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Interview with Mary White Gettys

Mary White Gettys

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**LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Interview VHP #094
GETTYS, Mary White**

GETTYS, Mary White

Enlisted: 1943 June

Interviewed: October 14, 2009

Interviewer: Miciah Bennett

Index by: Michelle Dubert-Bellrichard

Length: 00:48:13

Abstract: In her October 14, 2009 interview with Miciah Bennett, Mary White Gettys relays her experience in the WAVES as a code breaker. Gettys details the equipment she used and the secrecy in her work. Gettys speculates what the WAVES did for women and provides her opinion on the wars in the Middle East. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: WAVES, Navy, Electric Coding Machine, uniforms, Thomas Smithwick Gettys, D-Day

Interview Session (October 14, 2009): Digital File

Time Keywords

- 00:00:00 *Question:* School? *Answer:* Graduated from Erskine College. June 1943 joined the Navy. Had to get a waiver on eye sight. Went to Massachussetts. Sent to Portsmouth, Virginia,
- 00:01:10 *Question:* Taught? *Answer:* Naval regulations. Studied codes. Some people say the war was won because United State codes weren't broken. I man was in charge of 11 female code breakers. WAVES. The "E" in WAVES was to mean "temporary." "When the messages were secret, one of us girls would strap on a .38 pistol, and deliver it by hand to the proper office. Now my grandchildren don't believe that..." In the Naval yard for three years until the war ended.
- 00:03:57 *Question:* Family's reaction to enlistment? *Answer:* MG's family was supportive. "A lot of people criticized the women for joining. They said they didn't join for patriotic reasons. They joined it to follow the men wherever they were."
- 00:04:50 *Question:* Enlistment? *Answer:* Physical and mental tests. The Navy accepted women who had finished college or had two years of junior college. 86,000 women were

WAVES. Beautiful uniforms – designed by a Frenchman. Women encouraged to wear makeup. Elizabeth Arden developed a lipstick to match the red cord on the female Marines’ hats. After basic training, MG selected to work in communications and went to Smith College.

- 00:08:30 *Question:* First day of service? *Answer:* MG tried to get acquainted, because office was full of men and women. Worked around the clock. Worked eight hours a shift, but the office was open 24 hours.
- 00:09:15 *Question:* Worked mostly with women? *Answer:* Office was so secluded.
- 00:09:45 *Question:* Other women? *Answer:* Became friends. All were interesting and came from all over the United States. MG was one of the last women at the Naval yard when the war ended. Navy asked MG to stay on, but MG wasn’t interested in moving to Washington DC. MG went home, married, then moved to Washington DC.
- 00:11:00 *Question:* How did you meet your husband? *Answer:* Met in South Carolina. Husband was in the Navy. Lived in Washington DC 14 years of their married life. “He outranked me. That was too bad.”
- 00:11:40 *Question:* Rank? *Answer:* MG ended up lieutenant.
- 00:12:05 *Question:* How did you feel about your rank? *Answer:* People moved up, if their work was satisfactory. MG liked her position. She was not in charge of other people. Coding machines were electric. ECM (Electric Coding Machine). MG describes her work. Code book.
- 00:14:40 *Question:* Describe machine? *Answer:* Had to set machine for the specific day.
- 00:15:30 *Question:* Who did you send messages to? *Answer:* Got messages about damaged ships. Sent them to repair yard.
- 00:16:00 *Question:* Any problems with other women? *Answer:* Didn’t work as a group. Secluded. Secretive. Socializing on the Navy Yard. Foreign, Allied ships came in to be repaired. French and British sailors.
- 00:17:25 *Question:* Cherished memories? *Answer:* The people MG met. MG stayed in touch with two girls.
- 00:18:05 *Question:* Regrets? *Answer:* Doesn’t have sad memories. MG had two brothers fighting in Europe who were badly wounded. “We women didn’t face the bullets and the morrows, but we well knew what all was goin’ on.”

- 00:19:02 *Question:* How did you stay in touch with family? *Answer:* MG wrote brothers every day. “But it’s a wonderful feeling then that families tried their best to do everything they could to help the war. There was a great spirit of cooperation, which I don’t think any war since then has had.” Many women worked in the factories. So much was rationed. Couldn’t get nylon stockings. “That was a terrible thing.” Had to wear cotton stockings. Women had to wear stockings – couldn’t go bare-legged. “Travel was simply terrible.” MG recalls being on a train sitting on the floor. Women were paid the same salary as men.
- 00:21:54 *Question:* Last days in service? *Answer:* No more secrets. MG did secretarial work. MG did not choose to stay in.
- 00:22:25 *Question:* Life after? *Answer:* MG felt she had a richer life. MG speculates that she would have just continued to teach, if she stayed home.
- 00:23:47 *Question:* Teaching? *Answer:* Hasn’t worked since MG married.
- 00:24:00 *Question:* Activities? *Answer:* Belonged to clubs. Husband was a congressman for ten years. MG’s husband worked with the NATS. MG’s husband and Richard Nixon.
- 00:26:13 *Question:* Moved back to South Carolina? *Answer:* Husband retired in 1974. Been back ever since.
- 00:26:20 *Question:* How has the WAVES helped women? *Answer:* Women have proven they can do the same as men. WACS.
- 00:27:15 *Question:* Status changed? *Answer:* Yes. Pay has improved, but it’s not perfect. Female news commentators.
- 00:28:20 *Question:* Women fighting in wars? *Answer:* Mixed feelings, but that’s equality. MG tells stories about her grandsons. Silver dollar routine.
- 00:31:30 *Question:* WAVES song? *Answer:* To the tune of anchors away.
- 00:32:00 *Question:* Encourage daughters more? *Answer:* MG proud of her daughters – done well.
- 00:33:45 *Question:* Perception of war now? *Answer:* “We don’t back them like we should.” MG’s father was in WWI. A lot girls’ families did not encourage them to join the service.
- 00:35:10 *Question:* Wars today? *Answer:* MG is not sure what we are fighting for. Belongs to the Women’s Auxillary.

- 00:37:25 *Question:* PTSD during WWII? *Answer:* MG speculates it wasn't as serious. People were applauded for going.
- 00:38:20 *Question:* Anything else? *Answer:* It was a good experience.
- 00:39:35 *Question:* Other countries' militaries? *Answer:* MG not sure. MG recalls an English battleship coming into the Navy Yard. MG recalls her impressions of the British sailors. MG believes the US takes better care of its soldiers.
- 00:41:10 *Question:* How are veterans treated today? *Answer:* MG talks about veteran hospitals. It makes a difference that every woman volunteered for the WAVES. "I don't think we treat them like we should." Healthcare for veterans. Barack Obama.
- 00:44:20 [no question] MG on duty on D-Day – heard first announcement of D-Day. Soldiers carried toy crickets.
- 00:45:50 *Question:* Men tell you about the war? *Answer:* Not in the office – the office was secret. Women not allowed in the bar. There was socializing, no business with the WAVES. MG would have been discharged if she mentioned the ECM.
- 00:47:15 *Question:* Progression of technology? *Answer:* Easier now. MG's generation lived through the Great Depression and WWII – they didn't indulge as much as today's generation.
- 00:48:13 *End of Interview*