, captain or above 'til I found out that that wasn't...that they weren't really all that way. But it took a long time. And he, um, one night he...uh, the officer of the day forgot to announce that the captain was giving a lecture. We were all ready for bed and we had to get dressed and march up to the campus and listen to him talk. And, but, but I, but he used to get good speakers. He got...one time we had Hiram Bingham, the man who discovered Machu Picchu.

Interviewer: Oh.

Phyllis: He was, at that time he was the Senator from Connecticut and he came and talked about that. And Mrs. Forrestal came but she was, she was looped.

Interviewer: (Laugh)

Phyllis: But she talked. Communications we had a book about this big and it had lead covers so it that if, if the ship sank the book would sink.

Interviewer: Oh.

Phyllis: Because it had stuff that they didn't want the enemy to read. And we took, we took things like Naval Hist...Naval History; we took things like Naval Geography and, uh...

Interviewer: Did you get to choose anything that you took?

Phyllis: No. And once a week you had drill and that was fun. Anything physical was fun because it, it, you really had to work kinda hard and it was just good for you to get out and do something. But we had a lot of free time too. You could go downtown in Northampton.

Interviewer: What did you do usually?

Phyllis: Eat.

Interviewer: (Laugh) Eat.

Phyllis: I remember there was a place there that had homemade potato chips and Eastern potato chips are better anyway. And then they had a...I tried my first seafood. I'd eaten fish but never anything from the ocean. And I discovered scallops. They're still my favorite. But then they used to sing at night in the, in the lobby of the hotel. And the girl that played the piano was in my class in college. In fact, she was a journalism major too, and I don't know what she ever, ever worked...she wasn't Communications. She wasn't in Communications. I don't know what she did afterwards. But she was in Washington and I never, ever saw her again.

Interviewer: So how long did this training take?

Phyllis: Two, two more months. We were there all summer. I went there the fifth or sixth of June and I left in August, late in August.

Interviewer: And so what was your...what did your job end up being?

Phyllis: I was a coding officer at the Naval Communications Annex. The Navy took over this girls' school, Mount Vernon Seminary, which is Awards Circle in Washington, way out northwest, forty, forty-six hundred Northwest I think, and at the beginning of the third alphabet. But anyway they took over and in the code room you never knew. It was made up of dozens of sections and, uh, each section would do one thing. But where I was in the code room they were all officers and you got the messages as they came in. You decoded them. But you still didn't know what they were. I mean you could read

part of it but, but a lot...but some of it was still coded. And then it said where, which section it would go to like GIP or GTP or something like that. And we'd deliver the messages and then they'd, they'd decode them more and send them back to us and we'd put them on the, and we'd encode them again. We had these machines which were, at the time were very secret and called ECMs. They're not secret anymore or I wouldn't tell you. But you couldn't talk...you couldn't talk about what you did. You couldn't, you didn't dare talk about the Pacific war because you didn't know if you read it, or heard it or maybe you read it. Maybe you got it at work. You just couldn't talk about it. We got to so we didn't like MacArthur because it seemed like he took credit for everything.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Phyllis: Because everything came through...it would go to CINCPAC and other people but still everything in the paper was MacArthur. And I remember seeing pictures of Admiral Mountbatten, the British Admiral. Boy, we didn't have anything that looked like that. (Chuckle)

Interviewer: (Chuckle) So where did your communiqués come from? All over? From Europe?

Phyllis: No, we, um, there was a G, a European one. But that was very small. The guy that did the European decoding was a guy named Oswald Jacoby. He was a bridge expert. In fact he's written books on bridge. His...he's dead now but we used to see him. And we had a guy in there named, uh, not in our section but in another section, named Cochran. And he had a brother whose name was Phil Cochran. And he was...there was a comic strip at that time called "Terry and the Pirates."

Interviewer: Yes.

Phyllis: Well, Flip Cochran was in "Terry and the Pirates", and that was Phil Cochran.

Interviewer: Ohhh.

Phyllis: Most of the messages came, sometimes they were relayed from the West Coast. Sometimes they came direct from CINCPAC. We, the whole place got two unit commendations. I only got one, I wasn't there when they got the first one. I believe that was for the Marianas, or, I'm not sure. And ours was for the second battle of the Philippines because we got a message to Admiral Halsey so that he was able to counteract what...

Interviewer: Oh.

Phyllis: And change what he was doing. But the whole place got the, got the ribbon because it took the whole place to do it.

Interviewer: And what medal was that?

Phyllis: It was the Navy unit commendation. It was just a ribbon.

Interviewer: Oh, just a ribbon.

Phyllis: It was just a medal.

Interviewer: Well, that was, that was great.

Phyllis: And I didn't get it until, well, long after the war I got it. I was in BUPERS when I got it.

Interviewer: Do you remember what you were doing, where you were on December 7, 1941?

Phyllis: Yes, I was watching a...listening to a football game. Between the Chicago Cardinals and the Chicago Bears.

Interviewer: And, um...

Phyllis: That's what I did every Sunday, listen to the Bear games.

Interviewer: And did they...

Phyllis: They broke in, all day long, all afternoon long.

Interviewer: And what did you think when you heard that?

Phyllis: Well, I...we had one boy in our class from Hawaii and I really...Barton Nagata, he was Japanese-Hawaiian. And I, I really worried about him.

Interviewer: So you, you did your job assignment in Washington, D.C. Um, were you taking over men's positions that would normally do that so they could go to...?

Phyllis: Well, they would have had to do it, yes. Somebody had to do it. And we did have, we had a, a, one or two watch officers who were men on each shift. We had...we worked in...there were four shifts. The Able, Baker, Charlie, Dog...we were the Charlie watch. And, uh, we worked, in the beginning we worked two, two and two shifts. We worked two days in the evenings, two days in mid-watches, two days of days and then you had forty-eight hours off. Then they changed it to three, three and two, I think, three, three and two: three days of evenings, three days of mids, and two days of days and forty-eight hours off. And I...that was only the code room that did that and I think they did it because this room we worked in was an inside room. There was no ventilation. They had this air conditioning and I don't know if you remember what air conditioning was like in the beginning. Trains used to have it and it smelled terrible. It was awful. I mean it was just...I can't tell you how it smelled. But I think the air was so bad that they had us work that way to get us out of there for longer periods instead of having us stay longer periods. But it was the day that...we had a, some officers that were learning the coding that would go overseas and do it. Anyway, they got the...most of the men got promoted one day and they all brought cigars to work. And that day the Able watch relieved us...I remember because I liked the guy that was the Able watch, watch officer. I liked ours too. But, anyway, I got so sick and I was outside, and I went out to another room where they had a teletype where you could breathe air. And he came to work and said, "Phyllis, you're green."

Interviewer: (Laugh) Now where did you live in Washington?

Phyllis: I had a room on Albe...in walking distance on Albemarle Street which was the beginning of the third alphabet. It was a...I would...Word Circle where I worked was at the top of the hill and I walked down the bottom of the hill to Forty-sixth street and down to Albemarle and I was there. And I

always walked. I wasn't afraid. You didn't have to be afraid then, in that neighborhood or in those days. And the only time it was ever a problem was if it snowed. It'd get icy. If it snowed it was really funny. The buses would all be backed up at the foot of the hill because they couldn't get up.

Interviewer: Did you have a roommate?

Phyllis: No. I had a room. Well, yeah, my sister came, but no, I had ...there was another WAVE that lived there. We lived in a house, got rooms in this house. And I got...I took the basement and I had my own shower and room, and the housekeeper would do my laundry. I paid her.

Interviewer: Oh, nice.

Phyllis: Some little bit to do my laundry so with all that. And then when my sister finished high school in forty-four, she got a job with the FBI so she came back and lived with me and we stayed there. And we had to eat out, we ate out all the time.

Interviewer: You liked, you liked your eating establishments.

Phyllis: Well not...those weren't too good. Then it wasn't very good. At first, when we first were at the Annex we used to eat at the headquarters across the way. I lived there for a couple of weeks when I first got down there before we got a place. Anyway, we'd eat in the dining room there and they...there were so many guys there that they finally had to...we couldn't eat there all the time any more. It was just mobbed because the food was good and it was cheap. I think you got eighty cents a day. You were allowed eighty cents a day for food. Breakfast was twenty cents and lunch was forty cents and dinner was twenty cents.

Interviewer: Wow.

Phyllis: Or maybe...you know, I mean it was like that, it was really cheap. And it was usually pretty good too.

Interviewer: Did you notice any of the rationing and things like that when you were in the WAVES?

Phyllis: No, except shoes.

Interviewer: Shoes were hard to come by?

Phyllis: Yes. They were rationed. But otherwise I didn't need anything. Sugar was rationed but that didn't matter. And butter, and that didn't matter. You know I don't remember what else. Gasoline but I didn't have a car.

Interviewer: Right. Right. What about your uniform. What was it like? Tell me about it.

Phyllis: Well, the first one we called grandma because it was kind of a...it was navy blue. Some kind of washable material and I really don't know. It was just sorta, it wasn't all cotton but...and it just looked terrible all the time. I mean it just never looked good. Then, that was the summer uniform. Then you had a wool for the winter uniform, made out of gabardine and that was a lot better and then...although I'd wear the other ones to work. And then we got seersucker, gray-striped seersucker

for summer. Well, you could wear them...they were a dress with a jacket which you could wear or not, and then they had covers for your hats. And that was before they had [??] caps. You know what a [??] cap is? It's a cap that goes...

Interviewer: Oh, okay, okay.

Phyllis: And we had raincoats with havelocks, the havelock that fit over your cap and came down this way.

Interviewer: Oh. So you always wore a hat when you went out?

Phyllis: And gloves.

Interviewer: And gloves...when you were on your off time did you still have to wear your uniform?

Phyllis: Well, it depended on what you were doing. Like if I went over to...I had a friend that was a Navy nurse that had a room nearby and I used to go over there and I didn't, and, uh, I didn't bother. I wore jeans. And the guy, the owner of the place where she lived was a brigadier general in the Medical Corps and he was in Africa and he was in Italy. And then they told me he was coming home and I said, well, I won't be seeing you anymore because I don't want...I just won't come over when there's a general here. Well, I sure got surprised. He came home and I didn't know it and I went over there. Had on jeans. He was sick in bed. She said the general's sick in bed and he wants you to go up and visit him. I went up there and sat on the floor and talked to him. I, I couldn't believe it. Of course, he was a doctor, but, I mean, still he was a general. And that's when I, I had...I found out that maybe they weren't all so bad. And then the captain, the first captain on our base, went to sea as a captain of the Wisconsin when it was launched so we got a new captain. And he was a great big guy, and he just looked so austere. Really like a really hard guy. Well, one day I was riding my bike, which I did, I bought a bike when I was there. I was riding my bike, and I was over at the dispensary to talk to this friend of mine over there. I'm standing out there by my bike and the captain came along and he said "hello", and I said "hello". And I figured, you know, he'll never know me. Well, I took a message to the captain's office about a week later and he looked at me and he said, "How's the bike riding?" And he'd always talk to me and if they had inspections he'd come in and talk to me and they just laughed and laughed because they knew how scared I was. But he got me, he got me over it.

Interviewer: Well, good. How did...other than that one captain, how did men treat you in general? Was there any animosity?

Phyllis: No, not really. Once in a while you'd hear somebody say something but it would be somebody that didn't know you or...but, um, you were...they really treated us real well. We weren't, I didn't think...of course, now they call it discrimination. I think it's ridiculous, a lot of it. This friend of mine was telling me she had to take a class on it when she went to work and she said she couldn't believe what they called discrimination. I think it's just nuts.

Interviewer: Yes, um. How did you celebrate the holidays?

Phyllis: I didn't. You didn't.

Interviewer: You didn't.

Phyllis: You didn't. You got...you... If you were off you were off. If, you know, if you were scheduled to work, you worked. They didn't do anything. And it was hard to...I mean, people would ask you to do something on the weekend. Well, we didn't have weekends. I had cousins in Hagerstown. In Maryland but I'd never see them or anything. My grandmother wrote them and told them that I was there so I'd get this letter from this person, Ann, inviting me up for a weekend. So I wrote and told her that I didn't have a weekend yet. But I didn't have one and I wasn't free and I really appreciated her writing. Well finally she hit one. She was inviting me up and then she finally hit a weekend so I wrote and said I'd be up. I thought well I might as well do it. Because I thought you know, you don't know whether you're gonna like them or not when they're shirttail relations. Well, I went up and this guy met the bus and he said, "I bet you didn't want to come." (Chuckle) So right away I knew it was gonna be okay. So we go out and there's an old, clunky car and a convertible out there, and I knew he was the one that had the old, clunky car. But he didn't, he had the convertible. I mean, you wouldn't believe their house. I went...we drove over to their house. Their lot was a city block. The house was built in 1796 by Nathaniel Rochester who founded Rochester, New York. The house had like eight bedrooms, thirteen fireplaces.

Interviewer: (Laughing) Wow.

Phyllis: And old people where I lived always turned the heat off. At eight o'clock at night the heat went off so you froze. It was warm in that house. They owned a coal company. But it...on that house. The city of, the city of Hagerstown condemned it after the war and made a parking lot.

Interviewer: Oh, no.

Phyllis: I...of course, they couldn't get it by, I don't think they'd ever get by with it now.

Interviewer: That's too bad.

Phyllis: 'Cause it was just...it was called Mount Prospect and it was just beautiful.

Interviewer: Hmm.

Phyllis: And those people were really nice.

Interviewer: So you had lots of friends and stuff. What did you do to pass the time when you had off time?

Phyllis: I used to swim in the, in the summertime. We'd swim in the river, go bike riding. I rode my bike to Hagerstown once. They wouldn't let me ride home. They sent it home on a big truck and I took the bus home. Anyway, I wanted to go, I went to Antietam battlefield that day. I used to like...after I'd been there over a year, maybe a year and a half, I got interested in the Civil War. And one time Sybil and I were going to go to Arlington and we didn't know how to get which bus. So they told us the third line and the bus came along that said Arlington Annex. I said well I know that's the back of the cemetery so I said we might as well get on it. So we walked all the way through the cemetery and went through the mansion and then back across the bridge to Washington. It's quite a, quite a ways. But, and then I, and that's when I started getting interested in the Civil War. And I started reading books on it. A man named Douglas Southall Freeman was editor of either the Richmond News Leader or the Times

Dispatch. The papers were in the same, in together, and I don't know which one it was. But he wrote, during the war he wrote "Lee's Lieutenants" which was a three volume series of books on the generals under Lee and the other officers. And I'd buy...each time a book came out I'd buy it. And he also had written a biography on Lee, four volumes. I got that...and then I'd go to a lot of used book stores. I...anything I bought was books because it didn't cost...you got in for half price at the movies and the movies were expensive in those days. You know. So I did start buying a lot of books. And at the end of the war I went down to Richmond one day and I took the first volume of each book and went up to see Douglas Southall Freeman. I was out there in the outer office and he said to me, "Young lady, what have you got?" And I said, well, I'd like to get you to autograph these. So he asked me where I was from. And he said, "Oh, did you go to Grinnell College?" And I said, yeah. He was very nice. And he was so knowledgeable it was just a thrill to talk to him. And he was...I used to go...we went to Gettysburg lots of times. We had to take the bus up there but that was on every long weekend I could do the whole battlefield and walk all over.

Interviewer: Oh, such interesting history back then.

Phyllis: And then, you know, not only that, but in those days you could do these things and you didn't have the crowds. You know, and that...the last time I went to Gettysburg I took my children and...

Interviewer: Must be a mob.

Phyllis: And Manassas is the same way. Bull Run.

Interviewer: Did you have a nickname?

Phyllis: Phyl.

Interviewer: Phyl. It seemed like everybody had a nickname at that time of some sort or another.

Phyllis: I was always...in Parkersburg they called me P.K. because that was my dad's initials.

Interviewer: Oh.

Phyllis: And I played with these boys all the time. And I was P.K. to the boys. Mostly I was Phyl all the time.

Interviewer: Tell me about your most memorable moment.

Phyllis: (Pause) Actually it was a mistake I made. I used these coding machines that we used. You'd set wheels and set the...and then you typed them. Well, evidently when I set the wheels I didn't get one. It was sorta semi out of line. So I, I coded it and I decoded it. And it was for CINCPAC. That's why it was so bad. Well, I get to work the next day and the day-code watch officer, Theamy, Feeney...I think his name was Feeney. Anyways he says to me, "You garbled the CINCPAC message." I was scared to death. I said, "I decoded it." Well, from then we did it on, you'd code on one machine and put 'em on, decode them on another so you wouldn't have that, that problem. It wasn't the only time it ever happened. It happened other times but that's the only time it happened to me and it just...I just felt terrible.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Phyllis: Another memorable moment...but it was more of a...I was sick. I had bilateral ear infections and I went, I went to the doctor and he said to me...he'd just done my promotion physical... and he said, "I thought you told me you never had ear infections." I said, "I told you I hadn't had one for a long time." He said, "Well you've got two of them." I said, "I know." And so anyway, he gave me some medicine and I went home and Sunday I was worse. Both my ears are draining. So I called the doctor and they said, "You'll have to go to the hospital." So they sent a car and I went to Bethesda. Well, the next morning...that was Sunday afternoon. I didn't see a doctor then. The next morning I started down to the clinic and I'm in the bathrobe, which is what you're supposed to wear. I met – I can't remember what you call those guys, ?? – anyway, I met this guy and he said to me, "Go get your uniform on." So I went back and I got my uniform on and I went down to the clinic. And I waited and I waited and I was so sick I thought I was gonna die. Well I finally got in and the doctor looked at me and he said, "Why did you make this girl wait?" He says, "When anybody comes in that's this bad they better get in right now." And he says to me, "And why do you have your uniform on?" And I told him and he says, "They don't make the rules around here. Don't you wear it again." Well, so anyway, the reason for the holdup...I didn't know that there was some big holdup like in emergency when I was there so I, when I went to go back to my room I got in the elevator and here's this old man in the bathrobe, Admiral Nimitz.

Interviewer: Ooh.

Phyllis: He was back from the war. He'd been in there having a physical. So we rode up together.

Interviewer: Cool. Okay, um, what type of woman do you think it was that it took to make a WAVE?

Phyllis: Well, you know the funny thing, most of my friends were well-to-do, almost all of them. They came from well-to-do families and they, and they had money and they... I was one of the few that would say...I had my grandmother's only money when I went to college and I used to pay her back. I sent money home to the bank every week, every month. And, uh, I don't know, uh, you just had to be kinda determined that you were going to do it. And they didn't, not more than most of the WAVES, since I'd been going to JEMS, they were all enlist..., they were all enlisted, and we just...it wasn't that we were stuck up. It was just that that's who we worked with and the people that we knew. And I wasn't... when I went to BUPERS after the war that's when I found out but I never could be that way.

Interviewer: Well, it seems to me like, you know, you had to have a sense of adventure and...

Phyllis: Well, you did, and yet it wasn't...you didn't really...we were so restricted. I mean, uh... the WAVES didn't get to go anywhere. At the end of the war they went to Hawaii. And then you could, and then they changed the...they were always changing the rules. I mean you could be married or you couldn't be married, or...you know, and stuff like that. Well, you couldn't go overseas while they...you couldn't. The WACS could and I don't know about the Marines. And the Coast Guard...but then they started and when you...they let you enlist in the regular Navy and then you could go anywhere. And I was...I got married in '47, '47 in January and so I wasn't gonna, you know I wasn't gonna enlist in the regular Navy and I didn't want to go anywhere. Should have but I didn't.

Interviewer: What was your career after the war? Did you have a career?

Phyllis: Well, I got pregnant and I had two kids. And I stayed home until...let's see, he was born in '48 and Kathy in '49 and we went to California in '51 and got kinda dumped there. And, uh, then I got a job at, at NACA, which was the predecessor to NASA. It was the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics. And I worked at Moffett Field. And then I got married again which was a mistake, and stayed home until Kathy was in first grade and then I got a part-time job in a doctor's office. Then I, then I worked full-time in a doctor's office and then I worked in a lab. And then when I, when I eventually moved to Reno, then I stayed in the medical field for the whole rest of the time. I liked it.

Interviewer: How come you, um, joined the Nevada JEMS?

Phyllis: Well, Carol came up and talked to me as I was waiting for the doctor over at the VA and she asked me if I knew about it. And I said no, I never heard of it. So I...she told me to go to a meeting and I liked her. She was really...she was really good. Do you know Carol? She was in the Korean War. She was younger. And, uh, so I went and...

Interviewer: How long ago was this?

Phyllis: It was this year.

Interviewer: Oh, so it's just been this year that you started going to the...

Phyllis: I think it was like, maybe March.

Interviewer: You hadn't heard of the WAVES organizations before that?

Phyllis: And I, I used to correspond with a friend, one WAVE, until just, well until I moved down here and I lost...I just...I lost track of her and I don't know how, how I did it, but I did. I used to...cause I knew her...I worked with her after the war and then I...we were neighbors in, in Arlington. And then we just kept track of each other. And if I went back there I'd see her and when she came to Reno...and then they moved to Phoenix, to Arizona anyway. And I wrote to her once and then after that I don't know.

Interviewer: So did the WAVES do a lot of volunteering? Is that something that you like to do?
(Laugh)

Phyllis: In fact, Rhea's trying to get me to be the secretary and I said no, I didn't want to. Well, I'm also in the Audubon and I do, do some volunteering for that. So I, I, I just...and I gave my car away so, I mean, I can have it whenever I want to use it but I decided to give it away so I didn't accidentally go on any more trips.

Interviewer: Chuckle.

Phyllis: I used to go...I always went to Reno every year, but I haven't been up for two years now. And I used to go all over. In fact in '99 I went...I took a trip and I went the perimeter of the country up as far as...well all around the Southern states, the Eastern states, the Northern states and then I come back in Montana and came back down.

Interviewer: Do you have any regrets that you joined the WAVES?

Phyllis: No. Sometimes I wish, sometimes I wish I hadn't had a family and I could have stayed in and then I think, well what would I do without my family.

Interviewer: Right.

Phyllis: And then I could've gone back in but by the time you could go back in I was too old. You know, I mean, like I said they kept changing the rules. They had to. It was like we couldn't use the VA when I got out.

Interviewer: Oh, you couldn't?

Phyllis: Uh-uh.

Interviewer: But now you have those benefits, right? And when you joined the WAVES, what was...how long was your stint? How long did you have to be in there? For four years?

Phyllis: No...the duration and six months.

Interviewer: Six months?!!

Phyllis: The duration of the war and six months.

Interviewer: Oh, duration of the war AND six months. Okay.

Phyllis: But, but I stayed. I stayed 'til '48.

Interviewer: Oh, you did.

Phyllis: I went to BUPERS afterwards.

Interviewer: And did you do the same thing?

Phyllis: No, I worked in...first, I worked in Enlisted Discharge. And it's...first I, I, I, uh, had this little office all by myself, with two, two enlisted WAVES under me, which I didn't need. I mean, by then it wasn't that kind of deal. Ours were all special-order discharges, people that...they got out under the points system.

Interviewer: Oh.

Phyllis: And they might have a need to get out before their points were up. And that was a special-order discharge. When, um, a girl applied for a job, I mean wrote that she had a job waiting for her with Mr. Justice Black, and I turned her down.

Interviewer: Oh. (Chuckle)

Phyllis: But then the Admiral found out. And I had to change it. (Chuckle)

Interviewer: (Chuckle)

Phyllis: But I, I never... I wasn't very political. I was, I was more go by what I felt than what was politically correct back then. But it was extremely interesting because you, you...it was hysterical in fact, the things you got. I, uh...I eventually went in with everybody. And then we had women now that, mine was just women. Then we just took it with men and women all together. And they...it was hysterical. I just loved it.

Interviewer: Well, good. Well, thank you so much for doing this. That's all the questions I have unless you have something else you'd like to share.

Phyllis: No, I don't think so.

Interviewer: Okay.

Phyllis: I, I, I liked the Navy. I, I didn't like the war, but I liked the Navy.

Interviewer: Well, it was wonderful opportunity for women.

Phyllis: It was still the Depression, I mean, really. So that you got out where you wouldn't be. I'd never been East of Indiana. (Chuckle)

Interviewer: A big adventure.

Phyllis: Yep.

Interviewer: All right. Well, thank you.

Phyllis: Thank you.