

WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Blanche Holt Gwyn

INTERVIEWER: Hermann J. Trojanowski

DATE: February 4, 1999

[Editor's note: Transcript incorporates interviewee's revisions and does not reflect audio recording of the interview]

[Begin Interview]

HT: [My name is Hermann] Trojanowski. Today is February 4, 1999. I'm at the home of Mrs. Blanche Gwyn in Mount Airy, North Carolina. I'm here to do an interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection.

Mrs. Gwyn, thank you so much for seeing me today. I really appreciate it. If you could say a word or two to see how this sounds. Just give me your full name, including your maiden name, and where you live.

BG: First, let me say I am Miss Gwyn.

HT: I'm sorry.

BG: Gwyn is my maiden name. Where I live right now?

HT: Yes.

BG: I live at—the address is 3101 Summit Hills Trail, Mount Airy, North Carolina, 27030.

[recorder turned off]

HT: Again, Miss Gwyn, thank you so much for seeing me today. Could you tell me where you were born and where you grew up?

BG: I was born in Mount Airy and went through high school here.

HT: And what was the name of the high school that you attended?

BG: It was Mount Airy High School.

HT: And did you come from a large family?

BG: Yes, I was the oldest, but I had two brothers and two sisters younger.

HT: And I understand that you attended Woman's College [of the University of North Carolina] in Greensboro, and graduated in 1936. What was your degree?

BG: It was a B.S. in—I believe they called it secretarial administration at that time.

HT: Is there anything you particularly remember about your school days in the middle of the Depression in the 1930s?

BG: I remember that it was the middle of the Depression. I don't remember anything in particular, except that I took that particular course because I thought it gave me two chances of finding work. I did get teacher training and a teacher certificate, which later I never used, but was also trained for office work.

HT: This was a four-year program?

BG: Right.

HT: And do you recall any of your professors that you had during that time? Do any of them stand out?

BG: It's odd, but the only two I remember extremely well were a history professor, a Miss [Vera] Largent, and a chemistry professor whose name, I believe, was [Miss] McDearman.

HT: Any particular reasons why these stand out in your mind?

BG: Well, I was interested in their courses, and they were extremely good teachers. I think Miss McDearman asked me about majoring in chemistry. I was sorry later I didn't do it, but at that time I just had in mind being quickly trained to do either of two jobs.

HT: Do you recall why you chose Woman's College?

BG: For one thing, I had an aunt by marriage who was devoted to the school and very enthusiastic about my going there. Another thing, my mother was a graduate of Salem Academy and College [Winston-Salem, North Carolina] and would have liked me to go to Salem, but as you know, it was the Depression. I had a sister who was just one year behind me, so it was a matter of finances, too.

HT: And do you recall what life was like on campus in those days? What was dorm life like,

and what did you girls do for fun, and that sort of thing?

BG: Well, I wound up in a room in what was then called Spencer [Residence Hall]. It was one of the oldest buildings on the campus. It had a lady in charge—I don't know why I can't remember her name, but she was a dear, white-haired person, and truly a lady. And we used to give her fits sometimes because we wouldn't get to bed early enough, and she'd come checking down the hallway.

HT: She was the housemother, I guess?

BG: She was the housemother. [Minnie Lou] Jamison.

HT: Miss Jamison?

BG: Jamison. And she was of such years that I think my aunt had known her. [chuckling] Anyway, she was always telling me, "Now you know better than that." But I never could get to bed very early. We used to lie in our doorways and talk to each other up and down the hall.

HT: Was there a curfew, that you had to be in bed by a certain time?

BG: Yes. There was a house president, a senior student, who checked the halls and tried to settle us down. We gave her fits, too. Oh, we weren't all that bad; but it was mainly a matter of being quiet. [chuckling] Anyway, we had a lot of fun in that. I also enjoyed all studies, really. And I made some good friends, of whom I know almost nothing now. I don't know what's happened to them.

I will tell you that I attended the first general reunion of classes after World War II. My two sisters and a sister-in-law, all alumnae, said, "We are going to the reunion and you must come." Well, every class was supposed to have a luncheon or some sort of get-together. When we got there and registered at the Alumnae House, it turned out that there was nothing for the Class of '36. I guess not enough members responded, I don't know. [chuckling] Anyway, my sisters and my sister-in-law all had luncheons at various places around Greensboro, and they were very worried about me. Someone in the Alumnae House said, "Don't worry, we'll put her with a group." They took me to the home ec[onomics] Building to be with the class of, I believe, 1904.

HT: Nineteen-oh-four?

BG: Right. And they were charming ladies. It turned out that one of them had known my aunt. So they were very nice and very welcoming, and I appreciated that. After we had had lunch, one of these dear ladies asked, "Dear, where are you going now?" And I said, "I'm going back to the Alumnae House to meet the rest of my family." And she said, "Oh, well, I'll just take you there." So we go out to her big limousine and waiting chauffeur, and we get in and drive up to the Alumnae House. And my sisters and sister-in-law are standing there waiting. The chauffeur hands me out of the car, and the dear lady and I say goodbye. And when I joined my sisters, who never were any respecters of person, one of

them said, "Well, we needn't have worried. We see you found your age group." That's all they ever said to me about it. [chuckling]

HT: Where did you have lunch that day? It was off campus?

BG: In the home ec building.

HT: Oh, in the home ec building? Okay.

BG: As I recall, we had a long and merry luncheon. [chuckling] Anyway, I haven't been to many reunions, so I remember that one in particular.

HT: And this was right after the war?

BG: Pretty soon. I think it was a reunion for everybody, for all classes, and nearly every class had some plan and some place to be.

HT: Did you ever meet Clara Booth Byrd? She was the alumni secretary about that time.

BG: It doesn't ring a bell, but that doesn't mean anything.

HT: Okay. Well, that's fine. Do you recall any of the administration from that period of time, like Miss Harriet Elliott [dean] or Dr. Walter Clinton Jackson [chancellor]?

BG: Miss Elliott, yes.

HT: Did you ever have a chance to meet her and talk to her person-to-person, perhaps?

BG: Well, yes, but just where there were a lot of people.

HT: And what about Dr. Jackson? Did you ever meet him?

BG: Not just personally, no.

HT: What did you girls do for fun at WC [Woman's College] during the mid-1930s?

BG: Well, you know, I can't recall a great deal that we did do because I guess nobody had very much money. So we weren't out spending lavishly. When I could get away, I visited grandmother at Oak Ridge [North Carolina]. Do you know where that is?

HT: Yes.

BG: It was a very short distance away, and sometimes on weekends I went there.

HT: And how did you get back and forth?

BG: Usually with some friends who—

HT: Because not many people had cars in those days.

BG: No. Some friends of my grandmother, who had connections in Greensboro, often gave me a ride, a lift.

HT: Do you recall the trolley system that ran on Spring Garden Street in those days?

BG: No, I don't.

HT: I was going to ask you how you and your other classmates got downtown. Did you walk?

BG: We walked. We walked. Once in a while we'd go down to a movie. I think it was the old Carolina Theatre.

HT: Right, it was built in 1927, so yes. Do you remember the boys coming on campus from Chapel Hill [the University of North Carolina] and NC State [University] in those days to date the girls?

BG: Well, yes, to an extent. In fact, there were boys from Guilford [College, Greensboro, North Carolina] and other schools also who came.

HT: After you graduated in 1936, what type of work did you do?

BG: Secretarial.

HT: Were jobs very difficult to come by in those days?

BG: Well, I think it was a little harder, certainly. And also, being from a fairly small town, I really didn't know how it would be elsewhere. I returned to Mount Airy and worked as secretary to the superintendent of schools. And then I heard from a friend of mine who was in Kingsport, Tennessee, with Tennessee Eastman Company, which was a wholly owned division of Kodak, and I was offered a job there. So I went to work for Eastman.

HT: And how long did you stay in Tennessee?

BG: About four and a half years. In 1944, I went on military leave from Eastman to join the WAVES [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service—Navy]. At Eastman I worked first as secretary to the medical director, and then as personnel and production statistics assistant in a production department. Do you know anything about Tennessee Eastman?

HT: No.

BG: Well, I don't want to bore you with too much, but a plant there was started by Kodak

about 1919, wood distillation. What they were after was acetic acid, which was needed at Kodak. With very active research, the plant expanded into the production of fibers, plastics and chemicals. It was already a very large company when I went to work there.

HT: So you stayed there from what, about 1937?

BG: I believe I went in 1939.

HT: Until 1944?

BG: Until 1944, and then I took military leave. When I left, I was working in a fibers sales group. Later, when I was about to be discharged from the navy, someone from Tennessee Eastman got in touch with me and asked if I'd like to work in New York City, and they offered me a job there as assistant office manager. They were opening a general office to bring together all Tennessee Eastman sales and advertising activities in the New York City area. Eventually all the marketing and advertising were put under a new company, a subsidiary of Kodak called Eastman Chemical Products. I worked for this company until retirement—all later years in advertising. I don't know if you want all that detail or not.

HT: Oh, that's wonderful. It's fine. If we could backtrack just a minute about when you joined the WAVES. Do you recall why you chose the WAVES, as opposed to one of the other branches of the service?

BG: Well, I went in rather late, and—I don't know, I just liked what I knew of the navy better. Also, I liked their uniforms.

HT: I understand they were very handsome uniforms, designed by a New York fashion designer named Mainbocher, I think was his name.

BG: Yes, right. A WAVES recruitment group came to Bristol [Tennessee], and I went to ask some questions. This unit was there looking for officer candidates—they called it *procurement*, which I always thought was funny. They *procured* officer candidates. Well, they procured me. I took a written test and had a physical, and in due course was ordered to report to the Naval Reserve Midshipman School, at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts.

HT: And do you recall what month in 1944 that was?

BG: Yes. My pay entry base date, I think, was July 7th. I can look that up.

HT: We can do that later on. Do you recall your first day at officer indoctrination school, I think they called it, at Northampton? What was that like?

BG: Well, there were two battalions. One was the Hotel Battalion which was quartered in the Northampton Inn, a place famous for food in New England. The other, the Campus Battalion, was quartered in a dormitory at Smith College. The Campus Battalion had to

march a few blocks to the Inn for meals. I was assigned to the Campus Battalion. Another girl and I were in a suite.

My, you asked about the first day. Well, for the first few days we went through much processing—measurement for uniforms, trips to a shoe store to be properly shod, and scheduling of doctor and dental appointments. Of course, we received shots. It was a week or a little more before we got uniforms, I believe. But we immediately had to muster each morning, of course. I was on the third floor in the dormitory. I went down three flights to muster in a courtyard. We were immediately assigned to a platoon, and naturally I was immediately a squad leader because of height. When we would muster, I was supposed to get my squad lined up and check attendance. I'd step out and look down the line. To see if they were all there, I counted feet. There was one gal near the end of the squad who told me afterwards that the sight of my earnest face counting their feet saved her sanity for the first few days of regimentation. [chuckling] They rang a bell for us in the morning, and we had very little time to get down to the courtyard. I had a dreadful time with my roommate because she didn't want to get up.

HT: What time did you have to get up in the morning?

BG: You know, I don't remember. It could have been 7:00, but may have been a little earlier, because we had to muster and then march to breakfast. From there we marched by platoon to a full schedule of classes. It was midsummer and pretty hot. Have you interviewed anybody else who was there?

HT: Yes.

BG: Yes? Well, then you probably know that they had us organized every minute of every day. And when we were drilling or exercising on the playing field, oh, it was hot!

HT: Do you recall how long this indoctrination school lasted?

BG: Two months.

HT: Two months?

BG: Yes. I will tell you one thing. An officer frequently inspected our quarters. I happened to be there at the first inspection. Maybe it was the first week. In came this spic-and-span ensign, wearing white gloves. The dormitory rooms had old radiators, and she started checking the back of the radiator with a white glove. You know, I never was very nautical; and so I said, "Ooh, if I were you, I don't believe I would do that." She didn't smile or say a word. She just put that white glove down behind the radiator and came up with dust on it. Well, inspectors left a little report in your room. Normally we didn't see it until the end of the day. The best report you could get was "smart, shipshape, and seaman-like." We got only "smart" the first time. So [chuckling] we worked and worked. We dusted, cleaned, made up beds so tight you could flip a quarter on them. But "smart, shipshape" was the best we got. Then my roommate sprained an ankle and was in the infirmary for a couple of weeks, I believe. I thought, well, surely with just myself here to

mess up things, I can get a perfect report. I worked diligently. You could eat off of anything in that place. Well, I returned to a report that still said only “smart, shipshape.” The inspector had added a note to explain why I didn’t make it all the way. And you know what it said? Now this became a joke in my family and among others in my platoon that I knew over the years. It said, “Moth adrift.” You know, anything out of place is “adrift” in the navy. Well, I looked and looked. I couldn’t even find that moth that was adrift. Finally, way back in a far corner of the closet, I detected small fragments of a moth’s wings. And I pledge my word to everybody, that little moth flew in there and expired after I left that morning. Anyway, it was a joke among us for years: “Moth adrift.” Eventually my roommate and I achieved “smart, shipshape, and seaman-like,” maybe because that ensign just gave up.

HT: Now, the top grade was “seaman-like”? Was that the best grade?

BG: In a sense, but you were supposed to get all three. I think everybody perhaps had somewhat the same trouble. The first reports were strict. When our quarters didn’t appear to be “seaman-like,” as well as “smart” and “shipshape,” it worried us because we felt it would go against our record. Anyway, we finally did get there, but it made me very conscious of moths and other things being adrift, I’ll tell you. [chuckling]

I would like to say that although I’ve been to school a lot in my life, I have never been in any one place, and in such a concentrated course of study, where I had more excellent instructors. You know, the navy took in women later than the other services, or at least later than the army, and gained from what the army had learned. Also, the navy apparently went to various colleges over the country and selected instructors who, I suppose, had no choice but to come. We had some excellent instruction, we really did. The classwork was very interesting and thorough. We drilled, too, but I don’t think the navy has ever been terribly strong in the marching. An unfortunate marine captain had the job of drill instructor.

HT: Speaking of instructors, did you have all female instructors?

BG: No, some were male, but most were women. All the courses were connected with the navy in some way: naval history, regulations, terminology, aviation, ship identification, customs, etc. And we were briefed by a navy captain once a week on the progress of the war. We marched nearly everywhere we went—by platoon to classes, by battalion to meals. And we sang as we marched. You’ve probably heard this before many times, but you know of a song popular at the time, “I Don’t Want to Set the World on Fire”?

HT: I’m not familiar with that one.

BG: Well, it had been adapted for our purpose. We sang just this much, “I don’t want to set the world on fire, I just want to set.” There were several such ditties, inherited probably from previous classes. I always wondered how the people who lived along our route could stand the noise.

HT: Did you ever have any free time?

BG: At the end of our first month, we had a weekend off. Another girl and I went to Boston. I had a lifelong friend who was playing in the piano bar at Dinty Moore's Restaurant, and we had a wonderful visit there with her. The restaurant owner insisted we be his guests at dinner and gave us a table despite a long waiting line. When we tried to thank him, he said he just liked the navy. [chuckling] We met many such unexpected kindnesses—a tribute, I think, to the uniform.

HT: What did your family and friends think when you joined the navy in 1944? Did they have any kind of reaction?

BG: No. They were a bit surprised, perhaps, and interested. I had a brother in the army and one in the air force. So my mother, [chuckling] used to five children, said, "Well, why not just be represented everywhere?" [chuckling]

HT: Did you have any sisters who were in one of the other branches?

BG: No, I was the only one.

HT: Did you have any friends who joined, female friends who joined one of the services?

BG: No, I didn't. Oh yes, there was one girl I knew in high school who joined the WACs [Women's Army Corps] early on, I think. However, after I was out of service, on the train coming south one Christmas I met a college classmate and learned she had been in the WAVES.

HT: Do you recall her name?

BG: Yes. Well, I'll tell you in a moment. [pause] She died about two years ago, I think. Laura Gamble, G-a-m-b-l-e. She was working in New York and belonged to a Naval Reserve unit there. Through her suggestion, I also joined the unit.

HT: After you finished officer's candidate school, where was your first permanent duty station?

BG: I was sent to Washington to what was then called the Bureau of Ships.

HT: And what type of work was done there?

BG: I was in an expediting section. We expedited delivery of new electronic equipment of various kinds to ships that had been damaged in battle. Our job was to contact naval inspectors at manufacturing plants under contract for the specific equipment needed, and to push for speedy shipment. For instance, I remember one urgent request from a damaged cruiser on the West Coast. I talked with the appropriate inspector and we managed between us somehow to get the desired equipment quickly on its way to the West Coast.

As the end of the war neared, I worked in a section that was somewhat different. It dealt with "controlled correspondence"—an effort to expedite answers to incoming correspondence. Shortly before I was discharged from service, what was then called the Bureau of Supplies and Accounts suddenly got hot on my trail about that equipment that went to the West Coast. It was not accounted for—paperwork evidently went astray. I talked with various seniors and finally with an admiral in the Bureau of Ships. I told him the whole sad story, and he said—I'll never forget him for this—"Tell me one thing, young lady. Did the ship get the equipment?" I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Then you forget it. Just ignore inquiries." And I left the service, ignoring—I thought, well, someday they'll come after me, I guess. [chuckling]

HT: Did you enjoy your stay in Washington?

BG: Yes, I did. I enjoyed it. While there I also was in some navy classes, such as Russian and rifle and pistol shooting. I was in one or two University of Maryland extension classes, too. One, I know, was writing.

A team in the Bureau of Ships asked me to take part in a pistol meet with the Bureau of Ordnance. I said, "But I'm not that good." However, they were in dire need, so I went. I remember we went out to Anacostia [Virginia] on a very windy day. Every time I'd start pointing the pistol at the target, it seemed to me the wind just pushed my arm aside. And I thought, "They'll be sorry they asked me to come." Some two or three or four weeks later an officer came by to see me in the office one day and said, "I am so pleased to bring you this medal." And I said, "A medal? For what?" He said, "Well, you won sixth place." [chuckling] Sixth place! And he said, "The Bureau of Ships is very happy to award you this medal because you helped us win." I told somebody in my family once, "Don't mess with me, I won sixth place in an important meet and have a medal to prove it." Ah well, I'm just trying to remember some little things that for some reason stick in my mind.

HT: That's a wonderful story. What did you do for fun in Washington in those days?

BG: Well, I did not live in barracks, I lived out in town. Yes, for some time I lived in a—What was the name of that place? Two homes had been thrown together and doorways cut through, and officers were quartered there. When I first went it was filled, but finally there was an opening and I moved in there for a while.

Well, as I recall, friends called and sometimes you met people. It seems to me we often went out to good dinners, usually seafood. And I went to New York a couple of times to meet some other friends with whom I had been in training. One very good friend was at the navy's underwater sound lab in New London [Connecticut], and she would come down to New York.

HT: Did you have much free time?

BG: It was a lot like just working in an office, really. Of course, the navy was strict about your reporting on time, and you were there duty until a certain hour. It was very good duty. I was glad I didn't live in navy quarters, really. Because even in the house where a lot of

WAVE officers were living, it was not regimented very much.

[End Side A, Begin Side B]

BG: In civilian surroundings I always felt it vaguely pretentious to refer to the floor as a deck, and the wall as a bulkhead, and the ceiling as the overhead. Especially at Northampton in training, there were some gals who were just so—they were so nautical that it was hard not to laugh. But they were dead serious about it, and, of course, correct. Fortunately, I never was in living quarters where I had to observe that terminology very much.

HT: Did you enjoy your work?

BG: I enjoyed it, and I met some very nice people working. I worked with a lot of civilians—civil service personnel. There was a naval officer in charge of our section and three or four other persons were in the navy. But the majority were civilians. And I will tell you, I don't think the civilians liked us much. The officer in charge thought we needed more personnel, and he asked me to survey the situation and give him a report. I found one or two areas in which I thought, yes, another person or two might be helpful; but in general I didn't think we really needed them, and I tried to put that tactfully in the report. Being “surveyed” didn't set well with the civilian employees. They thought that we were going to do something to make them lose their jobs. I tried to reassure them. But they all thought, “Well, you were just put in here, what do you know about this? We've been doing this work for years.” So it was not all really easy, but we managed to get along. For years after the war, I kept in touch with some of them.

HT: With the civilians?

BG: Yes.

HT: Did you ever encounter any discrimination because you were a woman and in the navy?

BG: Not really, and perhaps I was never in a situation where I would. I was not in competition with any men. I have to tell you, at Northampton instructors reminded us frequently, “Remember, you're a lady first and a navy officer second.” I always thought that was rather nice. They also told us, and I'm sure you've heard this one probably many times, “A WAVES officer—a navy officer—does not drink.” You've heard that?

HT: I have not.

BG: You haven't heard it? “But if she drinks, she does not get drunk. But if she gets drunk, she does not fall down. But if she falls down, she falls with her stripes folded under her as she goes.” They quoted us that every now and then, too. You can see there was some thought put into these exhortations. [laughter]

HT: Well, did you ever receive any special treatment because you were a woman naval officer?

BG: I don't know of special treatment, but maybe—I was very fortunate, I think, in that I never found that I was put down at all by service personnel because I was a woman. Everybody seemed to be very nice, very respectful, very cooperative, and I didn't feel that I was put upon or put down at all. I don't remember ever feeling like that.

HT: You mentioned that you worked with quite a few civilians. Did you have enlisted navy personnel working with you as well?

BG: No. Well, there were some that I knew there, but I don't think they worked directly in the section I was in. But there were several that I knew who worked in and around, nearby. You know, a lot of people who went into the WAVES and became officers were assigned to barracks to supervise enlisted gals. The powers-that-be did their best, I think, to assign us to some duty that they felt any previous education or experience we had would fit us for. And I was glad I didn't get any barracks duty.

HT: So you never had to supervise enlisted people?

BG: No, I didn't. I was very happy about that. [chuckling]

HT: Do you recall the hardest thing you ever had to do physically while you were in the navy?

BG: I never did anything physically as hard as some of the days in training, because we had classes from early morning until late afternoon, and sometime each day we had to get down on the athletic field or do something in the way of physical activity. I did do swimming for a while, and then I believe I played a little tennis. Then we had at some point what they called Sports Day, and the battalions competed with each other. In my company we had two little French girls—I never knew before then that the French also had a women's organization attached to their navy. On Sports Day everybody had to participate and they didn't know what to do. So some of us suggested various things, and they elected to play softball. You should have seen those girls waving the bat. It never connected with a ball. [chuckling] But they were very congenial. This wild activity was something they'd never tried. Incidentally, they had very attractive blue uniforms and they wore a tri-cornered hat.

HT: Now, were they there to learn?

BG: There were there to get the training.

HT: To learn at the training? So they were fellow classmates of yours, or something like that?

BG: Yes.

HT: They were Free French, or—?

BG: Yes. They were on our side. [chuckling]

HT: Okay. And after they left, do you know what—

BG: I don't know what happened. I think they went back to France. I believe one of them was the daughter of a French admiral. Perhaps that was why she was in the service.

HT: That's interesting. I had never heard of that. We were talking the other day about German women in the military, and we didn't know if they were in the military, and we have since found out that they were in the military. So that's very interesting. I imagine many countries had that same sort of organization. I know there were military women in various branches of the British army and navy, and the Canadian services as well.

BG: Well, the one question everybody has always asked me, "Were you overseas?" At that time the navy didn't send WAVES overseas. The whole idea was to release men for sea duty.

HT: Right.

BG: A few went to Hawaii, I believe.

HT: Right. Well, speaking of releasing men for duty, one of the reasons that many women did join was to release a man for combat. Did you view your enlistment in that perspective? Did you think that you joining the navy released a man for combat?

BG: Well, I knew the purpose was to, yes, release men from the duty ashore so they could be at sea. Of course, that usually meant combat. I thought it was worthwhile. I can't say I was totally altruistic. I'll tell you, I felt kind of out of it all. There was this big war going on, and you read about all this, and we just seemed to be sort of in a backwater. And I think that was one reason I thought I'd like to just get out and be in part of this myself. So I think that's one reason I did it.

HT: Do you recall the hardest thing you ever had to do emotionally while you were in the service?

BG: I don't recall anything that was especially emotional.

[recorder turned off]

HT: What was your most embarrassing moment, funny moment, or hilarious moment that you can recall? Anything that stands out?

BG: Oh, I don't know that I—I don't momentarily think of anything in particular.

HT: Okay, that's fine. Were you ever in any kind of danger, or afraid?

BG: I don't think so.

HT: We've discussed your social life a little bit. Is there anything else that you'd like to add about what you and your fellow WAVES did in Washington during the war for fun? I know there wasn't probably a great deal of money and that sort of thing, so it was kind of difficult.

BG: I seem to remember the Willard Hotel cocktail lounge with a great deal of affection. That used to be a sort of meeting place. We met other service people there, too. I was in there once—it was crowded—and somebody came up behind me and put an arm on my shoulder and said, "Well, I do declare, I think this is my dear cousin." It was a first cousin who was in the paratroopers. He had been wounded and was just out of a hospital in England. He had in tow a little Marine girl. [chuckling] They joined us, several of us, for the evening; and he asked me not to tell his mother that I'd seen him because, "She doesn't know I'm home yet and I don't want her to worry." At the Willard I also ran into a number of other people that I knew or had known somewhere else over the years.

HT: Did you meet any interesting people during your service days? They could be famous or not famous.

BG: Some interesting, but none very famous. The Bureau of Ships was in one of the temporary buildings connected by a wide covered walkway and I would see sometimes a celebrity or two there. I remember one day I nearly ran, literally, into Douglas Fairbanks Jr. He was evidently just in from the sea—his braid had turned green.

HT: These buildings you referred to, were they on the Mall [Washington, D.C.] at that time?

BG: Yes.

HT: And they were all temporary barracks-type?

BG: They were temporary office buildings.

HT: Do you recall what your favorite songs and movies and dances were in those days?

BG: Well, I don't remember about songs. We were all, what do they say, into popular music of the day, of course. We still did [chuckling] what was then, to some extent, ballroom dancing, along with some version of the "shag." As for movies, we were very fond of British wartime films.

HT: And how long were you in the military? When did you get out?

BG: Well, I was in just under two years. I got out on—I think it was April 20, 1946.

HT: Did you ever think about making it a career, or was that an option?

BG: No, I didn't. I think it was an option—to apply, at least—but I had no real wish to do so. I enjoyed it all, but I think I was purely a wartime volunteer. [chuckling]

HT: Well, do you think you made a contribution to the war effort?

BG: I hope I helped a little. I worked fairly and I was busy, but somebody else would have to say whether my presence contributed anything or not. [chuckling]

HT: Do you recall what the mood or the climate was like during the war years in the country?

BG: You mean the—

HT: The general mood of the country.

BG: The mood? I think there was a great spirit of cooperation. It's a terrible thing to say because a war caused it, but I think there was a feeling of everybody being in the same boat, a whole lot more so than had been true before the war. It was a time when people really were actively patriotic. I thought of this often in later years when young people seemed to have a very different attitude toward the military.

HT: What did you think of President Franklin D. Roosevelt? Since you were in Washington, did you ever have occasion to see him and Mrs. Roosevelt?

BG: No, not in person. I thought he was the right man for the job at the time. If you are interested at all, when he ran for a third term I became a Republican. [chuckling] I just somehow didn't approve of another term. I also felt that he—maybe through the needs of the time, I don't know—had gotten us well on the way to socialism. You know, I'm a bit conservative. I believe in helping people to help themselves, but I do not think the government should support them indefinitely. I think there should be help where there's real need, but I have seen a generation or two come along who regarded it as a way of life. I think it did something with the work ethic. I may be wrong. One of my nephews said, "You're a tough old bird." So maybe that's the trouble.

HT: [chuckling] Well, what did you think of Mrs. Roosevelt?

BG: Well, I admired a lot of the things she did. I think she was pretty far out on the liberal end. But, oh, certainly she was a great woman. And I think he was a great president, and just what we needed. And now I hope you're not going to ask me about our present one, are you?

HT: Oh no. I was going to ask you, do you recall who your heroes and heroines were in those days?

BG: Mercy! Well, you know, I was always a great admirer of [General] Omar Bradley. I thought he was the brains of the Allied headquarters. [chuckling] And I always thought a lot of [General] George [C.] Marshall. [chuckling] I just don't remember anybody else in particular. Maybe I wasn't thinking much about it at the time.

HT: Do you recall where you were when you heard about VE [Victory in Europe] Day and VJ [Victory in Japan] Day?

BG: I was in Washington when I heard about VE Day. And I actually reported in to work, as usual, but there wasn't anybody there. Everything just folded, just broke up for the day. And there were people all over the streets, parks and open spaces—all celebrating. Things were pretty wild that afternoon and evening. As for VJ Day, the offices closed and weren't even open the next day. I met people on the way—I walked to work—and they would say, "Gosh, no use going." And they were right. We had a celebration with some other navy people that evening.

HT: You said you got out of the navy in April of 1946?

BG: Right.

HT: Can you describe for me your adjustment to civilian life after you got out?

BG: Well, Eastman had asked me if I wanted to work in New York City. It was arranged for me to report there some days after I got out of the navy. So I really had no time to adjust. But going back to the same company made it easier, I expect. The main problem was finding a place to live.

HT: What type of impact did having been in the military have on your life immediately after the war, and in the long range?

BG: Well, one thing it did was get me out of the sort of work I was in before I went into the WAVES. I probably wouldn't have had the chance to go to this job in New York if I hadn't—I don't know, but I think I might not have had. So it sort of changed the direction. Also, since I had taken the course I had graduated in at UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro], I always felt what I really would have preferred to get was a B.A. So I hadn't been in New York too long before I enrolled at Columbia [University], and I went to school a lot there at night and on Saturdays. I did about two years' work in what they called the School of General Studies and then enrolled in the graduate school of business. So I had a chance to do a little bit more about education.

HT: Did you use your GI Bill?

BG: I did for a little of it.

HT: Because I've talked to many people who say that was just absolutely a wonderful thing, to be able to use the GI Bill to further their education.

BG: Yes.

HT: Has your life been different because you were in the military?

BG: Well, just insofar as it took a different direction after that. I joined a reserve unit. Although I did so little active duty in the beginning, I had some more time in in the reserve unit. Part of the time I was in pay-status for the drills. And I was in the ready reserve for a long time, with orders where to report in case a war was declared, which was not, in a way, such a remote possibility for some years there.

HT: And how long were you in the reserves?

BG: I think I finally—I believed they added up twenty-three and a half satisfactory years in all.

HT: So you retired from the navy then?

BG: I retired, yes, and draw a little something, which is nice. Every little bit helps.

HT: That's true. [chuckling]

BG: I'm still in touch with two or three people that I knew well in the reserve unit, and I knew some wonderful people there. I don't know if you're interested much in that, but I belonged to a very interesting reserve.

HT: Yes, tell me about it. Yes, please.

BG: Well, first, the old Greensboro classmate of mine, whom I met on the train after the war, she was in what they called a Composite Unit. It was all women, but it had a few Coast Guard gals. So I went into that unit, but pretty soon it broke up and we were asked to join what was called a telecom censorship unit, an adjunct of naval intelligence. It met in the evening, and it was composed of men and women who worked in New York City during the day. They were an interesting group. Among the women there were two who worked for Burroughs, computer pioneers, as instructors. Then we had a gal who was in some sort of administrative job in the John Robert Powers model school. There was at least one who worked for the City of New York, and one who was with New York Telephone Company, acting as liaison with other smaller telephone companies throughout the Northeast. Oh, yes, and we had one who was a home economist with a national food company. She belonged to an organization called Home Economists in Business. [chuckling] And you just don't know what an important group they were. It was composed of home economists in business, women editors from the shelter [women's] magazines, and people in high-up jobs in home [economics] schools, and women in fashion. Now, [chuckling] this gal was always going off to conventions. And during the time I knew her, she went to Paris [France], Montevideo [Uruguay], to Lima [Peru], not to mention all the cities across this country. Many of the women were in interesting lines

of work. Several of them had joined the WAVES in the beginning and had risen in rank, and I imagine that helped them get better jobs when they were out. I'm sure it did. I think it helped me too, probably.

HT: I would imagine it would have given you some leadership training as well, and that sort of thing.

BG: Right.

HT: Well, do you consider yourself to be an independent person?

BG: Yes, sort of. [chuckling] I've been accused of it.

HT: Well, did the military make you that way, or were you independent before you went in the military?

BG: I think I was somewhat that way, but I will have to admit I was a—For some reason, I was a shy child, and timid. I think being in the military helped me a lot. Of course, a few other things later helped me too, I suppose. [chuckling]

HT: Well, do you consider yourself to be a pioneer or a trailblazer when you entered the military?

BG: Not really, I suppose, because I went in so late that I didn't think of myself as a trailblazer. But someone said to me, "Now, of all the people I know, you are the one who would do that." I don't know what they meant exactly by that. I didn't seem to know any women who had gone in the service. I'm sure there were some in the town, but I didn't know them.

HT: Would you consider yourself and other women who joined the military to have been forerunners of what they call the women's movement today?

BG: Mercy! [chuckling] Well, I certainly had never thought about that at all. I didn't look at it that way myself. Perhaps in a way, though, it's true. Well, you can see even in my case it enabled me to step out of the sort of thing I was in, and it made me also more ready to take on different things. After I was in New York a few years, I went into the advertising department for Eastman. I was in that for a good while until I was transferred back to Tennessee in a technical writing capacity.

HT: So you were a writer for Eastman?

BG: I did ad and publicity writing. Then we turned more and more of the work over to an advertising agency, and I became copy editor, working closely with the agency people.

HT: Who was the agency? Do you recall?

BG: For most of the time it was J. Walter Thompson . Very nice people to work with.

HT: As you know, as I mentioned earlier, I've talked with several ladies on this project, and one of the things that I always ask is how were the women who joined the military perceived by the general public and by their families and by men? There were some slander campaigns started, particularly against the WACs in 1943. Do you recall anything about that?

BG: Yes, I do, and I will say that that may have been one reason I chose the navy. Well, I believe I said I think the navy benefited from some of the bad experiences the army had had. And that may be one of the reasons they put so much emphasis on, "Remember, you're a lady first."

HT: How do you feel about women in combat positions? Such as recently women flew combat over Iraq.

BG: Well, I've always thought I wouldn't like to do it, but I really believe it's inevitable in the long run. If women intend to be out there, they've got to give as well as receive, I think. If they intend to get out in the world and have equality with men in many ways, then they've got to—they should share some of the same burden. I really don't know—and certainly you realize I'm no expert on this—I'm not sure if women are emotionally ready for it, or whether they ever would be. But I think it's probably inevitable.

HT: Well, is there anything else you'd like to add about your military service that we haven't covered, any unusual stories or remembrances that you might have?

BG: No, I don't believe so. I've probably run off too long at the mouth now. [chuckling]

HT: We touched on what you did after the military. I think you said you were in advertising for a number of years. And when did you come back to the South from New York?

BG: I believe it was in 1970.

HT: Well, is there anything else you'd like to add about your time since you left the service that we haven't talked about?

BG: After retirement from Eastman I moved to a place my youngest sister and I owned near Fancy Gap [Virginia], on top of the mountain, and then to a condo in Mt. Airy. In more recent years I sold both places and in 1998 moved into this retirement complex where you've found me. I like it very much [tape excerpted].

HT: It's very nice indeed. It truly is. Well, Miss Gwyn, I don't have any other questions for you, and I don't want to tire you out because we've been talking for about an hour and a half.

BG: Well, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to run on so.

HT: No, that's perfectly all right.

BG: See, you just started me off with things I hadn't thought about. [chuckling]

HT: Well, again, thank you so much.

[End of Interview]