

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JANICE BELLEAU
Clerk, United States Navy, World War II
2007

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Belleau, Janice Jones, (b. 1924). Oral History Interview, 2007.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 20 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 20 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Abstract:

Janice Jones Belleau, a Green Bay, Wisconsin native, discusses her service as a clerk in the Navy during World War II. After basic training at Hunter College in New York City, she served as a "Mailma'am" at the Fleet Post Office in San Bruno (California). She describes the Navy Recruiting Office telling her to "go home and grow up" when she tried to enlist after graduating high school in 1942. Instead, she went to Layton School of Art in Milwaukee (Wisconsin) until she was twenty years old. Belleau explains that her father had been in the Navy during World War I and her brother was currently serving, so she "wanted to be there helping." Belleau reports that her father was in the hospital when she enlisted with her mother's permission. Her father reacted so furiously to her enlistment that the hospital staff put him in restraints. Belleau recalls working at the Fleet Post Office at Hunter College following basic training. While there, she handled many damaged care packages addressed to sailors overseas. The clerks would save the addresses and put all the items from the damaged boxes into a large, collective bin. Using random items from the bin, they would make new care packages to send to the sailors whose packages from home had been damaged. Belleau tells a story about coming across a package for a sailor she knew from Green Bay who had recently been killed. Belleau forwarded the package to his unit, thinking "somebody on his ship could use it." Belleau also touches upon being stationed in San Bruno (California) at Tanforan Racetrack, which had been converted from a Japanese internment camp into a port of embarkation for the Navy. She briefly mentions difficulties of life on base, including living on a small salary and having an allergic reaction to eucalyptus trees. She details the Navy's precautions to separate the fifty-three WAVES from the thousands of sailors on the train to San Francisco, in the barracks, and on base. Belleau comments that she appreciated the car service that would drive the servicewomen around the base or into San Francisco, stating "they were very protective of us." Belleau mentions that she went to the USO often and that Ralph Edwards (a radio and television star) once took her and a few other servicewomen to dinner. Belleau tells the story of meeting her future husband, a sailor, on Treasure Island Naval Base (California) in 1946. He was scheduled to ship out to the Pacific, so he bought her the most expensive item in the PX, a blanket, as a goodbye gift. He unexpectedly returned to base the next day because his ship collided with a piling of the Golden Gate Bridge during embarkation. They were married soon after in Oakland (California). Belleau states that after the war she and her husband moved back to Green Bay (Wisconsin), but she briefly took beauty school classes in Memphis (Tennessee) under the GI Bill. Despite his angry reaction when she enlisted, Belleau's father was very proud after her homecoming and enjoyed showing her off in public. Belleau describes her father taking her to the Beaumont Hotel in Green Bay for

coffee and walking her up and down Washington Street in her uniform. Belleau was the first woman to be hired by the Post Office in Green Bay. She tells of encountering sexism there and feels that an injury caused by a mail sack mysteriously falling on her head was not an accident. Today, Belleau continues to enjoy VA medical benefits and goes to the VA Clinic in Green Bay. Belleau refers to herself as “one of the most active” members of the American Legion Post in Green Bay, which she joined in 1960.

Biographical Sketch:

Belleau (1924-) served as a mail clerk with the Navy during World War II at in San Bruno, California. She has been an active member of the American Legion in Green Bay, Wisconsin for forty-seven years from 1960 to 2007.

Interviewed by Terry MacDonald, 2007.

Transcribed by Cathy Cox, Wisconsin Court Reporter, 2007.

Transcript Abstract written by Darcy Gervasio, 2008.

Interview Transcript

Terry: This is an interview with Janice Belleau, who served with the United States Navy during World War II. The interview is being conducted at approximately 2:15 p.m. at the following address of 2543 Hazelwood Lane, Green Bay, Wisconsin, on the following date of February 15th, 2007, and the interviewer is Terry MacDonald.

Ok Janice, can you tell us a little bit about where you grew up and a little bit about your family history?

Belleau: I grew up in Green Bay, Wisconsin. I was born here in 1924, to Wilhemina and Harold Jones. My father had a trucking company in town, and he was a contract carrier for the larger cheese companies, so I grew up around trucks all the time. And then he said—he sold trucks, Devon reels, and um—So I was in trucks most of my young life. So now I drive almost anything. (both chuckle) Well, not as much as I used to though, tell you the truth.

Terry: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

Belleau: I had two—I still have—two sisters and a brother.

Terry: Were they older than you, or younger?

Belleau: I'm the oldest. I'm the one that had to cut the way for them. And it wasn't always easy because my dad was real particular about how we looked and—you know, I had trouble wearing lipstick to my high school graduation. But uh, I had a nice family. A good Christian family.

Terry: And when you graduated from high school, what did you do after graduation?

Belleau: Well, I wanted to go in the service. And I went down to the Navy Recruiting Office and they told me to go home and grow up. So then I had—I got a scholarship at high school for Layton School of Art in Milwaukee, so I went there just to kill time till I was 20 so I *could* go in the Navy.

Terry: So, when you said you wanted to go into the Navy, what [was your parents'] reaction?

Belleau: My father was *furious*. And he had *been* in the World War I, and my brother *was* in the Navy at *this* time. And often, we waited a long time for

mail from him 'cause he was in very active duty. And so I wanted to be there helping.

Terry: What year was that that—

Belleau: That was in 1942. I graduated from high school in 1942.

Terry: And you had to wait until you were 20 years old—

Belleau: Yes.

Terry: --'cause you didn't need your father's signature at that point?

Belleau: I needed *a* parent. And so my dad was in the hospital when I turned 20, so my mother went down with me and she signed. And my father was so furious they had to put him in restraints. But uh, it worked out real fine, because when I came *home* from the Navy, he was so proud that he walked me up and down Washington Street in my uniform.

(both laugh)

Terry: So what made you join the Navy versus the other branches?

Belleau: Because Dad was in the Navy, and Buck—my brother Buck—was in the Navy.

Terry: And where did you go then for your training?

Belleau: I did my training at Hunter College, New York City. And it was a really good experience. It was very cold, and I went in in the middle of December, and 1946 I think it was—'45—I've forgotten. Anyway, it was cold, so I marched around in a fur coat. (both chuckle) And, and, when I sent my coat home—it was dark when we had to walk to the mess hall—the girl behind me hung on to my coat, and here I had a bald spot in the back of my fur coat from them hanging on.

(both laugh)

Terry: Did you go with anybody else from the Green Bay area?

Belleau: No.

Terry: You went by yourself.

Belleau: I went by myself.

- Terry: That's quite an experience for a young woman to go off like that.
- Belleau: Well, it was—it was fun. It was fun.
- Terry: When you're out in New York then, what was it like in your basic training type thing? What did they do?
- Belleau: Actually—
- Terry: Marching, or—
- Belleau: Oh, I *loved* the marching. But I'm short. And I was always in the *last* row. Except when they said "To the rear, Harch" then I'm the front row. (chuckles) But, but I loved it. And I belonged to the EE(??) team, you know. We really had a good, good group.
- Terry: Roughly how long did they keep you in—
- Belleau: I was there quite awhile, because I—I've—the rate I got was Mailma'am. And you understand, I said "Mailma'am." (both laugh) But uh, I trained for postal work. And so I was there for 18 months in New York City, but I was at Fleet Post Office during ark 1st (?). So uh—that was a real wonderful experience.
- Terry: Now did you still house at Hunter College?
- Belleau: Yes, I did.
- Terry: Oh, so you didn't have to go any place after you got out.
- Belleau: Not at that point, no.
- Terry: So what was it like—you were at the Fleet Post Office?
- Belleau: Right.
- Terry: So they were basically dealing with Navy—probably Navy and—
- Belleau: It was. Right. Navy and Marine, you know.
- Terry: So, you're basically the mail being shipped out, right? To the—
- Belleau: Well, I had a kind of an unusual job. So many times people would send packages to fellows overseas, and by the time they got to Fleet Post Office they would fall apart. So, at the Post Office they would just cut off the address to where it was going, and put all that was good in the box in these

great big huge bins—half as big as this bedroom. So anyway, I would get a *new* box, and make it up from all the stuff that was in that bin, and then use that address. So we sent out a box anyway, they got something. Not necessarily what was sent from *home*, but they got something. And there was only one time that a package went through for someone I knew. And it was from [for?] a fellow from Green Bay, and I knew he had been killed because I'd just heard about it from my folks. But I sent the package off anyway. I figured somebody on his ship could use it, you know.

Terry: So how long were you there then as a—

Belleau: Eighteen months I was in New York.

Terry: And then what happened after that?

Belleau: I was shipped to Fleet Post Office in San Francisco. That was a long, tedious train drive, and it was on a troop train—

Terry: Did you go with other women?

Belleau: The car—our car was full of girls going to the West Coast. And not necessarily girls that I worked with, but it was all servicewomen in that car. And that was the back car on the troop train, and they couldn't march us through to the mess car, because the fellas were just *silly*, you know.

Terry: Yeah.

Belleau: So they stopped at a Paul Harvey every time we had to eat. And they had to wait for us to have our meal, and then we could go on again.

(both laugh)

Terry: When you were in New York City, how did people react to you? You had to wear a uniform all the time, huh?

Belleau: Yes, oh yes.

Terry: And how did they react to you—the civilians?

Belleau: Well, I thought it was wonderful. I went to the USO's of course, and um—saw a lot of stars. The best part of it was, I got to go to a *lot* of plays—only saw two acts of them 'cause I always had to get back to the base by midnight—but uh—they were very generous to us I thought.

Terry: Can you recall offhand any big stars you said—

- Belleau: No. You know I really can't. Except that uh—Ralph Edwards took me to dinner once. (laughs)
- Terry: Is that right? Ralph Edwards.
- Belleau: Yes. He, and me and two other WAVES. Yeah, he took us. He took us for an eight course meal. And I mean big courses. It took us all day to eat it.
- Terry: Wow. Wow. How did that come about?
- Belleau: Well, I don't know. We met him—one time, I think he was just talking to us in the hotel. The train that we got off of stopped at the hotel, in the back floor downstairs of the hotel. And he was just talking to us. Because we were servicewomen, or he never would have, you know. And uh, so he just invited—he and another man—who happened to be a doctor—and they were very courtly, very nice to us—invited us to eat with them, and so we went. Yeah. Safety in numbers, you know. (Terry laughs)
- Terry: So when you went out to California, and where at in California were you working at then?
- Belleau: I worked at Fleet Post Office in San Francisco, for just a short time, because they needed volunteers to go to San Bruno, California, which was only fifteen miles outside San Francisco. San Bruno was the Tanforan Racetrack that had been converted for all these Japanese people that they had to house. But they were—the Japanese people were no longer there. All those barracks were closed. But now they made it a Port of Embarkation for the Navy. And there were just 53 of us WAVES that went there, and uh, 20-some thousand men, so it was good duty. (laughs)
- Terry: You weren't doing postal work then at that—
- Belleau: Oh, yes. There I worked a window—I sold stamps, did money orders, the whole postal bit there.
- Terry: And where did they house you?
- Belleau: We had a barracks. A real big barracks. But I kept popping out in lumps all over my body living in a barracks. So finally they did a test on me, and I was allergic to the eucalyptus—it was in the middle of a eucalyptus grove. And I didn't know that. So they just moved me to a different barracks. It was all right then.
- Terry: So how long did you stay there working?

- Belleau: Let's see—now how long was I there? Maybe seven or eight months. Then I went to Treasure Island in California. And I was discharged from Treasure Island. I met my *husband* on that base.
- Terry: On Treasure Island.
- Belleau: No, I met my husband at San Bruno. And um—
- Terry: Was he a Navy man also?
- Belleau: He was a Navy man also. And he shipped out from there, because that *was* a Port of Embarkation, but when they were going through the Golden Gate Bridge, their ship collided with one of the pilings, so here I said a very tearful, tearful, goodbye to him, and uh—he wanted to buy me something, that was so funny, so we went to the PX and he bought me a blanket, 'cause that was the most expensive thing he could find, and it was just a wonderful blanket. And I said goodbye to him, and the next day he's back at Alameda. (both laugh) So there was nothing to do but get married then. (laughs again)
- Terry: Ok. What year was that?
- Belleau: That was—oh my goodness—1946—'47—'46. You know, I'm sorry Terry, I should have looked this up before.
- Terry: That's ok. That's no problem. So, when you got married you were both still in the service.
- Belleau: Yeah. We got married in Oakland, California. And uh—we had friends in Oakland, that's why we got married there, and that's where the church was that they went to, so we got married there.
- Terry: When did you end up getting discharged? You said you got discharged from Treasure Island.
- Belleau: Yeah, I got discharged—
- Terry: Was that shortly after you got married?
- Belleau: Yes. I was discharged in March.
- Terry: And what about your husband?
- Belleau: And he followed me, oh, maybe three weeks later.
- Terry: Oh, really. He was that close to getting out?

Belleau: Yeah, he was from St. Louis. And uh—but he came to Green Bay then, and we went to St. Louis together. Actually, it wasn't St. Louis, it was a little town across the river that was Illinois.

(both chuckle)

Terry: So you originally came back to Green Bay, and then he came back, and then you went down south?

Belleau: Right.

Terry: Oh, ok. And how did you end up back in Green Bay, then?

Belleau: We were only down there for a short time. And he was fascinated—he had been studying since seventh grade to be a minister. And but—when he came to Green Bay and he saw my dad's trucks, he—it was love at first *sight*.

Terry: Is that right?

Belleau: Yeah. So, he wanted to come and go into business with my dad. Yeah.

Terry: Oh, well that was interesting.

And so uh—you stayed here in Green Bay then? And did you—you or your husband either one—use any of the GI Bill benefits that you earned?

Belleau: You know what? I use them every day of my life. I get all my meds from the VA. I never dreamed that those months in the military would give me so much benefit later in life. I'd be dead now if it weren't for that. I'm just so grateful for—

Terry: Are you able to use the VA Clinic here in Green Bay?

Belleau: Yes. I started in Milwaukee. I was injured in the Post Office, and I went to work for the Post Office in Green Bay. But I was the first girl in Green Bay to be hired at the Post Office. And the men didn't *want* it. And so, an eight pound sack of mail mysteriously fell from a balcony on my head. So I was injured. And so they sent me down to the clinic in Milwaukee. And they took care of me there, and then when Appleton opened I moved there. And the doctor—I had Dr. Gallagher there—he came to Green Bay and I went with him. He took me with him. So I still see him—I just got a letter from him yesterday to come in again.

Terry: Well good. How about—were you able to use any of the other benefits?

- Belleau: Yes, I did. We did live in Memphis, Tennessee for awhile, and I wanted to go to school. And so—I could only go in the evening, ‘cause then we had *two* children. And so I went to beauty school. And I went for 900 hours, and found out I was going to have another baby so we came back to Green Bay.
- Terry: How did you manage to sign up with the American Legion Post, here in Green Bay?
- Belleau: Well, it was my mother’s fault. She saw a little ad in the paper that said all these women veterans were invited to a luncheon, and she read it to me, and she said, “I think you should go to that.” She said, “You might meet some people that you know, or like, or new friends, you know.” So, I went and I was sunk right then. That was 47 years ago.
- Terry: Wow. You must have been one of the original members, then, at the Post.
- Belleau: No, there were quite a few ahead of me. But I was certainly one of the most active. (chuckles)
- Terry: Good. Looking back on the—you know, the time you spent in the service—what kind of impact did that have on you? Did it have much?
- Belleau: I grew up. I did. It was very good. My parents were loving and very careful about us girls, and um—I just grew up. You know, I just found there was more to life. I had charge accounts all over town, didn’t have to worry about paying for anything here. And all of a sudden I had to get along on my \$45.00, you know, and that’s tough! The only time I wired home was when I needed some more money.
- (both laugh)
- Terry: An interesting comment you made before was when you came home and your dad was so proud of you wearing your uniform.
- Belleau: Well--
- Terry: That really made his day, huh?
- Belleau: Yeah. He belonged to a little coffee thing when the Beaumont Hotel was here in Green Bay. And so he took me down there all dressed up in my uniform for coffee so I could meet all the men. And then we walked, right down Washington Street a few blocks and back again. He wanted everybody to see me in my uniform. (laughing)

Terry: And he was proud papa, huh?

Belleau: He was. He was very proud. And he found out the service didn't hurt me at all.

Terry: Did you have anything that really stood out in your memory of your service career, your time—was there anything that really jumps out—other than you met your husband?

(both laugh)

Belleau: Well, you know, when you sit in a post office, and you don't have any customers, you got a lot of time on your hands. And I was sitting next to this very naïve young man in the next window, and uh—oh I told him some big whoppers. I told him that I was a burlesque dancer in Milwaukee. (both laugh) Because, this young man I'm going with, you know, is so interested in—was going to be a minister—so I made it as bad as I could.

(both laugh)

Terry: And the guy fell for it?

Belleau: Oh, he sure did, hook line and sinker. And gave poor old Del, my husband, a talking to. He said, "I don't think you should go with her, like that girl. She's got a poor background."

(both laugh)

One thing that impressed me very much about, when they shipped us to San Bruno, or Tanforan Racetrack, there were so few of us WAVES and so many men, and it was—it was scary, you know. Because you didn't know what to expect. And, they wouldn't even let us walk alone on the base. We had cars that took us wherever we had to go, to work or back to work, or to the PX, and wherever we wanted to go those cars were always there for us. And they took us to the main gate to catch buses to go into San Francisco, and they were *very* protective of us. And I appreciated that. I thought that was most unusual. You know that—and I—that's one of the things that—

Terry: The Navy itself was doing this and not—

Belleau: Yes.

Terry: --and not the individual sailors?

Belleau: No, it was the Navy itself. It was all set up for us. 'Cause it was *all* of us there you know, that, that uh—and they were not allowed anywhere in our barracks, or—nothing like that you know, they just—it was good duty. It was really good duty.

[End of Interview]