

U.S. Navy Biography of Elizabeth "BJ" Gersey



In mid-1942, having made the acquaintance of the Duluth MN Navy Recruiter, I learned that women radio operators would be recruited in September. To prepare myself ahead of that date, I enrolled in a men's Morse Code Training class and found that I really enjoyed learning code. I was Duluth's first WAVE and wrote a weekly column while in the Navy for the Duluth Herald newspaper, which, the Navy felt, would encourage other women to enlist. I thoroughly enjoyed writing those columns.

Enlisting in September 1942, our group of potential radio operators was sent directly to the Navy Radio Training School at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. There was no basic training facility for this pioneer group of WAVES. We marched to classes in our civvies and high heels until tailors from Marshall Fields in Chicago came to Madison, measured each of us individually and sent our well-fitting uniforms to us in late October. We felt very special the first day we marched to code class in our new uniforms! We lived in two of the women's dormitories, two to a room. We had to take turns cleaning the Head (washroom). Because that person had to be sure that all stalls had toilet tissue in their holders, among other things, we called that job CAPTAIN OF THE HEAD AND KEEPER OF THE ROLLS. One of our WAVES wrote to her Mom that she had been given that title. Within two weeks, she received a letter from her Mom, which contained a clipping from their local newspaper, announcing that her daughter had been elected CAPTAIN OF THE HEAD AND KEEPER OF THE ROLLS. We put the clipping on our bulletin board and never let her forget her great "honor"! Also at Madison, I recall a friend sending me a box of chocolates which the dorm mail clerk put on the top of the radiator cover. It remained there for several hours and, of course, melted completely. Upon receiving the package, I fished out all the brown papers holding the chocolates and put the covered box outside on our window sill. The weather was below zero so the box contained a one-pound cake of chocolate with all the nuts, coconut, and fruit fillings frozen in place. I chopped up the candy and broke it into pieces, and my friends commented about the taste, which no one could quite identify. I was asked several times where I got that "wonderful slab of chocolate"!

After three months of intensive training, 75 of us were assigned to active duty at Naval Air Station, Jacksonville, FL, later referred to as NAS Jax). We left Madison as qualified radiomen in 28deg below zero weather in our wool dress blues and found the 80 deg temp in Jax to be almost overwhelming. Upon our arrival we were housed in one of their two-story BOQ buildings, with four women to a room in two sets of bunk beds. There was a pool behind our quarters and we were happy when what had been men's gang showers were remodeled into individual shower stalls for us women. We were not allowed to walk to the base

area where German POWs were housed, behind tall metal fences, so I never had the opportunity to see that aspect of WWII history.

Serving as an air traffic controller for four months, I witnessed many plane mishaps as young men were training as Navy pilots. During those months I was trained by Traffic Controller Stuart Shank, whom I replaced when he was shipped out to Italy. It was a special privilege for me to get to know the man my enlistment allowed me to replace, as that was the major point in recruiting Navy women. I treasure the V-mail he sent me from Italy during his tour of duty.

One of the most memorable events in my Navy life was being contacted by then-Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal, and was told that I was being granted a special 10-day leave to christen the Navy ship PASSACONAWAY, which was a Navy net tender used in the waters around Japan toward the end of the war. It was a great experience to stand atop that high platform and swing the ribbon-wrapped bottle of champagne and loudly say, "I christen thee Passaconaway!" I will never forget that thrill! Another memory was when I was the person on duty to receive the priority-rated teletype when President Franklin D. Roosevelt's death was announced. It was a shock to all of us!

One disturbing memory involved my duty in the tower. An Army transport plane was on the flight line going to Miami. It was usual for the pilot to ask if anyone wanted to fly to Miami and there were always some personnel there in Operations waiting for a 'free hop' while on liberty. There were seven Navy nurses waiting for a hop, but the pilot could accommodate only six. So, one of the nurses had to stay behind, standing on the flight line, undoubtedly very unhappy that she couldn't accompany her friends. As I cleared transport for take-off, the plane began to rise and was about to circle the tower when it suddenly burst into flames! The plane and all personnel aboard plunged to the ground, killing all on board. That nurse watching from the ground must still be having nightmares about how close she came to being killed too. And, as Watch Supervisor, I will never forget that either!

An amusing incident in my Navy life occurred in May 1944. When returning from Duluth to Jax we had to transfer trains in Chicago. Unfortunately there was a flood just south of Chicago which washed out the roads so the train was stopped just short of the major flood area. We sat in that train all day and all night, with water up to our ankles, no food, and the Heads were closed. We finally got underway the next morning and I arrived in Jax 24 hours over leave. I went to a Captain's Mast with the written excuse that I got from the train conductor about the train being 24 hours late into Jax. The Captain looked at the note, and with a wry smile on his face, he said to me, "Young lady, you are in the Navy and you are to report on time, come hell or high water. This time you ran into high water. Next time, you'll catch hell!" With that, he smiled again, and I went back to my watch in Communications with my attending Communications officer. (The Navy does have a heart!)

As with most other servicewomen, I imagine, we had the opportunity to see and often meet celebrities. We were entertained by USO shows, including Bob Hope and his men and women movie stars. Because Radio Central was housed in the tower building, many of us saw famous people come and go as they landed and entered the Operations building. One radioman recalls only too well the time she was trying to open the door to the women's Head with both hands clutching a tray filled with coffee cups that needed washing. She asked for assistance from passing man, who obliged by opening the door for her without comment. When she returned to her duty station, she was surprised to learn who had opened the door for her – Col. Charles Lindbergh!

Many sailors on active duty at Jax had been musicians in famous bands of the 1930's and 1940's, and we had Saturday night dances at the Mainside auditorium. Those musicians had come from bands such as Tommy Dorsey, Jimmy Dorsey, Charlie Barnett and Bob Crosby. We really missed those talented men as they began to ship out during the war, one after another.

We greatly appreciated Pepsi-Cola sending their public relations staff to our building, where each of us was given the opportunity to make a record of greetings and news. Pepsi—Cola then sent the records to our parents, who really appreciated this "unique" way to hear from their daughters.

D-Day on June 6, 1944, was a memorable day for me, as it was my room-mate's 24th birthday. Also, one of the men who died in that invasion had a sister in our building and we all shared her grief. We were truly an extended family for each other, even though we had come from many states across the country to serve at Jax.

After VJ-Day in August 1945, our women began to be discharged. I was discharged as a First Class Petty Officer (Radioman). We returned to civilian life and found it to be far less exciting than our Navy life. Many of us married and began to raise our families, which brought us all the excitement that we could handle!

In 1947 one of our radiomen from New York hosted our first reunion. We have continued to hold reunions, most being held on the east coast, and also three times at NAS Jax. Now they are held every two years and I have chaired the last eight reunions.

In 1953 we began staying in touch by mail as well as at reunions. I initiated two Round Robin letters which have continued to circulate since 1953.

As the historian for this group I publish a newsletter named SCUTTLEBUTT every six weeks or so, which goes to all the Communications personnel from Jax with whom we have stayed in touch. We consider our group as our extended

family and are up-to-date on most of the goings-on in their families – marriages, births, divorces, death, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, etc. When we meet at our biennial reunions we can greet any attendee and ask how their daughter's surgery came out or if their husband is doing okay after his open-heart surgery. They often accompany us to our reunions too.

My Navy days were outstanding and I can't imagine not having had that experience during WWII. I have lifetime Navy friendships that I cherish more than I can say. Incidentally, my husband Jon and I both were rated Radioman 1/c and were married in the Navy Chapel on the base in 1945. Our son Tom also served in the Navy during the Viet Nam war. Daughter Leslie chose a career in retail after college but she has heard a lot about the Navy from the three of us. After both of our children were in high school, I returned to the business world. I worked for 18 years for Dayton Hudson Corporation and two of their operating companies. The highlight of my career was serving as Administrative Assistant to the President of the Corporation, and I retired in 1984.

As a Minnesota native, I was very happy to move from Chicago to Richfield, MN in 1953. Minnesota is a wonderful state for veterans, as we have countless veterans' organizations. There are women's Army, Navy, Coast Guard, and Marine units, as well as the Women Veterans of Minnesota, made up of women from all branches of the Armed Forces. Our 10,000 Lakes Unit #37 of WAVES National established a monument honoring all Navy women at Fort Snelling National Cemetery. And we now have matching windbreakers depicting our WAVES insignia, which we wear at various military functions. I am kept busy with many veterans' organizations as well as women veterans' issues.

How fortunate I am to have served in the Navy during WWII! I was able to release another radioman for overseas' duty, and my memories are filled with friendships of those service days. What more could I ask for?

Elizabeth "BJ" Gersey