

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
RUTH POTIER.
Storekeeper, U.S. Navy WAVES, World War II.

2007

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Potier, Ruth, (1922-). Oral History Interview, 2007.

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

Ruth Potier, a Sturgeon Bay, Wis. native, discusses her service as a storekeeper second class with the United States Navy WAVES [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service] during World War II. Potier tells of entering the service in 1943, and cites wanting to “get out a little bit” as her reason for joining the Navy; she also had several siblings in the service at the same time. Because her brothers were already overseas, she chose not to sign up for overseas duty in order to alleviate some worry from her mother. Potier discusses reporting to Hunters College (New York) in March of 1943, completing basic training there, and then being transferred to Burdett Business College in Boston (Massachusetts) to attend storekeeper school. Potier describes marching in a parade in New York City, as well as sightseeing in both New York and in Boston. After graduating in July of 1943 from business school, Potier tells she was then transferred to the Naval Air Technical Training Center in Millington (Tennessee.) Potier describes her work there in the dispersing office, and her transfer to the travel office where she was responsible for routing troops finished with training, and making sure all of their tickets were dispersed. She details the living conditions on base, and says there was no entertainment for the enlisted personnel on base. Potier describes writing to a soldier injured during the attack on Pearl Harbor, and their eventual marriage in January of 1945 while she was home on leave. She says she needed special permission to wear a wedding dress because she was not allowed to be out of uniform for any reason. Potier talks of her homecoming in July of 1945 after Germany’s surrender, and describes the VJ-Day celebrations at home when Japan finally surrendered. Portier returned to Sturgeon Bay and she and her husband, who was declared 100% disabled due to his Pearl Harbor injuries, raised six children.

Biographical Sketch

Ruth Potier, (1922-) a Sturgeon Bay, Wis. native, served as a Storekeeper Second Class with the United States Navy Waves during World War II. After her discharge, she returned to Sturgeon Bay where she and her husband raised six children.

Interviewed by Terry MacDonald, 2007.

Transcribed by Cathy Cox, Wisconsin Court Reporter, 2007.

Transcription edited by Brooke E. Perry Hoesli, WVM staff, 2008.

Interview Transcript

Terry: This is an interview with Ruth Potier, who served with the United States Navy Waves during World War II. The interview is being conducted at approximately 2 p.m. at the following address of 236 North Jennings Avenue, Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, on the following date of March 31, 2007, and the interviewer is Terry MacDonald.

Ruth, could you give us a little bit of background information regarding your life circumstances before you went into the military? When you born, where you were born?

Potier: I was born January 30th, 1922, in Casco, Wisconsin. From there we moved to Algoma, and from Algoma we moved here when I was in the 4th grade. And, uh, went to Sturgeon Bay High School, and the small business college here in Sturgeon Bay, also. And then I worked at Plex Dairy until I went into the service.

Terry: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

Potier: Yes, I have--my oldest brother was Delly, and my next brother was Daw, he was in the Army. And my sister Marion, married to Bernard Leanall. And then there was Tony, and he was in the service in the Navy. And I had a brother Bill that was in the service and he was in the Navy. And then I was in the Navy and then my brother Joe, a younger brother, later went into the Air Force.

Terry: Now, were your older brothers, were they in all at the same time during World War II?

Potier: Not brother Joe. The older brothers were.

Terry: Now, when you graduated from high school and then college, business school, what made you join the military?

Potier: (laughs) Well, I just felt it would be kind of nice to get out a little bit and see the world, and that's-- and a girlfriend of mine, we decided we'd go together.

Terry: What did your parents think of it, knowing that they already had some--?

Potier: My mother felt kind of bad because she did have sons in the service already. And so then when they did allow girls to sign up to go overseas, then I decided not, I thought my parents had enough to worry about.

Terry: So who was the other young lady that went into the service with you at the same time?

Potier: She didn't go in.

Terry: Oh, she didn't go in.

Potier: She backed out at the last minute.

Terry: So you ended up going by yourself!

Potier: So I went in alone, yes.

Terry: And how old were you?

Potier: Oh, let me see. Well, I was working at Plex(??), and I guess I must have been around 20.

Terry: I mean, did you have to have your parents' signature to go in?

Potier: No.

Terry: You didn't. Okay.

Potier: No, uh uh.

Terry: Did you join the Navy because you had other brothers in the Navy? Is that what the main reason [was for] the Navy?

Potier: It just seemed like the Navy appealed to me.

Terry: And so when you went in, where did you have to go for training?

Potier: Uh, we left Chicago and went to Hunter College in New York City, the Bronx. And that's where we had our boot training.

Terry: What kind of training did that consist of?

Potier: Well, that's where we got our shots, and all the Navy lingo, you know, and we had to learn all about the Navy, and that's where we were trained to march.

Terry: What did you think of that?

Potier: I liked the platoon marching. In fact, one of the highlights of it was--La Guardia was mayor at the time, and they had this big parade in New York and we had to march in that parade. And that, that was fun.

Terry: Yeah.

Potier: Uh huh.

Terry: And how long did that training last?

Potier: Well, let me see here. I um—we reported to Hunter College, March 3rd of 1943, and then--we left Hunter College on April of that year, for Boston storekeeper's school. Burdett Business College in Boston.

Terry: Now, when you were at Hunter's College, were most of the ladies your age, (clock chimes) roughly all the same age, or were there quite a variety of ages?

Potier: I would say they're pretty much the same age. In fact, um, the train from Chicago to New York-- it was a large troop train, and one of the girls going past my area saw me and she said she thought I looked like a nice friendly girl and could we stay together. (chuckle) And she was from Minnesota. And we did, we stayed together through boot camp and through Hunter, and through Business College.

Terry: Ok. Now, why did they send you to Business College? What was the reason behind that?

Potier: Well, you--I think they took sort of your aptitude and what you are most likely aptitude, apt for, you know?

Terry: And it was like a storekeeper type thing?

Potier: Well, it was the Burdett Business College and we went for storekeeper school. Which was sort of bookkeeping and things like that. Yeah.

Terry: And how long did that last, roughly?

Potier: Well uh, that was, uh, (chuckle) let me see, uh, July 8th and we graduated from that school. And while I was there, I got a bad case of tonsillitis and I had to go to the sick bay for a couple of days. But I did end up graduating the top of my class.

Terry: Can you tell me a little bit--what was it like coming from a small community like Sturgeon Bay going into the big city like New York and Boston?

Potier: Well, yeah, that was big, but uh, we did have a little liberty and a group of us would go down into New York City to see some of the sights. And then Boston also, you know, we--a group, we went out to Revere Beach I remember that. But that was such an old building and the, ahh, it was such a fire hazard. We had so many fire drills, even in the middle of the night and everything, you know. But I enjoyed it there.

Terry: So when you came out of the business school then, did you have a ranking? Did they give you any ranking?

Potier: A Storekeeper First Class, I believe it was. I think so. And then we were allowed to go home on leave, and for a few days. And then, on July 18th of 1943 reported to NATTC, (unintelligible) Naval Air Technical Training Center in Millington, Tennessee just outside of Memphis. And we arrived there on the train in the middle of the night and it was just sweltering. (laughs) And so, anyway, that's where I spent the rest of my Navy days.

Terry: In Tennessee at a naval base.

Potier: Uh huh.

Terry: What kind of job duties did you have down there?

Potier: I started in the dispersing office, and that was figuring out the pay and paying the men, and then these students that were there for their schooling at the training center, we'd have to pay them. And then the paymaster would take some of us girls up to the hospital and pay the people up there, even the prisoners. And shortly after I got to Millington, after being home on leave, I got there and I broke out in some kind of a rash, sort of. I went to sick bay, and this young ensign (chuckles), well anyway, he thought it was chicken pox. And I said, "Oh, I don't think its chicken pox. I feel so good." He said, "Lady, the Navy doesn't pay *you* for thinkin'." I learned from then on to keep my mouth shut.

(both laugh)

Terry: So can you describe what it was like at that navy base, as far as your living conditions?

Potier: They were big wooden barracks and just rows of bunks, you know, bunk beds, and um, although I--and it was very warm. A lot of the girls had trouble after we got there with their feet, you know, warm, and doing a lot of walking and everything.

Terry: Oh, with no air conditioning at that time, it was just the fans and that was about it for movement.

Potier: I don't even remember having fans. (laughs)

Terry: How was the food when you were in?

Potier: At Millington?

Terry: Uh huh.

Potier: Oh, there it was alright. That I didn't have any complaints about. And then, from, uh, I transferred from dispersing office into the travel office. And that's where we used to route all the boys that were leaving who had finished training, and they were being sent on to other places, and we would figure their routes. And then I would take the truck and go into Memphis to the different ticket offices, railroad ticket offices, and pick up their tickets and bring them back to the base.

Terry: Again, what kind of training base was this – air?

Potier: Naval Air Technical Training Center. And the naval air station was across the road from this one.

Terry: Did you meet any, did you make any acquaintances, friends there, that you kept track of and such?

Potier: Oh, yes, I still hear from some of them. Gradually it's fewer and fewer. But um, we were allowed--we were not to travel more than fifty miles from the base when we were on liberty, you know? But this one time, this good friend of mine, whose father was a doctor in Tutwiler, Mississippi, and we decided to hitchhike on the weekend down to their house. And luckily a group of sailors, there were two of them in a car, came and picked us up, and they were going right that way so they took us right to her front door (laughs).

Terry: Oh that was a lucky one, huh?

Potier: And picked us up and took us back!

Terry: So what kind of entertainment did you have at the base? Or in the community around it?

Potier: I don't remember that we had that much entertainment really. We used to go into Memphis and we could do things in there, you know. Um hmm. I had lots of good friends down there, and we enjoyed it.

Terry: How long did you stay in the Navy then?

Potier: I believe it was about two and a half years.

Terry: And the whole time was down in Tennessee?

Potier: The most of it.

Terry: What happened when you got discharged, then?

Potier: Well, huh, I started writing to my now, and then, husband. His um--my brother's sister was married--my brother's wife was his sister. And um, she suggested I write to him. So I started writing to him, and, um—

Terry: Was he in the military?

Potier: He was in the Navy. He was at Pearl Harbor at the time of the attack. He was on the USS Argonne, a Submarine Tender. So we started writing and got to where I finally came home on leave. January 11, 1945 we were married.

Terry: He happened to be home on leave?

Potier: He was discharged. He had gotten a medical discharge and he was home. And so--I had to get a permission from my commanding officer to wear a wedding dress. At that time you were not to be out of uniform at any time.

Terry: And that time too, then did you have to get out of the Navy?

Potier: No, I had to go back after I was married. And then, after the first surrender, Germany surrendered, they allowed married Navy, married Waves, to request a discharge. And so that's when I requested the discharge. And I came home, uh when was it--July 12th of '45.

Terry: When you were home on leave, what did the people think in town? What was their response to you, when you came home?

Potier: I would say favorable. And I was happy to be home when the Japanese surrendered, and I could see what was going on here. It was just so wonderful. Everybody out in the streets and celebrating.

Terry: So when you and your husband got married in January and then he got out—your husband was from Sturgeon Bay too, then?

Potier: Yes, he was.

Terry: Did you use any of your GI Bill benefits when you got out?

Potier: No, I didn't.

Terry: Did your husband have a chance to use any of them?

Potier: Oh, yes. He was declared 100% disabled, and so he started working for Mark Schlise, which was my uncle also, and it was under some kind of a veteran's program. So that's where he did work, some time there, and then he left there and went to work at the Southern Door Schools.

Terry: Now what was your final rank when you finally did get discharged?

Potier: Storekeeper Second Class.

Terry: Did you end up having a family here in Sturgeon Bay?

Potier: Oh, yes. We have, we had six children. Three boys and three girls. So um--

Terry: What did they think after they found out that you served in the Navy? What was their reaction?

Potier: Well, I don't know. They didn't have much of a reaction. (laughs)

Terry: Not only had you met quite a few people, did you have any reunions or gatherings that you went to, with people you served?

Potier: No. Some of my friends came up, Wave friends, came up to see me after they were out of the service also. But other than that I've just kept in touch, usually at Christmas, or I have one friend out in Oklahoma that calls me every so often.

Terry: Can you tell us how did you feel about serving in the military?

Potier: Well, I enjoyed it, I really did. And I thought it was fine.

Terry: Overall did it have any impact on you later on in life or anything? The war probably impacted your husband being disabled and things had an impact, but overall you said you enjoyed serving in the military and it was quite an experience? (clock chiming)

Ruth: I thought it was a very good experience. And I made a lot of nice friends.

Terry: Now when you were working down there, was it pretty much like an 8 hour shift to work or were you working more?

Potier: No, I'd say we pretty much worked a day shift, you know. And I used to go to Mass most every morning down there. And then the priest asked me one time if I would mind standing up for a wedding. And that was a couple that, he was from Green Bay. (laughs)

Terry: Wow! That was unusual.

Potier: Yeah. So (laughter), uh huh, I got to stand up for a wedding.

Terry: Did anything else happen while you were in the military that really stood out that you can think of right off hand?

Potier: Well, while we were stationed at Millington, like I said, we did go—we went over to Tutwiler, Mississippi and Hot Springs, Arkansas, and tried to see as much of the surrounding area as we could, you know. And then they had, the Peabody Hotel had a room that they reserved for the military to come and use on their free time. So that was nice.

Terry: Did the government do any entertainment? I know being stateside--overseas they did USO shows and things like that. Did anything like that come into that area down there?

Potier: No. None that I remember.

Terry: Were they training mostly air pilots or technical people to work on aircraft and things like that?

Potier: That's right.

(clock begins chiming)

Terry: Ruth, when you got out of the military, did you join any veteran's organizations?

Potier: No, I did not. I was busy raising a family. Six children! (laughs)

Terry: And your husband was a disabled veteran. Was he able to use his medical benefits while he--.

Potier: Yes.

Terry: He was. And have you used any of the medical benefits available to you at all?

Potier: Not for myself, no.

Terry: Your husband, was he able to use any of the GI Bill for education or anything?

Potier: Just this work for Mark Schlise, that was under the GI Bill.

Terry: Ok.

Potier: Are we going—ok—put it off?

[End of Interview]