

**Oral History Interview of
Wilma Coon**

**Interviewed by: David Marshall
February 16, 2015
Lubbock, Texas**

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Transcript Overview:

This interview features Wilma Coon, who discusses her early life and experiences as a nurse, veteran, and dog trainer.

Length of Interview: 02:17:46

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David Marshall (DM):

The date is February 16, 2015, and this is David Marshall interviewing Wilma Coon at her home in Lubbock, Texas. And could we just begin with your date and place of birth? What is your date and place of birth?

Wilma Coon (WC):

I was born in Inglewood, Tennessee on October 5, 1923.

DM:

Okay, and your full name.

WC:

Wilma Green Coon.

DM:

Okay. Where is that in Tennessee? Is it the eastern part, or the—?

WC:

I have no idea. I passed by it one time on the train, and an arrow point that said “Inglewood” that way.

DM:

Okay, so you didn't really grow up there.

WC:

Oh, no, no, I—my family moved to New Orleans when I was an infant. In fact, mother tells the story that I took my first steps in City Park in New Orleans. So I was a—I wasn't even walking yet when we moved there.

DM:

Okay, and what were your parents' names?

WC:

William L. Green and Alberta Bailey.

DM:

Okay, were they from Tennessee, both of them?

WC:

No, my dad was from Arkansas, and my mother was from Mississippi.

DM:

Okay, well why did they move to New Orleans?

WC:

Business.

DM:

Okay, your dad was a businessman. What kind of business was he in?

WC:

At that time, I don't really know. I know I've been told, but I've forgotten.

DM:

Well, you were young, anyhow, when you moved. Did you grow—did you stay in New Orleans all of your childhood?

WC:

Yes, in fact I graduated high school there. And I went to girls' schools, and—

DM:

Were they private schools?

WC:

No, they were public, but in New Orleans they separated the girls from the boys in schools. I don't know if they still do that or not.

DM:

Do you remember the names of those schools?

WC:

Uh-huh, I went to—well my grade schools were coed; that was John Dibert and Wilson. Then I went to—we didn't have junior high schools there—I went to Sophie B. Wright High School.

DM:

Okay, Sophie B. Wright High School. Okay, and that was a girls' school. While you were in school, was there—what were some of your favorite subjects, what were you interested in?

WC:

I don't know, I think probably my journalism class was my favorite.

DM:

Was there anything going on in your life, in childhood, that suggested that you would one day become a nurse?

WC:

No. I was brought up to be a southern lady. I think I was the last generation that was raised that way, and I was brought up to marry a proper young man from a proper family. When I was fourteen, I don't know why, I had never been around a hospital, but—I don't know why, but something just told me I wanted to be a nurse. And from then on, that was my one thought.

DM:

When you were fourteen.

WC:

Uh-huh, when I was fourteen.

DM:

This was well before the war, so it wasn't the war that prompted you. That's interesting.

WC:

So when I graduated high school, I went to St. Louis, and I was there two—over two years, I guess—and joined the Navy while I was there.

DM:

Before we get in to that, I want to hear a little bit more about being raised to be the proper southern lady, that's interesting. Was this part of the curriculum in the school that you attended?

WC:

Well, I suppose so, because it was just the way we were raised and taught, you know?

DM:

Did they teach you etiquette and things like that? Can you give me some examples?

WC:

Oh yes, uh-huh, yes, the proper way to enter the ballroom, the—yes, just proper behavior.

DM:

What's the proper way to enter the ballroom?

WC:

Well, your arm on your escort, you walk in slowly. You pause at the door and look around and that gives everybody a chance to look at you and your gown. And that's important, that gown. Then you proceed on in to the ballroom for the first dance with your escort—always the first dance with your escort, and always the last dance with your escort. Then we had stag lines—do you know about stag lines?

DM:

This is where the men were lined up?

WC:

Uh-huh, and that was the men who didn't bring dates. And they came alone, they were called stags, and they would cut in—tap your escort on the shoulder, and he would step aside, and you would dance with that man. So as many cut-ins as a girl had meant a lot. (Laughing)

DM:

(Laughing) Okay, okay, so the person with the most—the girl with the most cut-ins wins, huh?

WC:

Well, I went to some dances, I don't think I took more than two steps with any one man.

DM:

Before there was a cut-in?

WC:

And of course, as far as I was concerned, that was a successful dance.

DM:

Where did you learn this? Was this something that they told you in school?

WC:

What?

DM:

How to enter the ballroom, and etiquette, other etiquette.

WC:

Yes, that was taught as manners. The same way they taught you manners for anything.

DM:

Well, most schools—by the time I was in school, there were no classes on manners. There—maybe there should have been, but there were not. So someone in the school—a teacher in the school was actually teaching you manners? What about how to set the table, things like this?

WC:

Yes, yes, uh-huh. And, of course how to set the table, and table manners was taught in the home-ec department. Yes, we had that from—and then we were taught to sew, and I had been sewing since I was a little tot. My mother had me doing cross-stitch embroidery, you know, and simple little things like that and I just grew up doing it. And I remember she went to—over to the school to talk to my teachers one day, and she talked to my Home Ec teacher. And she told mother that I was an exquisite seamstress, but oh, I could not cook, I would never be a cook. (Laughing) And I'm not, she was so right.

DM:

(Laughing) Did you ever quilt?

WC:

Oh, yes, I made a whole bunch of them, and I taught quilting in North Carolina, when we lived there. I taught quilting for a while at the YWCA. And I have a bunch of them up there in the top. And I wove; I did that weaving on the wall. And I had five looms when I moved into here, and couldn't bring any of them, no room. And I had the big floor loom, all the way down to what they call "ankle loom."

DM:

My mother would like to meet you; she does all of that kind of thing. She has spinning wheels and looms and all of this. She even raised rabbits and sheep and combed out the—and started from scratch.

WC:

Well, I have a spinning wheel I bought at the Plymouth Plantation in Plymouth, Massachusetts. And I didn't spend as much—I had the wool, you know, I bought. But I didn't spend as much as I thought I would. But it looked pretty, you know, sitting there in my studio. All that I had to—went in the estate sale. I really hated to part with my things, but that's the problem with coming into a place like this: all the things you've had for so many years is gone.

DM:

Well, my mother is doing that, too. She's still in her home, but she's giving things to interested nieces, you know, so one got her quilting frame and, you know, she's just having to do that. It's something we'll all have to do, so—but I'm sorry.

WC:

Well, I didn't have anybody to give it to, I had one son and he didn't want anything, and his wife is sickly and she didn't want anything.

DM:

When you were quilting, did y'all ever make friendship quilts?

WC:

No.

DM:

Did you ever hear of those?

WC:

No, I know what they are, but no, I didn't. I really didn't, until just recently, we might say about—well, it was after my husband died—that I found a quilting group here, and joined them. But that was just for a short time, it was all women like me, and they're all dead—I've outlived everybody. Seems getting to ninety-one isn't much fun. You see, all my friends, they're in the same shape or worse shape than I am. They're dying—one died just this past week, another one.

DM:

Do you participate in the activities out here? Do you have good activities here?

WC:

Yes they do, we have a wonderful activities director. And she's not working today, she's off on Mondays, but most of the activities—as I told you, I had started out when I first moved here, going in—but most, well, I don't know how to put it, but you can't find anybody to carry on a conversation with, you know. I spend most of my time in my room, reading and studying.

DM:

Well, when you were—let's go back to school again. When you were in school, you were—you went to a girls' school for high school—you were involved in some activities, I assume, outside of school you did sewing—your seamstress work when you were outside of school or inside of school?

WC:

Well, I did a little bit outside of school, but most of it was just in school. I remember I made a skirt or two, you know, at home to—they were Hawaiian print skirts, and I wanted one, and so I

just decided, "Well, gee, I saw some beautiful fabric," and I thought "I'll make it." So I did, you know, and the size of me, one yard makes a skirt.

DM:

What were some of your activities outside of school? What were you interested in?

WC:

Boys, mostly boys. (Laughing) Well, I don't know, we liked to—the girls—we used to meet downtown and just go shopping, not buy anything, just looking, you know. And we'd stop and have a Coke, you know, and—

DM:

What's the favorite hangout at—area to hang out there, where you lived?

WC:

I don't think we had any favorite, I mean we just—wherever we happened to be—if we wanted a Coke and there was a drugstore, we went in there—.

DM:

When you were a child in New Orleans, did they have Chalmette set aside as a historical area?

WC:

Chalmette—no, there was nothing special about it, but—there was nothing there, it was just a battlefield, and it was outside the town at that time, way out on the trolley. And it was just a battlefield. And sometimes we'd go out there and—

DM:

—In class, as a fieldtrip?

WC:

Yeah, uh-huh. And then, let me see, and the sugar refinery was out that way—the Domino Sugar Factory—and we went to the sugar factory. And they'd give us a package of Domino—you know the little squares—do they make those anymore?

DM:

You're talking about the little sugar cubes?

WC:

Yes.

DM:

I haven't seen them in—I've seen them in Europe, but I haven't seen them here in a while.

WC:

I can't remember, it just dawned on me, I haven't seen any. But they gave us a little package of sugar cubes, and we munched on them all the way back home. And a stalk of sugarcane—of course we always got sugarcane everywhere we went, and we loved—did you ever eat sugarcane?

DM:

Uh-huh, sure have.

WC:

And—oh, they had big sugarcane fields in Hawaii, made me feel right at home. Oh, this might be interesting, the—well, when you first went over to Hawaii, you were supposed to go out and pick out of sugarcane fields one that had just been planted, a new one. And you watched it, and when they, you see—and then they burn it. When it's time to harvest, they burn it, and then they go and get the canes. And when they burn the field, you know your orders are coming in to go home.

DM:

Oh, why's that?

WC:

You see, it takes, I think eighteen months for a field to mature, and your tour of duty is approximately two years. So when your field is burned, you know your orders are coming. (Laughing) That was tradition out there with the Navy.

DM:

That's pretty good, I'd never heard that before. Back to New Orleans, when you lived there, did you see any effects of the Depression? Was your family affected directly?

WC:

Oh my lands. We weren't, no we were, well, you might say "well-to-do-of." But yes, we saw it. I saw it.

DM:

What were some—?

WC:

Well, I was a child, and I guess I was up in my teens when it really registered. And you'd see the children that—the girls that—well, the way they were dressed, for one thing, you'd notice. And—

DM:

Did you see breadlines or poverty in the streets?

WC:

I didn't see any breadlines, but I know they were there, I heard about them. And I heard about the poverty.

DM:

What about when the war began, how did that change New Orleans? You were still there, weren't you?

WC:

Huh?

DM:

What year did you graduate from high school?

WC:

In '41, I think, before, you know, up in the spring. Yes, now, when we had been—when I say “we,” I mean my group of girls and boys that I was close to—we had been what we called “across the lake” to a ball that this boy's family gave, and they had a large plantation over there. Now the lake was Lake Pontchartrain, and you had a bridge across Lake Pontchartrain.

DM:

Did you have that long bridge back then?

WC:

Oh yes.

DM:

That what, twenty-mile bridge?

WC:

Yeah, had—as long as I can remember. Anyway, we was across the lake and—we had to go across the bridge, but—we'd go over to these places like that, and we'd go on Saturday and spend the night—have the ball and spend the night, and come home Sunday because our parents

didn't want the boys driving on that bridge at night with a couple of drinks in them. So anyway, they always put us up. And the girls would sleep upstairs on pallets—you know what a pallet is? And the boys would sleep downstairs. And one of the servants would sit on the stairs so the girls couldn't come down and the boys couldn't go up. (Laughing) And we came home that Sunday—it was about—well, it was after dark. When we got to the bridge, there was a soldier with a gun standing there, and stopped us. And this never happened before, and we stopped and he said, "Where are you going?" and the driver said, "We're going home, to New Orleans." And he looked in and saw us, and of course we had the girls' formals stretched out on the back seat across their laps. At that time they had big skirts, so he looked in and he could tell that that was what happened and he said, "Go on," and the driver said, "Well, what's the matter?" And he said "Go on," and didn't tell us, just "go on." So we went, "That's funny." Well, I was about the second one to be dropped off as we got to the houses, and when we went in, the first thing my mother said was that they'd bombed Pearl Harbor. And I said "Where is Pearl Harbor?" She was horrified, it just didn't mean that much to me. And so that was when I first heard about it.

DM:

Were you there in New Orleans long enough to see the city changed by the war? Shipping and—

WC:

Oh yes, almost immediately the shipyards there started working like crazy. You see, our whole Pacific fleet was destroyed at Pearl Harbor, and people at home didn't know that the whole fleet was gone. And they really started building ships fast. And that's when everything changed. The girls and women went to work in the shipyards; they started working outside the home and things changed.

DM:

Now what about these guys that you had—you know, you'd been dancing with all these guys—were they starting to leave in large numbers?

WC:

No, because they were still in college, you see, and of course, the services wanted them to finish college, because they were the officers. And we had some that were in the ROTC—Navy ROTC there, and of course, they—and a lot of the boys in our group were medical students, things like that—they wanted them, their education. So they didn't leave then—later, of course, as they graduated, they went in.

DM:

Did you ever happen to see the shipyards as they got busy? I wonder if they were mostly building—in New Orleans, if they were building Navy vessels or merchant marine?

WC:

I would say Navy.

DM:

With the losses at Pearl Harbor.

WC:

But then I left, and—but this was the beginning—just beginning, you know, when I left.

DM:

This is when you went to St. Louis? Why did you go to St. Louis?

WC:

Well, I wanted to—nursing.

DM:

Oh, you enlisted.

WC:

No, I went in to nursing—I went to the hospital to train. And then I joined the Navy up there.

DM:

What was the hospital in St. Louis? Do you remember which hospital it was that you first went to, to train?

WC:

The Park Lane.

DM:

Park Lane Hospital, okay.

WC:

And the—I had thought about it, you know, in the back of my mind, and wondered. But it was so foreign from me, it was so different. But—I thought about it—but as time went on and, of course, I was dating the young men that were in the service, and heard them talking, and of course, coming from New Orleans, it was a Navy town, it always way, I didn't have any thoughts but the Navy was the only ones I thought about. And I'm glad I did.

DM:

But you first entered nursing school to be in the military, but to be a nurse. And later you thought, “Well, I’m going to go—“

WC:

Well, as the war went on. And then the hospital—all the young men were gone. And we had mostly women old men; they were every day of forty. (Laughing) That was mostly what was left. But I had thought about it, and I think the thing that really made up my mind for me was one day I walked into this patient’s room—she was a new patient, a woman—and there I was in my white uniform, there was no—you know, we wore white uniforms, white stockings, and light shoes—there was no question about who I was when I walked in that door. And she said, “Oh, maid, would you pick up my magazine for me?” and I looked at her, and I said, “I’ll tell the maid when I see her.” And I turned around and walked out. And that, I think, is what did it. I was sort of sick of these women. (Laughing) Anyway, I remember I went down and I called my mother, and I said “Guess what I did today,” and she said, “There’s no telling.” I said, “I joined the Navy.” There was a silence, and then: “That’s nice.” (Laughing)

DM:

Were they okay with it, though, did they—?

WC:

Well, they were shocked, but yes. But my dad—see, there were no boys in the family, just my sister and I; just two girls—and my dad was very proud of me, to the point that when I was in the service, every time I came home from leave, the first night I was there he would tell me “Now you save one night for me, for a date.” And so I’d always let him pick it because of his business, you know, and he and I would go out, have dinner and go dancing. And that’s—I guess that’s one of my fondest memories. And we became friends, you know? And I always enjoyed myself so much with dad, he was a lot of fun to be with, and he was a good dancer.

DM:

Did you wear your uniform, by any chance, when you were out and about around town?

WC:

Hmm?

DM:

Did you wear your uniform around town, or—?

WC:

Oh, that was another thing, in World War II, you had to wear your uniform, you could not put on “civvies.” You wore your dress uniform when you were off the base.

DM:

Even on leave?

WC:

Even on leave, you wore—in fact, to the point that when the girls got married, they would have to ask permission to wear a wedding gown. And sometimes they did not get it; they had to be married in their uniform.

DM:

But I bet your daddy was proud that you had your uniform on, you were a WAVES¹, you know—

WC:

Yeah, uh-huh, yes he was. And we really got to know each other then. Before then, I had been his little girl—and like I told one man who had a bunch of grown daughters, and he was going to Dallas for one of them's birthday. And I said, "I want to give you a fair warning," and I said, "What I used to do with my dad, I'd go set on his lap, put my arm around his neck, and he'd pat my leg and say 'How much is this costing me?'" (Laughing) If you have any daughters, remember that.

DM:

So you went down—you were in St. Louis—you went down to the recruiting station in St. Louis?

WC:

Hmm?

DM:

You went down to the recruiting station in St. Louis, did you go by yourself, or with a friend?

WC:

I went by myself and talked to them first about it, and found out all I wanted to know. And then I went back—we had to take a physical—and I went back and I had my physical, and then I had to be twenty years old to join, so that was just before. So I had everything done, and I was all ready, and on my twentieth birthday I was sworn in.

DM:

And then what happened, did they ship you somewhere else right away?

¹ "Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service," division of U.S. Naval Reserve.

WC:

Well, yeah, my orders came in within a week or two, and sent me to the Bronx, I think it was. Yeah, New York was where they had the—what they call boot camp. And I was there oh, about four weeks, I guess, I don't know how long, didn't last long.

DM:

What was it like, what did they have you do?

WC:

Well, it was just teaching you the Navy way, I guess, I don't know how to describe it. And we learned how to march, we learned how to salute, and when to salute and not—and you don't do a lot of that in the Navy—you learned your, well, the Navy manners, you know, what no-no's and—

DM:

Can you think of any—can you give me a couple of examples? Like Navy no-no's? I think this is interesting because it's a whole different type of etiquette.

WC:

Well, it is, yes. Well, let's see, well, of course, now one thing, let's see, they were all new to the idea of accepting women, and having women there, you know, with the men. So one of the no-no's for the men—you couldn't touch—they couldn't touch us, I mean, you know, on duty. Now we could date them, you could date them, you could kiss them goodnight at the front door and everything, but while you were on duty, they did not touch you, they couldn't even take your arm if somebody saw them do that, they'd jump on them about it. They treated us like ladies, they really did. And of course, we were expected to act like a lady.

DM:

Well, this is a whole new world for you, all-of-a-sudden. After having been in the society in New Orleans—

WC:

Yes, it was, it really was. But I slid into it without any problems. And of course, a hospital is a hospital wherever you are. And the doctors and nurses were still doctors and nurses. And we didn't have all this “snap to attention,” and saluting that you see the Army and the Marines doing. And, let me see, you never salute under cover, which means if you're in a building you never salute. You don't salute if you're bareheaded.

DM:

I'm sorry?

WC:

Bareheaded.

DM:

If you're bareheaded, yes, okay.

WC:

You stand at attention if you're with the skipper or somebody of high rank, you just stand at attention when you talk to them.

DM:

And how is that for a lady, how does a lady stand at attention? Do you have your arms crossed; are your arms by your side?

WC:

At attention?

DM:

At attention.

WC:

Just like the men, at your side.

DM:

Okay, arms straight down by your side.

WC:

And, of course, there in the medical corps, we were pretty sloppy about it, you know you might have your hands on your hips, and "Hey, doc." (Laughing)

DM:

Was there anything strenuous about the training? You marched, but was there anything that—did you have to develop any more physical ability?

WC:

No, I don't think so. See, we didn't do anything like marching with a pack on your back like the Army—I don't know whether they did that with the women, or not, but we didn't have to build

up strength. The marching was something that we did there in boot camp, and we didn't do anymore. And I don't think I marched anymore until VJ day, when I was in Hawaii and they had the big parade at Honolulu, and we had the day off to go march in the parade, I think that was the next time I marched.

DM:

Oh, we're going to have to talk about that here, in a little bit, that'll be interesting. But let's continue with the training. What about nursing abilities? Did you learn anything in the Navy that you didn't already know?

WC:

Oh, okay Sampson. Sampson Navy Hospital, I was on the tropical fever ward.

DM:

Now tell me again, for the record, where Sampson Navy Hospital is.

WC:

It was on Lake Geneva, between Syracuse and Rochester, New York. And it was cold.

DM:

And it was what ward?

WC:

Huh?

DM:

And you were on the, you said you were on the—

WC:

Lake.

DM:

—on the lake, Lake Geneva.

WC:

And it was wintertime. And I was fresh from the South. And was it cold. But let's see, I lost my thought. Oh, the Tropical Fever Ward.

DM:

Tell me again, oh, the Tropical Fever Ward. Okay.

WC:

Now, there was a lot of malaria. Now that's one thing I had never seen, and I never saw since. These were boys—Marines—that came back from Guadalcanal, Wake, and those islands down in there.

DM:

Right, the Solomon Islands and down in that area.

WC:

And they came back and had Malaria. And it is pretty vicious. And then other diseases, I'm trying to think, right now, what other ones. But things I had never seen, never saw since, and would never have had a chance to see. They brought all these things back with them, and it was very, very interesting.

DM:

Were there any that were contagious? That you had to concern yourself with because they were contagious?

WC:

Uh, no, not really. Now if we did have someone with something contagious, they were isolated, and we had strict laws about entering the room and putting the gown on, taking it off, and—

DM:

But most of these were mosquito-borne diseases, maybe?

WC:

Well, I don't know whether they were, or not. I really don't, because I didn't know that much about them to start with.

DM:

Well this was a learning experience, then.

WC:

Yes, it was—and that why I say, it's something that I would have never run into anyplace else, and I didn't.

DM:

Can you tell me about some of the severe malaria cases, what were the symptoms that you saw?

WC:

Well, basically, the skin was yellowish from the medication that they were taking, and they also took it as a preventative, so you would see these Marines with yellowish skin and you knew they had been there. They, of course the chills, that's the main thing that I saw. Just suddenly, you know, they'd start chilling and jump into bed and pull the covers up and we'd see them and run, grab something out of the—a heated blanket, and put over them. That was the only thing you could do for them, you know, just let them chill it out.

DM:

I still talk to POWs, people who were POWs in Japanese camps who still suffer from malaria. They still have remnants—occasional remnants of these diseases.

WC:

That's one thing that was interesting was when—after the war—when I was still in Hawaii, we got a shipload of prisoners of war from Santo Tomas Prison in Japan. They were on their way back to the States, and they stopped over, they had to let them rest, and if they needed any medical treatment, or anything, and then shipped them on, they were there just a couple of days and so. And there was—one of the boys came and got me and told me there was a boy from New Orleans there, so I went over and talked to him at length. He told me, he said they were not badly treated. And really, they all—they looked healthy, every one of them, they didn't look starved. He told me he had been—he lost his ship in the Atlantic, and the Germans picked him up. And he—they took him to the hospital in Germany, and his face—the bones were all broken in his face, he was just flat. And he said the German plastic surgeon there came in and apologized to him, because he could not take—restructure his face—he said he had too many of his own, too many Germans to take care of, but he said, “When you get home, they will and can fix it.” And so anyway, he was in a prisoner exchange to Japan, and he said he was so lucky that the Germans had picked him up, because if the Japanese had, he'd have died, you know, with these other injuries. But anyway, in Santo Tomas, he said, they were not badly treated. And the Red Cross gave them vegetable seeds, and the Japanese let them plant them; raise some vegetables to help out their diet. Anyway, basically, that was it.

DM:

Well, when they liberated these guys that were on the ship, how long do you think before you ever saw them? They were getting some nourishment along the way for, at least—

WC:

Gee, I don't know. See, it took a week to go from San Francisco to Hawaii. So you can figure how long it took you to— (Laughing)

DM:

Uh-huh, pretty far, pretty good distance.

WC:

So I don't know, I didn't even ask. But they were there just a couple of days or so, and they went on home.

DM:

Let's—we were in upstate New York at the—talking about upstate New York a minute ago, at Sampson Hospital, where did you go from there?

WC:

Okay, now let me see, from Sampson—

DM:

I'm just trying to get the chronology correct.

WC:

Okay, from there I went to Brooklyn, Brooklyn Navy Hospital.

DM:

Brooklyn Navy Hospital. How long were you there?

WC:

About six months, I guess. Something like that. Then I went to Lido Beach, Long Island. That was a summer resort hotel that the Navy had taken over. And it was a receiving barracks—boys came in there, and while their papers were being cut to go overseas, they were there. And then coming back, they came there while their orders were done to go home, on leave. So they actually weren't there any length of time, we had a small, what you call sick bay. I think, maybe, if I say fifty beds, it would have been plenty. It's probably less than that. And it was one wing of a building, was sick bay. And mostly we had cat fever; I think you saw it in that article. Catarrhal fever, and it was like a flu.

DM:

Catarro fever, can you spell that?

WC:

C-A-T-A-R-R, I don't know, it's been a long time.

DM:

C-A-T-A-R-R-O, something like that?

WC:

Something, A-L, something, I don't know.

DM:

Okay, Catarrhal, okay.

WC:

Anyway, we called it "cat fever". And

DM:

It's something they contracted overseas?

WC:

Oh no, no, no, it was more like a flu. And I don't know, but the—in the article I told about one of the patients' mother wrote to this—wrote to the doctor and asked what it was. (Laughing)

DM:

Worried about her son, right? (Laughing)

WC:

Well, of course, you know some strange disease, you would be, you know? He said give him two APCs² four times a day and if they get better they had cat fever. (Laughing) And that's about it. That was about the truth.

DM:

But you can just imagine being on a crowded ship, especially, with whatever little fever or disease is going around, oh, that seems like a hotbed for problems.

WC:

Well, I never heard of anything, you know, anything like that on board.

DM:

Were you always treating only Navy personnel?

WC:

² "Aspirin-phenacetin-caffeine," a compound analgesic, as a remedy for fever and pain, used until the third quarter of the twentieth century.

And Marines, you know the Marines, they're fighting men, period. They have no other—they have no legal office, they have no hospitals, they have no—

DM:

Right, they're part of the Navy, though.

WC:

Yeah, they use Navy facilities.

DM:

That makes sense. That's why the guys were coming in from Guadalcanal. There were probably Marines up there at Sampson with malaria.

WC:

Oh, yeah, I had a lot of Marines for patients.

DM:

So you were at Brooklyn; you were elsewhere on Long Island, and then did you go from—?

WC:

Long Island, then I went from there to Hawaii.

DM:

Now, how did that come about, did you request that, or were you—?

WC:

Oh, you had to. You see, women had to volunteer to go to sea, and—they would never send you. But that was another thing about them looking after us. We were only allowed, at that time, to go to either the Aleutians, or Hawaii.

DM:

Oh, that's not a hard decision. Wouldn't it be better to go to Hawaii?

WC:

Well, you don't have a choice, you see, you just volunteer. Well, because I had so much trouble having colds and flu in the wintertime in New York. The weather was so—my whole body wasn't used to that. And I did have flu several times, and so when they checked with my senior medical officer when I volunteered to go, whether I was a good subject or not, and he said that I could not go to the Aleutians. He said "She'd be dead in a week." So I got Hawaii.

DM:

Okay, well that's good, that worked out. Now this is exciting, how did you get to Hawaii—when was this, first of all, what year?

WC:

Oh, I—'44, '44-'45

DM:

Do you think D-Day had already occurred?

WC:

Huh?

DM:

Do you think it was after D-Day?

WC:

Oh, no, it was before. I was there for D-Day.

DM:

Okay, so June 6, 1944 was D-Day, so it was maybe sometime in '44?

WC:

Spring, I guess, or—it was earlier than that, quite a bit earlier. But, let me see, oh, now one thing, have you heard much about the censorship?

DM:

A little bit. About correspondence being censored, telegraphs and all that?

WC:

Well, now, that—they were strict. In fact, my mother saved a letter that I had written home that had been censored. And from what I can make out, I think I was telling her about a beach party. We did such a “black,” so-and-so “black.” She could make no sense whatever.

DM:

Good grief, and it's just about a beach party.

WC:

No, but that would tell the enemy, if they got their hands on it, would tell the enemy that they had—we were on a beach. You see, and all these little things coming in together add up. Oh no,

no one—in fact, when we left, we weren't even allowed to tell our parents. See, we were out at our port of embarkation, and they knew I was going there, because I told them it was a port of embarkation, and I had met a sailor on a train going to San Francisco. Well, it seems we both wound up at the same camp—the embarkation camp. So he came over and brought a buddy, and so I got a girlfriend, and we'd go over to the service club every night we were there. So before we left—we had no idea when we were going—I wrote a letter to my parents, and told them that when they got the letter, I would be at sea, I would be gone. So I wrote the letter, and gave it to the boy, and I said “The first time you come to pick us up, and we're not here, mail the letter.” So my parents knew, you see, that I was gone.

DM:

Did they worry? Did you hear later—?

WC:

Oh, of course they worried. They worried the whole time I was in the Navy.

DM:

But especially overseas.

WC:

They worried about it, but—

DM:

You know, I don't know, but I suspect that some people, even as late as '44, they were worried that maybe Japan could retake the Hawaiian Islands.

WC:

Well they were sure trying to.

DM:

That would be a concern for a parent.

WC:

That's why those battles were so fierce for those little islands like Iwo Jima, with nothing there. People would was well, what do we want with that? Well, heck, that was a stopping off point. We didn't have the long-range planes—that was before they even had the aircraft carriers, where they took off. We had aircraft carriers, but they weren't using them for the long range.

DM:

By the way, how did you ship out? What kind of ship were you on? Do you remember?

WC:

When I went out—well, it was the *Matsonia*. It was a merchant ship that the Navy had taken over.

DM:

What was the name, again?

WC:

The *Matsonia*.

DM:

Matsonia.

WC:

Matsonia, it was the Matson shipping line, and the Navy took over a lot of those to—

DM:

Okay. How would you spell that, by the way?

WC:

M-A-T-S-O-N-I-A.

DM:

So you went out under the Golden Gate, because you were at San Francisco, right?

WC:

Well, we didn't get to see it because we were—as soon as we got on board, we were taken into the dining room. You see, they always sail on the tide, and that's in the evening, and so we were all in the dining room when the ship started, and didn't get to see. And of course, there was none of this "standing out on deck," you know.

DM:

That might have been a disappointment.

WC:

Hmm?

DM:

Was that a disappointment?

WC:

Well, not really.

DM:

I guess there was just so much going on—

WC:

Yeah, I had too many other things, you know.

DM:

Was it mostly a ship full of Navy nurses?

WC:

It was—I'm trying to think if there were any men on board. Yeah, we did have some. Yeah, we did. We were up here on this deck, and they on the deck below us.

DM:

With the servants sitting between you? (Laughing)

WC:

—(Laughing) Sort of patrol?

DM:

Did you go in convoy, were there other ships around?

WC:

No.

DM:

They must have felt fairly secure about the waters, then—

WC:

Well, I think in that section that they were fairly safe.

DM:

Between San Francisco and Hawaii.

WC:

Oh, did you hear—now this—I don't know whether it's scuttlebutt, or not, but I heard it from several sailors at different times. The Battle of Midway. They said two of our ships sunk each other, have you ever heard that?

DM:

I haven't.

WC:

Well, they said in the heat of the battle, you know the smoke and everything, and all; two of our ships sank each other. And I—like I said—I heard that from several sailors, but I don't know if it's true, or if it was just something they heard.

DM:

I don't know, I know about the Battle of Midway, but I haven't delved into all of the sources of it, so that theory might still be out there.

WC:

It might be. And I don't even know the name of the ships.

DM:

Well, that would be a sad thing.

WC:

But I thought, that's an interesting thing to research, you know?

DM:

And especially since you're hearing it from different sources, of guys that were there.

WC:

See, if it was just one, you sort of fluff it off, but the—since I heard it from several, it was —

DM:

Yeah, that's a frightening thought. You know it happens, it happens with infantry out on a front line, it's going to happen. With so many armaments flying around, and the confusion of battle, you could just imagine. Well, what about arriving? Tell me about arriving in Hawaii, and where you were stationed.

WC:

I can't remember much about arriving, to tell you the truth.

DM:

Did they let you up on deck to see?

WC:

I don't remember. I mean that part I don't remember. But I was stationed at Aiea—Aiea Navy Hospital.

DM:

Can you spell that?

WC:

A-I-E-A, I believe.

DM:

Where was that, was it anywhere near—?

WC:

That was on a mountaintop outside of Honolulu. And it was the most beautiful hospital I've ever been in.

DM:

Was it kind of up in that rainforest, north of Honolulu?

WC:

No, it was just up on a mountain. The building was built with wings coming out like that, and these were wards. Each one was a ward. And there was space in between so that you—windows on both sides of the ward. And I think we probably held, I think it's safe to say, a hundred patients in the ward. And the breezes just—you see, out there on top. And at the back, they had a *lanai*, which is a screened-in porch, all the way across the back of the ward, so the ambulatory patients could sit out there, and it overlooked the harbor, so they could see the ships going out. It was absolutely beautiful.

DM:

You could see Pearl Harbor from up there, or Waikiki?

WC:

Well, Pearl Harbor was down here, you see, but this was going in, it was just water.

DM:

Could you see Waikiki down below, or—?

WC:

Well, Waikiki was way the heck over there. (Laughing)

DM:

Oh, it was way over there, okay.

WC:

No, you didn't see that.

DM:

I'll have to get on a map and find out exactly where this is.

WC:

Well, an interesting thing that—the VA down here, at one time, they had—someone had built, like the architects do.

DM:

Uh-huh, with the topography of the land.

WC:

Yeah, on a map of Hawaii, and had Pearl Harbor down there, and up on—there was a mountain, and there was a big red cross on top of our hospital. And I was with my husband, and I said, "Well, that's Aiea." And I could point out things to him, and that, I don't know, disappeared. They took it down; I don't know what they did with it.

DM:

I wonder where it went. Well that's kind of nice. What kind of patients did you have there, were they combat patients from—?

WC:

Mostly what I had was surgery, post-surgery. Which was all sorts of things. They had appendix, they had battle wounds, and—now we had one patient that absolutely floored me. It was a young man, he was from Texas, and I do remember his name, which, I won't give it. But he was injured in the buttocks, and they had done surgery, and it broke open, and he bled—they had to go back to surgery. This happened about three times. And he was a young fella, and he said—he kept saying, "Why did this have to happen to me? Why am I here in the first place? What am I doing here?" He had, actually, no conception of why he was there, and I couldn't believe it. You know, we had studied history as a separate subject, all the way through school, and here—then I found

out, after I got to Texas, that they didn't teach history. And I thought, "No wonder he didn't know what was going on."

DM:

All he knows is, he was called in to the Army and shipped out. That's—but that was a—

WC:

He's the only one that I ran in to like that.

DM:

What about in the aftermath of a big campaign—a big event like Iwo Jima, were you over—ever overcrowded?

WC:

Well, I don't know about the hospital, but my ward wasn't. See, the only time was when we got the prisoners. And our ward was emptied out, completely. They sent the patients to other units, or back to duty, or whatever, and just filled up our ward with them. But that was the only time that I know of. See, we didn't know what was going on. People—civilians would ask us questions, we didn't know—they knew more about it than we did. And most places, we didn't even have a newspaper. Now, in Hawaii we did, and they sold them at the ship store, and every morning I went to breakfast with this girl that worked in the ship store, and we'd go up there and—take a cup of coffee and go up there until time to go report for duty, and we'd read the newspaper. They had them for sale up there, and we'd read the newspapers up there, but that was more or less at the end, by then. But the civilians knew more about what was going on than we did.

DM:

I guess, if you had known something like "This huge battle at Iwo Jima is occurring," you would probably worry that you were going to get a lot of injured people.

WC:

Well, we might think we would, but it wouldn't be anything—did you see my flag?

DM:

I saw it, I saw—you had it in the picture that's in the newspaper.

WC:

That's—Randy Neugebauer sent it to me, it was flown in my honor over the capitol.

DM:

Oh, yes, I knew they did that kind of thing. That's something, isn't it?

WC:

That's—I'm real proud of that.

DM:

That is, that's amazing. Did these guys—when they came in—did they talk about what they had been involved in, their experiences, they said "Oh, this is what happened to me," that kind of thing?

WC:

Nuh-uh.

DM:

Okay, it was all business, then.

WC:

They just didn't talk about it, you see. Like even now, some of them—

DM:

Like a trauma issue.

WC:

And they might—you know, two Marines might be sitting over here talking, and it might be that they were talking to each other, because they knew that the other one understood, you know? But no, they didn't talk about it, and in fact, when I first went in, when I was at Sampson, I found that out one—like I said, they boys were from Bataan, Corregidor. And I asked a couple of them, you know, I asked one of them; I said "Well, was it as bad as they said it was?" "I really wouldn't know." And he walked off. And another one, he was in bed and I said something to him, and he just turned over and pulled the covers up. They just wouldn't talk about it.

DM:

Well, I'll tell you this, among those of us who conduct oral histories, and we have conducted oral histories with veterans for a long time, there seems to be—for combat veterans—there seems, in most cases, to be about forty years that go by before they would open up and start talking about this. Now some talked about it right off the bat, but some wouldn't talk about it for about forty years.

WC:

Well, you know, we have a small veterans' group here, that we meet, and they don't unload too easily. We had one that—he was from Korea; he was a prisoner of war in Korea. And he never had anything to—and the—Patrick, you might know him from the VA, he comes out here and he leads our group. And he—we'll be talking about something, and all of the sudden he'd turn around, and he'd say "Adolfo, does this bother you?" So I didn't know—and Adolfo was very quiet. And all of the sudden, this happened just this last—within the last month. He walked with a real shuffling gait—

DM:

Adolfo?

WC:

Uh-huh. And all of the sudden, he's in a wheelchair. And he couldn't operate it. And he—like he got up at a table, and he was too close, and I said "Back up, Adolfo, back up," and he went forward. I said "Back up," and he kept going forward when I'd say "Back up," and about that time, one of the girls saw, and came running over, and she just took him—it was one of these—and she just pulled him out and took him over and put him at another table, and parked him. And I thought, well, gee, he's overmedicated. Just from that point, I'd say, within two weeks, and he's out of here now. They—I don't know if he's coming back or not. But he just—all of the sudden, he went. And I had—I don't know, you know, he never talked, and he—

DM:

So you don't know what happened to him?

WC:

No, I have no idea. I just know that he had been a prisoner.

DM:

Now what group is this?

WC:

Huh?

DM:

What local group is this?

WC:

Right here, we meet right here.

DM:

Oh, in this—in Mackenzie Place.

WC:

Yeah, in Mackenzie.

DM:

Do you have a name for your group?

WC:

Oh no, just the veterans group. There's only about, maybe ten of us, or twelve.

DM:

I'm glad you have a group like that, that you can talk to. It's a shared experience, in a sense.

WC:

Yeah, and you see, it's closed. No one can get in except the veterans. And so that gives the men—if they want to talk, they can, and they know we all—see, I'm the only woman, but they accepted me from the time I got in. Now we have a young girl—she's not young, she's, I guess, fifty. But she was in the Air Force, and she wanted to join a group, and didn't have a group to join, so Patrick asked us if we would accept her, and we said yes. And she's a delight; she comes to see me once a week. She actually jumped out of a helicopter with a gun. (Laughing) And, you know this is so foreign to me, because they protected the women; they didn't want us anywhere near the action. And she was stationed in the Aleutians for quite some time.

DM:

What are—at that ward—what are some of the more memorable cases that you had, were there some that still stick in your mind?

WC:

Not particularly. This one, like I told you about, the young boy, that does, but that was because of his attitude.

DM:

But no unusual combat wounds or injuries or diseases?

WC:

No, but oh, I'll tell you one thing, now, and of course, this was true of civilian hospitals as well as the Navy hospital. We kept them so long. Of course, with the Navy, they had a long recuperation period because they had to be ready to go back into action when they went back to

the ship. So anyway—like, an appendectomy, this was true in the civilian hospitals, fourteen days in the hospital. This, it'll get to you—hernia, forty-two days in the hospital, flat on your back. It's a wonder we didn't kill them. Now, it's an in-and-out thing. The, of course, then, afterwards, you can imagine the long recuperation period after being —

DM:

Forty-two days—

WC:

Forty-two days on your back.

DM:

You'd have to build your strength back, wouldn't you?

WC:

Uh-huh. So, anyway, they left us to recuperate, but—and the other things they had were comparable; these long hospitalizations.

DM:

Was it more often something like that; something kind of routine like hernia or appendectomy more so than combat injuries?

WC:

No, I wouldn't say so. It was a combination, I mean, you had this group of young men, they're going to have the same things that they would have if they were home, you know, appendix, hernias, so forth. They would have them anyway. But the combat injuries were in addition to—and like I said, I always worked post-surgery, and that's what I liked best of all, was post-surgery.

DM:

Were there a lot of amputees?

WC:

Hmm?

DM:

Were there a lot of amputees?

WC:

Well, now I didn't have that, you see, that was in another ward.

DM:

How about burns?

WC:

That was also another section, you see.

DM:

It was specialized, then.

WC:

Well, see, I was in post-surgery, and, well, you have in any hospital, you know, you have your different wings, your different sections.

DM:

Well, see, that sheds a lot of light, because I would have thought that, with this war going on, there would just be lots and lots of casualties dumped upon you, of all different types, and it would be a big confusion, but it sounds very orderly to me.

WC:

Well, yeah, as they come in, they're sent to whatever wards they're assigned to; whatever is wrong with them, they go to that particular ward. This—you might want to flip through here, I haven't really gone through it, but I dug this out before you came.

DM:

And I was going to ask you, by the way, if you had any R&R while you were in Hawaii, any time to go enjoy the island, away from the war?

WC:

Oh, okay, every sixth day we had the day off, and we went on beach parties. There wasn't anything to do there. You could go sit in a bar all day, but that won't get it. So either that or go to the beach, of course, everyone went to the beach.

DM:

Right, were they luaus? Did they bake out there in the—?

WC:

Oh, well now, a luau was something different. And yes, I did go to a luau. And have you ever been to Hawaii?

DM:
I have.

WC:
Have you been to a luau?

DM:
I did not go to a luau.

WC:
Now that's the *Boarfish*. The menu from—the skipper took me on board for lunch.

DM:
The *Boarfish*.

WC:
Uh-huh, it's a submarine.

DM:
And by the way, just for the record, we're looking at your Hawaii album. So here's "lunch aboard, December 3, 1945, Oahu, Hawaii. Steak, corn, boiled potatoes, tomato salad, iced tea, apple pie," that makes me hungry.

WC:
Well, the Navy fed us well. They did—we had excellent food. In fact, my girlfriend and I had a couple of men from Hickam Air Force Field come over to visit us, and there were there for the lunch, so we took them in to lunch with us. And they could not believe the food we had.

DM:
Did you see different parts of the island?

WC:
Oh, yeah.

DM:
You were just on Oahu, right?

WC:
Yeah, uh-huh, but—yeah, I think I saw the whole island, because we had the use of a jeep. We were up on the mountain and come down on the Pali Pass, which was really a wonder. It was

high, it was—you'd turn a curve, and you were up on top of it, and you'd feel the jeep just from the wind, just pick up almost.

DM:

Did you go to the north shore?

WC:

I'm sure we did.

DM:

How about over to that—there was a Navy station over on the east shore, Kaneohe, or something like that, do you remember that? I'm probably saying it wrong, I don't remember for sure.

WC:

No, uh-huh.

DM:

You know, I wonder if it would be okay if we took some photographs, or some digital scans or something, of some of this scrapbook sometime, would that be okay?

WC:

Yeah.

DM:

Because this looks like good information. I don't have time to read it all right now, but you've got newspaper clippings, you have that menu back there, and it looks like you have some correspondence. I think that would be good information to put into the archives. What about Diamondhead and Waikiki, did you go down to—?

WC:

Oh, we didn't go all the way to Diamond Head, but we went just—to the beach just below—Diamond Head's out here, and the beach is in here, and we did go to this beach, there was nothing out that way—oh, it just kills me, watch Hawaii Five-O, I cannot believe it. I wouldn't go back for anything in the world. When I was there, they actually had some grass shacks—things were scattered way out—people just—well, it wasn't even a city.

DM:

Were they—are you talking about thatched shacks?

WC:

Yeah, uh-huh.

DM:

Oh, that would be something, do you have photographs? Did you take any pictures?

WC:

No, well, see, we weren't allowed cameras. But some of them did have cameras—I didn't, but some of them did.

DM:

Do you have any correspondence with your family? Like, for example, do you have that telegraph that was censored?

WC:

No. I sure don't.

DM:

I'll tell you what, just the fact that you have this scrapbook is very good.

WC:

Well, and I had more—I had so many other things, but when I moved from my home here, see, I had about three thousand square feet. I had walk-in closets bigger than this. And the girl—the lady that was taking care of me at home—we couldn't get a wheelchair through the door to the closet, and I can't stand up. So she was in there, and she'd say "Oh, you won't have any use—you won't need this," and my clothes, you know, "Oh, you haven't worn that since I've been here."

DM:

Oh, I know that is hard, that's got to be awfully hard.

WC:

Well, I mean, yeah. Everything I had—

DM:

Let's talk about this after I finish the interview, but I'd like to make some copies out of this, one way or the other. So tell me about VJ Day.

WC:

Okay. Let's see, they were going to have a parade, so if we wanted to march in the parade, we could have the day off. So of course, boy—(Laughing)

DM:

Well, first of all, when you heard that Japan had surrendered, what—was this a surprise that it happened when it did, or did you expect the war to go on?

WC:

I'm not real sure. It seems to me that we'd gotten some kind of word before, or—I'm not sure. But—I can't remember that, but I do remember the parade, because we went out there and we stood in the street for hours while the Army went by. Every truck, every jeep they owned, the tanks, the men, went by for hours. We thought they would never—and it was hot, you know. And so finally came our turn, and we went—and there was a—

DM:

Hadn't they ever heard of ladies first? (Laughing)

WC:

No, we were Navy. (Laughing)

DM:

Was this right through Honolulu, downtown Honolulu?

WC:

Yeah, it was—and there were crowds all along the way watching the parade. This—(Laughing)

DM:

I was going to ask about that. It's a note in your scrapbook that says "I can't believe it."

WC:

In my bunk, onboard ship, they—it seems that just about every time the supply officer—his office was right outside the door, and my bunk was right inside the door. So he could see it, and it seems I was always in my bunk when he went by. And we came by one time, and I wasn't in my bunk, and I came back and found that note. (Laughing)

DM:

So he put a note saying "I can't believe it," because you weren't in your bunk. (Laughing) But you finally got to march in the parade—

WC:

Yeah, if you want to call it marching. We were pretty sloppy, I'll tell you, because we didn't do that sort of thing.

DM:

But this is exciting, the end of this war that had occupied your life.

WC:

Yeah. "Aiea on parade."

DM:

Oh here's the parade, okay. "Aiea on Parade"

WC:

That's how you spell "Aiea."

DM:

So you—yeah, there you are. Can you see yourself in any of these—?

WC:

I thought I did, let's see. Ollie was—I was on the right flank here, somewhere. Right in here, and Ollie was the point. Here's Ollie.

DM:

So great, about halfway through the scrap—about a third of the way through the scrapbook, there are some pictures of you on Parade for VJ.

WC:

Anyway, Ollie was from Boston, and she raised horses.

DM:

Now how do you spell that name?

WC:

O-L-L-I-E, her name's Olive.

DM:

Olive, but it was Ollie.

WC:

We called her “Ollie.” And Ollie was on point. So here we are, marching down the street, and all of the sudden, she turns this corner, and the whole line—and I was in that line—we just followed Ollie. (Laughing)

DM:

Why'd she turn?

WC:

—and she'd realized what she'd done. She saw a horse and she followed it.

DM:

(Laughing) Because she loved horses?

WC:

Oh, she was as mad about horses as I am about dogs. Oh, and we had a dog out there, these Seabees³ that we dated. I was going to say, it was—anyway, they had—a dog came around their camp, and the boys started feeding it, and she stayed. Well, they got to where they brought her along when we'd go on our beach parties. So the boy I was dating—she was real jealous about him, and she'd come, she'd squeeze between us, and I'd get in the jeep, and she'd get up there and squeeze in. She was a sweet thing, very sweet. So—

DM:

Remember her name?

WC:

Lady. So when we got ready to go home—of course, we went home before they—I went home first, in fact, of the group. But anyway, the boys were the last ones to go home, and I worried about Lady. And of course, we were corresponding then, and so they boy I dated wrote and said Slim took—Ollie took Lady, he had two little kids at home, and said he took Lady home with him. So I was happy that she wasn't going to be deserted. And then—it wasn't too long—I got a picture. It may be in there, I don't know where—but Lady, with about six pups.

DM:

Oh, really, how nice. Where was her home by the end, where did he take her?

WC:

In Washington state, I believe.

³ A Seabee is a member of the United States Naval Construction Forces.

DM:

Oh, that's a great story. When did you ship out?

WC:

Well, in December of '45, and—well I got home, it took about a week to get there—I was about a week in there, in San Diego waiting to get a train home, and we came on a troop train. Anyway, it took about a week to get across country on train.

DM:

To New Orleans?

WC:

No, I went to Memphis—my family had moved to Memphis. So I went to Memphis. I don't know, it took me almost a month, I think, to get home. I got home—I got discharged on the twenty-third of December, just in time for Christmas.

DM:

What about your homecoming, what was that like? Did they have a welcome for you—a party or anything like that?

WC:

Huh-uh.

DM:

Well, it was a very common thing, then, for so many people to be coming back home.

WC:

Yeah, and they didn't do any particular thing for us, you know when the ship came in.

DM:

And you came in to San Diego, you said.

WC:

I came in to San Francisco.

DM:

Oh, so you came—

WC:

And then we went to San Diego on a bus.

DM:

Did you at least get to see the Golden Gate when you came back through?

WC:

Not that I remember. I think we were in our cabins. See, we weren't on a sight-seeing tour. We were supposed to stay in our cabin until—well, when we came into the harbor, the fireboats met us with hoses, you know, and—and I'm trying to think—they had signs, "Well Done," and then they announced for us to return to our cabins, and so we had to go back in to our cabins and get our things together to get off the ship.

DM:

The reason I keep asking you about the Golden Gate is, you see these old videos, film, like in *Victory at Sea* and that kind of thing, where lots and lots of people are waving from the Golden Gate. But by December, there was probably, maybe less waving, you know, I don't—

WC:

Well, of course, you don't have winter out there like you do in the rest of the country. I don't know, but—I hadn't thought about it before, though, I hadn't seen the Golden Gate.

DM:

After the war, you were back in Memphis, did you work at a hospital in Memphis, did you remain a nurse?

WC:

No, I was discharged, you see, when I got back there. Stayed home about two weeks, and I couldn't stand it, I was used to being busy. I had to be doing, so I got a job, it was in a retirement home, and I was chief nurse at the retirement home. I wanted to go to medical school, and I had been told that there was a long waiting list. So anyway, while I was there I was talking to this young intern that—he had just gotten out of the Army, and he had to take his state boards, you know, so he could practice in Tennessee. So he was there acting as a doctor, because he didn't have his license yet. But anyway he told me, he said, "Well, listen, if you want to, you'd better get down there and register, get your name on the list." I said, "Well, I didn't even think about that," he said, "Get your name on the list so when the space comes up, they'll notify you." So I went out there, and boy, they fell all over me, and they accepted me right then on the spot, and a new class was starting in something like two or three weeks. So I hated it, I went back and had to resign, told the manager I was so sorry that they'd spent all that time training me in, and just as I was really getting to know my way around down there, then I leave them. But I went on in, then, I went to school. And then I went from there to Washington University in St. Louis. And at that time, that was one of the most prestigious ones in the country.

DM:

Your intention being to get an M.D.?

WC:

Well, that's what I was hoping for, but at that time, we had the good ol' boys club. And did they pour it on to me, as they did the other women. And finally, I just decided, if they're doing this to me now, what are they going to do to me when I'm interning, and residency—get seventy-two hour shift, put them back-to-back, and I thought it's not worth it. So I left.

DM:

I hate that it was that kind of environment.

WC:

Well, it was pretty rough. The boys tried to help me, you know, and they gave all the extra work to me, and they boys would take some of it and say, "Meet me after class, I'll do this research for you." They knew what was going on, but there wasn't anything that could be done.

DM:

And had you continued on, it would probably be a difficult profession for you to be in at that time, for the same reason.

WC:

Well, yeah, uh-huh. But I was interested in psychiatry, and of course, this. So much is coming back to me, being in here with these people.

DM:

Well, what did you do, now, after this, what—

WC:

Hmm?

DM:

What did you do after this?

WC:

Well, after that—I guess it wasn't too long after that, I got married.

DM:

Okay, now tell me about your husband—how you met, what was your husband's name?

WC:

John T. Coon.

DM:

Okay, and where was he from?

WC:

Well, he was from Houston, and St. Louis—he had moved back and forth, his father was a railroad man, and he moved back and forth several times.

DM:

So you met him in St. Louis, apparently.

WC:

But he was born in Houston, and had gone back and lived there with his parents.

DM:

When did y'all get married?

WC:

In '48 —St. Valentine's Day, 1948.

DM:

Did you stay in St. Louis?

WC:

Well, we did—we had our son—I have one child, and he was born in St. Louis. And then—I guess he was about two, so—we were married about two years when we moved to Memphis. My husband's job took us to Memphis.

DM:

Was your family still there?

WC:

And my family was still there, so that worked out great for me, I had a babysitter. But I stayed home and raised my son, and then he was—when he was eight, the company brought him here. My husband worked for Time Motor Freight, you know where the Science Spectrum is?

DM:

Uh-huh.

WC:

That was their office.

DM:

Oh, okay. You said “Time Motor Freight?”

WC:

Time.

DM:

T-I-M-E?

WC:

T-I-M-E and so they brought him here, and I just fell in love with Lubbock the minute I saw it. And just really enjoyed—by the time he was in—oh I guess he was about eight or ten, and I started getting active in civic affairs. I was a charter member of the Women in the Chamber of Commerce; I was a charter member of Women’s Toastmistress Group—

DM:

Toastmasters?

WC:

Hmm?

DM:

Toast—

WC:

Toastmasters—

DM:

Toastmasters

WC:

Uh-huh. Women—Toastmistresses—they didn’t call us that, but—

DM:

Okay. Y’all called each other “Toastmistresses?”

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WC:

Uh-huh. And we—my husband and I trained dogs as a hobby. We started the obedience training classes here. We had them all at Tech, at the Livestock Pavilion—the old Livestock Pavilion.

DM:

The Southwest Collection, where I work, is now right behind the Livestock Pavilion—it's about a hundred feet away. You need to come out and see us sometime, we'll go over to the Livestock Pavilion.

WC:

Yeah. And we trained the dogs, and had our classes out there, and when—I had gone to St. Louis to visit my sister, and they had the canine corps training school up there where they came from all over the country to get trained. And I told her, I said I wanted to go out to the school and see it, and she said “Well, they won't let anybody out there.” And her husband was an alderman, and wouldn't let her go out there. So I said “Well, darn.” So I just picked up the phone, put on my Texas accent, and I said “This is Wilma Coon, from Lubbock, Texas, I'm a dog trainer, and I'm very interested in your canine corps. Is it possible I could talk to somebody about that?” “Yes ma'am, just a minute,” and he put me through to the major in charge. So I talked to the major, and he sent me out to this policeman's home, and—that was in the canine corps—and I went out there, and he was absolutely a delight; he and his wife, they just welcomed me like that, you know, we just hit it immediately. Got out there, and the dog, even, he was sleeping right across my feet. And they didn't train the dogs to attack, they just held, you know. So he told me some stories about his experiences, and we took the dog out in the backyard, and he put him through his paces, which, most of it was just ordinary obedience, and so I tore him up after he put the dog on the sit-stay. And he walked across the yard for some reason—“Down,” the dog dropped, and he turned around, and I said “I think you've got a problem.” I said, “it's back to the training class,” because they're not supposed to obey anybody but the handler. You see, anybody could go to one of these dog shows—they're free, you just walk in and sit down and watch the obedience, and you can pick up the commands. So any perp can—you know, the dog starts after him, he could, “Down, stay,” and he can get away. So boy, they had a fit when—I understand, now, this group here has—gets them from Holland.

DM:

From Holland? Really?

WC:

Uh-huh, that's what I was told. I'm not—I haven't heard that except from one person

DM:

Now, what kind of dogs are they?

WC:

Well, usually they're just any kind, mostly German Shepherds, and the German Shepherd-type breeds.

DM:

But they come from Holland?

WC:

Now that's what I was told.

DM:

To this group, okay.

WC:

I don't know, but that's—you know, they used Dutch commands.

DM:

Oh really, so you have to learn a little Dutch?

WC:

Yeah, you see, I don't know. I was just told that. But anyway, when I came back, they—one of the news reporters had—she called me on a regular basis, looking for some kind of a story, and she's liable to pick up anything I said and put in it in the paper. So I told her about going to the canine school, so she printed it. And boy, that morning, the—Chief Alley called me—Chief of Police—

DM:

Oh, yeah, J.T. Alley.

WC:

I didn't know him at the time, and he called me and talked to me, and said he had been thinking about a canine corps, and he'd like to talk to me. So, boy, I was all for it. So I went on down there and met him, and encouraged him, told him I was so impressed, and he formed the canine corps.

DM:

He formed it. And did he follow your advice?

WC:

Well, he wanted us to train the dogs, and I told him we couldn't, because we weren't familiar with that type of training, and this was an experiment. And it was going to be an expensive experiment, and he needed to get someone with that type of training to train. So he brought in this man from Houston to train—Harvey Richards—and he was a good trainer.

DM:

Harvey—

WC:

Richards.

DM:

—Richards

WC:

But he trained them to attack, and I was all over Chief Alley about that. But that's the way it was. But they said in St. Louis that they lost a lot of the usefulness of the dogs if they were trained to attack. So anyway, they did train them to attack, and I still think they should not have done that. But they didn't need it, like, well, the policeman, Vernon, in St. Louis, he was telling me he was walking down the street with a dog, and the dog was pulling towards this—this was down, the slums, downtown buildings deserted and boarded up and all—and the dog was pulling. And he kept snapping the lead, and telling him "Heel," and the dog would pull. And finally, he thought—well, they were by a building—and he thought "Well, does he know something I don't know?" So he goes into the building, takes his lead off of him, tells him to search, he said "That dog went up those stairs three at a time," and he couldn't keep up running, trying to follow him. Finally, when he got to the third floor, the dog was standing there—sitting there—and had four men lined up against the wall. And every time one of them would move, he would snarl. See, he didn't attack, he just snarled, and they believed him.

DM:

So he wasn't trained to attack, but he did his job.

WC:

But he did, he stopped and he held. So here comes Vernon up there, and what was going on, the men were ripping the copper piping out of the building, and the dog could hear it but he couldn't, down three stories.

DM:

That's amazing.

WC:

But, now if the dog had been trained to attack, see, could he have sent his dog on a search?

DM:

Right, right, and even more so, today, it would be a liability issue—you have a dog that'll attack somebody.

WC:

He told me several stories like that, one where he'd—the first one, where he was patrolling and he saw this man trying to break into a car. So he—and, see, they patrol on foot—so he called to the man, and the man took off running, so he sent the dog, and the dog went. They went down a dark alley and kept going, and kept going, and he couldn't keep up—there's no way he could keep up—thought he had lost his dog. That was the first time he'd taken it off-leash, and he thought oh, man, he'd never live that down—for him to lose his dog the first time out. So he's going along, calling, and then he said finally, way down the alley, and the beam—just at the edge of the flashlight, he saw the dog. So he ran on down there, he said, "Here's the perp, lying face down on the sidewalk, dog sitting on his shoulders, and every time he moved, the dog snarled."

(Laughing) And the man says "Get this dog off me."

DM:

(Laughing) Oh, buy. It's amazing what those dogs can do, oh my goodness. When y'all had your school—obedience school—is that what you would call it, "obedience school?"

WC:

Classes.

DM:

What was the name of your company.

WC:

Heart of the Plains Kennel Club.

DM:

Heart of the Plains—

WC:

Kennel Club

DM:

—Kennel Club.

WC:

You see, it's the kennel club here, and we had the obedience for the kennel club—and they put the shows on.

DM:

Now, what year did you start this?

WC:

Oh my land. It was back in the sixties—yeah, sixties, early—late fifties.

DM:

Was it the first obedience classes in Lubbock?

WC:

Well, they had tried to start them, but they didn't have anybody that could do it, and they just didn't go across—they never finished one, they never—they didn't know what they were doing. So, anyway, they got—and my husband, he had a very curious mind; he was a bookworm. And he started—as soon as they asked us—he started reading everything he could get his hands on, on dog training. So, by the time we got the classes going, they—I've got a scrapbook down here in that box, running over with press clippings and stories about my dogs. That was our first dog that we took all the way, [inaudible], and took him all the way through utility, he was the first one we took through utility. I had his portrait painted for my husband—for his Christmas present that year.

DM:

Did you deal with particular breeds of dogs, or just any breed of dog?

WC:

Any. Mutts, anything, we trained them. Now, they couldn't show a mutt, but we could train them.

DM:

Right. Do they all train the same?

WC:

Well, no. People ask me, "Well, why do you have standard poodles?" Well, it's obvious.

DM:

Uh-huh, they're smart.

WC:

They're smart, they're people-smart. You can see a poodle laying on the floor over here, and he'll look over here—

DM:

He's watching, back and forth.

WC:

He's looking. Then, in a minute, he'll get up and go over there and do something—pick up something, or do something over there—but he was thinking about going over there and doing it.

DM:

Working things out in his mind.

WC:

And he'd actually go do it. If you—do you have dogs?

DM:

I don't right now, but I have all my life.

WC:

Okay, if you get another one, watch him. You're sitting there, watching television, it's more fun watching your dog, even if he's asleep, you'll learn. But those dogs—actually, they're almost human, the standards. So we had another one after him—well, while we still had him, we got a puppy, and—it was a brown standard—and raised him. And then we left Lubbock and we stopped training. So, it was right after my husband had his heart surgery, and he was supposed to walk every day, and he found a miniature poodle puppy—a black miniature poodle puppy, brought him home. We searched that neighborhood, it was one of these little things that was happy, happy, happy, and I said, "Somebody's looking for this little thing." And we searched the neighborhood, knocked on doors, "Have you ever seen this dog before?" Nobody had. Nobody knew the dog, he was chasing cars in front of a school on 58th, and Tom stopped and picked him up. We put signs up all over the area, didn't get one phone call, and finally, we decided he was ours. My husband started training him, and he just trained him while he took him on his walks. He was training him, took him all the way through utility. He only lived to be about ten.

DM:

When did you stop offering classes?

WC:

Oh, we moved.

DM:

Oh, you moved from Lubbock?

WC:

We moved to North Carolina. My husband's business told him he had—they offered him a big promotion—no, we moved to Denver, first, and that just wouldn't get it, it snowed every Wednesday. (Laughing) No kidding, every Wednesday, it snowed.

DM:

(Laughing) And we know how you are about cold weather, too.

WC:

So anyway, and the—he wasn't particularly happy after he got there, and then we got a call from North Carolina. And that sounded right to both of us, so we went to North Carolina, stayed there five years, and he got a call from Atlanta, giving him another promotion. So we went there and stayed there eighteen months, and Time called and asked him to come back. They didn't know, they could've gotten us for half price. (Laughing) But we jumped at it, and it was quite a promotion. So that's where we were when they closed up.

DM:

I see, so what year was it that you came back to Lubbock, about?

WC:

Possibly somewhere around 1980, something right there.

DM:

1980, okay, you've been here ever since?

WC:

Uh-huh. Yeah, because then, when—see, what—my husband did the legal work for the truck line, getting their authority to go, you know, you can't just drive a truck and say "I'm going to California," you've got to go through all this process with the federal government.

DM:

Permits, and—okay.

WC:

So he did all that, and so when they closed—he had always thought about going into business for himself, and he said he thought maybe he'd try it then. So I said, "Okay, go ahead." Well, he

started out knocking on doors of people that didn't have interstate authority; they just could travel in Texas. And he went to these truck lines, knocking on doors, and he just—I don't know, it just boomed. And it just wasn't any time, and we're working out of the house, and I had taken a legal course—I had—oh, it was after we got back here—and, I don't know, I decided I just wanted to take some legal courses, and my husband always encouraged me in anything I wanted to do, he'd tell me, "Why don't you," you know. So I did, and so we started out together. And the two of us, we just boomed with a business that we could carry with us, because most of our work was done over the telephone and by the mail—so we very seldom met a client, because it was all long distance. So we were able to travel, we wore out three motor homes. We traveled from the North Pole to the tip of the Yucatan.

DM:

Oh, is that right?

WC:

Crisscrossing the country, and so then he had a heart attack, and that slowed us down considerably, but I kept the business running while he was—and took the papers to the hospital [to] let him sign them, and ask his opinion occasionally just so he'd feel like he was still in the loop. Then when he died, I kept the business going until I was eighty-three. And one morning I woke up—and I'd hit the floor running every morning, had to do this, had to do that—and I woke up, and I was thinking "I've got to do this—" and I thought "What am I doing this for?"

DM:

(Laughing) That's when it's time to retire.

WC:

Yeah, so I did.

DM:

But, it was helping these companies to get permits, or whatever they needed to go interstate.

WC:

That's right. And any problems that they had along the way, you know, that involved the interstate—well, like one man stopped a truck that was going interstate because of the load that he had, he had not paid for. He had not been paid for the—whatever it was—and the driver called my husband, and said he was stopped there, and the man wouldn't let the truck—wouldn't let him have his truck. So Tom got the man's telephone number and he called him and told him, he said, "I know you don't realize what you've done, but you've broken a federal law." And he said, "You cannot enter an interstate shipment, and the law's very clear on that." And he says, "You'll have to release that truck, whether—" He said, "The government doesn't care whether

you ever get paid, but you have to release that truck.” And he said, “If the driver doesn’t call me within five minutes after I hang up, and tell me that you’ve released the truck, my next call is to the FBI.” Oh, he had no idea, so Tom said, “I didn’t think you did, just release the truck.” And so the man did. But, I mean, you know, he got calls like that. Then there were insurance questions, oh my land, but they were required five million dollars insurance. You don’t realize that, you see, and—

DM:

So he probably dealt with Hazmat issues, hazardous materials, wide loads, this kind of thing?

WC:

Anything that was legal, had to do legally—federal.

DM:

What about doubles and triples? Because that goes different for different states, so a triple heads out of one state, and into another—

WC:

Well, now I don’t know, we didn’t run into any of those problems, you see, that was back in the eighties. And I look out here, they park trucks out here all the time and the leave them two or three days. And I’ve seen some that was almost as long as this walk, and I think, “Oh, I wouldn’t want to get on a two-lane road with them.” But they’re really getting too big, I think.

DM:

Well, those triples—I don’t think Texas allows triples, I don’t remember, but I see those triples out in other states, and they’re just all over the place. You just can’t control them, especially when the wind’s up. Anyway, y’all were the people to call about issues, insurance, legal issues related to that, that’s interesting. Can you tell me about Honor Flight?

WC:

Oh yes. Well, I’ll say what everybody else says, it’s unbelievable. Here I am in a wheelchair, I can’t even stand up, so if I want to go in that chair, I have to use a slide board, or somebody has to pick me up and put me in it. So anyway, we were—I was told that I could either take a guardian, as they called them—

DM:

A guardian?

WC:

Someone to look after me, personally. Or, if I didn’t need constant attention, that they had

volunteers that would push wheelchairs and things. So I felt like I needed somebody with me constantly, so I had—I asked Betty, who was—she had come out to take care of me when this first happened to me, we thought for a couple of weeks, wound up to be two years. So then I was going downhill, and I knew it, so I told her, I said “I think it’s time I started thinking about assisted living.” And she agreed with me. So I made the move over here, then, and she went to work for my best friend out in Acuff, who was having some problems, and she was still out there. So anyway, I said, well, I’d take Betty. Now, it’s free to the veteran, we don’t pay anything. But if you take a guardian, it’s sixteen hundred dollars for the guardian. So I said, “Well, I’ll pay that, there’s no way she could pay it.” We went well, there was not one snag, there was not one problem that I know of, everything went smooth as glass. We had several of us in wheelchairs permanently. The buses—we had three tour buses, and they were as big as Greyhound buses. And they had the wheelchair lifts on them. Like our bus carried two of us, and the other buses, I don’t know how many they carried. But then a lot of the veterans were able to walk, but when you got out to these places where the things were, you know, they couldn’t—it was too far. So they carried—see the travel chair back there? You know, it folds up to where it’s just practically nothing—they carried a whole bunch of them in the tour buses, and so they put all these men in these chairs. So there’s a bunch that you see in the wheelchairs, and then there were two men that sat next to me on the plane that had portable oxygen. I mean, nothing was a problem, you know, they could manage it.

DM:

They had it all figured out.

WC:

Yeah, it was just unbelievable.

DM:

How many people went from Lubbock?

WC:

Well, there were ninety—about ninety-something veterans, and then it was a total of two hundred-and-something, you see, with volunteers.

DM:

Getting that many people around efficiently is quite a feat.

WC:

I know it. That’s what I was saying, it’s unbelievable. And we went to here, we went to all the monuments, World War II, yeah—

DM:

You went to the World War II memorial?

WC:

Yeah, we went to all the monuments, and—

DM:

Oh, okay, you have a book here.

WC:

Yeah, they sent that to us after we got home.

DM:

You went to Arlington Cemetery, I know that you put a wreath on—didn't you put a wreath on the tombs?

WC:

Oh, yes, yes. I considered that quite an honor.

DM:

Uh-huh, I'm sure. Here's a list of the participants.

WC:

Uh-huh, all the people that went.

DM:

Oh, you were at this last one.

WC:

Yeah, uh-huh—

DM:

This last October—

WC:

—yes, in October. And—just turn it over.

DM:

Oh, okay. Oh, it's a nice booklet.

WC:

Oh, it's beautiful.

DM:

Photos of the participants—

WC:

Yeah, and you'll see me. Betty didn't get her picture made, I don't know how come she didn't get her picture made, and she didn't get her thing in—

DM:

Okay, and then photos along the way.

WC:

Yeah, now, wait a minute, let's see.

DM:

Oh, your guardian, Betty. Oh, Betty didn't get her picture taken, okay.

WC:

No. Let's see, here, I think this is it. Yeah, here, that's in Baltimore, that's Betty and I.

DM:

Oh, okay, yeah.

WC:

Now, see, we were supposed to wear—what Betty called our uniform—khaki slacks and they gave us golf shirts that said “Honor Flight” on them, and gave us a red, white, and blue one. And they told you every evening which color to wear so they could spot us easily, you know. And, now I can't stand up, so I can't put trousers on, so I made khaki skirts. So you can see me in the crowds, if you look for the legs.

DM:

I see. But you'll have your khaki skirt and your golf shirt on.

WC:

Yeah.

DM:

Okay, and here's the World War Two memorial. I'll have to get with Honor Flight and see if they'll put a copy of this in the archives. They probably have one for every year.

WC:

You see, here I am—

DM:

Right back there, I see you, there's your khaki skirt.

WC:

Yeah, right there.

DM:

There's Arlington Cemetery, Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

WC:

That was quite emotional.

DM:

Oh, I bet, let me get my reading glasses on, here. Okay, those are some other, but over—now, is this you here?

WC:

Yeah, you see, there were four of us. Two men in front and two men in the back, and I was up in the front.

DM:

Looks like you might have—is that a Navy hat, or is that an Honor Flight hat?

WC:

That's the Honor Flight hat. We all had them on, and I think that's the day I wore my dark blue skirt. You could either—you could wear dark blue. And you see here—

DM:

Right. There's the Iwo Jima—there you are.

WC:

See, now this is the other woman, there was just two of us women. And she didn't really do anything. I don't even think she wore—most of the time she didn't even wear the—

DM:

The uniform?

WC:

—uh-huh. Now you see Iwo Jima.

DM:

Iwo Jima, yes. There's the *Enola Gay*. This is a really good book.

WC:

It is, it's beautiful.

DM:

I'll talk to the—did you meet Randy Neugebauer?

WC:

Yes, uh-huh, that was the day at the Capitol, and you'll see—let's see—

DM:

And you mentioned he gave you the flag.

WC:

Yeah, uh, here—right about here, by about the second post, you'll see Betty.

DM:

Oh, I see.

WC:

You see? Yeah. Like the little photographer, Chandler Lemon, they sent a photographer and a reporter along with us. And the young photographer, he'd say "Oh there's the Legs over there," and they'd come running over to get a picture of me. (Laughing)

DM:

So your nickname was "Legs" on this trip. (Laughing)

WC:

I guess. Now this is the Air Force. And that is—I cannot tell you how tall that is. It's huge; it looks like it goes up forever. And it's supposed to represent the entrails of the plane, when they peel off.

DM:

Right, right. I just don't remember seeing that, but it's been several years since I've—

WC:

Well, you see, when we stopped—we went to Washington twice a year on business, and I had seen, I thought, everything, but they didn't start building the monuments until the next year.

DM:

That's Korea.

WC:

This, I think, is so impressive.

DM:

I think so, too.

WC:

That was one of the most impressive things I've seen.

DM:

I've seen that at night, and it kind of glows, and it's spooky, you know, it's eerie to see those soldiers out there. But it's a good memorial. Those statues kind of catch the moonlight. And The Wall, Vietnam Memorial.

WC:

And The Wall was so much bigger than I thought. It just went on and on and on. I had seen the little one they brought in to Tech. We had seen that one, but—I knew it was going to be bigger than that, but—

DM:

It just gives you an idea of how many people died in that war, but it wouldn't compare to World War II, would it?

WC:

I don't know.

DM:

They couldn't even do a World War II wall, there would be so many—it would be huge.

WC:

And here's—this is our welcome home—

DM:

Oh yes, back at the airport.

WC:

That was unbelievable, absolutely.

DM:

A lot of people were out there, I understand.

WC:

I think half of Lubbock was out there. And this has a funny story.

DM:

You're in front of the Lincoln Memorial.

WC:

Every place we went, there were tourists and school buses. And right over here—we were here—there was the pool—the Reflecting Pool, and the—

DM:

Washington Monument

WC:

—Washington Monument—no, it wasn't the Washington, it was something else. Anyway, so all the tourists were back over here, you know, and so right in the middle of this, this woman falls in the Reflecting Pool—

DM:

Oops!

WC:

—She went under—head—I mean, she went down.

DM:

Was she in a wheelchair?

WC:

No, she was trying to take a picture and, I think, what she was doing was backing up, trying to get us all in, and she just went in the pool. (Laughing)

DM:

(Laughing) Well, everybody ought to be smiling in these pictures, then.

WC:

Well, I laughed.

DM:

Oh, how funny. (Laughing) I'm glad it's not too deep.

WC:

Oh yeah. But she was one unhappy camper. And the weather—we couldn't have ordered anything any better. It was—I don't know, it—we were comfortable in our short sleeves. Now, one morning we had to wear a jacket, but as a rule, it was short—it was overcast—not cloudy, but just overcast, so we didn't have the burning sun. And when we had the sun, it was just—wasn't "sunburn-y". We couldn't have ordered better weather.

DM:

I am so glad that went so well.

WC:

And that's what I was telling you, everything went so—and our hotel—we stayed at the Hilton, and we were on the nineteenth floor. Betty had not done much travelling, so we—let's see, we didn't get to our room—we had to be at the airport at five thirty in the morning, and it was about six, six thirty before we got to our room that night. So we get up there, and here's Betty over there closing the drapes, I said "What are you doing?" She said "I'm closing the drapes." I said "Well, don't do that." Here's lights and Washington, just beautiful out there, you know, and I said "Don't do that." She said "Well, they'll see in." And I said "Who?"

DM:

(Laughing) You're on the—so high up in the hotel—

WC:

Yeah (Laughing)

DM:

Oh, that's great. I'm really glad to hear it went so well. Well, is there anything else to add, that we haven't talked about?

WC:

Oh, I don't know, I jotted a couple of notes, I think I touched on just about everything.

DM:

Okay.

WC:

Oh, yeah, one thing I wanted to talk to you about if you don't know about it. Have you heard about the "Abandon Ship Drill?"

DM:

The "Abandon Ship Drill?"

WC:

"Abandon Ship Drill."

DM:

No.

WC:

Well, before you go overseas in the Navy—or to sea—you have to pass the "Abandon Ship Drill," and evidently they're still doing it, because when we went to our cruise to the Panama Canal, the safety director came and got me and wanted to know if I wanted to watch the crew do it, they were certifying some sailors. So anyway, what it amounts to—thirty-five foot tower—you have to jump.

DM:

Into water.

WC:

Of course. And swim as hard as you can for a hundred yards. All right, now, the purpose of that is in case of fire, flaming oil, they figure a hundred yards will get you out of the fire.

DM:

So you have to do this underwater? Swim underwater?

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WC:

No, just swim. And, now thirty-five feet, like my son told me—he was the fire chief over there, where he is—he went off the tower a lot, repelling, you know. He said “Mom, that’s like a three story building.” I said, “You want to tell me about it?” (Laughing) Well, I went up the ladder, just as happy as a lark, sure, I’ll jump off that thing—until I looked down. You remember these high divers and things with the little thing—that’s what it looked like. That big, Olympic-sized pool looked like a bucket down there. And I said “No way.” Well, he kept encouraging me—my swimming instructor was up there—and I wouldn’t go, finally he said, “Now, look, you want to go. You can’t go overseas if you don’t pass this. He said “You’ve got to do it.” “Okay. No. I’m not going to—” So he said, “Well, listen, I’ll do what I do to the boys.” He said, “I’ll kick you over.” And I knew he would, I said, “No,” so I said, “Will you hold my hand?” He said, “Yeah, I’ll hold your hand.” So we went over.

DM:

Oh, he went with you.

WC:

He went with me, holding my hand. Well, when I came up—well, heck, there wasn’t anything to that, that was sort of fun. (Laughing) So I started swimming. And it’s just—now they did that because in the beginning of the war, they had kids freeze at the ramp—when they had to abandon ship, they froze at the ramp. So they—once you jump it—

DM:

You know you can.

WC:

—There’s nothing to it. So when we were on the way to Panama and the safety director asked me if I wanted to watch them, we went up there and watched the crew—they were certifying them, they were new members. And this one—I’ll never forget him—great big black boy from Alabama, name was James. And he walks out on the little platform and he looks down, and I thought, “Uh-oh.”

DM:

Shakes his head.

WC:

He backs up. He said, “Go on, James.” He walked—

DM:

Yup, backs up.

WC:

And I felt so sorry for him; I knew exactly how he felt. I told Tommy, "I feel like going out there and taking his hand and going with him." So anyway, really I didn't think the boy was going to do it, but finally he did. Well, when he came up, he had a grin from ear to ear. And he starts backstroking and swimming around and just laughing and having more fun down there—they couldn't get him out of the water. So finally he came up the ladder. But once you do it, there's nothing to it. I wouldn't hesitate today to do it.

DM:

You just have to know that you can.

WC:

Well, that's it. I mean, it's scary—downright scary. But you find out you are going to come up.

DM:

What else did you have on your list, there, anything else that we hadn't talked about?

WC:

Oh, yeah, about working. And I didn't remember this, but the lady that gives me a bath mentioned it. We didn't use gloves.

DM:

Right, plastic gloves in surgery.

WC:

Well, oh yeah, we used them in surgery, and we used them at isolation, but just like giving a patient a bath, we'd give them a bath, and then we'd go to the next patient and give them a bath, you know. And passing out the medications, well, everything you do, we didn't do it except if it was isolation or reverse isolation and surgery, you know, something like that was the only time we used gloves.

DM:

Things have really changed, now, haven't they?

WC:

And we didn't spread any diseases that I know of. And here, the girls come in—like the girl that gives me a bath has to wear gloves.

DM:

Really, is that right?

WC:

Everything they do, they have to wear gloves.

DM:

It's a different kind of world we live in, now, isn't it?

WC:

It certainly is.

DM:

Is there anything else that's occurred to you?

WC:

I think that was all. Yep.

DM:

Well I'm going to go ahead and turn this off.

WC:

Okay.

End of Interview

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