

Wisconsin Veteran's Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

MARY STROBE

Communications Ensign, WAVES, US Navy, World War II

2011

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Strobe, Mary. (1919-). Oral History Interview, 2011.

Master Copy: 1 .WAV (ca. 35 min.)

User Copy: 1 audio cassette (ca. 35 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract:

Mary Strobe born in 1918 in Battle Creek, Michigan, served in the WAVES as a coder and decoder for Navy communications during World War II. Her father was enlisted in the US Military, and after World War I came to an end, she and her family moved to Antigo, Wisconsin. Strobe touches upon what it was like growing up in the early twentieth century and then leads right into her experience in college. She graduated from Lawrence University and then decided to attend Katherine Gibbs School, a graduate school for secretaries. Once she completed graduate school, Strobe went on to Boston, Massachusetts to work in an investment firm.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the opportunity to for women to become involved in the US Military effort presented itself. Strobe elected to enlist with the WAVES in 1943 and started out as a mid-shipman. Eight weeks of training at Smith College in North Hampton, Massachusetts passed, and Mary was sent to Mount Holyoke in Massachusetts to begin communications school. Her first assignment sent her to a Navy headquarters in Seattle, where she decoded and coded secret messages to and from Alaska. While discussing her experience in the WAVES, Strobe mentioned delivering top secret messages, spending time play golf and participating in recreational activities, and working with the enlisted men. Toward the end of the war, Mary worked on decommissioning aircraft carriers in Seattle. Once the war was over, she was discharged and returned home to Appleton, Wisconsin, where she got a job working in the dean's office of a university. Toward the end of the interview, she talks about marrying her husband and having a family.

Biographical Sketch:

Born in May of 1918 in Battle Creek, Michigan, the narrator, a twin, grew up with a father who served in the US Military. Her family moved to Antigo, Wisconsin after World War I came to an end. Strobe attended college at Lawrence University and then went on to study secretarial work at Katherine Gibbs School as a graduate student. After completing graduate school, Mary went to Boston, Massachusetts to work in an investment firm. In 1943, she enlisted with the WAVES and began mid-shipmen training at Smith College in North Hampton, Massachusetts. She continued on to Mount Holyoke in Massachusetts to complete communications school. Her first assignment was to decode and code messages for the Navy in Seattle, Washington. Toward the end of the war, she decommissioned air craft carriers in Seattle. After the war, Strobe was

discharged from the Navy and returned to Appleton, Wisconsin where she worked in a dean's office as a secretary. Strobe married and had children after her military service.

Interviewed by Molly Graham, 2011.
Transcribed by Alison Hyde, 2014.
Edited and Abstracted by Kylee Sekosky, 2014.

Interview Transcript:

- Graham: Okay. So here's the introduction: This is an interview with Mary Strobe. Am I saying that—?
- Strobe: “Stro-bee”.
- Graham: “Stro-bee”. Who served with the WAVES [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services] Division of the U.S. Navy that consisted entirely of women during World War II. This interview is being conducted at the Veterans Museum at Thirty West Mifflin Street in Madison, Wisconsin on Tuesday, November 29, 2011. The interviewer is Molly Graham, the Oral Historian for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. Mary, just to make sure that this all sounds okay, and I like to start off my interviews by asking my interviewee to describe themselves. [Laughs]
- Strobe: I'm a ninety-three year old, and I was in the WAVES in Massachusetts. And my first assignment was at Smith College where we were mid-shipmen. And we went through a—probably about eight weeks, I think, session, and then I went to Mount Holyoke and communications school.
- Graham: Was that part of basic training?
- Strobe: Mm-hm. Is this what you want?
- Graham: Yeah. I want it all, but I think maybe we should start at the very beginning.
- Strobe: Oh.
- Graham: Maybe tell me about when and where you were born.
- Strobe: Oh, [Both laugh] well I was born in Battle Creek, Michigan, because my father was stationed there in the Army and that was in, ah, May 13, 1918. I had a twin sister, so there were two of us in Battle Creek.
- Graham: What are some of your early memories from Battle Creek and growing up?
- Strobe: Well we were then—after the war, we were stationed—oh not stationed—in Antigo, Wisconsin, and I was there probably when I was about two. And, ah, what do I remember? [Laughs] What I remember is looking down to the south and thinking that was the jungle where the monkeys were [laughs].
- Graham: In the United States?

Strobe: Sure! That was my perception of the size of the country.

[Both laugh]

Strobe: We had a very good time as young people. And I can remember, ah, there were—a lot a the transportation was by horses, and they pulled some wagons with a lot of peas on them that were going to be shelled and canned. And we'd follow them and grab the pea vines off the wagon [laughs]. And we'd spend a lot of time in the sand pile.

Graham: Was it just you and your twin sister?

Strobe: Yes.

Graham: And what did your dad tell you about his experience in the service?

Strobe: Oh he didn't tell me very much.

Graham: Was—

Strobe: He never left the country. And—so I don't what he was—don't know much about that.

Graham: Was his involvement one of the reasons you enlisted?

Strobe: Well coulda been [laughs].

Graham: What was going on in your life before you enlisted? Do you remember?

Strobe: Oh sure. I was graduated from Lawrence University and then I went to Katherine Gibbs School, which was a graduate school for secretaries. And I finished that, and then I was—worked for an investment firm in Boston. And then, of course, the war came along and there was the opportunity to sign up for—for the WAVES, which sounded very interesting. And, ah, so I was accepted. As I said, I went to Smith College in North Hampton, Massachusetts and then to Mount Holyoke, also in Massachusetts. After that I was assigned to the headquarters of Seattle. See, what was it called? Ah, I can't seem to remember that, and so I was stationed there as an ensign.

Graham: And for those who don't know, can you describe what that is?

Strobe: Oh that's—that's—what is the word? Anyway, it's the first—oh dear—

[Both laugh]

Strobe: I just can't think of it. It's not a—I don't know. Well it's an officer, so that's the first officer you become when you—after you, gain that stage. And then, ah, let's see I'm in Seattle now.

Graham: Well we can—

Strobe: And we did—

Graham: Go ahead.

Strobe: As I said I was in communications, and we coded and decoded messages mostly from Alaska.

Graham: What kind of messages?

Strobe: Well, military messages.

Graham: Who were you relaying from and then to?

Strobe: It was going from Alaska to—to the headquarters at the Seattle.

Graham: What were some of the examples of the messages?

Strobe: Oh, I don't remember those. They were secret. [Both laugh]

Graham: Oh. I have a note here that on Christmas Eve one year, you and another ensign delivered a top-secret message. Could you talk a little bit about that without revealing too much?

Strobe: Yes. On Christmas Eve, in fact it was about midnight—

Graham: What year was this?

Strobe: That must have been 1944. We were set—we had to go to one of the aircraft carriers that was docked there in Seattle and deliver a top secret message by hand. So we came to the ship and had to ask permission to come aboard, and we delivered it to one of the officers. So that was kind of exciting.

Graham: Backing up a little bit, what were some of the options for women, um, during the war years? What else could you have done besides get involved in WAVES?

Strobe: Well there were the nurses, but, of course, I wasn't a nurse so I couldn't do that. And then there was, I suppose, ones who helped out with the—oh [laughs]

Graham: Can you tell me why WAVES?

Strobe: Why it's called WAVES?

Graham: Why that was your choice?

Strobe: Oh, because the Navy appealed to me.

Graham: Why was that?

Strobe: Oh, I don't know, on the seas. I like to sail.

Graham: How did your family feel when you told 'em you were going to enlist in WAVES?

Strobe: Oh, I'm sure they approved.

Graham: Did your sister get involved at all?

Strobe: No, she didn't.

Graham: What do you think you would have done if Pearl Harbor didn't happen, and this wasn't something you participated in?

Strobe: Oh, I guess I would just stay in my profession in Boston as a secretary.

Graham: What was people's reaction when you told them you were a member of WAVES?

Strobe: Oh, I can't recall any [laughs]. I don't know that I told them.

Graham: Can you talk to me about your training or your boot camp experience? How was it different for women? What was the typical day like?

Strobe: I don't know if it was much different for women. We learned the communications, and we marched in formation.

Graham: And how long were you there for? You said eight weeks?

Strobe: Well I'm kinda guessing at that. I think it was—

Graham: First at Smith, then Mount Holyoke, and then you were assigned to Seattle.

Strobe: Mm-hm.

Graham: What do you remember about this time period?

Strobe: Well we had different shifts, which went around the clock from eight to four, four to midnight, and midnight to eight in the morning. So we had time off during the day, and we'd go skiing in the mountains, and I played golf. So it was a great opportunity to enjoy the sports there, and for a while we stayed in a dormitory that wasn't being used. It was with all our WAVE friends, so that was fun, too.

Graham: Was it the bombing of Pearl Harbor that, um, inspired you to get involved in this way?

Strobe: I think so.

Graham: And what do you remember about that day, or finding out?

Strobe: Well, I was at a hockey game when they announced it. So it was very exciting. Well, we felt kinda worried about things, 'course. That's about it I guess.

Graham: Then what steps did you take—I guess what happened between finding out and then boot camp or training?

Strobe: Yeah. Well then I applied for—to the Navy and was accepted, and so then we went to Smith College.

Graham: Was it that straightforward, because I know that women weren't typically involved in this way in wars previously.

Strobe: Oh it was straightforward, 'cause they were all women who were interested in doing that.

Graham: For someone who doesn't know, could you describe what WAVES was or what it meant to be a member?

Strobe: It was mostly to kinda take the place of the men in the Navy, so we did many of their jobs.

Graham: Such as?

Strobe: Well, 'course I was specific with the communications, so I don't know much about the rest of it.

Graham: And then what were your particular responsibilities kinda day-to-day?

Strobe: Well it was just the coding and decoding.

Graham: Can you explain the saying I heard when I was reading about this, that for each woman who enlisted, that meant a man was sent to the frontlines?

Strobe: Where'd you read that? [Laughs]

Graham: I think I heard it in an interview, that the men were a little skeptical of the women involved, because it meant that sort of those duties taken care of, and that they would be sent to the frontlines, but I might have that wrong.

Strobe: Oh, yeah I don't know that.

Strobe: Okay. How did the enlisted men treat you?

Strobe: Well, very fine, 'course we were their bosses.

Graham: Oh yeah? Talk to me about that—

Strobe: Well 'cause we were officers, and they were enlisted.

Graham: What was that dynamic like?

Strobe: Oh, that was great. They were very—that didn't—that seemed to suit them okay.

Graham: And did you stay in touch with your family while you were in Seattle?

Strobe: Oh, somewhat. My twin sister was on Cape Cod, and my parents were in Appleton, Wisconsin.

Graham: What else was going on in the world at this time?

Strobe: Well, of course the European front with the invasions. Hitler doing his [long pause] getting rid of the Aryan population, and then there was the Pacific front. So a lot of the men lost their lives, 'cause at first it was very—the tide of war was with Japanese but as it turned then—then the Navy—well they finally won the war so.

Graham: Do you remember when WAVES began to allow African American women in, in that change?

Strobe: No, I don't remember any African women. I wonder if there were any?

Graham: Can you tell me about the WAVES uniform?

Strobe: Yeah, you know, I just got rid of those last year.

Graham: What was that like?

Strobe: Oh, it was a nice very flattering uniform. We enjoyed wearing them. We had, ah, both a dress uniform in white and then the navy blue and we even had something for more recreation, seersucker, and we were allowed to wear civilian clothes when we were off-duty.

Graham: What did you do for fun when you were off-duty in Seattle?

Strobe: I played golf [laughs]. We went on bike trips. We did a lot of biking.

Graham: Was this you and the other women?

Strobe: Yes. Well some of the men, too, 'cause they were on our watches. They did communications also.

Graham: And what was your relationship like with the other women in the unit?

Strobe: Oh, very cordial. We enjoyed each other.

Graham: Have you stayed in touch?

Strobe: For a long time. Not so much anymore. [Laughs] Kinda dies out, but for a long time we did.

Graham: And what kind of woman was a WAVES woman?

Strobe: [Long pause] Well, they had to have a certain scholarship. I mean, ah, they had to be, ah, intelligent [laughs] and had to fit in with other people.

Graham: Do you remember the WAVES song?

Strobe: Yeah, I think so. You know, I have a—I was looking for it before I came. I have a songbook from the WAVES.

Graham: Oh yeah?

Strobe: I'll look for it some more and send it to you if I find it. Yeah 'cause they were a lot of songs, yeah.

Graham: And any, just, anecdotes or memories that stand out to you from that time period?

Strobe: Mm, let's see. I suppose I should mention before that we'd hike up to Mount Rainier.

Graham: Where's that?

Strobe: Outside of Seattle, and it was foggy there in the spring when we first went there. So, it was a couple months before I ever saw Mount Rainier. I remember the day the clouds parted and there's this huge strawberry looking [laughs] mountain. It was just beautiful.

Graham: Was this the spring of 1942?

Strobe: '43.

Graham: Okay. So just so I'm clear on the timeline, um, Pearl Harbor happens in 1941. And then what was 1942 like for you? How long were you--

Strobe: I didn't, ah, I didn't go into it right away. It was 1943.

Graham: Okay. What surprised you about your experience? Something you didn't expect?

Strobe: Hm-mm, [Long pause] what could that be? [Long pause] I can't think of anything [laughs].

Graham: That's okay. What advice would give someone, maybe a female, who's choosing to enter the service today?

Strobe: Oh, go for it. It was very interesting and really lots of fun, and you felt like you were contributing.

Graham: Where were you and what were you doing when the war started to wind down?

Strobe: Oh, I was in Seattle and so my new job came—we decommissioned the ships, so that's what we were doing instead of coding and decoding.

Graham: And what does that mean?

Strobe: Well, we were decommissioning, and they were commissioned to be aircraft carriers, is what in Seattle, and they were, ah, getting rid of them.

Graham: So, what was happening once the war started to wind down? Do you remember what was going on in the different parts of the world?

Strobe: Well. [Long pause] Well let's see. [Long pause] Trying to see how to express it. Well, people were going back to their civilian jobs, and, um, there was much rejoicing 'course, 'cause the war was over.

Graham: And what did that mean for you when the war was over? Do you know what you're going to do next?

Strobe: Well I—yes, I went back to Appleton and worked there in a graduate school in the dean's office.

Graham: What was coming home like? Were you disappointed that this experience was over, or were you ready for the next step?

Strobe: Oh kind of [laughs]. But I was ready, yeah.

Graham: Then talk to me about life after World War II.

Strobe: Well, we were back doing our--what we would have been doing. As I said, I went back to working in the dean's office.

Graham: Did you marry?

Strobe: Yeah. Yes, while I was there, while I was skiing, and I met my future husband skiing. Besides, I already knew him. We went to high school together.

Graham: Oh yeah? And did you just stay in touch over the years?

Strobe: No, because he went to a different school, and I went to Lawrence. He went to UW [University of Wisconsin], but then we met on a ski trip.

Graham: When was this?

Strobe: That was in 1946.

Graham: So after the war?

Strobe: Yeah. So then—we went on a lot ski trips and got married.

Graham: Did any of your military or WAVES experience kind of influence or inform any parts of the rest of your life?

Strobe: That's a hard question.

Graham: Sometimes people talk about the discipline they learned, and they apply it to the rest of their life. Or, I'm thinking about, you know, you're a part of this first wave of women being involved in the military, and then, um, did that mean you felt like you could participate in other aspects of society that women were previously or traditionally excluded from?

Strobe: Oh I don't think so [laughs]. Sorry.

Graham: [Laughs] That's okay. Then talk about being active in Veterans groups after the war.

Strobe: No I wasn't.

Graham: But you did stay in touch with some of the women you served with?

Strobe: Yeah, oh yes.

Graham: And how do you feel about your military experience? You seem pretty positive about it.

Strobe: Oh very, very positive, yes. It was not only enjoyable, but it felt like you were accomplishing something.

Graham: How are you different, because you participated in this way?

Strobe: [Laughs] I don't think I'm any different.

Graham: Did you have children?

Strobe: Yes.

Graham: And grandchildren.

Strobe: Yes, and great-grandchildren.

Graham: Oh my goodness. What have you told them about your World War II experience?

Strobe: Nothing.

Graham: Really?

Strobe: No [laughs].

Graham: Even your children?

Strobe: Oh, not much. Their father was a B-17 pilot, so his experiences were a lot more important [laughs].

Graham: What did you learn about World War II after it ended that you weren't really aware of while you were serving, in thinking about the Holocaust, and labor camps, and things that kind of took us a while to get our head around?

Strobe: Yeah. Well, about the invasions, and all that was going on with the Holocaust. Yeah, those things we didn't know too much about.

Graham: And how did you find out about them?

Strobe: Oh after the war, because it became quite public.

Graham: What would you want people who might listen to this interview to know about?

Strobe: Well, let's see. What would they know about? Well, know about the WAVES. What the WAVES were doing, how they helped out, 'cause I don't think that's generally really known. 'Cause, today if you tell 'em you were in the WAVES, they say, "What's that?" They don't even know what it is, so you have to explain to them.

Graham: And what do you say to them?

Strobe: I say that we were part of the Navy and took the place of the men who went off to war and what our jobs were.

Graham: Would you ever want to re-enlist, afterwards?

Strobe: I think I would.

Graham: And why—why was it important, or why did you agree to participate in doing an oral history interview? You know, this will last a long time.

Strobe: Well, I want to—if they were interested in it, I would be happy to do it.

Graham: So, any other memories or stories you'd like to share?

Strobe: It was so long ago [both laugh]. Let's see [long pause]. Oh, I can't think of anything. I'm not a very good person to interview.

Graham: No, you've been great. So, am I missing anything, 'cause I think I've gotten to the end of my questions?

Strobe: I don't think you [laughs] have. No, you've done very well.

Graham: All right.

Strobe: I'm trying to think of something. Well, I can't think of anything.

Graham: That's okay. Well, if something comes to you just let me know.

Strobe: Okay.

Graham: In the meantime, we'll shut this off.

Strobe: Yeah.

[END OF INTERVIEW]