

WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Alice Starr May

INTERVIEWER: Brittany Hedrick

DATE: October 23, 2015

NOTE: INTERVIEWER HEDRICK IS MAY'S GREAT-GRANDDAUGHTER

[Begin Interview]

BH: My name is Brittany Hedrick and today is Friday, October 23, 2015. I am in Thomasville, North Carolina at the home of Ms. Alice Starr May to conduct an interview for the Women's Veterans Historical Project at University of North Carolina of Greensboro. Thank you, Ms. May, for participating and sharing your experiences with me. I'd like to start the interview by asking you about your childhood. Ms. May, could you tell me about what your family life was like before you entered the service?

AM: I was raised in a little country village called White Bluff, Arkansas, and my father was a sharecropper, we were very poor. My family was very hard working. I finished the eighth grade in a two room school and then went to Fort Smith, Arkansas, where we moved, and my father died. And at that time my mother had never worked in public work, so she took a job washing dishes in a restaurant; she ended up owning it. At that time in Arkansas—I'm out of school—there was not much possibility of anything I saw that I wanted to do, so I had a friend that said, "Let's just go in the air force, or let's go in the army." So we did. We got the recruiter and they signed us up and we went into the military, which I'm thankful to this day that I did because I loved it.

When I went into the military I was really, I guess, surprised. Of course we worked hard but it was nothing like I'm sure they work now, because they really didn't know how women were going to react—or do—in a big group together working, but it was very good. The basic training was pretty hard, but not as hard as the women work today in basic training. We had a lot of fun too. We all were in one barracks. They weren't in rooms or anything, it was just one big barracks. And a lot went on. They brought some entertainment and movie stars and things on occasion, and people you probably wouldn't even remember now much—Bing Crosby and such people—down to entertain us, and we—until such times as we were ready to go to school we did the usual army things. We scrubbed bathrooms, [chuckles] we scrubbed garbage cans, did KP [Kitchen Patrol] and the regular things that you do in basic training. And then I was sent

to Lowry Field, [Denver] Colorado to study photography, and I liked it very much. It was quite an ordeal for a little country girl to go to a big town like Denver, and it was quite an experience. There were quite a few that—oh, fifteen or twenty that came to go to school when I did in Denver, and after the school, from Denver I took a short trip to California as a—seeing family before I went in to [unclear, phone ringing]

[recording paused]

AM: Sorry about that, where was I? Oh, I was on my way to Eglin Field, Florida. This was travel all by train which was quite an incidence to begin with; it was different for sure. And one time I was on the train with a whole load of the air force men; was nothing on there but me and air force men, and believe me, they treated me like such a lady, I felt like royalty.

And then arriving at Eglin Field, Florida, I went in to a different kind of training there in a dark room, and after that the different phases of photography I had to go through down there, and in the end I liked the projectionist better so I stayed and got assigned to the projection room, which I had a little theater that was very important; it was the high ranking officers from all around the world. [General George S.] Patton and different ones were flown in there to see certain tests that they were doing at Eglin Field, Florida.

BH: Did you meet Patton by any chance?

AM: Yes.

BH: Did you meet anybody else?

AM: Different ones but I can't remember them all now.

BH: That's really interesting.

AM: Yeah. And they were very, very nice to me. They didn't treat me like a normal PFC [Private First Class], they treated me really well. And I didn't—I just met them and then went back to my projection booth and did what I had to do, but I really liked it. I'd run training films for military—the men and everybody—and I worked with a staff sergeant named Koppe from Denver, Colorado, which I didn't know until I went in there.

BH: You said Koppe?

AM: Koppe. K-O-P-P-E. Koppe. And he was a staff sergeant that was in charge of the projection room when I went in, and we worked very well together. He was married with a wife in Denver, and I stayed there for the most of two years, or a year and a half, something like that; I'd have to look back at papers to see. And then I met my husband in

the—in the club on base at Eglin and six months later we were married, and it was Tech [Technical] Sergeant James H. May. We were married and I became pregnant in about six or seven months [chuckles], and so at that time you couldn't stay in the services if you were pregnant, so then I got out. But I married a military man and we spent the next twenty two years traveling with our family over everywhere. And that's pretty much what I did.

BH: Interesting. So let's see, what were some of the rules and regulations while you were in the military?

AM: Well, your hair could not touch your collar. Everybody's skirt—The dress uniforms had to be the same length from the floor. I mean, it didn't matter if you were six feet tall or like me, five [feet] two [inches]. They had to be the same length from the floor, and at that time it was very strict. I mean, the WAAC [Women's Army Auxiliary Corps] detachment was by themselves; they were fenced and they had guards that guarded us at night. There was never any problems like that, but at the same time, like, coming home from the NCO [non-commissioned officer] club or somewhere, or the movies, you could hardly hold hands coming down because the police were very strict and would stop you for it, so that was one thing.

The dress code was the regular work uniforms that—fatigues like I guess they still wear some of them today, and for dress we had to be full uniform. And of course, we had the Saturday morning inspections where everything had to be perfect. They could find dust where we didn't even know there was dust [chuckles]. Well, a lot of strange things happened. One girl got hysterically laughing at one formal inspection and they did what was gigs then and you had to do some extra work, but it all settled down and we became pretty good soldiers. That was our job, we liked it, that's what we did, as you would a job today, and we were very proud. And I think one of the proudest days of my life is when we became part of the real army-air force and we weren't WAACs anymore, we were in the army-air force.

[In May 1942, Congress created the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC). In July 1943, army women were granted military status and the WAAC became the Women's Army Corps (WAC)].

BH: Do you remember anything specific about that change?

AM: We kind of were all excited. Some chose to go home at that time but most of us didn't. We liked what we were doing, we felt it was important, the things that we were doing, and we stayed; most of us stayed in. I know I felt like it was a big thing when I became a real soldier. [chuckles]

BH: That makes me remember something. Jumping back, where were you when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

AM: That was before I went in service. It was just a little bit—a few days before. I mean—Well, it was seventh of December [1941] but it was—that was the turning point of me thinking about the service. I mean, I think it did all of—a lot of people—how they could serve. I don't know the dates and everything. After this many years here, dates and times kind of run together a little for me, but I remember very well when it happened.

BH: How did it make you feel?

AM: Very bad, like—I don't know, almost like it had hurt my country that it would—I don't—I can't explain how we felt. We—I think my family—all of us felt that. I had two brothers that—one joined the air force and one went in the navy, and it was a real shock, I think to everybody in America, that they would ever hit us or anything.

BH: Do you—Would you say that was one of your reasons for joining? Or what were your reasons for joining?

AM: Well, I think one of the reasons for joining is I didn't see a future being a little country girl at that time. I couldn't go to college. It was too—We were too poor and had very few—it just wasn't feasible for me to go to college. And just talking to other girls—another good friend really—it determined me that that's what I wanted to do. That I wasn't—It wasn't there what I wanted to do in Fort Smith and I just couldn't see a future, so I went in and that's what determined me going in.

BH: At what age did you enlist?

AM: [chuckles] Well, I had to lie a year, but I went in at seventeen and I was supposed to be eighteen.

BH: And no one ever caught you?

AM: No, I had a staff sergeant that signed me right up [chuckles]; I was eighteen. That's what happened.

BH: I know you said that your biggest reason for joining was opportunity, but were there any recruiting posters around—

AM: Yeah.

BH: —encouraging women to join?

AM: There were some, not like you would see today at any recruiting office, but there was some. And I think that talking about it with a friend and thinking that would be a good thing. We thought that we would maybe learn something and see some of the world outside of where we were born and raised.

BH: Now, some of those posters stated that if you enlisted you would be freeing a man to fight.

AM: Yeah.

BH: So did you view your enlistment as freeing a man to fight?

AM: Yes, I did, and I did after I was in service. We had great respect for those men. Some of them came back in really bad shape, and some we had known that came back to do the kind of duty we were doing. I got to fly in a B-17 [bomber] and that was a big thing back then because that was the queen of the air force—was the B-17—and then they came out with the [B-]29. It was a big deal.

BH: I'm curious, what do you remember about the first day?

AM: Confusion [chuckles]. Yeah, I remember the first morning very well. My name was on the board to go clean the latrine and I didn't know what a latrine was, but I was on there with several other girls so we figured out we'd go clean the toilets [chuckles].

BH: Are there any certain smells that trigger those times?

AM: No. Maybe scrubbing the garbage can [chuckles]. Maybe that brings memories of when we first went in. Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia was really hot when we went into basic training down there. We had a first sergeant from Brooklyn [New York] and all of us southern girls, we couldn't half understand him. [both chuckle] Yeah, it was interesting. Now looking back it was funnier than it was at the time, because naturally that was the services; you didn't get too funny there. But I very well remember that first sergeant; little black headed first sergeant from Brooklyn [New York].

BH: I know that you said that basic training was hard; could you elaborate a little on that?

AM: Well, did a lot of running. We didn't carry the packs like they have to carry today but we did a lot of running, and I could do push-ups like you wouldn't believe [chuckles], and all of that sort of thing. But the strange thing, after basic training when we started—young people—young girls and boys getting out and going to the beach and things, we'd go run the obstacles for fun—obstacles. We couldn't hardly do them through the week when we had to. It was a different thing than going out and doing them for fun. Course we lived at—our base was at Pensacola, Florida so the beaches—we had beautiful beaches to go to on the weekends and when we had time off.

BH: You were in basic training in Pensa—

AM: Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia.

BH: In Georgia, okay.

AM: You never get through with training in the military. You're doing one thing or another all the time. And that's really great I think because you're learning something. Might not be always the best thing in the world but you're learning something. Where I went to school they didn't have a library, and I'm a reader—I've always been a reader—and when I got to the base and found the library I was happy [chuckles]. I could read all I wanted to when I had time. I can remember, on duty, when I wasn't running the projectionist—the projection machine, I put a—had a book underneath the dark[?] table that was sitting there for our use and I'd hide it under there [chuckles] and if I didn't have anything to do I'd read a while.

BH: You were a projectionist?

AM: Yeah.

BH: And a photographer?

AM: Yeah. I didn't do photography very long. Dark room photography we did for a few months but then I liked this other job, and got really talked into taking the projection room and the theater all by myself; I had that. That's where I got to meet everybody, in—was in—from the theater that I ran.

BH: Any memories that stand out to you about being a projectionist?

AM: Well, I learned to tear down a machine and rebuild it [chuckles], which I—course it would be very obsolete today but back then that's how a sixteen millimeter and a thirty-five millimeter, and that's what you [use to] run a film.

BH: Now, were these just—were these movies that you were showing?

AM: Tests. They were movies of tests that the services were performing. That's what the generals would come there for—the leaders, the military—to see the tests that the military were working on.

BH: Oh, okay.

AM: Eglin Field is a proving ground for all kinds of instruments and everything.

[A proving ground is a military installation where weapons or other military technology are experimented with or are tested.]

BH: Okay.

AM: And that's what they came there for, is to see the tests that they were doing at that time; much of the things for the atomic energy. We didn't know what we were looking at really, but a lot of tests were made there—I mean were shown there to generals and people that would come, and they came in at night or anytime. They didn't announce it and say, "So-and-so's going to be here next week." They'd fly them in at night and out the next morning. You didn't see them again. They just saw the tests they were supposed to look at and went back to their—overseas or wherever.

BH: You were seeing top secret stuff?

AM: Yeah. I didn't know what it was. I guess I was busy and didn't—wasn't much interested in it anyway at the time, because I had no idea what they were doing or anything. The people watching it down there did; they knew what was happening.

BH: Now, you did mention atomic.

AM: Yeah, that [unclear]—

BH: You mean the Manhattan Project?

AM: No, from White Sands, New Mexico, out there, and that's where the atomic bomb was being tested and everything [Trinity Atomic Bomb Site].

BH: So you saw the atomic bomb on film?

AM: No, parts of it; tests that were being made of it.

BH: Oh, okay.

AM: Yeah I didn't know what it was. Anything that they were improving there I saw, whether it was—whatever, any kind of new [unclear] weapon or anything that was being tested, but I didn't know what they were doing so I didn't—being a girl I wasn't too interested in it [chuckle].

BH: That sounds very interesting.

AM: Yeah.

BH: Well, what was a typical day like for you, being a projectionist?

AM: Well, same, I guess, everywhere. Military—you had bugle call in the morning, you got to the mess hall and ate, got back and they gave you so long to get showered and everything and get over to where we were supposed to go; to whatever building you were working in that day. And of course, I was working in the photo section with about two hundred and

fifty men in my outfit—all of us together—and everybody went to their jobs. [chuckles] We were all young and full of energy and everything then and jitterbug was the big thing, so when lunchtime came we'd all run to a building—oh, it was a pretty good ways from where we worked, that was like three quarters of a mile, something like that. We'd run up there and dance all through—jitterbugging through the lunchtime and run back to work. [chuckles]

BH: So you liked to dance?

AM: I did then, yeah; I sure did. We all did. It was just something we did. You see old movies today of the jitterbug and how we did.

BH: Are there any funny or embarrassing moments you can remember?

AM: Well, a lot of funny, a lot of interesting. I was sitting at the table with five other girls at the NCO club—noncommissioned officers club—one night and in came four guys and we didn't—I didn't pay any attention to them. We were just laughing and sitting there with just the girls and this one man looked across there and told his friend, "That's the woman I'm going to marry," and he had never seen me before. [chuckles]

BH: Did you marry him?

AM: Yeah, it was Pop. Yeah. Yeah. We all got just talking around the table. They came over and they asked us to come over, so they had a big table—the guys—and there was five of us that went over there and sat with them and they had me sit by this guy, and so time to go, the girls, we just back up to go to the WAC detachment, and he stood up and said, "I'm walking you home." He didn't say, "Can I?" or anything he just said, "I'm walking you home." [chuckles] So it ended up—that was your great grandfather.

BH: Now, speaking of males in the military. You were talking about how they treated you with respect, but what were the interactions with males? Do you have any particular memories?

AM: They'd just laugh and friendly and, of course, working—we didn't have a lot of communications right at work. I mean, give us a little while and we'd be out there laughing and talking and everything on a break or something, but it was a different world. They didn't—There was no filthy talk in front of us. There was—They treated us very much with respect. At least Eglin Field, Florida it was that way, and I suppose most of them was that way because it was a different time. It was a lot of fun and it was just—everything was ready to go. We'd go into Pensacola for a weekend and go swimming out. It was a good life I have to say. I know it was a terrible time for those that were overseas and everything and we felt like we were doing something that we did well and was needed and it probably saved a lot of lives. It put a lot more men to fight—freed them up to do that and that's what we did, and I think we were all very proud of it. I was. I was always proud that I was part of the first bunch in the army-air force.

BH: Of course. Now, did women drink and smoke?

AM: You rarely saw a woman smoke. Now, there was a lot—there was some drinking, and there was some you knew that were different, especially from up North where there were big cities. But then there was an awful lot of school teachers came in about that time. We were—It was a lot of school teachers and I think it was very educational for some of us, especially from the country like we were. I really had a lot of respect for those women that could have maybe kept on teaching but they felt the same need that we did to do something. I guess from big cities and things, from the North, it was just a lot different than the southern part of the nation at that time. Now there's no difference, I don't suppose, in education or anything but it was in my time. That's a picture of my school house, a two room—

BH: Very small.

AM: Yeah, two rooms.

BH: So you only got to the eighth grade?

AM: There at that school before I moved to town, yeah.

BH: How far did you go with your education?

AM: I didn't get to go to college. I've taken college courses but I never got to go to college. I feel like I learned a tremendous amount from those northern girls and their teaching, and they sang and everything else.

BH: In the military?

AM: Yeah.

BH: The girls that you met in the military?

AM: Yeah. I'm thankful for them, just having been part of their lives too. They were really nice. You could tell the ones that had came from maybe part of the city that wasn't that way to the others that did; the big cities. We southern girls were a lot different.

BH: Did you have any close personal relationships?

AM: Yeah from—a girl from Missouri and a little girl from South Carolina and a girl from Minnesota whose husband was a prisoner of war at the time with the Germans. We made good friends and we'd talk about it a lot at night in the barracks; families and things like that. Sometimes you'd hear crying in the night; people that were homesick and missed family or had boyfriends or fathers or whatever overseas. When the lights went out at

night sometimes you'd hear sobbing and crying, but we all knew how they felt, because I had two brothers in service.

BH: How many siblings did you have?

AM: There were ten altogether but two of them died, and now my lone relative is my sister that's just younger than me.

BH: Do ever recall being afraid?

AM: No. I can't say that I was ever afraid.

BH: You never felt afraid or in physical danger?

AM: No, never did.

BH: Okay. Going back to the barracks, what were the housing accommodations like?

AM: Well, it was—they were all pretty much the same, one huge big room, and there would be maybe twenty-five—thirty girls in rows down the side. The NCOs—there's a couple of them—had rooms in the back, but it was all the same for everybody. Downstairs was the showers and baths and everything—downstairs.

BH: What did it smell like?

AM: It didn't smell bad. There wouldn't have been—We'd been scrubbing all night at it. No that's—extremely clean.

BH: And were you kept separate from the men?

AM: Oh yeah, ours was a fenced detachment. They had guards—men guards that guarded us at night.

BH: What was it like being a woman in the air force?

AM: Felt great. When we went anywhere in uniform we caused a stir. I mean, a lot of people would talk about us.

BH: What did you wear? What were your uniforms? What did they look like?

AM: They were—At that time they were the—they're not brown, they were that army green uniform like the old—Ours were just made with the skirt rather than pants.

BH: You said green?

AM: The army—The army green, yeah.

BH: Okay.

AM: I think a lot of it's brown now, but it was a dark kind of green back then, and khaki—always khaki—as you can see in my picture. Course the fatigues was the most unfeminine thing you've ever seen [chuckles].

BH: Did you ever encounter any discrimination because you were a woman while in the military, or were you treated equally and professionally as the men?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

AM: We just were soldiers, we felt like that, yeah. We were very proud we were soldiers. I didn't see any at all when—that I can recall.

BH: What was the general perception of women who joined the military at that time?

AM: Well, the civilian population, I don't think, really realized what we did. I had heard remarks but I never had any made to me, about what they were doing with the women in the military and all like that.

BH: What were some of the remarks?

AM: That we were like prostitutes for the army or something like that, but it was ignorant people that didn't know anything about what was really happening.

BH: Were women confined to certain jobs?

AM: Well, just like the men, we were assigned.

BH: Were there certain jobs that women could not do?

AM: Not in photo section. Anything in there that you were capable of doing, they would assign you to it and that's what you did. I—At one time or another I was all over the photo section; it was a big outlet down there. My job—main job was the projection room and that's where I—what my job was, and it was like—you got up early, you ate, and you got over there and did it. That's all.

BH: Was the pay similar?

AM: Well, nobody got any pay much back in those days [chuckles]. I mean, what it was—it was fifty-four dollars a month, I think. Pay wasn't what they make now. Not like my

husband and all the years he was in; it was a different thing. The military's never been—gotten rich—the enlisted people—but it's an honorable thing that you do. You're not poverty stricken either. We went a lot of places, with my husband being a career military. We lived in a lot of different places. Germany, Puerto Rico, been to Spain, and a lot of that. That was out of the military for me. It was what we did, but we were definitely a military family.

BH: What were your experiences with minorities in the military?

AM: Just before I got out of the military was the first time that the blacks—any of them was in there, and I don't think we thought much about it. Hey, this is a soldier. I had a Cherokee Indian, I believe, in the bed next to me, right off the reservation, so it was interesting. You think back and there's a lot of things happened that you thought you'd forgot that happened during that time; trips you've taken. My engagement party—I've never been a drinker but my engagement party—to my husband—was the first time that I had ever been, in the military—let's put it—pie-eyed [chuckles].

BH: What does pie-eyed mean? [chuckles]

AM: It means I was stewed. [both chuckle] All the girls in the barracks, they gave me a big party down outside the base at a—I guess it was a bar-restaurant or something and we had a real big party down there. The only thing I remember is our lieutenant came in—that we knew real well—he was a young man and he knew I—we were not drinkers as a rule, any of us much, and I can remember him saying, "Starr, keep your eyes open." [chuckles]

BH: So you had a good social life.

AM: Yeah, real good. Course, I met my big handsome husband, that was the main thing; a really good man.

BH: Any friendships that lasted throughout the years?

AM: Oh yeah. The little girl from Missouri; she probably is long gone. The little girl from South Carolina, we were very good friends and very close. The military life is different; you're military from now on. I mean, that's where you make your friends for life. I had a woman call me—a friend of ours—call me this—about a month ago, and she was the only one left. Her husband had died, and like me, she's alone, but she's my age, and just friends you've kept through the years.

The military life is hard sometimes but it's very rewarding I think, too, because my children, they had been so many places that kids in school here were just learning about, had to study about. One of my kids said in—I forget where it was that we were at, and the teacher was teaching about some place—Oh, it was in Spain. He said, "We saw that Pala—Presidential Palace in Spain." So our kids were—sometimes they were kind of outcasts at the civilian schools when they came out, but I think it was really good for

them. I love the military. It's a lot different now I understand. I know the women today is a whole lot different to what we were. I mean, they have to work now and train with the men and everything.

BH: Going back, have any of your children enlisted in the military?

AM: My two sons, both; one a Marine and one in the army.

BH: Did you encourage them to join?

AM: I didn't discourage them. That was their decision, but their father being a career military man, they knew. They were both athletes, so the one joined in the Marines especially, I think the biggest thing he did for them was play football for them when he got in. He had to go to school for communications, which was not in his line at all since he's a teacher/coach. The other one was in Korea up on the thirty-eighth parallel [the line separating North and South Korea] and that's where he spent most of his military time. He was a trainer there for dogs, and how to protect the men with their dogs, and train the dogs what to do and that sort of thing, so he was [unclear].

BH: You mentioned women today. How do you feel about women being in combat positions today?

AM: I don't know. I really—I suppose if that's what they want to do they should, but really I don't think a—I know a woman can be anything she wants to be and some of them are really strong and so forth, but I don't feel like I would have made a good combat person.

BH: Why?

AM: I was probably more feminine and I had been raised where—wife and family. I kind of stepped out to be military myself. I guess I was ready for a family when the time came for me to get married. I don't think that I would have ever wanted—I don't think I would have been good at it—let's put it that way—to be a combat soldier.

BH: But you would recommend the military to women today?

AM: Yes, I would. Yeah. If I had a daughter I would feel very proud of her if she wanted to be in the military. I have such high respect—I think it's just amazing—the nurses in World War II that did go overseas and the things they did. It's just—I don't think there's anyone that could have—be more respected than they were. They were something else.

BH: Going back a little bit, do you recall when President [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt died and where you were?

AM: Yes. Where I was? No.

BH: Do you recall anything about that day?

AM: I think we had a great respect for President Roosevelt at the time. We knew that Harry [S.] Truman would be the next president, but he was such a big figure, though he was crippled. He was such a world figure. I think we were all very saddened and everything. It was just a real shock to the nation, I think, when he died.

BH: What did you think of Eleanor Roosevelt?

AM: Thought she was a great woman. I think she was an example for all women, really. She did so much for people.

BH: What was the mood of the country during this time period? Were they fearful or confident?

AM: I think they were confident. America had—At the time I guess they knew they were good and they knew it. We were Americans, we were proud. We were proud we were Americans. Later into my life when we moved to Germany we were still proud, and maybe a little bit—I don't know. But our kids, in any kind of game they always beat the German kids and so we were real proud. [both chuckle] But we did a lot for them. We had the military do a lot for the German kids and everything; orphans and all that. That's one thing the military has always done, is that they tried to rebuild the nation when they do conquer it. Germany was really a mess when we went there even.

BH: Do you remember anything about that? I mean, what did you see? I guess, what do you mean when you say it was still a mess when you got there?

AM: Well, it was very poor; it was very poor before; that's how Hitler got control probably. But they—Of course, the Americans, they start rebuilding, they don't try to tear them on down. I don't know what it was like in the Russian [Soviet Union] side. On the American side they start rebuilding right away; schools and everything else; hospitals.

BH: Where were you when you heard about VE [Victory in Europe] Day and VJ [Victory in Japan] Day?

AM: I can't remember where in the world we were living at that time. We've lived so many places? We may have been living in Montana when I heard about that.

BH: Okay.

AM: It's hard to recall all of the places we've lived and what was happening at that time.

BH: Well, do you recall who your heroes and heroines were from the 1940s?

AM: Patton was—The biggest hero we had was Patton; General Patton.

BH: And you had met him, so—

AM: He had been there to see something. I don't know what it was that he saw but he had been there.

BH: So you got to meet your hero.

AM: Yeah, and I stood there stuttering and couldn't even say, "Sir." [chuckles]

BH: What was he like?

AM: Just like a common guy. He smiled at me, and just as nice as could be. Most of the high ranking ones were. They were very nice.

BH: Were your heroes strictly military or did you have any other heroes or heroines?

AM: I'm sure I did. I've never been one that was—had a hero—being a movie star or something like that. At that time it was Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra and those people. We all liked music, but Glenn Miller Orchestra was the thing for us, and Tommy Dorsey—

BH: You said Tommy—

AM: Tommy Dorsey, they had a big band too.

BH: Dorsey. Okay.

AM: The big band era. That's what our music was.

BH: Okay. What were your favorite songs; did you have any favorite songs or movies?

AM: Oh. Andrews Sisters had some popular ones out then. It was real jazzy. I liked the romantic type songs like "I'll Walk Alone," and those things. I remember we thought my husband was going to have to go overseas. That really—When I'd think about it—It would bring tears to my eyes when I thought he was going to be sent over.

BH: Do you think that was one of the hardest things about being in the military?

AM: Well, see, we had guys coming back all the time with their lives really torn up; their nerves shot and things. And some of them came back to the easier jobs, like they had in the photo section and things. Then the aerial photographers, they would get shot up regularly, too, in the service, as well as the bombers. I don't know, I guess it's one of those things, the best of times and the worst of times, because I think our best people that's ever been was in that—during the time of the Second World War. I think that was

America's greatest moment, probably, in history; was the people that came from everywhere to defend their country.

I worked with a cowboy from Utah, and one from Montana. Just you wouldn't think about cowboys and all that, but there were all kinds in there. I know the women certainly took over the ship building and all of that during the Second World War, so they all did a job and proved their worth, that's for sure.

BH: Do you personally feel that you made a contribution to winning the war?

AM: Yeah, I probably freed up someone to go; that I did the job he would be—have been doing. It's hard to think about, too—really to think about those times and what might have happened to him or anything when they left.

BH: Did you receive any memorable awards or decorations?

AM: Good Conduct Medal [both chuckle].

BH: Okay.

AM: I got a Good Conduct Medal. No, I did nothing outstanding, I'm sure, but I did get a Good Conduct Medal.

BH: Well, that's good.

AM: [chuckles] Yeah.

BH: What was your highest rank?

AM: PFC; Private First Class.

BH: Okay. I know that you said that you became pregnant.

AM: Yeah, about six months after I was married I became pregnant.

BH: Were you encouraged to return to the traditional female roles, like going back home, starting a family, or were you encouraged to make it a career? Did you want to make it a career?

AM: I probably would have if I hadn't married and got pregnant but I don't know. I guess civilian life was—looked kind of boring; to go back where I came from and go back to that life. So I was very happy to marry a career service man.

BH: How long did you stay in, total?

AM: Total? Two years, eight months, and four days.

BH: Okay. Do you recall the impact the military had on your life immediately after you got out, and in long term?

AM: Well, it just becomes your life when you're career military; that's just your life. Your friends, everything, is there and friends become like a family. We'd have Thanksgiving dinners; black, white, all of us together. We'd have it in one house or another house and sometimes we ate in the mess hall with all our families and have Thanksgiving there, but it's—you're still—like in the military—it's a family. I think, probably the military wives have it a lot harder in ways now than we did back in the times, but I know I had to raise my children home an awfully lot by myself when he was sent places, but I'm not sorry for it. It was a good life. I'm glad. I'm sure that he made a difference, because twenty-two years he was military.

BH: How well did you adjust to civilian life?

AM: I really—Well, the first thing I did was bought some pretty clothes [chuckles], because after the uniform all that time it was kind of nice to go try on new clothes and get them. It felt pretty good. I didn't have any problem with civilian life. I—We were on the move so much I didn't work. I just had children—the three children—and then in later years added the fourth.

BH: Do you consider yourself an independent person?

AM: Yes.

BH: Do you think the military contributed to this?

AM: Yes, I really do. I kind of learned my own strength in the military and became physically, and I think mentally, strong in the military.

BH: Many women that joined the military were considered to be trailblazers. Do you feel this way?

AM: I had never thought about that. I was real happy that I was one of the first in the Army Air Corps. I was right in the front with that and I felt good about that.

BH: Is there any connection to the ideas of the women's liberation movement?

AM: Not for me, no. I don't go that route; that's not what I think. I think probably the greatest thing a woman can do is to take care of her family and children, and the biggest contribution she can make to this country is to raise a good family. I'm certainly proud of my sons, as you well know.

BH: What was your favorite thing about being in the military?

AM: I think the comradeship; being close to other people that were just like you. I liked my job, I liked what I did. What I accomplished, I don't know; if anything. But I liked it and I'm glad I did it. It made a different human being out of me, I think, than what I would have been had I stayed and not gone in. I think in so many ways it furthered my education, too, because it became very important to me, and I certainly pushed my kids' education, but they were very willing when they got out of the military.

BH: What was your least favorite thing about being in the military?

AM: Scrubbing garbage cans. [chuckles] That's my number one thing.

BH: Okay. So you didn't mind the running?

AM: Huh?

BH: You didn't mind the running, you just didn't want to scrub the garbage cans.

AM: Yeah, it was the scrubbing of the garbage cans. Course, it only lasted in basic training; I well remember that; big ol' cans and your head down there with a brush scrubbing them out.

BH: What did you do after the war? I know that you had a family.

AM: Yeah. We went to Puerto Rico; soon after my first child was born we went to Puerto Rico. We came here for a few weeks—a couple of weeks—and then he went to Puerto Rico and I went back to Arkansas with my family, and then we came back I went to Puerto Rico with my daughter, and that was the first time my husband saw her. She was six months old.

BH: Were you just a stay-at-home mom or did you ever get another job?

AM: I didn't work until my children were up in school and everything. I talked a lot—always have—so I was a salesman for a good many years. I worked at that and in later years became a realtor and did that for about twenty years.

BH: Did you take advantage of the G.I. Bill?

AM: No, I didn't. We didn't.

BH: Did you receive any benefits?

AM: Well, yeah. Our first house that we bought and settled in, in Arkansas, we got through my husband's benefits from the military; we got moved in that and bought that. Now, when

you have four kids, it's best to stay home and take care of them, that's what I believed in, but we still went every—wherever they sent us, we went.

BH: Was there every any mental strain because of the war, on you or your husband?

AM: No. I don't think so at all for me. Of course, he flew and he was an engineer on the planes, and he may have had stress but not on me.

BH: Okay. How has your life been different because of the military?

AM: Well, I've seen a lot of the world. I think it broadened my education tremendously. I made a lot of friends. I think my family, it's been better for them because of the experience we've had.

BH: What was the most rewarding thing about your experience?

AM: You want to know the most rewarding thing that still gets me, still? When I see that American flag go up, and that makes me want to cry to this day, because that's America. And I don't believe anyone should step on the flag of America.

BH: What does patriotism mean to you?

AM: Home. Country. It's a great big beautiful country and I've seen a lot and I find no place like America, and I've seen a lot of America and I've lived in a lot of places.

BH: Is there anything in particular you would want a civilian to know or understand [about] what it was like to have served in the military? Anything in particular they may not understand or appreciate?

AM: Frankly, I never thought much about it. I did what I did and came out and took up my life as a military wife. I just never thought too much about it, and now and thinking back I know it really changed me a lot, from the little country girl that had never been to anywhere but over in Oklahoma—Arkansas. It's really changed me a lot. I like a lot of the world but there's nothing like America. I don't like what's going on maybe in this nation now and I know we could be a lot better than we are, but it's still my country. I suppose you might say my roots run deep because I'm part Indian [Native American].

BH: Was your mother or your father?

AM: My father.

BH: Okay.

AM: No, my mother looked just about like me, short, tubby, "Irishner;"[?] [chuckle] Irish-German. But she was a good one.

BH: And you said you were Native American? Which—

AM: Cherokee.

BH: Cherokee, okay.

AM: When I grew up it wasn't very popular to be an Indian, they didn't—so my father never told us we were part Indian. We just kind of had to figure it out for ourselves and we did.

BH: So it wasn't—Do you mean that you had to keep it secret? You just didn't talk about it much?

AM: We just didn't talk about it. They said they were black Dutch, but it was—to look at him, he was a very handsome man. Small, but he was never healthy and he died when I was about thirteen. It just wasn't talked about. I don't know if they even thought about it.

BH: I did have a question about your family. What did your family and friends think about you joining?

AM: I don't know. I guess in a way I had always maybe been a little bit rebellious and so I guess they thought, "Well, there she goes. [chuckles] There she goes again." My mother went with me down to—when I boarded the bus to go to Little Rock. From there in Little Rock I went to Fort Oglethorpe.

BH: Was this the first time you had ever been away from home?

AM: No, I went to town to work after I got out of school at sixteen. I wasn't very happy with it. I couldn't go to school; I mean, nobody could afford it in those days, it was [Great] Depression time. My family were poor to begin with till my mother took hold. I went in during the time that Fort Chaffee was at Fort Smith, Arkansas—they were right outside—and it was filled with military. Fort Chaffee was a big training center [Fort Chafee Maneuver Training Center], and I think that probably had something to do with me wanting to be in.

BH: And why did you go into the particular branch that you did?

AM: Well, when it became the Army Air Corps it wasn't separated into the army and the air force at that time, so that was really what you did, you went into army-air force. But when I went in it was just called the WACs; Women's Army Corps. I don't know what I would tell women today if they wanted to go. I guess if it was my daughters I probably wouldn't discourage them at all. Bethany, if she hadn't been in so much trouble with her feet and problems she probably would have gone to West Point because she had an offer to go to West Point, and I have a grandson considering the [United States] Air Force

Academy now. He's a senior this year; very, very bright boy; unbelievably bright. He doesn't take after his grandmother [chuckles].

BH: Well, Ms. May, I don't have any more formal questions to ask you. Is there anything you would like to add to conclude this interview? Anything you hadn't thought of before?

AM: No, not really. I hadn't been feeling well for a few days and I really hadn't done the research back there that I intended to, to look and see if I had papers and things that would help, but I really don't have anything else I would add to it. I'm glad I did it. I'm glad I went in.

BH: Okay. Alright, well I guess I'll stop recording now if that's okay with you?

AM: Alright.

[End of Interview]