WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Ruth Heavner Shepherd

INTERVIEWER: Therese Strohmer

DATE: 20 June 2015

[Begin Interview]

TS: Today is June 20, 2015. I'm at the home of Ruth Shepherd in Hickory, North Carolina to conduct an oral history interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Ruth, could you state your name the way you'd like it to be on your collection?

RS Ruth Heavner Shepherd.

TS: Okay. Well, Ruth, thank you so much for having me here today. Now, tell us a little bit about when and where you were born. Let's start out with that.

RS: Well, I was born 27 July 1924 in Burke County [North Carolina] in—I think it was in Hildebran, but my birth certificate came out of Morganton.

TS: Morganton?

RS: Which is the county seat of Burke County.

TS: Burke County? And how far is that from where you're at right now? Very far?

RS: It's about eight or ten miles.

TS: Oh, it's real close. Okay.

RS: Yeah.

TS: Okay. Well, now, what did your parents do for a living when you were growing up?

RS: Most of them worked in the cotton mill, or my dad worked for Southern Desk Company, which made school desks and church furniture.

TS: Did your mom work outside the home?

RS: She worked in the cotton mill.

TS: She did too? Same one as your dad?

RS: No, she worked in Henry River [Mill Village] cotton mill.

TS: Henry River? Yeah, that's hard work, huh?

RS: Yes.

TS: Now, do you have any brothers and sisters?

RS: One brother and one sister. My brother was two years older than me and his name is Lawrence Heavner. My sister was Jessie and she was two years younger than me. And she was married to Ewell Ray White.

TS: So you're the middle child?

RS: Yes.

TS: What was it like growing up in the 1920s and thirties?

RS: Tough. It was during the [Great] Depression and we just had a small farm, which—we did not go hungry.

TS: Didn't go hungry?

RS: But we did not have what we would have liked to have had in the way of clothes and medical care and dental care. Things like that we did not have, because the Depression was a tough time.

TS: Now, did you just live with your immediate family, or did you have any other extended family around at that time?

RS: Well, my mother and her sister had bought an old house when they were young girls working in the cotton mill. And then my grandmother still lived there during the Depression. When my parents couldn't find any work anywhere—we were living in Maiden [North Carolina] at the time—but we had to move back to the home place that my mother and her sister had bought, and lived there with my grandmother.

TS: So you did, kind of, all need to live together at that time.

RS: Yes.

TS: That's a common story, I think, for many people growing up in that time.

RS: Yes.

TS: What do you remember about being a child during the Depression?

RS: Well, the one thing that I remember was we never felt like we were hungry or anything, and most people were just like us—didn't have much—and clothes were something that we didn't have, but I think the thing that I thought about was how some of the girls in high school wore so much nicer clothes than I did. But I found out that they were from big families and the girls interchanged clothes, so they didn't have all that many clothes really. They just—

TS: Shared them?

RS: —changed them out.

TS: Yeah. Did you like school growing up?

RS: I did. I've never been much of a reader, but I liked school and—

TS: Do you remember any kind of activities that you liked to do at school?

RS: We didn't have a lot.

TS: No?

RS: I had friends that played basketball, but unfortunately I rode the school bus; I couldn't participate in anything after school.

TS: You just had to get home?

RS: But the one thing that I—that—and I still don't like to read that much—but the one thing that I—when I got the book my daughter got me of *Unbroken* [story of WWII bombardier Louis Zamperini, written by Lauren Hillebrand] I couldn't put it down.

TS: I see it sitting over there, yeah. Did you finish it?

RS: [chuckles] Oh, yeah.

TS: Yeah. It's a World War II story, right?

RS: Yeah.

TS: Yeah. So it got your interest?

RS: Oh, yeah.

TS: Now, before we started the tape you were talking about how you grew up on a farm and you had to work pretty hard. What kind of things did you have to do as a young girl on the farm? What were your chores?

RS: Well, one thing that I never did was milk the cow, because I was always afraid of the cow, but we always had to work in the garden. And my mother was not in good health so I had to stay out of school one day a week and do the family wash, and that was no easy chore, because I had to carry everything down the hill to the spring where we got our water, and do the wash down there, and then carry all the clothes back up the hill and hang them up on a clothesline. So that was tough.

TS: Did you have one of the scrubbing boards?

RS: Oh, yeah.

TS: Is that what you used to wash them?

RS: Boil them and scrub them and—

TS: You did all that down by the spring and then carried it on up? It was probably an all day thing, wasn't it?

RS: It was. It was hard, but—

TS: And you're a petite kind of woman too. You're not tall or anything.

RS: And I did the cooking, because with Mama being sick we each had to chip in and do what we needed to do.

TS: Did your sister also have to do things like that as well?

RS: Well, my sister was younger than me and she didn't do as much as I did. I think Mama saw that she made beds and things like that, but—

TS: Not hard lifting, carrying, kinds of things?

RS: No. And draw water. We stood on the back porch. Let a—

TS: A pump.

RS: Let a bucket down a wire to the spring, and it would dip the water into the bucket, and we'd draw it back up to the porch.

TS: How far did that go on a pulley?

RS: Oh, it was probably two or three hundred feet.

TS: Oh my goodness. That's a lot of pulling.

RS: Yeah. In cold weather it wasn't—

TS: It didn't dip too good. Oh my goodness.

RS: You had to stand out there and freeze to draw water.

TS: What kinds of things did you do for fun?

RS: Not much. [both chuckle]

TS: No? Did you play any games?

RS: Well, the guys always played marbles—my brother did—with—and we didn't live close to anyone, and occasionally we might get paper dolls that we played with, but we didn't have the money to buy anything.

TS: Not too much. Running around, kick the can kind of thing. Did you do that?

RS: Yes, that was—And on Sundays we always played cow pasture ball with the kids we went to church with.

TS: Yeah? Cow pasture ball?

RS: Yeah.

TS: Just out in a cow pasture? Like baseball?

RS: Yeah, just go out in a pasture and play ball.

TS: So you went to church pretty frequently then too? Did you have church activities? Dances?

RS: No.

TS: Nothing like that?

RS: No, back then we didn't have any kind of activities. You had Sunday school and preaching—bible study—but you didn't have church activities like they do now.

TS: So you're in school and you're growing up, and it's the Depression, and then all of a sudden this World War II happens; we get into it because of Pearl Harbor. Do you remember when Pearl Harbor happened?

[The attack on Pearl Harbor was a surprise military strike by the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service against the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on the morning of 7 December 1941. The attack led to the United States' entry into World War II]

RS: Yeah.

TS: Tell me about what you remember.

RS: Well, I graduated high school. It's a wonder I did, because I started school, of course, when I was six, and the bus came across the river over to the road that went into our house until I was three years old—in third grade, I'm sorry—and after that we had to walk that mile and a half to the company store over in Henry River to catch the bus to go to school. And it's a wonder I ever graduated high school. But after that we found out that the bus from Catawba County schools came closer to the house, so we started going to Catawba County schools, and I graduated when I was sixteen. When I was seventeen or eighteen—can't remember which now—I went to Raleigh to what they call—it was an NYA school, National Youth Administration**.**

[The National Youth Administration (NYA) was a New Deal agency in the United States that focused on providing work and education for Americans between the ages of 16 and 25. It operated from June 26, 1935 to 1939 as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA).]

TS: Okay.

RS: I went to school down there. I think it was on the campus of State [North Carolina State University]. We learned to do woodwork, and as soon as we were finished down there they sent us to work in—because the war had started—they sent us to work in defense plants. I worked for American Hammered Piston Ring Company in Baltimore, Maryland, for about a year and a half.

TS: Where was it that you were working? What was the name of the company?

RS: American Hammered Piston Rings. We were making piston rings for the aircraft industry.

TS: How was that? Did you like that kind of work? Was that tough?

RS: It was sort of tough but—[unclear], me and another girl that I was in school with in Raleigh, went up and we lived in a boarding house—

TS: In Baltimore?

RS: In Baltimore. And we rode halfway across town on the streetcar, then transferred to the bus and rode the rest of the way to the defense plant. And we ground—piston rings had to be a certain—a certain width, so we ground them down to the specifications that they required for the piston rings to go in the aircraft. And I worked there for about a year and a half, and it was all from 12:00 at night to 8:00 in the morning.

TS: Oh, you were on the midnight shift; the third shift?

RS: Yes. And just like any young people, after we got off from work at eight o'clock in the morning we'd go home, get us something to eat, and head out to the roller rink and skate a half a day, and then come home and catch a little sleep before having to catch the bus and the trolley to go across town to work.

TS: What was it like living in a fairly big city, at that time, coming from where you grew up?

RS: It was. We didn't—My girlfriend and I didn't do much, except, well, working at night; it was sort of tough. But by the time we fixed our own food—and we had to go to the basement of the boarding house we lived in—well, it was not a basement, it was a cellar really—to fix our food. And we'd go up to the grocery store up the street to buy what we needed because we fixed our own food and did our own laundry down there. So it was tough, but hey, everybody was doing that. You were doing what you needed to do.

TS: Yeah? Were you ever homesick or anything?

RS: No.

TS: No? Not at all?

RS: No. I was never homesick because I felt like everybody else had to do the same thing.

TS: Well, when you heard about Pearl Harbor, what did you think? Do you have any recollection of your feelings at that time?

RS: Well, the one thing that I—that bothered me was that my brother had gone into the Marine Corps in '41—in August of '41—as soon as he got out of high school, and he had

been in Panama, and my thoughts were, "What would happen to him. Where would he have to go?"

TS: Right. So you were worried about your brother?

RS: Yes.

TS: Was it a shock to learn that we had been attacked?

RS: Yes. I never thought that—we never thought that the Japanese would come that far. Of course, the war had been going on in Europe and we knew about that.

TS: But it seemed kind of far away?

RS: But then to have the attack on Pearl Harbor was a big blow too.

TS: Yeah. Now, you had mentioned to me earlier that you had a sweetheart when you graduated from high school. Tell me what he asked you to do.

RS: Well, in '42 his brother had told him, he said, "You don't want to get into the army;" his brother had been drafted.

So he joined the navy, and he was—he had been on two runs in the Atlantic to North Africa when they had the big meetings over there, and he came back and was going to deploy to the Pacific and he wanted us to get married. And I said, "No. We better not. We don't know what will happen."

And he said, "Well, I've got to go to the Pacific. I'm needed there."

I said, "Well, I'll join the navy too."

He said, "I'll never speak to you again." [both chuckle]

TS: But did he speak to you again?

RS: No, that was famous last words. He got out before I did. He got home in December of '45, and I didn't get home until May of '46, and we got married in December of '46. [both chuckle] And we were married fifty-six years.

TS: Sixty-five or—

RS: Sixty-five years, I'm sorry.

TS: You told me that earlier, sixty-five years. Well, were you working in Baltimore when you decided you wanted to join the WAVES [Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service]?

RS: No, it was when he—I had come back home and was working in the hosiery mill again when he came home and told me he was deploying to the Pacific, and that's when I told him I was joining the navy.

TS: Now, why did you decide that you needed to do that; to join the navy?

RS: Well, I felt like I needed to do my part, and making socks for the guys over there I felt like somebody else could do.

TS: You thought maybe there was more meaningful work that you could do during the war?

RS: I felt like there was something that I could do more than what I was doing.

TS: Okay. Well, how did you pick the WAVES, then? Did you think of the WACs [Women's Army Corps] at all?

RS: No. The navy was mine. [chuckles]

TS: Yeah? Why did you like the navy?

RS: Well, because my sweetheart was in the navy.

TS: You wanted to be in the same service?

RS: Yeah.

TS: Well, what did your folks think about you joining? What did your brother think about you joining?

RS: Well, my brother at that time was in the Pacific trying to dodge bullets, so he didn't know about it. And back then, when my husband joined the navy—he was my boyfriend then and that was in '42—they asked him, said, "Will your mother sign for you?" Because he was only twenty.

And he said, "Goodness no. She wouldn't sign for me."

And the recruiter said—he wrote in twenty-one and he said, "As far as I'm concerned you're twenty-one." He said, "You're in the navy." And they asked me, they said, "Will your parents sign for you?"

I said, "I think so."

TS: Did they?

RS: Mama did.

TS: She did? What'd she think about you joining the navy? Was she worried about you?

RS: No, she didn't.

TS: No?

RS: Mama didn't worry about anything.

TS: No? [chuckles]

RS: No.

TS: Why not?

RS: She was just a laid back person, easygoing, and I'm sure that she did worry but we never knew it.

TS: You never knew it. What about your dad?

RS: He never worried about anything either.

TS: Neither one of them were big worriers, huh? Well, they let you go on up to Baltimore by yourself.

RS: Yeah. Well, they trusted me.

TS: So you enlisted here in Hickory?

RS: Yes.

TS: Okay. And that was in 1944, I think you said; '43, '44, somewhere in there.

RS: Yeah.

TS: It wasn't the first time that you were far away from home, because you'd been in Baltimore. So tell me about your trip to New York to boot camp.

RS: It was an unusual trip. Got on the train in Hickory at five o'clock one evening and we rode all night and stopped in a lot of places on the way to New York. And I would think, "Well, why are we stopping here?" But we were stopping to pick up all the troop trains from the West Coast, all the way across country, that were taking—because there were fifteen hundred WAVES going in at the same time. And we finally got in to New York the next evening, about eight or nine o'clock. And of course, we'd never been in a place like New York City before.

TS: What did it seem like to you? Busy?

RS: I thought, "I wonder why they're taking us into this big city." Big surprise; we lived in the big city. They had taken over civilian apartments, and we lived in civilian apartments. Of course, it was not by any stretch of the imagination a real fancy place. There were bunks set up in there, and even though we had a kitchen in our section of the apartment, we didn't do anything but keep it clean.

TS: That's it? You didn't cook in it?

RS: No. We went over to Hunter College [Bronx, New York] every morning, fell in about 6:00 or 7:00; I can't remember what time. Six, I think.

TS: You marched over there, right? You went in formation and then marched over to Hunter College?

RS: We did.

TS: Like, through the streets, right?

RS: Yes. And if there was snow you still marched over to Hunter College. And after breakfast you were in classes all day. And the weather was bad, so you couldn't march or drill anywhere except march back into town and go to the armory to drill.

TS: Because you joined in the winter, right?

RS: Yes.

TS: [chuckling] You went to New York in the winter.

RS: And then it was all day long. Most of the time we got home—after we had eaten the evening meal we fell in and marched back over to our apartment where we stayed and got ready for bed.

TS: Now, did you have any second thoughts about joining the WAVES?

RS: No. No.

TS: Did you make good friends?

RS: Oh yeah. I met a lot of really nice girls. Of course, in boot camp you meet some and then they're sent to different schools than where you are. They ask you where you would like to go to school, to see where you might be—what you might be fitted for. It doesn't matter what you put down. They send you where they need people. So I went to [Naval] Hospital Corps School.

TS: Well, before you get there, let me ask you, was there anything that was particularly hard that you had to do in boot camp for you?

RS: Not for me.

TS: No? Now, you were telling me about when you got your linens. Tell me that story.

RS: [chuckles] Well, we had to get up early in the morning—six o'clock in the morning when we had reveille. This one morning we had to change the linen. So we stripped our beds off and had to take it all down to the basement and went on, and that just happened to be the day that we went to the infirmary and got shots in both arms. We came home that evening and your bed wasn't ready to get into; you had to put your linen back on your bed. So I didn't—It didn't bother me that much with the shots. It hurt, but I knew I had to do it. And my roommate—bunkmate—she slept on top bunk and I did too. And I was putting my bottom sheet on, which is the hardest one to get on—you have to have them on so tight they can bounce a quarter on them—and she couldn't manage hers. Her arms hurt so bad she just put her head over on her bunk and cried. I knew it wasn't time to cry; we just had to do it. [both chuckle]

TS: You told me earlier—I asked you if you helped her and you said—

RS: No, I didn't help her. I let her struggle with it.

TS: [chuckles] You knew that she had to get through that, right? Now, you said you shared a bunk. Was it two different beds and they were just up high next to each other, or how was that?

RS: They had—Let's see. There was four double bunks to a room, and the girl that was having such a struggle, she slept on top bunk and I did too. There was four top bunks and four lower ones; double bunks.

TS: So that you guys had two of the top ones. I see. So you're going through your training at Hunter, and how was the food there? Was that okay?

RS: Oh, it was good.

TS: It was good?

RS: Never had KP [kitchen patrol].

TS: No?

RS: No.

TS: Did you have any other duties that you had to attend to?

RS: No. We just had to stay in class all day long.

TS: A lot of marching and back and forth. Now, did you have any down time where you got to do anything fun?

RS: Not until the last weekend that we were in boot camp.

TS: What did you do on that weekend?

RS: They gave us liberty on Saturday from 12:00 [p.m.] to 5:00 to go into New York City. On Sunday we could go in after church from 1:00 to 6:00. So that's the only time we got to go in and see the city.

TS: Did you go in?

RS: We did both times. You just ride the—I don't know whether it was the train or what it was.

TS: Like the subway or something?

RS: Subway.

TS: Yeah. Was it interesting? Did you see anything interesting?

RS: Well, we mostly just walked around and looked. [both chuckle]

TS: Window shopping, sort of?

RS: Yeah.

TS: Now, when they evaluated what kind of job you could do, what did you get chosen to do for your training?

RS: Well, I put down that I would like to go to [United States Naval Training Center,] Bainbridge, Georgia, and go to storekeeper school, which was a secretarial type of job. I went to Bethesda, Maryland, to hospital corps school, because that's where they were needing pharmacist's mates. So you could put down what you would like, and then they sent you where they needed you.

TS: So then the next place you went was to Bethesda?

RS: Bethesda, Maryland.

TS: And you learned to be a pharmacy mate. Now, tell me about that experience. What kind of housing did you have there? Barracks still?

RS: I really can't remember what our barracks was like in Bethesda. The one thing that I do remember about Bethesda was we had to go to the hospital and make rounds with the nurse every day, but while I was there I found out that a guy that I had gone to school with back home in Mountain View High School—and he had been in the Marine Corps, and he had been wounded really bad—I'm not sure what all—but I found out that he was in Bethesda, Maryland. So I got a chance to go see him, and he was so shocked.

TS: Because it was somebody he knew, right?

RS: He couldn't believe that somebody from Mountain View High School was there.

TS: I bet he was glad to see you.

RS: Yeah.

TS: Yeah. Now, how was the training for your pharmacy mate? Was that okay?

RS: Well, it was hard. There was so much to learn in nursing, you go—what?—two or three years; something like that? And there we went—was it six weeks? I'm not sure now.

TS: Just kind of a crash course, right?

RS: Yeah. And then they sent you right on to a hospital.

TS: Did you learn most of the stuff, kind of, on the job, then, while you were doing it?

RS: Yes, and the—of course, when you're fresh going in, there are some people in the hospital—or there were in Norfolk that had been there—and they were good to help you. And of course, you were scared about things that you had to do.

TS: What kind of things were you scared about?

RS: I didn't feel like I could give shots. And this one patient said—I never will forget his name, his name was Wally, and I said, "Wally, I don't believe I can do this."

He said, "Oh, yeah you can." He said, "Go ahead. It won't hurt."

But I was giving him penicillin and the needle looked like it was three inches long. But the saddest part about that was you couldn't—you might send to supplies—to stores to get supplies, and if they didn't have needles that they could give you then you sharpened the needles because they would get burrs on them and that tore skin—tore flesh—so we didn't ever—we had to sterilize our own equipment.

TS: You had to reuse the needles a lot?

RS: We had to reuse the needles, and if they got a burr on them we—and I don't remember how we sharpened them, but we did; got that burr off. Well, it was tough, but you did what you had to do.

TS: Now, where did you end up after Bethesda; after you did your quick training for the pharmacy mate?

RS: They sent me down to Norfolk Naval Hospital [Virginia], and that was a very small hospital. Most everybody, when they thought of a naval hospital they thought of [Naval Hospital] Portsmouth, which was a much bigger hospital than Norfolk.

TS: Is that right?

RS: Most people—My brother that lived there after the war was over didn't even—he and a friend of his didn't even know that Norfolk Naval Hospital ever existed. It was sandwiched between the receiving station and Marine disciplinary barracks. It was just a little compound sandwiched between there, and a lot of people didn't even know that it was there.

TS: Tell me about a typical day when you were at Norfolk.

RS: Well, if you were on day shift you went at 7:00 in the morning—and I think I'm quoting this right—from 7:00 in the morning until 9:00 at night.

TS: That's like a fourteen hour day.

RS: If you had a—Yes. And if you were on day shift you got two hours off in the afternoon so you could go to the barracks or go to ship's service or wherever. But if you were on night duty you worked from 9:00 at night until 7:00 in the morning. The only time that you left the ward that you were on was at midnight. The two wards that were connected would—one would go to midnight chow while the one that was on the other ward covered both wards.

TS: So you covered it while the other ward was eating, is that right? While you were having chow?

RS: Yeah.

TS: Now, what was it like at Norfolk for you? Did you enjoy that experience?

RS: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. It wasn't all work. And when the ships came in, women were not allowed to go aboard ships—it was considered bad luck—but the ship would always get a bus and send it out, and everybody that wanted to go into Norfolk—I think the Nansemond Hotel was the one place that always allowed the ships to provide a party for

the men, and they'd come in and pick up as many WAVES as wanted to go in. We always got corsages and they had hors d'oeuvres and we just danced and enjoyed fellowship with the guys from the ship.

TS: Were you still engaged to your later husband at that time?

RS: Yes, I still was wearing my boyfriend's diamond, but one time—and all the guys that I chummed around with knew that I was engaged and that if he ever got back home I probably would marry him. But I came home one time after he got home and I couldn't find him anywhere. He was with a bunch of his buddies out—

TS: Carousing somewhere?

RS: Having a big time. So when I got back I just took my diamond off and threw it up in my locker and I said, "[Doggone?] your time." [both chuckle] But that didn't last either.

TS: No? You made up? Yeah, you made up with him.

RS: But it was—But it wasn't all work. It was hard work, but it wasn't all work.

TS: Besides going to the parties and dancing, did you do anything else for fun?

RS: Well, we'd go into town bowling, and there were certain sections of Norfolk that we were allowed to go into. The rest was considered red light district, so we couldn't go into that. But we could go in and go bowling or go to the USO [United Services Organization] place where we could write letters or something.

TS: Oh, okay. Did you go to any movies?

RS: Not off the base; most of the time we went to the movies on the base. And the guys that were in the recreation department at Norfolk, they would—every so often they would organize a swim party, where we would go out to a restricted—restricted section of the beach only the military—

TS: Had access to that?

RS: No lifeguard, no nothing. And we'd go out there and the guys would have big old cans full of drinks and we'd have a hot dog roast and have a big time swimming. [chuckles]

TS: That sounds like a lot of fun.

RS: Nobody out there but us. So that was one of the fun things. And—Well—And this sounds terrible for this point in time, but if we decided—if we didn't have duty on a weekend and we decided we wanted to go to the beach, all we had to do was walk from our compound

out to the street where the streetcar ran. And we can hitchhike to the beach. Anybody would do anything for service people. They'd pick us—

TS: You felt safe to do that?

RS: And we were—We felt just as safe as could be. We usually went in two or three or maybe four together.

TS: In groups. Pairs or groups.

RS: But everybody was bent over backwards to do anything they could for service people. And you weren't afraid.

TS: You weren't.

RS: No.

TS: What was one of the hardest things about your job?

RS: The worst thing that ever happened to me, I guess, was—I was on—and I don't remember which ward it was on—it wasn't my regular surgery ward—but I was working on a ward where—and I don't know what ward they called it—but anyway, we had a chief come in that had been a prisoner of war. And we got very few casualties; they had already been in the hospitals overseas. We got some. But the hardest one was when the chief came in and he had been a prisoner of war, and he had a terrible time breathing, so back then we put oxygen tents over them. They didn't—They didn't have to wear these oxygen masks or anything.

TS: No mask, they're just in the whole tent, right? Okay.

RS: And I had taken his oxygen tent off of him and fed him his lunch. And as soon as I got him settled back into bed I went on my two hours off. And when I came back his door was closed.

TS: He'd passed on? Yeah. After all these years you still remember how that felt? Pretty sad? Yeah.

RS: Yes, that was one of the hard times. One of the times that you enjoyed most was when you had night duty and worked on the dependents ward, because the navy guys' wives always came there to have their babies. So if you were on night duty, you took the babies all out at ten o'clock to the mothers to feed them, but then at two o'clock in the morning—and we might have as many as eighteen, twenty babies in the nursery—and you'd go down and pick up the formula and feed all eighteen babies. [chuckles]

TS: Was that fun?

RS: That was a fun time. But most of our patients were guys that were stationed there in Norfolk, and they either had hernia operations or appendicitis operations, or maybe something else. I never worked on any of the wards hardly, except the surgery ward.

TS: Oh, that's right. You said they were either going into surgery or coming out of surgery.

RS: Yeah.

TS: Was it pretty busy?

RS: Yeah, it was busy. One night when I was working on the pre-surgery ward, and I was on the ward and the corpsman was in the emergency room, and of course we didn't have to help out in any emergency. But this guy came in that night and the corpsman and the doctor was in there working on him, and of course with all the guys in the ward settled down for the night I walked in there to see what was going on. I said, "What happened to him?"

The corpsman said, "Well, him and his buddy was out drinking and they got into it and his buddy cut him from the corner of his mouth back to his ear." So they were trying to stitch him up.

TS: Cut him with a knife?

RS: Yeah.

TS: Oh. They were fighting?

RS: [chuckles] I guess. A disagreement. Probably both drunk, and his buddy cut him from the corner of his mouth back to his ear.

TS: So you had things like surgeries, and fights, and probably illnesses too. But in the surgery ward you might not have seen as many of those, huh?

RS: Yeah, we didn't see—and they had people with pneumonia and stuff like that.

TS: Typical illnesses that you'd get.

RS: Yeah. But it was a learning experience, and I—one of the doctors—and I made sick calls with the doctors if the nurses were busy. We had a nurse during the day, but we didn't have one at night. But if the nurse was busy during the day she then would just say, "You go ahead and make sick call with the doctor."

And one of the doctors—and I can't remember which one it was—said to me one day, "Now, when you get out of here, you're going into nurse's training, aren't you?"

I said, "Yes, Sir." Well, when I—when I got home I found out that the only way I could go into nurse's training was to not get married.

TS: Oh, really?

RS: Back then you couldn't be married and be in nurse's training. You had to live in a dorm where the place was where you were going through nurse's training. And of course with my boyfriend home, we started planning to get married, so I went to business school.

TS: Business school instead? Well, we talked about how you had fun too. Do you have any stories that you remember that were humorous at all, or things that you did?

RS: [chuckles] I know one time when we went on a picnic out on the secluded section of the beach there that the undertow was so strong that—and we'd stand on the guys' shoulders and they'd flip us off and flip us over in the water. And if you weren't very careful—and we didn't think anything about undertow then—and it would turn you over more times than you could count. And they'd just have to get you out.

TS: That happened to you? Did you get caught up in the undertow?

RS: Oh, yeah. Got sand all—[chuckles]

TS: But you were young and didn't think about those kinds of things, right?

RS: Invincible.

TS: Invincible, that's right. Invincible. Well, did you have any favorite songs or movies from that time? Did you have any movie actors that you liked?

RS: No, I wasn't a big movie fan. The songs that we always liked were the ones that you—that were popular to do; the jitterbug. We didn't do much slow dancing.

TS: Like the big band kind of dancing?

RS: Yeah, big band.

TS: In the scrapbook that you had me look through, there was a couple of laminated papers that had songs on them, I think, that you had copied, right?

RS: When we were in boot camp, and nobody in boot camp had time enough to compose a song, but I think every—I don't know whether it was every group—like there's fifteen hundred of us that went in at one time—and we were supposed to compose a song that I guess they would use to go for the WAVES that were coming in.

TS: Okay. So you just wrote them down?

RS: Yeah. I copied some of the songs. And then right before we graduated boot camp—and this was on—I believe on a Friday night—it was bitter cold, it must have been way below zero [degrees], and we had to march, and I cannot remember where we had to march to, but it seemed like all over New York, out to this place where we had a songfest. And everybody that had composed a song had to sing that song. Another way to keep you busy. [chuckles]

TS: Yeah. Lots of that going on, keeping you busy. Well, what did you think about the mood of the country at that time? You talked a couple of times about how everybody did their part, sort of. Is that how you felt it was during World War II?

RS: Everybody sacrificed. You couldn't get shoes. If you got shoes—Before I went into the military, my boyfriend at that time was home one weekend and just to be with him a few hours longer I rode halfway back. He was going back to Norfolk—or maybe New York. I rode with him up into Virginia and it was bad weather then. Rainy and snowy. And then I sent him on and I got on the train and came back home. And in the process I had gotten my shoes wet, and they were made out of cardboard, and I almost had anklets by the time I got back home.

TS: Kind of falling apart on you?

RS: Yeah. And you couldn't get sugar, you couldn't get tires, you couldn't get anything. Had ration stamps.

TS: What kind of things did they ration then? Did they ration coffee and sugar and things like that?

RS: Yeah.

TS: Now, what did you think about—with the end of the war—with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Sometimes they talk about that and it seems a little more controversial today, but what did you think about it at that time?

RS: I didn't know that much about it. Really, we didn't. Then, there was no TV, no nothing, so what we heard is all we knew. And of course, when the war was over, of course we heard about it, and we decided that we needed to celebrate; the people in my dorm did.

TS: Okay.

RS: And we had on blue jeans and sweatshirts, I think. We didn't have on sweatshirts because it was summertime. We had on blue jeans and t-shirts, I guess. So we put our—and we had raincoats that were wool but that were real lightweight like serge material. We put our raincoats on over our blue jeans and t-shirts because we weren't allowed off base not dressed. And we put our raincoats on and went out at the gate.

TS: Snuck out?

RS: Walked out; all the way out. It was about half a mile out there to where there was a beer joint, along the trolley there.

[Extraneous comments about rainstorm redacted]

TS: Here, let me pause.

[Recording paused]

TS: —wherever you went to; the beer joint. Okay, we're back. So go ahead.

RS: We went out to the street where the trolley went down and there was a beer joint out there. And we bought a bottle of wine to celebrate, [chuckles] went back to the barracks—

TS: Did you drink it in the barracks?

RS: —and everybody had a little wine to celebrate the war being over.

TS: You didn't get in trouble?

RS: No. No.

TS: But you were kind of trying to be camouflaged if you were covering up. [both chuckle] That's good. Well, were you glad; was that a really good mood when the war was finally over?

RS: Yes. I think everybody was happy that the war was over.

TS: Well, what did you think about President [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt as a president?

RS: I think he was the greatest president we've ever had.

TS: Yeah? Why do you think that?

RS: He made some tough decisions. He had a lot of adversity, too, in his life because he had polio and couldn't get around. And he's the only president we've ever had that ran for a third term and got it. Was it four?

TS: He died soon after he was elected the fourth time. Yeah, four times.

RS: Well, when I was watching that movie that's been on lately, it said he was running for the third time, and I didn't finish watching it, [both chuckle] so I guess he did run again.

TS: Well, what about his wife, Eleanor? What did you think about Eleanor Roosevelt?

RS: She was a tough lady.

TS: Tough in a good way? What kind of way did you think?

RS: Well, she had a lot to put up with, plus she did a lot of—she did a lot of—what am I trying to say?—not community, but worldwide good works.

TS: Service. Service for the country too. How about President [Harry S.] Truman, who took over? Do you have any thoughts about him?

RS: He was okay. He was a tough nut. [chuckles] Well, he had to step in where—he was facing having to rebuild after the war, which was hard because everybody had sacrificed so much and there was so much that had to be rebuilt and rethought about.

TS: So the war ended but you didn't actually get out of the navy until May of the following year, right?

RS: Yeah.

TS: Were you still doing the same thing at work?

RS: Same thing.

TS: Did you ever think about staying in at all?

RS: Well, I did, but then I knew Ray was already home so I wanted to come home and see how things worked out at home. But we did—And we got married in December after I got home in May. And we did a foolish thing after that, though.

TS: What did you do?

RS: We'd been married a year and a half, and we talked about it, and we said, "Let's go back. Let's go back into the navy. We'll reenlist and save money to buy us a home." We went back and tried to reenlist, and Ray was in communications so they wanted him back, but they weren't taking—unless you had reenlisted while you were in there you couldn't get back in.

TS: No? Was this before 1948, before they actually made women permanently in the military, so they weren't taking anybody?

RS: Well, let's see. Was it—

TS: So you got married in '46. So about '47, is that when you were trying to get back in?

RS: I don't know. I got my discharge from—

TS: You got out in '46. So it might have been it was a period where women didn't have a permanent place in the military yet. That came a few years after the war ended.

RS: I'm not sure, but I know I couldn't get back in.

TS: You couldn't get back in but he could?

RS: He could.

TS: So then what happened?

RS: We said no.

TS: Okay. Did you do the reserves or anything like that?

RS: We were in the—what they called the inactive reserves. We didn't go to any meetings or anything, but we were in the inactive reserves for eight years.

TS: So you could get called up if something came up?

RS: Yeah.

TS: So then you got married, but you didn't have kids right away, you told me earlier, right? Yeah.

RS: No, we were happy as we can be, just the two of us, for seven years.

TS: Was it hard to adjust back into civilian life after being in the military during wartime?

RS: No, because back then most people had been through the Depression. And there not being anything here when we got back, we didn't feel like we were deprived of anything anyway. We just didn't. I know when we got our first refrigerator—we moved out of that rooming house—we got married and lived in a rooming house for a year and a half. We had our bedroom, and our kitchen was about as big as that living room.

TS: Very tiny.

RS: And a community bathroom. Everybody that lived on that hall used that bathroom.

TS: So a lot different way of living than we think about today, right?

RS: Oh yeah.

TS: Still sacrificing, I guess you can say.

RS: Yeah. And we cooked on a two burner oil stove.

TS: Being a woman who was in the WAVES at a time when really not that many women joined the military, relative to how many were in industry, like the factory that you were working in in Baltimore, do you think you were kind of like a pioneer at all; a trailblazer?

RS: No, not really. You always just felt like you were doing your part.

TS: Just doing your part. Nothing special?

RS: No.

TS: But you did say earlier you kind of wanted to try do something maybe more memorable, more meaningful, from what you were doing when you were working in Baltimore, when you joined the navy.

RS: Yeah.

TS: So you felt like maybe closer to the war by being in the military?

RS: Maybe I could make a little more of a contribution, because somebody might be able to ground down piston rings that maybe had a family and couldn't go.

TS: Okay. Do you consider yourself a fairly independent person, pretty much your whole life?

RS: Oh, yes.

TS: I already knew the answer to that, Ruth. [both chuckle] So the military didn't make you more independent, then. It just kind of brought it out in you, maybe?

RS: Yeah.

TS: You were a little bit freer to do some of the things away from your responsibilities that you had back home? Is that true?

RS: Well, I always felt like you got to do what you got to do. I mean, with Mama sick, I did what I had to do.

TS: Pick up the slack and go forward with that. Well, when the women's movement came along later in the sixties and seventies, what'd you feel about that movement; women's lib [liberation] and things like that; that women should be able to do the same jobs as men and stuff like that? Did you think about that at all? Did that affect you?

RS: No. I felt like I'd always been able to do whatever I wanted to do.

TS: You could always do whatever you wanted to do. Except for that not being able to go to nurse's training because you were married. [both chuckle]

RS: Yeah, that was discrimination for sure.

TS: Little things like that that we just—well, that's the way it is, right? And then—

RS: But then after I—And this is—this was after that, though—it was probably ten years after that—and I was working for the company that I was still employed with until this past March when I had a stroke. I'd been with them for fifty-three years. And when I first went to work with them, we had a man working in our machine shop—and I didn't know about it until it was over with—but his wife was in nurse's training at the time, but when they got married they didn't tell anybody.

TS: Because they wanted her to be able to do the training?

RS: Because she would have gotten kicked out of nurse's training, I guess. They didn't tell anybody until she had finished her nurse's training.

TS: So a secret marriage, huh?

RS: Yes.

TS: Now, what company were you working for?

RS: When I learned about that?

TS: You said you worked for a company for fifty years. What company did you work for?

RS: Drillers Service.

TS: Drillers Service?

RS: Yeah.

TS: What did you do for them?

RS: Well, I started out—and I just took the pictures back—I started out doing bookkeeping work. Of course, I did payroll, I did bookkeeping, and invoicing and everything. Well, I worked for Thomas and Howard Company for eleven years after I got out of business college, and then I went to work for Drillers Service in 1961.

TS: That's the year before I was born, Ruth.

RS: And I'm still on the payroll, I guess.

TS: Are you?

RS: I don't know.

TS: Well, after you had your stroke in March, so you haven't been working since then. Well now, you had two children. Did any of them ever decide to go in the military at all?

RS: No. My son should have—we should have pushed him in.

TS: Why do you say that?

RS: Because he is not disciplined. He has never given us one minute's trouble. He just—whatever. Couldn't get him to do his homework. Couldn't get him to clean up his room. I said until he got grown I thought my name was, "Yes, ma'am. I will. I am." And he's still the same way. But I don't have to live in his condominium.

TS: [chuckles] There you go. Now, if either your daughter or your son had wanted to go in the service, would you have encouraged them?

RS: That would take some—My son, I would have said, "Yes, you need to go in the service." My daughter? No.

TS: Why not for your daughter?

RS: It's not the same anymore.

TS: How is it different?

RS: Back when I was in the military, men respected the women that were in the military. Now I do not feel like there is any respect. And they lived separately. They worked together and lived separately, which I don't think there's a problem with that. All the guys that I ever worked with, there was never one that I worked on the wards with that was ever disrespectful. Now living together creates a whole new mess of problems.

TS: What kind of problems do you think they create?

RS: I don't think men respect women anymore, especially if they have to live together. I don't think I could live together with a bunch of men that I didn't know.

TS: You mean like in the barracks?

RS: Yeah.

TS: Well, do you think that women should be able to do any job in the military, or are there things that they shouldn't be able to do?

RS: Well, in the first place, I don't think any woman that has children should be in the military, because those children need her. And I think a woman does most of the raising of the children. So, no, if I were married and I had a child I wouldn't even consider the military. Of course, we've got a—one of our pastors at our church, he and his wife were both in the army, and I think—I don't know if they had both the kids while they were in the army or not.

TS: So you think that's just made it more difficult?

RS: I think so. I couldn't have handled it. I couldn't go off and leave a little kid at home.

TS: So if they are single, is there any job that you think they shouldn't be doing?

RS: Well, there again, if they have to go overseas they're living with the men, and to me that wouldn't be right. I just wouldn't do it.

TS: It's just a different kind of environment today than it was back when you were in the navy.

RS: Yeah.

TS: Now they go on ships too.

RS: We did not—I did not even know where the men's quarters were at Norfolk Naval Hospital.

TS: They were separate from the women?

RS: Oh, yeah.

TS: You were telling me before we turned the tape on that you do have a tradition of military service in your family, right? Your husband, and you, and your brother, right?

RS: Yeah, and my nephew.

TS: Your nephew, right. And that's [U.S.] Navy and Marine Corps, right, mostly?

RS: Yeah. Well, my husband's older brother was in the army, but he didn't—he wasn't in the army long until—

TS: Well, do you think your life has been different because of the time that you spent in the navy?

RS: Well, yes and no. I don't feel like—that I needed the discipline because I had the discipline at home—because of the situation at home—but I do feel like—that I came to respect [unclear]—

TS: The ones who gave the sacrifices? That didn't come home? You think about how that was in the 1940s and here we are in 2015 and all these years have gone by and you still have—

RS: War is still going on.

TS: War is still going on, that's right. You think about that when you read about the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan and the men and women who are—

RS: Well, you know what my husband said?

TS: What did he say?

RS: He said, "What are we doing over there anyway? They've been fighting since before [Jesus] Christ came." He said, "They're going to keep fighting till the end of time." He said, "We don't need to think we can do anything to stop it."

TS: Do you think there's anything that people who haven't been in the service don't understand about being in the military; like, any misperceptions that you'd like to address at all?

RS: I can tell from the young people now that the ones that have been in the military are probably more disciplined—I mean, the ones that are in ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps]—from the young people that haven't had any kind of military exposure. Young people now are not committed to doing a job and doing it right. They just—

TS: So you think that having some kind of military service would be beneficial to most of them?

RS: Absolutely. I think every young person, as soon as they graduate high school, they should not be just encouraged, but required to go into the military for a year. And then they'd be

more disciplined. Of course, when my great nephew went in—and he did good—that's my brother's grandson—he went in and he made real good—I can't remember what he—when he—I don't think he was officially discharged yet—

TS: But he's going to retire?

RS: He's still connected to them in some way, but he's still in school. And then a man that we go to church with who is a twenty-some year Marine Corps veteran, his grandson went into the Marine Corps at the same time that my great nephew did. He bombed out before he finished basic training I think.

TS: Well, maybe it's not for everybody then?

RS: Well, it's not, but a little bit of it wouldn't hurt.

TS: [chuckles] There you go. Well, what about the issue of—because now one of the things is that you can be a homosexual and be in the military openly. Was that anything that was out during World War II? Was that anything anybody talked about?

RS: No. No. No. No.

TS: What do you think about all that today?

RS: It's not good.

TS: Why not?

RS: Because that's not a way of life that is normal.

TS: So you see it as something that shouldn't be accepted today? They're just doing their job?

RS: Well, I don't think their lifestyle is acceptable, and I certainly wouldn't want to be in the military with homosexuals.

TS: If you knew that was happening?

RS: Yeah.

TS: Yeah. Well, what have you learned from being in the military? Anything that you'd like to pass on to anyone?

RS: No. The only thing is if you've got a job to do, do it right, no matter whether you're in the military or out. But—

TS: Just work hard?

RS: Stick with it and do the job that you're supposed to do.

TS: What does patriotism mean to you, Ruth?

RS: Everything.

TS: Everything. I'm bringing out all your tears today. You okay? Yeah. Well, would you do it again? Would you join up again?

RS: Not unless it went back to the way it was when I was in.

TS: If you had to do it all over again back then you would still do it though.

RS: Yeah.

TS: Yeah. Well, I don't have any more questions. Is there anything that you want to add that I haven't asked you about at all, that you can think of?

RS: No. The kids think I'm—My kids think I'm over patriotic now.

TS: Your kids think you're over patriotic? You're sentimental about it? Well, I look around your house and you've got a lot of symbolism of America.

RS: My nephew that was in the navy, his wife made that.

TS: Yeah. Well, it seems to me that you think a lot about the sacrifices that were made, and that are being made, and it has a deep meaning for you, right?

RS: It's so sad now.

TS: Yeah. Well, I'm grateful for the time that you shared with me here today. Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

RS: I'm sorry that I get sentimental.

TS: It's okay. I can pause here.

[Recording paused]

TS: Okay. So I'm just finishing up with Ruth, and we were talking about that she doesn't think that she's going to be going back in the navy any time soon, right?

RS: I tried one time and they didn't want me. [both chuckle]

TS: That's right. Well, I'll go ahead and shut it off, but thank you so much, Ruth. It's been a pleasure visiting with you today.

RS: Thank you.

[End of Interview]