

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
LOUISE M. NAULT
Office, Women's Army Corps, World War II
2004

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Nault, Louise M. Prevenost. Oral History Interview, 2004.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 25 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 25 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Louise M. Prenevost Nault, an Iron Mountain, Michigan native, discusses her service in Washington D.C. with the Women's Army Corps during World War II. Nault recalls signing up with a friend, basic training in Florida, passing motor pool tests even though she had not driven before, and assignment to Fort Myer, South Post (Virginia). She describes her duties typing decoded messages and delivering them to the Pentagon. Nault recalls the FBI checking into her background and the promotion that allowed her to carry top secret material. She states the military personnel she worked with were friendly and recounts once getting lost and accidentally walking into a room "full of gold braid." Nault states that, through handling messages, she had an idea of what was going on in the war, and she talks about waiting to hear the announcement of the D-Day Invasion on the radio. She mentions the FBI were suspicious that someone was leaking information to Drew Pearson, a radio announcer. She touches on housing in the barracks and talks about seeing celebrities such as Eleanor Roosevelt come to the Pentagon. Nault characterizes life in Washington D.C. and recalls going on long weekend trips to New York City. She describes the wild atmosphere when the war ended and discusses WAC positions being quickly replaced by men. She talks about meeting her husband and getting married a month after being discharged. Nault recalls going to the Women's Memorial (Washington, D.C.) when it opened and touches on using veteran medical benefits.

Biographical Sketch:

Nault served in the WAVES during World War II and was honorably discharged at the rank of Technician Fourth Grade. She eventually settled in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin.

Interviewed by Terry MacDonald, 2004.

Transcription by Cathy Cox, 2007.

Abstract by Susan Krueger, 2010.

Interview Transcript:

[There is part of a recorded conversation on the tape prior to the beginning of this interview.]

Terry: This is a tape of the history of Louise Nault, Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, conducted on July 16th, at 44 West Oak Street, by Terry MacDonald. Louise, can you tell me a little about your background before you entered the military service? Where you grew up and what you did?

Louise: I'm from Iron Mountain, Michigan, and I graduated from high school there in 1939. And I had a younger brother. I decided to leave Iron Mountain and went to Milwaukee, to work at Cutler-Hammer. And one day, I was thinking of joining the WAVES. Very seriously. And when I worked at Cutler-Hammer as I said, and this one girl was going to go up to the movie theater where they were recruiting for the Army, and she wanted me to go up there with her. So I did. And they kept telling me, "Oh, you would have basic training in Daytona Beach, Florida." And that sounded real good, so I signed up. So this other girl and I were all set to go together, and she was rejected because she was too heavy. And there I was all by myself, but I did go with the Milwaukee group to Daytona, and spent my basic training in Florida. And then from Florida, I went to Fort Sheridan—which they called it a pool, to decide where you were going to go, and they gave us—[clears throat]—excuse me—some tests, and I passed the test for driving a car and I didn't even know how. So then they decided I couldn't do that, I couldn't work in the motor pool. And then I went to Camp Ellis, Illinois, till I got sent to Washington D.C. in 1944, in the spring. And I was at Fort Myer, South Post. And North Post is on one side of Arlington Cemetery, and South Post was temporary on the other side of Arlington Cemetery. And we had a tunnel that went under the road to get to the Pentagon, that we could walk. And there I worked there for—till 1945.

Terry: What [were] your job duties while you were working there?

Louise: Well, I worked in messages, in the—Signal Corps would get the messages, and they would decode them, and they would pass them through a little window to us, and we would type 'em out and decide where they had to go—if they went to G-1, 2, 3 or 4—which offices they went to. And um—

Terry: Were these messages Top Secret?

Louise: Some of them were. Yeah, some of them were Top Secret. And then we had to decide where they went, and we had to type 'em out, and we did copies on an old ditto machine, which was fun. And then we delivered

them in the Pentagon. And the Pentagon was quite a building. It was brand new back then. And it had five stories, and we were on the fifth floor, but it was sectioned off. And one time I got lost for about three hours—I didn't know how I could get back. And, it was a—it was a fun job really, because you got to see a lot.

Terry: What did you think of being a young lady at that time handling this Top Secret information?

Louise: I didn't yet. I didn't yet. But one time I come home on a furlough, and when I come home on the furlough I called my friend that worked at the Chamber of Commerce and I says, "Guess who?" And she says, "Oh, I know you're home. The FBI man was here before you." He was on the train *with* me, on the way home. And he went to my school, to the police department, and neighbors, and when I got back, then I was promoted and then I could handle Top Secret.

Terry: So what rank were you at that time?

Louise: I was a Corporal, T3—T2. Then I got the three stripes—and then I could carry Top Secret. And—this was strange, because they gave me a bunch of messages one time to take over to Eastman Kodak to have them put on film. And they said they'd call me a car to go. And they gave it to me in a big manila envelope. And they drove me over there, and I had to sit and wait for the tape. And while I'm sitting waiting, a Navy guy comes in, and he's got a suitcase with a chain around it and a lock, he's got a gun on his hip. He was doing the same thing as I was doing with my manila envelope. I thought well, ok, that's fine. I'm not in danger as he is, I guess. But there was a lot of things—the Pentagon wasn't like it is now, 'cause I did go in '97 when they had the Women's Memorial, and it's uh, it's a whole little town now. They've got stores and everything for the people that work there. We didn't have that.

Terry: What was it like working—was there a lot of brass, Army brass—

Louise: Oh, yes.

Terry: And Navy brass?

Louise: Oh, yes. That's *all* there was.

Terry: And could you co-mingle with those, or—how did they do that?

Louise: Well, they were real friendly. I mean, it was—it was a good place to work. Although one time I was taking messages and I had to take them to a Navy office, and they were down in the first floor—I remember that—

and I couldn't find the office. And I opened the door, and it was full of gold braid. Boy, and I turned around and left real quick 'cause I was in the wrong place. But it um—all the officers were there. And there was lots of lawyers there, there was—well, General Marshall's office *was* there. General Marshall—we never went actually up to his office to deliver—they had one of those things you know, like at the bank, where it flies up there through the little tube—they had that at—for General Marshall.

Terry: Well, who was in charge of you, then? What type of—an officer or—

Louise: It was a Corporal—I mean a Colonel—that was a civilian, and I guess the day after the war started he was a Colonel. It was—he was promoted real quick. But uh—we had three shifts. The office was working constantly. We worked day shift, then we worked an afternoon shift, and then we worked the midnight shift, and then the fourth week was the swing shift. When others had off, we worked in. And it was—it was—different. I couldn't tell anybody what I did—my mother and my dad never knew what I did. They didn't know that I was handling—and then, we kinda knew things were happening when we'd see all these messages you know, and we knew when D-Day was coming, but we didn't know exactly when. But we thought we knew. And this friend of mine went to the radio station and we sat there waiting for them to announce D-Day, but it was the 5th instead of the 6th—because of the weather they had postponed it. So we sat there all day on the 5th waiting for them to announce it. So we did know a little bit, but—and Drew Pearson, do you remember—I don't know, you probably don't remember Drew Pearson—the radio announcer that—he knew things before he should. Well, then we had FBI men following us to see who was giving out information. That was kind of exciting. Not knowing who was following you around.

Terry: When you worked at the Pentagon, then, where did you live? You said—

Louise: At the South Post.

Terry: South Post. It was a regular military barracks?

Louise: Yeah, it was—but it was a temporary one. It's gone now. I think the Cemetery's taken it over.

Terry: What type of living quarters did you have?

Louise: We had nice big barracks. Nice barracks. Was—there was like ten of us in a room. And then right next door to us was Arlington Farms, because there was a lot of civilians that worked at the Pentagon, too.

- Terry: What was it like working in Washington D.C., at the nation's capital?
- Louise: At that time—I don't know about now—but at that time Washington D.C. was the cleanest place I ever saw. I mean there was never dirt around the town or anything, you know. And there was always something to see—you know, the Smithsonian, and you could go in—it wasn't—it wasn't as wild as it is now. It wasn't the traffic. It was—
- Terry: Did you have any—you said about the FBI following you and things like that—was that probably one of the most memorable things or—
- Louise: Yeah, that kind of—you remember *that*. You remember that you have FBI men looking at you, wondering what you're doing. But ah—well, there were a lot of celebrities we would see, too, like Clark Gable came to the Pentagon, and Joe Lewis came to the Pentagon, and Eisenhower was at the Pentagon, and we saw all those.
- Terry: Did you ever have a chance to see the President at the time you were there?
- Louise: Not the President, but his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt. [traffic noise in background] She was a very, very nice lady. In fact, there were some girls that were walking down to catch the bus one time, and her limo stopped, picked them up, and she took them to the White House and showed them all around. I mean, she was really nice. And then after he died, when Truman was president, his wife worked at the USO. You'd never know she was a First Lady. She was very—she was like everybody's grandma. She'd come over there and serve coffee and stuff, because it was close to the White House. She just—
- Terry: Did they bring entertainment at the USO there? Or –
- Louise: No.
- Terry: Was that mostly—what was the USO like there?
- Louise: It was just a place to relax and—there was books to read, and snacks to have, and stuff like that. They had music, but nothing, nothing big.
- Terry: There must have been an awful lot of soldiers and sailors and things in that area.
- Louise: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. There was—yeah, a lot of Air Force and everything. There was a lot. And, in Washington at that time, you could go to the movies at 9 o'clock in the morning, at the theatre because people worked all these different shifts. They had everything going on all day. But it

was—it was interesting. And we have long weekends—we had like a Friday, Saturday, Sunday and a Monday, and we would go up to New York, and take in all—everything we could there. There was a—there was a lot of places where you couldn't go in unless you had an escort, so we'd just grab anybody [laughs] need an escort to get in. And a lot of places where guys couldn't get in by themselves, they had to have a girl. So they would grab anybody—it was all service people doing it. And it was all different languages, I mean, service people from every place. So, we got to see a lot of New York.

Terry: Then you stayed at the Pentagon your whole time?

Louise: That's the only place I worked, yeah. And the when the war ended, of course, you know we had points, so we just waited for our points to get out.

Terry: So what was it like, or what were you doing when you heard that the war ended?

Louise: Well—[chuckles]—the streets were wild. I mean, you couldn't drive a car down the street. And I remember, we had to be to work at midnight, these girls that I was with. And, we were running around downtown, and we got to work—I mean everybody was just wild, and there was confetti flying, and there was a black boy that used to come in in the morning and clean up the office and sweep. He come in the door in the morning, and he looked and the floor is covered with confetti, and he turned around and walked right back out. He wasn't going to clean up that mess! But it was pretty wild when the war ended. It was—well like you've seen pictures of New York, it was the same thing in Washington.

Terry: Did they muster you out pretty quickly, then, or what happened—did they downsize the operations? [traffic noise in background]

Louise: Yeah, I got out in uh—February of '46. So it wasn't too long. Well, they had young fellas come in and replace us. See, what we did—now they have the women doing the same thing the guys are doing. And which I don't like, tell you the truth, I don't think women should have to go fight in the war. But we *replaced* a man for active duty—we took over their job. Well then, when the war ended we had young fellows coming in and replacing *us*. So as soon as they came, we could go.

Terry: Did you go back to Milwaukee, then, or did you go back to Michigan?

Louise: No, I went back—I got out in February, and in March I got married. [train horn in background] My girlfriend and I, we got out at Fort Sheridan—we were mustered out at Fort Sheridan—and we had these big plans. We

were going to buy a bike, and we were going to get our twenty dollars a week—they'd send em to us and then our parents would have to send it to wherever we were. And we were going to bike to California.

Terry: Now, a bike—a motorcycle—

Louise: No, no, no.

Terry: A bicycle.

Louise: A bicycle. We were going to work on the way, you know. This was our big plans. Well, I got married in March, and then she got married in about April, so we never did do that.

Terry: How did you meet your husband?

Louise: I had met him before the war, but I hadn't—we weren't steady or anything—and then he had just gotten out in December, before I did. And we met in the tavern-- [chuckles]—as usual. And we got married. And he worked for Ford Motor Company. And two years later—1952—'51—about three weeks before Christmas, Ford decides to close down. And we could have gone to Detroit, we could have gone to Cleveland, we could have gone to California—and that I would have gone, if he decided, but he didn't want to go out there. He wanted to stay around here. [traffic noise] So there was um—PBI was hiring a lot then.

Terry: In Sturgeon Bay.

Louise: In Sturgeon Bay. So that's where we ended. We were down here in 1952 and—and we've—our youngest daughter was born—she's a native—the other three were born up in Iron Mountain. So we had—he worked at PBI until he retired in '81.

Terry: And did you do any work?

Louise: I worked at Doorco. [probably Doorco Automatic Doors] Until '81. I had been roller skating, and I wanted to learn how to turn while I was roller skating, so I did it in my basement and I fell and broke both my wrists. And so after that I quit working. [laughs] But then he retired, too. We were ready to retire. And I have all my children living in Sturgeon Bay—all four of them. Which works out real fine.

Terry: How do you think your military service had impact on your life?

Louise: *Oh.* There were times when I was in the military and I wondered, "What the hell did I get into," you know. But I wouldn't give it up for anything.

It was a great experience—I got good friends, you know, that I still write to—and well, when the Women’s Memorial opened up, we four of us met in Washington, and we went through all that business, and we went again in ’99 I think. And now my kids are going to take me this fall, I *think*—to see the World War II Memorial—they want to make sure I see that. They said, “Dad didn’t get to see it,” but she said—they said—“you would.” And uh, I get all the benefits. I go up to Iron Mountain to the VA. I get all my medication. I have a primary doctor there. So I go every six months and get a whole physical.

Terry: Is there anything else you’d like to mention about your service time? That you can think of?

Louise: I don’t know—it was pretty routine mostly. It was a lot of—a lot of good friends. Civilian ones, too—you know, they were girls that worked with us. And it was—a lot of the girls were from down south, and most of us were from up north, and it was sort of a little battle going on, about Dixie and all this, you know. But it was all in fun, really. But it was—I wouldn’t give it up—I mean, it was something I always remember.

Terry: And what was your final rank when you got out of the—

Louise: I was still the T-4 with three stripes.

Terry: All right. I think that’s pretty much it. I don’t have anything else.

[End of Interview]