

[The Carter Women Veterans Historical Project at The University Of North Carolina at Greensboro: The Oral History Segment](#)

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[Trojanowski, Hermann J.](#) "The Carter Women Veterans Historical Project at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro: The Oral History Segment." *North Carolina Libraries* 67, No. 3/4 (2009) pp. 87-8: .

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A class reunion was the inspiration for the Carter Women Veterans Project at the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina, now the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). The Class of 1950 Reunion Committee met with University Archivist Betty Carter in the 1990s to plan their upcoming 50th reunion. The meetings included discussions about their classmates who had attended Woman's College from 1946 to 1950 on the GI Bill.

Carter realized that there was very little documentation about Woman's College students who joined the war effort during World War II (WWII) and wanted to learn more about their contribution to the military and to the country. In order to accomplish this, she envisioned a project with three components; a women veterans' luncheon, a premier research collection, and oral history interviews to preserve the personal stories of women veterans. In 1998, the Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project was established at UNCG and is permanently housed in the University Archives & Manuscripts located in Jackson Library.

In the summer of 1998, Carter planned a luncheon to honor women veterans on Veterans Day in November. The luncheon was a huge success, with over sixty-five women veterans attending. Since 1998, the project has hosted a Women Veterans' Luncheon each year featuring a speaker and entertainment. The twelfth women veterans' luncheon was held on November 14, 2009, with retired Brigadier General Clara Adams-Ender as the keynote speaker.

A primary goal of the project was to establish a collection that would be available to students, faculty, and scholars for conducting research in women's studies and military history. Women veterans have donated their military papers, diaries, letters, scrapbooks, photographs, artifacts, and uniforms to the UNCG University Archives. The collection has been used extensively for scholarly research producing books, dissertations, exhibits, and journal articles as well as presentations and teaching. Brenda Schleunes drew upon material from the collection in writing her play *Star-Spangled Girls*, which has been performed by The Touring Theatre Ensemble of North Carolina throughout the East Coast. Uniforms from the collection have been loaned for exhibit to the Imperial War Museum in London and the Yeshiva University Museum and Center for Jewish History in New York City.

The Oral History Segment

The oral history segment of the project has become a significant collection of its own. During the first ten years, more than 275 women veterans have been interviewed for the project. All the interviewees have interesting stories to share and we are very pleased to collect and preserve those accounts for future generations. The emphasis has been to interview women from the WWII and Korean War eras since that generation is quickly slipping away – more than fifty interviewees have already died. In May 2007, the project officially began the next phase, which is to interview approximately seventy-five women veterans from the Vietnam War era.

The aspect of the project with which I have been most closely involved is conducting oral history interviews, which began with a personal connection to one of the veterans. One of my friends, Virginia "Ginny" Mattson,¹

grew up in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, and served in the United States Navy during WWII. Ginny had often told me about her military experiences while working at the Naval Supply Depot in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, processing personnel going overseas. She was the subject of our first oral history interview conducted in January 1999.

Women in the Military

Since that first interview, we have completed oral histories with women from all branches of the military: WAAC (Women's Auxiliary Army Corps), WAC (Women's Army Corps), WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service), Marine Corps Women's Reserve, Coast Guard SPARS (Semper Paratus, which means "Always Ready"), Army Nurse Corps, Navy Nurse Corps, Red Cross workers, WASPs (Women Airforce Service Pilots), Cadet Nurse Corps, hospital dietitians, Army physical therapists, as well as Special Services such as librarians.

As far back as the Revolutionary War, women have served with the military as nurses, cooks, and laundresses; however, these women were considered civilians. It was not until World War I that women were considered part of the military. Between 1917 and 1919, approximately 12,500 women enlisted in the United States Navy. These women, known as "Yeomanettes" performed mostly clerical duties to help relieve the Navy's labor shortage.² With the exception of nurses, women would not again be part of the military until WWII.

In the late 1930s, while WWII raged in Europe and Asia, many government and military leaders in the United States believed the country would eventually be drawn into the fighting. Military planners feared the armed services would not have enough men to complete all of the tasks necessary to fight a war. Forward thinking military officials believed that women could contribute to the war effort by filling support positions to free men for combat duty. In fact, a common theme on WWII recruitment posters for women was "free a man to fight." Although there was opposition from Congress, the general public, and many in the military, in May 1941, Representative Edith Rogers of Massachusetts introduced a bill in the United States House of Representatives that created an Army women's corps. In May 1942, officials established the WAAC, giving women auxiliary status, but not military status. Auxiliary status meant that women did not receive the same pay, legal protection, or benefits as men. Females received official military status only when the army disbanded the WAAC and created the WAC in July 1943. Other military branches quickly followed the Army's lead. Congress established the WAVES in July 1942, the Coast Guard SPARS in November 1942, and the Marine Corps Women's Reserve in February 1943.

In August 1943, Congress created the WASPs, but did not grant them military status. From 1943 to late 1944, these women ferried and flight-tested military planes, towed shooting targets for male pilots, and transported passengers and cargo. One thousand and seventy-four women served with the WASPs³ and thirty-eight lost their lives during the War.⁴ Because they were considered civilians, their bodies were sent home at the expense of their families. The women who served with the WASPs finally received military status in 1977.

Approximately 350,000 women served in the military during WWII.⁵ They held jobs such as administrators, clerks, cooks, dietitians, drivers, mechanics, nurses, pilots, therapists, as well as many other positions. These women served throughout the United States as well as overseas in China, Europe, India, North Africa, and the South Pacific.

Consistently, the women veterans said that their military experience changed their lives. They learned new skills, met new people, and dared to try new things. I have heard many interesting remembrances from the women I have interviewed for the project and would like to share a few of those stories.

Susie Winston Bain

My first anecdote is about Susie Winston Bain,⁶ a pilot in the WASPs who ferried military aircraft, towed air gunnery targets, or taught flying to cadets of the Army Air Forces. During its three years of existence, the WASPs logged nearly 300,000 flying hours.⁷

Bain, a native of Markham, Texas, had never flown before seeing an advertisement in her local newspaper looking for women to join the newly formed WASPs. She persuaded her father to lend her the money to take flying lessons, which cost \$10.00 to fly with an instructor and \$5.00 to fly solo. She took the necessary lessons and joined the WASPs in November 1943.

While stationed in Laredo, Texas, Bain was the co-pilot of a B-26 Marauder, a twin-engine medium bomber. Since she was only five feet three inches tall, she had to sit on pillows to reach the controls. Her job was towing large banner-like cloth targets attached to the airplane with a rope. She vividly recalled the male gunners on the B-17 Flying Fortress bombers firing live ammunition at her target as part of their training program. Bain said that WASPs were considered expendable; they were required to fly unsafe airplanes that most male pilots would not fly. Once she was ordered to deliver a plane that she later found was not airworthy. When she tried to land, she discovered that it had no brakes or operable flaps, yet she was “chewed out” by her superiors for wrecking the plane when she crash-landed.



Susie Winston Bain in WASP leather A-2 jacket with Fifinella patch, 1944. *Image courtesy Susie of the Winston Bain Collection.*



Willie Mae Williams in off-duty dress, circa 1944. *Image courtesy of the Willie Mae Williams Collection.*

Daphne Doster Mastroianni

Some interviews included a more personal story. Daphne Doster Mastroianni⁸ was born in Monroe, North Carolina, and graduated in 1927 with a music degree. After teaching music for several years during the Great Depression and making very little money, she decided to return to school to become a nurse. She was accepted by The Johns Hopkins School of Nursing in Baltimore, Maryland. After graduating from nursing school in 1936, she worked at the Berea College Hospital and then as a public health nurse in Bowling Green and Richmond, Kentucky. When WWII started, she joined the Army Nurse Corps as part of the 18th General Hospital formed by The Johns Hopkins Hospital alumni and staff.

While serving in Fiji in the South Pacific, she met Joe Mastroianni, a Red Cross worker. They became very fond of each other but parted when the war ended. He returned to his wife in New York while Doster continued her public health nursing career in Arkansas. In 1992, after Mastroianni’s wife died, he called Doster, who was living in Charlotte, North Carolina, and had not been married. He wanted to visit. She asked, “How will I recognize you since it has been over forty years since we saw each other?” He said, “I’ll wear a rose in my hair

or something so you'll know who I am." He stepped off the airplane with a carnation in his mouth. He then moved to Charlotte and they married -- she was eighty- six and he was eighty-three. Unfortunately they had only seven years together; he died in 1999 and she followed in 2000.

Willie Mae Williams

Several interviews have reflected both the gender and racial discrimination prevalent at the time. Willie Mae Williams,⁹ a native of Archer, Florida, worked as a domestic in Tampa, Florida, before joining the WAAC in 1942. She was one of the first African Americans to join the WAAC in Hillsborough County, Florida. Williams was sent to cooks' and bakers' school in Fort Des Moines, Iowa, and then to Fort Gruber near Muskogee, Oklahoma. I asked Williams what her family and friends thought of her joining the military, because at the time there was a perception that women in the armed forces had questionable reputations. Rumors to this effect were said to have been started by men in the military "to degrade military women and to drive them out of the 'man's world'."¹⁰ The rumors did not dissuade her from volunteering. She said, "It's just the way that your parents trained you and what you want to do in life. I was looking for something different, a way to get a better education."

Daphne Doster Mastroianni in her Army Nurse Corps uniform, ca. 1942. *Image courtesy of the Daphne Doster Mastroianni Collection.*



I also asked her about the procedure for joining the military. She said that if you worked as a domestic in the Tampa area your employer had to sign release papers for you to join. She worked for a retired judge who signed the paperwork for her to join the WAAC, but she had a friend whose employer would not sign the necessary release. Williams commented, "That's how segregated it was, that if the whites said no, they need you to keep their baby, or to work because they were working, if they didn't sign the papers, then you didn't get to go."



Lucile Griffin Leonard in her Army dietitian summer uniform, 1943-1945. *Image courtesy of the Lucile Griffin Leonard Collection.*

Dorothy B. Austell in her Women's Army Corps uniform, ca. 1943. *Image courtesy of the Dorothy B. Austell Collection.*



Brigadier General Clara Adams-Ender in her Army green winter uniform, circa 1993. Image courtesy of the Clara Adams-Ender Collection.



Lucile Griffin Leonard

For some veterans, joining the military was an adventure. Lucile Griffin Leonard,¹¹ a native of Sanford, North Carolina, majored in home economics at Woman's College and graduated in 1941. She joined the United States Army in 1943 as a dietitian and in September of that year she sailed on the British ocean liner *Louis Pasteur* to Casablanca, North Africa. Her two-person stateroom housed twelve other women quartered in bunks stacked three high. They slept in fatigues and boots in case an emergency occurred during the night. Leonard recalled playing bridge and dancing in her evening gown during and remembered the ship zigzagging all the way to North Africa to avoid German submarines.

In 1944, Leonard followed the United States Army as they liberated Italy. While in Italy, she wrote home asking for candles and food coloring so she could bake birthday cakes for the wounded GIs. Another recollection was getting beef tongue issued to her dining hall. She told the mess sergeant that the only way she knew to prepare beef tongue was to cut it into small cubes and pickle it with vinegar. Leonard then sent the pickled beef tongue on toothpicks to the officer's mess; the officers were thrilled with the hors d'oeuvres and never knew what they had just eaten.

Dorothy Austell

Many women engaged in occupations that few would have pursued outside the military. Charlotte, North Carolina, native Dorothy Austell¹² served as an undercover agent in the WAC during WWII. In May 1943, Senator Clyde R. Hoey of North Carolina asked her to perform undercover intelligence work against saboteurs in the armed forces. On one of her assignments she was sent to Fort Wayne, Indiana, to find out why so many planes flying from Bear Field to England had crashed. She caught three saboteurs putting objects in the gas tanks of planes, which would have blown up the planes in mid-air. To this day, she will not go into any detail about her work, having promised never to divulge any information about her activities.

Elsie Chin Seetoo

Two of my most memorable interviews occurred in September 2005 in Washington, DC. I had arranged to interview Elsie Chin Seetoo,¹³ a 1948 nursing education graduate of Woman's College, and retired Brigadier General Clara Adams-Ender,¹⁴ a 1961 graduate of the School of Nursing at North Carolina A&T State University (NCA&T). On Friday, September 9th, I took an early flight to Washington and caught the subway out to Mitchellville, Maryland, where Seetoo picked me up at the subway station.

Seetoo, a Chinese-American, was born in Stockton, California. When she was thirteen, her family moved back to China because her parents wanted their oldest son to marry a "good" Chinese girl. She was not very happy with the decision but was determined to make the most of it. In 1941, Seetoo graduated from the Queen Mary Hospital Nursing School in Hong Kong. During the interview, she recalled how frightened she and the other nurses were when the Japanese invaded Hong Kong in December 1941. She recounted her escape, with her brother and several other nurses, into the interior of China, where she joined the Chinese Red Cross Medical Relief Corps and worked in the operating room training orderlies.

Because she had joined a foreign army, she lost her American citizenship. Seetoo heard through the “grapevine” that she could regain her American citizenship by joining the United States Army Nurse Corps. After enlisting in June 1944, Seetoo was stationed with the Air Service Command of the 14th Air Force and the 95th Station Hospital in Kunming and Chengdu. She then joined the 172nd General Hospital in Shanghai and remained in China until she was discharged from the Army in February 1946. Seetoo returned to the United States and applied to the Woman’s College using the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (GI Bill). She was accepted as a student in the fall of 1946, and graduated in 1948. Many service members returning from WWII took advantage of the GI Bill’s benefits. In addition to providing education and training, the GI Bill also provided loan guarantees, job- finding assistance, and unemployment pay for returning service men and women.

Clara Adams-Ender

I had arranged to interview Adams-Ender at her home in Woodbridge, Virginia, and she agreed to pick me up from the nearest subway station on Saturday, September 10th. My visit lasted all day and yielded over four hours of interview. Adams-Ender, a native of Wake County, North Carolina, told me about growing up on a tobacco farm and attending (NCA&T), where she entered the ROTC



Elsie Yuen Seetoo at the Chinese Medical Relief Corps and Emergency Medical Training School in Guiyang, China, 1942.

program to help pay for her schooling. As a student, she participated in the 1960 sit-ins at the Woolworth store in Greensboro. After graduating from nursing school in 1961, she joined the Army Nurse Corps and rose to the rank of brigadier general in 1987. She was chief of the Army Nurse Corps from 1987 to 1991 and retired in 1993 as the first female African American commander general of Fort Belvoir, Virginia.

One of the stories Adams-Ender recalled with a great deal of affection was meeting her second husband at a German-American medical society while stationed in Germany. Heinz Ender was a German dentist who had fought in North Africa under General Rommel during WWII. After they had dated for quite some time, he suggested that he accompany her back to the United States and that they live together. Since Adams-Ender had always let it be known that she never intended to marry again, living together was his solution to them being together. She said to him, “Do you think the Army is going to tolerate its colonels living with other people and not being married?” He then asked her to marry him and she accepted. He retired from his dental practice and they moved to the United States where he took care of the household so she could concentrate on her military career.

Common Threads

Almost all of our interviewees stated that they joined the military for patriotic, economic, or educational reasons. There was no one particular type of woman who joined the service during WWII. Typically, women volunteers “were relatively mature women, all twenty years or older, with an average age running in the mid-twenties. Many were married, some had children, and a few even had grandchildren.”¹⁵ A common thread in almost every interview was a desire to help with the war effort and make a better life for themselves.

Many of the women I interviewed considered themselves to be pioneers and trailblazers by joining the military. They told me the patriotism of WWII has remained with them to this day. All had definite opinions about recent

military conflicts. Some were in favor of our involvement in the Middle East, but others were not. Several believed that women should not serve in combat positions. Almost all the women expressed their views about sexism and many commented they did not feel they were treated badly by the men with whom they served, although African American women often recalled confronting racism in the military. Almost all the interviewees told me that serving in the military made them more self-assured, independent, and tolerant of others. For most women, serving in the military was a positive and life-changing event.

For more information about the project, contact Beth Ann Koelsch, curator of the Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project at UNCG or visit the project's Web site at [http:// library.uncg.edu/dp/wv/](http://library.uncg.edu/dp/wv/)

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- 13 Elsie Chin Seetoo, interview by Hermann Trojanowski, Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project, Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, September 9, 2005.
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- 15 Holm, 69.

WAVES march in parade, 1944. Image courtesy of the Rosemarie Dodd Collection.

