

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

**ETHYL OLSON**

Radio Operator, United States Navy WAVES, World War II

2005

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**Olson, Ethyl.** Oral History Interview, 2005.

*Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.*

### **Abstract**

Ethyl Olson, a Waukegan, Illinois native, discusses her World War II service with the United States Navy WAVES. After graduating high school, Olson tells that she worked for Johns Manville Company until she decided to enter the WAVES after her boyfriend was killed in Pearl Harbor while serving aboard the USS Oklahoma. Olson describes her basic training as a member of the first class to go through boot camp at Hunter College (New York). She explains attending radio school in Madison (Wisconsin) and her transfer to a radio shack on Treasure Island (California) where she was responsible for listening to distress signals in Morse code. Olson describes spending her liberty time in San Francisco and her eventual transfer to Wahiawa Radio Station in Oahu, Hawaii, the main communication station for calls coming from the Pacific to the U.S. She describes the secrecy of the work of the station; explaining that all work was done underground in the middle of a pineapple field. Olson tells that the military in Hawaii were not prepared for all the women at the Station, especially regarding menstrual supplies. At the end of the war, Olson tells of the celebrations that took place at the Radio Station before anyone else knew the war had ended. Olson was subsequently reassigned to Great Lakes Naval Station (Illinois). She explains that after her discharge she attended Lake Forest College on the GI Bill where she met her husband, eventually settling down and raising a family. Olson tells of her membership in the VFW and that she kept in contact with people she met in the war through the newspaper, *The Scuttlebutt*.

### **Biographical Sketch**

Ethyl Olson, a Waukegan, Illinois native served during World War II with the Navy WAVES. She discusses her service in several radio stations in California and Hawaii. She attended Lake Forest College on the GI Bill after the war, and settled in Sturgeon Bay (Wisconsin) where she raised a family.

Interviewed by Terry MacDonald, 2005

Transcribed by Cathy Cox, 2007.

Transcription edited by Brooke E. Perry Hoesli, 2008.

## Interview Transcript

MacDonald: This is an interview with Ethyl Olson who served with the United States Navy WAVES during World War II. The interview is being conducted at 10:00 am [REDACTED] Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, on the following date of November 18, 2005, and the interviewer is Terry MacDonald.

Ethyl can you give us a brief description of your life before you entered the military?

Olson: Well, it wasn't too exciting in those days, I guess. I had graduated from high school and was working at Johns Manville plant in Waukegan.

MacDonald: Is that where you were born, and raised?

Olson: I was born in Waukegan, Illinois, yes.

MacDonald: And did you have any other family members?

Olson: I had one sister. Graduated from high school in 1940, and then I went to work at Johns Manville that I mentioned.

MacDonald: And what did you do at Johns Manville?

Olson: I was a clerk in the shipping department.

MacDonald: And what did they make?

Olson: Uh, building materials. I guess they still do.

MacDonald: And what made you decide to enter the military?

Olson: Well, at the time when World War I broke out, I was dating my neighbor boy—

MacDonald: World War II, right?

Olson: World War II, exactly, yeah. [both laugh] Uh—and he was aboard the Oklahoma and was killed at Pearl Harbor. So when they opened the service up to women, you know, the WAVES, then I decided to enlist.

MacDonald: Did you enlist with anybody else or did you go by yourself?

Olson: I went by myself. I was 19 at the time and you had to be 20, so I had to wait about 5 or 6 months I guess before they would take me in.

MacDonald: And why did you join the Navy?

Olson: I guess because *he* had been in the Navy?

MacDonald: And where did they send you, then, for boot camp—or training, initial training.

Olson: Oh, I was in the first boot camp they had. And that was at Hunter College in New York City.

MacDonald: Can you describe what took place at the very first boot camp?

Olson: Uh—[laughs a little]—well we lived in high rise apartments and they had a lot of stairs you had to run up and down all the time. And I remember a lot of marching. We had to march to everything, and—

MacDonald: Were they really strict with you?

Olson: Oh, yeah. Yeah. They were. But—um you had to learn Navy etiquette and that type of stuff. Did have one day of mess duty, but that was all.

MacDonald: And how long was that training?

Olson: That was for four weeks. And we had one liberty in that four weeks and it was from 12 o'clock noon till 6 o'clock. And they always said, "You have to always salute your officers." Well, when we went on liberty, I guess there were—"When in doubt, salute" is what they said—so I guess there were a lot of doormen that were being saluted by WAVES in New York City.

[both laugh]

MacDonald: Did they do a lot of physical training for you? The marching was physical, of course, but—

Olson: We had like PE class, you know—calisthenics and that type of thing.

MacDonald: So what happened then when you graduated out of —from—boot camp?

Olson: I went to radio school—in Madison, Wisconsin. That was for sixteen weeks. And we learned Morse code and that type of stuff.

MacDonald: Now was that the same radio school that the men sailors went through [for] the same type of thing?

Olson: Uh, I don't think they were there. It was the same *type* of school, but um—there were none in our classes, they were all the women.

MacDonald: And where did you live at Madison them—what type of living quarters did you have there?

Olson: We lived in a dorm, and two to a room.

MacDonald: Now [were] there a lot of military people at Madison at that time?

Olson: Uh, yeah, there were quite a few I guess. But uh, you really didn't get to mingle with students that much, you know, we're kind of off to the side.

MacDonald: Did you have to wear a uniform all—

Olson: Oh yeah. Yeah

MacDonald: And when you got done with radio school, what happened?

Olson: Uh, then I went to San Francisco and I was on Treasure Island. That's where I did most of my radio work.

MacDonald: Can you describe to us what it was like at Treasure Island as far as—what [were] your living conditions like?

Olson: Well, when we first go there, uh, we had a – they apparently—those buildings were used for the World's Fair that they had had, and so we lived in a huge dorm. I think there must have been 25, 30 in one room. And um, then later on, they moved us into another building and there were about 6 in a room. And they were usually the people that worked a watch together. You know, in the radio shack.

MacDonald: Now—you had to do a watch in the radio shack. Well, that was your type of job, and how many hours was that, off and on?

Olson: Well, it varied, sometime it was four, sometime it was eight, and then sometime it was six. It was a – I can't even remember the special round of it.

MacDonald: What were you listening for in the radio shack? What kind of communications were you listening for?

Olson: We were listening for uh, the ships that were out on patrol along the shore, weather station, the same as Herb had mentioned. It was ironic because he was on –doing that duty a couple years later—that I had been listening to

when I was there, you know as a radioman. But we listened for messages for radio contact or any emergencies with the ships, and the planes.

MacDonald: Did you ever run into anything where you heard emergencies when you were on watch that you had to act on?

Olson: No, no we never really did. There were some that were questionable, but nothing really exciting. [MacDonald chuckles] There was a submarine that had come up in the wrong place and hit one of the ships coming in. Which was kind of exciting. I think the poor sonar man probably got—

MacDonald: Fired.

Olson: -- taken off of that one.  
[both laugh]

MacDonald: Were you able to go on liberty at Treasure Island?

Olson: Yes.

MacDonald: And what city was that nearby?

Olson: Well, San Francisco. Yeah. It's right in the middle of the Bay there. So most of the liberty was in San Francisco. Once in a while we went to uh, Berkeley, and rented bicycles and –and one—a couple times we went to Muir Island, or Muir Mountain, Muir Woods—something—outside of – across –Golden Gate Bridge, and we used to hike up there. [Olson may be referring to Muir Woods National Monument, just north of San Francisco.]

[clock begins chiming during above segment, and continued throughout the following conversation]

MacDonald: There was an awful lot of military in that area at that time, I'm sure. It just must have been flooded with military people.

Olson: Oh yeah. San Francisco was [inaudible].

MacDonald: So you said you were—you spent some time there, and where else did you go?

Olson: I went to uh, Hawaii for six months. And was there from June until December. That was in '45. [clock stops chiming]

MacDonald: Where did you work at in Hawaii?

Olson: I was in the Wahiawa Radio Station—that was the main station of communications coming from the Pacific to the United States. So, it was stationed in the middle of the island of Oahu. And uh, the mountains there—the mountains that the Japs flew over—and they didn't know at that time that that was a communication center, and had they know, they could have blown up everything.

MacDonald: So again, as far as the communications, you were listening to all the ships and things like that?

Olson: Yeah, with all Morse code at that time.

MacDonald: Did you become pretty proficient at it, then?

Olson: Well, I was able to do it.  
[both laugh]

MacDonald: So what happened with the end of the war? Were you still in Hawaii at the end – when the war ended?

Olson: Yes, uh huh. In fact, we knew the war was over before anybody else did, so up there we were celebrating the night before. [chuckles]

MacDonald: Was it kind of isolated duty there because of the secrecy of your mission?

Olson: Well, yeah, everything was underground except the barracks, and they thought it was just—it was in the middle of the pineapple fields. And from air, that's all it looked like—was a, you know, pineapple field with workers.

MacDonald: Well, can you describe what it was like working underground, then?

Olson: Well, it—all I remember is taking a rickety elevator down there. And I was thinking about it the other day, and I don't think that I would have done that today—I would get claustrophobic. [chuckles] But at that time, it didn't bother me at all.

MacDonald: As a young woman serving in the military then that had to be kind of an exciting—not every—very few people—women—went into the military.

Olson: Yeah, that's true. There weren't too many of us.

MacDonald: So it had to be kind of exciting for you at that time, to serve your country.

Olson: Yeah, yeah it was. It was kind of neat because when they were trying to contact the Japanese, we sent messages out to the Japanese, telling what

frequency to go on. You know, to get on to contact them. So you felt like you were doing something. [chuckles]

MacDonald: Did you meet anybody interesting when you were in the military?

Olson: No, not really. Just friends that we made. And a couple of them, after the war was over, started a little newspaper called *The Scuttlebutt*, and everybody at Christmas time would send little messages of what they were doing, and then they'd print up and everybody would get a copy. And that went on for about 50 years.

MacDonald: Wow.

Olson: So it was kind of fun keeping up with everybody, you know, at command.

MacDonald: Now what happened when—how did you come about when the war ended—did they let the Waves go pretty quick? Or how did that come about—

Olson: No, they went more by point system.

MacDonald: They did.

Olson: Uh huh, yeah. So—

MacDonald: So how long did you have to stay in after the war actually ended?

Olson: Well, I went home in December. I was discharged on December what—well, I don't recall now—but it was in December anyway.

MacDonald: What did you do after the war?

Olson: I worked at Great Lakes [Naval Station] for oh, almost a year I think, and um, then I went to school on the GI Bill at Lake Forest College. And that's where I met my husband.

MacDonald: What did you take in college?

Olson: Um, I was an Art major.

MacDonald: Did you join any veterans' organizations?

Olson: I joined the VFW Auxiliary Post 1293, and that was all.

MacDonald: You said you kept in touch by the newsletter, *Scuttlebutt*. Did you keep in contact with anybody in particular—friends you made?



Olson: Three people that I still—are in close contact with.

MacDonald: Did you raise a family?

Olson: Yeah, I had two boys. One is a teacher in Menomonee Falls, and the other is a dentist in Wisconsin Rapids.

MacDonald: What was your impression of serving in the military as a young lady during World War II?

Olson: Well—my impression?

MacDonald: What did you get out of serving in the military?

Olson: Well, I think you get a lot of good experiences. You learn to trust people, and a lot of camaraderie and that type of stuff.

MacDonald: You did mention right off the bat that you were in the very first class of WAVES at Hunter College—

Olson: In a boot camp. There were some in already, but that was the first boot camp that they started.

MacDonald: Did they keep any names of other people that you might have served with at that time, uh—being at the first one I was just wondering if they kept anything like, any history—

Olson: You mean the service or something?

MacDonald: Yeah.

Olson: Not that I know of. They have the Women's Memorial in Washington where, you know, everybody's registered.

MacDonald: Was there any groups associated with WAVES over the years that you may have joined with?

Olson: Um, there was one group in San Francisco that would get together, and I understand there is a group in Green Bay, or Appleton, in that area. But I've never joined those—I figured it's just too far to drive over there.

MacDonald: When you were out in the West Coast there, did you run into any USO shows or meet any entertainers?

Olson: Um, well, we had entertainers come—Bing Crosby came and put on a show there at Treasure Island, and that’s the one that I remember most. They had the um—Pepsi Cola had a big USO building, and we used to go there a lot. And it was kinda neat because their top floor was strictly for women, and you could just go there and relax—you wouldn’t have to worry about the rest of the people down there.

MacDonald: Well, that had to be quite an experience for you to serve in the Navy, then, and uh—do you recall how many WAVES did serve?

Olson: No, I really don’t.

MacDonald: It was kind of unique, because not very many women went into the military.

Olson: Not at that time, no. It was very different. And we were treated really with respect. It’s nothing like what you hear today. Nothing of that stuff. So, one of the funny things which was, in Hawaii they just weren’t prepared for women. And uh, all of a sudden they realize, they needed to have personal things for them. And Kotex was one thing, so they hurriedly ordered some, and what they did, instead of sending boxes, they sent all those that are individually wrapped that they use in dispensers. And, uh, when we went—came home—they gave us those things to pack our sea bags. So everybody’s sea bag was lined with all those Kotex.

MacDonald: Interesting. [laughs]

Olson: Ah well, a little different.

[both laugh]

MacDonald: Do you have anything else you’d like to say about your service time?

Olson: No—can’t really think of anything.

MacDonald: It sounds like it was a very positive experience for you.

Olson: Oh, absolutely. Yes. It really was. Made a lot of good friends there.

MacDonald: Thank you very much.

Olson: Um hmm.

**[End of Interview]**