

A PART OF HISTORY: Novi woman's fling as a WWII WAVE turns out to be significant

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Bettie Archer Johnson chose the Navy WAVES partly because of the uniform, now on display at her Novi home. (PATRICIA BECK/Detroit Free Press)

Two mannequins -- one in the blue and white seersucker Navy uniform 84-year-old Bettie Archer Johnson wore on summer days, the other in her dark blue winter outfit -- stand sentry in the corner of her spare bedroom. Styrofoam heads, the kind usually used to display wigs, wear her Navy hats.

Photographs, awards and other memorabilia line shelves painted red and blue to accent the room's white walls. Newspaper clippings are filed in neatly organized scrapbooks.

This is where Johnson has decided Marcia Williams, who is taking oral histories for the Library of Congress' Veteran's History Project, will interview her about the 20 months she spent in the Navy during World War II -- about what she saw and who she saw and how the experience changed her.

Johnson, who lives in Novi, isn't sure why the Veteran's History Project asked her to give her oral history. Maybe someone at the American Legion in Novi recommended her? Someone at the Veteran's Administration? Someone at the military cemetery where she is a volunteer? Or someone from the Women's Memorial committee in Washington? She also isn't sure that she has much to say. While she holds dear the time she spent in the Navy, she didn't see battle or bombs. She worked as a switchboard operator, never stationed more than 30 miles from New York City. She spent her free time riding the subway and seeing plays and shows.

But in a few minutes, the tape will start recording and she will have to start talking.

Cute uniforms, and patriotism

In the summer of 1944, Johnson was Betty Archer -- the Navy made her change her name to Bettie because that's how it's spelled on her birth certificate; she took her husband's last name when she married.

She was living with her parents in Pontiac and working at the phone company -- "that was the best place for women to work in those days" -- and making enough to buy the most fashionable clothes and accessories.

With their brothers in the service and the men they knew being sent off to fight, Johnson and four of her girlfriends decided they needed to do more to help the war effort.

"We all got together and said, 'Why don't we enlist?'"

They chose the Navy WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) because the uniforms were most attractive. Later Johnson would say she felt proud and special walking through New York in her smartly pressed skirt and jacket, saluting officers she saw on the street. She felt like she was involved in something bigger than herself or the phone company. The Navy brought out in her a confidence that she'd probably always had -- a timid person doesn't up and join the Navy -- but maybe hadn't realized. When she was a civilian again and back to work, one of her male colleagues said joining the Navy was the best thing she and the other women had ever done because it made them better workers.

"We were the groundbreakers," Johnson says, "the ones who showed that women could do stuff."

Adventure and anxiety

Johnson and her friends were sworn in during the seventh inning stretch of a community baseball game in Pontiac. By Sept. 7, 1944, they were headed to New York on a train so crowded that some passengers had to sit on their suitcases.

"I thought it was very adventurous and exciting," says Johnson's sister, Gene Rayner, who is 81 and lives in Pontiac. But she adds: "I don't think I would've ever been able to do it. I was just more of a homebody, I guess."

Johnson had traveled a bit. She and her friends spent long weekends in Chicago; once she'd been as far away as Colorado.

But no matter where her travels took her, she always returned, a short time later, to her parents' house. This time, of course, it would be different.

"We tried to act very knowledgeable and secure in what we were doing," Johnson says of the train ride. "Actually, we were apprehensive and a little unprepared."

City life

After basic training, Johnson was assigned to shore patrol and then to switchboards. Eventually she got promoted to petty officer, third class, and ended up running the switchboard at a Manhattan hotel that had been converted to a Navy barracks.

She went to work every day and returned at night to a hotel room she shared with another WAVE.

On weekends, she and her friends went to plays, shows and clubs. She saw Judy Garland and Martha Raye.

She also met a sailor who was assigned to a PT boat. "He was in and out of the Brooklyn Navy Yard. When he came into port, we dated." And when he asked her to marry him, she said yes.

But like so many things that take place during heady times, their engagement faltered. After both were discharged, he visited her in Pontiac. Johnson decided she didn't want to get married.

They began e-mailing each other a few months ago; he lives in Colorado.

Johnson, a widow since 1969, likes the friendship.

Experience like no other

By the end of the war -- she was discharged April 2, 1946

Johnson had seen two presidents, Roosevelt and

Truman; both came to inspect the troops and the fleet.

She'd toured aircraft carriers.

She'd helped with a party for the surviving crew members more than 700 were killed -- of the U.S.S. Franklin, which had been almost sunk by Japanese bombs.

She'd made her way in a new city.

She'd grown up in a way she wouldn't have if she'd stayed home.

When she returned to Pontiac -- her parents had divorced while she was away -- she moved in with her mother, went back to work at Michigan Bell and retired in 1984 as a manager. She married a guy from the neighborhood, John

Johnson, who worked at a lumber company and had also served in the military (Army Air Force, stationed in Texas).

The couple had two sons, Dane and Rod.

As youngsters, the boys knew their mother had been in the Navy -- every so often, they'd run across one of her photos -- but it wasn't until they were older that they fully understood that she had done something unusual for her time.

"My brother and I often have discussed the notion that she, by participating in the WAVES and by always having a career, that she and the generation of women that did that are kind of like protofeminists," says Dane Johnson, who is 47 and lives in Lathrup Village.

"Long before there was a discussion of feminism, there were people who did these things when people kind of frowned on it."

Johnson has embraced her military history, celebrating it more and more as she's aged, reveling in a time when she was young and in the middle of an adventure. "It was an experience that we'd never get again," she says.

Johnson has traveled to monuments and ceremonies -- including one held in Hawaii to mark the 50th anniversary of VJ Day.

Johnson is past president of her local WAVES National, an organization for women who have served or are serving in the Navy, Marines, Coast Guard or reserves.

She's on the advisory council of the veteran's cemetery in Holly.

She is a field representative for the Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, helping other military women register for the database at the Women's Memorial at the Arlington National Cemetery.

Into perpetuity

Marcia Williams is testing the tape recorder, making sure it works.

It's time for Johnson to tell her story.



Bettie Archer Johnson & Visiting Angels Marcia Williams Enjoy a good laugh during the interview.