

Helen Robertson Williams

Served in a WAVE unit in the
United States Armed Forces

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Helen Robertson Williams

Hello today is October 20, 1994. My name is Marajeau Brooks. I am a volunteer with the Midway Village & Museum Center. We are cooperating with the statewide effort to collect oral histories from Illinois citizens who participated in the momentous events surrounding World War II. We are in the home of Helen Williams, 1819 Prestwood, Rockford, Illinois, 61103. Mrs. William served in a branch of the United States Forces. She was with a WAVE with the Navy during World War II. We are interviewing her about her experiences as a WAVE in Washington, D. C. and Virginia. Her current phone number is 815-877-0620. She was born April 2nd, 1925. Both her parents came from Aberdeen, Scotland.

HELEN: My name was Helen Robertson when I went into the service in April of 1945. Before I went into the service from the time I was in high school, I attended Rockford College for a time and also worked at Woodward Governor in the defense industry here in Rockford, Illinois. In April, 1945, just following the end of the war in Europe, I went into the service and I left Rockford and left a very heart broken mother.

MARAJEAN: Why did you wait until then?

H: Because I was not twenty until April, 1945, and you had to be twenty years old at that time—a woman to enter the service. As I left my tearful mother—being an only child, why I think I had broken her heart, but off I went. So I went to boot camp and Hunter College in Bronx, New York. It was kind of rigorous for a gal who wasn't that much of an outdoor person, but I made it through the seven weeks. At the end of the seven weeks, I went to recruiter school for two weeks to become a recruiter in the

WAVE. At the end of—I believe it was two weeks if my memory is holding up on me, I was sent to recruit in the state of Virginia. Now, actually where I was stationed was in Washington, D. C., because the Office of Procurement was there and WAVE came under the Office of Procurement in the Navy. At the time that I went to Washington, D. C., the weather was very hot and steamy that summer of 1945 and I lived in an apartment house that was a converted barracks just one block north of the White House. So it was kind of interesting. Every day I had to walk to go to my office when I was in Washington, D. C. I had to walk past the White House and many mornings I saw President Truman and saluted him. Then after a few weeks in Washington, D. C., I was sent out to do recruiting in the State of Virginia. Well, time was wearing down about then and it looks like maybe the war in Japan is going to be over. People are looking—I go out first with an officer who is supposed to be training me. We were out for a couple weeks and I went to various places and I learned the ropes of speaking before groups, scaring me to death, but I made it and didn't recruit a soul, because the war is coming to an end and the momentum is gone. Finally, I was sent out by myself to the various little recruiting stations around the State of Virginia. The first place I went was to Bristol, Tennessee.

H: Bristol, Tennessee, it's on the border of Virginia. So there I was and the Chief Petty Officer, who was in charge of the station on the 13th of August, came in with a notice and said, "You've been called back to Washington." So the morning of the 14th of August, I was put on a train and the Chief forgot to give me any orders. Luckily nobody asked me for any papers. As we came close to Washington, we found out

that the war with Japan had ended. They came on the train as we got to the outskirts and told us the war had ended and of course everybody was just very up. And me with my two weeks of luggage got off the train and went over to try to check it because I looked out on the street and it was just one sea of people and no transportation. So, I went over the baggage place to check my luggage and they just looked at me and said they didn't have room for it. Well, I begged and pleaded and they took it finally because by this time it was night and I had to walk amongst these throngs of people up to my quarters. But I did. I got lots of kisses on the way. All the service people were out. Everybody was out. And there was nothing to eat and I hadn't had anything to eat in a long time.

M: Were they noisy?

H: Oh, yes, very noisy. It was a big celebration. We had a big celebration here. So, I arrived home and that was the end of my recruiting career. One thing that was very interesting, I was in one of the towns in Virginia and all the time I was still in training with the office I was with. On a Sunday morning, she was a Catholic gal and I was a Presbyterian and we decided we were going to church and both churches were up the street a ways. I walked with her to the Catholic church, and the priest outside invited me to come to the Catholic church and I said, "Oh, no. I'm going to the Presbyterian church." They tried to dissuade me from going to the Presbyterian church. Then I went there to ...

M: The Presbyterian church?

H: To the Presbyterian church. No one spoke to me. This was upsetting to me because all during the war, at our home on Sunday morning, we had invited the soldiers

for dinner and so forth—not that I had expected an invitation for dinner but at least I expected that someone would maybe talk to me. They also had their former pastor there who was now a chaplain. During the sermon he made some rather pointed remarks about how terrible women in the Service were and here I sat in my uniform, the only Service woman in the audience and I quietly left as quickly as I could. The priest and the officer were waiting for me down by the Catholic church and they said, "What happened?" I told them and they said, "We were afraid that might happen."

M: They just didn't want their southern women in the Service.

H: They didn't want the southern women in the service and I was a northerner. I haven't been back—that isn't true. I have been back.

M: But not in that situation.

H: No.

M: And did you get anyone coming into your recruiting office at all?

H: Yes. We got mainly young black women who came in and wanted to go into the Service but very often they just didn't have enough education to pass the entrance exam. I don't know if that's what they called it, but some sort of a test.

M: A written test?

H: Yes.

M: Many of them couldn't read at all.

H: couldn't read or write because they hadn't been to school.

M: No. What did you do after VJ Day?

H: After VJ Day I was in this office with Officer Procurement and I did mainly clerical work.

M: In Washington?

H: In Washington. I was right down town in Washington. I was never in the Navy Department or anything like that. I was attached to this office of Officer Procurement and we spent the rest of the time sending back documents that people had. It was mainly men; not too many women, had applied for Service. They had sent certain documents, well, like some of them were birth certificates and some college transcripts and we were returning them. If we could find them, if we had an address for them. So I did that for several months, plus some other miscellaneous secretarial.

M: What prompted you to get out?

H: Well, I came home in December to be maid of honor for my cousin who was almost ... she and I had grown up together like sisters. And I being an only child, she was like my sister. I came home and the same day that I arrived here a man by the name of Al Williams was arriving from overseas in December. And on December 9, he was discharged at Camp Grant. I was home for a couple of weeks and then I went back.

M: Had you known him before?

H: Oh, yes. I met him at West High School. Our romance was mainly by letter even though we had dated a few times before he left. I went back to Washington. My quarters had been moved and I was moved out to Maryland. So I had to go back and forth to work on the bus.

M: On the bus?

H: Oh, yes. So they put me in quarters so I couldn't eat out any more. And then I went—I came home to Rockford in February. And on February 23rd, 1946, I was married to Al Williams. Allen Williams I should say and because I married a discharged veteran, I could get out of the service. I could be discharged myself, so I went back to Washington and a couple weeks after being back, they sent me on a troop train to Great Lakes and I was discharged at Great Lakes and I came home. That's the end of my career, March 9, 1946.

M: About eleven months.

H: That's true. That's all it was.

M: Did you get acquainted with other women?

H: Yes, I did, but I moved too many times and except in boot camp, I was never doing the same thing they were doing. I was always kind of off by myself. I did have one very interesting experience. In January, 1946, I am of Scottish descent. I happen to be a first generation American and a petty officer in our office and his wife asked me to go to the Burns' banquet in Washington, D. C., with them and the speaker at the Burns' banquet was General Dwight D. Eisenhower. That was a very interesting experience and being a little shy in those years, I didn't go up and ask him to sign my program, so I missed that opportunity.

M: Did you get to do anything else in Washington when you were there? There were so many important people there.

H: There were so many important people but you were a ___?___. I was fortunate in the

fact that when I was out in Virginia were some very old friends of my parents who had been friends of my mother in Scotland and who had lived in Rockford for a time. They didn't have any children, so they took me under their wing. They took me all over. I saw many of the sights, because I really didn't, at that point, have any friends that were—because most of them worked in the Navy Department and some of the people who lived in my apartment. By the way, I should tell you about that apartment north of the White House. It was what we call, let me see if I can find the word for it—one room, one bathroom and a little kitchenette.

M: Efficiency?

H: Efficiency! Maybe just a little better. Well, no. Do you know how many of us were in there? There were 6 of us.

M: In one room?

H: Yes, that was the same way when we were in boot camp. But some of the ...

M: Three bunk beds?

H: Three bunk beds and if you can imagine, I was probably the only one who worked civilized hours. The rest of them worked for the Navy Department and they worked various hours so I really didn't get too well acquainted.

M: By various hours? Was it?

H: Nights. Some of them worked so they were sleeping during the day so you didn't dare move around.

M: So the Navy Department was really open around the clock?

H: Oh, yes.

M: And they worked those hours? That made six in a room easier to cope with.

H: Yes. And people came and went. There was one gal who was much older than the rest of us. And, of course, most of these gals I roomed with at that time were older than I was.

M: How many of these efficiencies were in this building?

H: I really ...

M: How many floors. How many on one floor? How many on each floor?

H: I don't know. Well, it was just a regular apartment building with efficiencies—maybe ten on each floor. I don't know for sure.

M: That's a lot of people.

H: Mm hmm. But when I moved to Maryland and then after I went back, I ended up in Virginia in a barracks, so I was in several places. They closed this one that was down town, became actually it was premium quarters.

M: Sure, premium property, too.

H: Oh, yes. I'm sure, but I don't know that I ...

M: What was the name of these people, your mother's friends?

H: Their names were Polly and George Gordon. And they ...

M: G-O-R-D-O-N.

H: Mm hmm.

M: I'm sure they are long dead.

H: Oh, yes.