

Women's Overseas Service League
Los Angeles Unit

HAZEL M. HAMILTON

Interviewed May 28, 1983 by Genevieve Hill Casmus and Thelma Norris

Q We would like to know your full name that you enlisted under.

A Hazel M. Hamilton

Q In what branch of the service did you serve?

A I went in in the WAAC and then it became the WAC

Q Do you want me to spell it out?

A No

Q How long did you serve?

A Five years

Q And where?

A I went from Los Angeles; I was in the very first group of WAAC. From Los Angeles to Des Moines. When we arrived in Des Moines, we didn't even have uniforms as yet. That was in July of '42, and I was accepted in under the Signal Corps class in Des Moines, and took that --Daytona with the Captain that we had that was in the class; and I became their chief operator, down there in Daytona. I was there eight months, until an Order came through for some of the gals to go overseas. So, of course, I wanted to go. So I was sent out and I landed at Fort Sill. I found it wasn't overseas at all; it was an atomic bomb center up in Los Alamos. an assignment

But, it was so secretive that they didn't want anybody to know where I was going. There was one of the other gals that worked with us and I went up to Los Alamos. And I was up there eight months; and had a little illness that took me into the hospital--it wasn't too bad, but that took me out of there. So, they sent me to Fort Sam Houston, and I went to Fort Hood. At Fort Hood I was confidential secretary for the Adjutant, and so the order would come through for an overseas assignment. So, I went from there to, I think, Fort Hamilton in New York, and was there for overseas training, and then left there, I think it was about '43. I went over on the Queen Elizabeth; it was made into a troop ship. I went up into Scotland; from Scotland to England, from England to Paris, and I was in Paris for 2½ years . . .

Q Where did you . . . Were you stationed in England?

A No, I just went through England. I went on to France, and I came home. Well, I was discharged from Le Havre, at one of those cigarette stations, you know, they have those Lucky Strike and all the camps. I was discharged there. I worked eighteen months as a war accountant civilian in Paris. I had a very good assignment; I worked in the Essen billeting (?) I had about five gals who worked under me at that time. Then in '47, I think it was, I came home, and that was the end of my service.

Q We need to backtrack a little bit. What influenced you to volunteer?

A Well, I guess, before even Pearl Harbor that had this sort of military organization called the Ambulance Corps. Another friend and I enlisted in Alhambra, and we went out and trained, and we went to all the classes they had, and everything; and, of course, then when it came out in the paper that they wanted people to enlist, I was only too glad to run down and enlist.

Q What did you do prior to enlistment?

A I worked for the County of Los Angeles. I worked at the Telephone Company.

Q As a telephone operator?

A Yes

Q Then you continued that in the service?

A I went to Communications School, but then I went in as a secretary to, so when I got in Hood--when I went in there! But when I got in Signal Corps Communications they got a course; it was all about field telephones and everything connected with Signal Corps. But then when I got to Paris--

Q Let's backtrack. When you got to Las Tunas--

A Los Alamos.

Q You talked to the President, wasn't it, or you got a message from him?

A No, I didn't, not myself, but he called in every day, the switchboard. Because, you know, it was a bomb that was to end all wars and, of course, it was very secretive. When I went up there there was only nine WAC, and we lived in a delightful little cabin up there that had been a boys school. And the little ponies were ther and everything at that time. But when I left there, they had brought in thirty WAC and had made a barracks for them. But, before that when we went down into Santa Fe there was always a man officer with us, and stayed with us, and usually they would take four or five down . . . but you didn't go off and, but it was very secretive. It was very confining, and you didn't write what you . . . only about the weather or something like that. They didn't want you to tell too much, or that they could trace out the location where this was--that was the big secret of it.

Q So your mail was censored, right?

A Yes, all the mail was censored, in and out. I don't know what else to say.

Q Did you expect this experience in the service to prepare you for your future career?

A No, I don't think so.

Q She had what she had when she started. You did the same thing in the service that you did before. What was your pay?

A Do you know what my pay was the first time? Twenty-one dollars a month! You know, that was the private's pay, twenty-one dollars a month. And we worked for that for six months. Then we got fifty dollars. Well, it went up, and when I became a war time civilian I got very good pay then.

Q What was your highest pay while you were in the service?

A What you call war . . . in the service.

Q What was your rate; you got stripes?

A I only had a sergeant's rating.

Q Technical Sergeant? Buck Sergeant?

A Buck Sergeant

Q Were you given equal opportunities for service and education? We all know what that was.

A Yes.

Q A double standard.

A Well, I went through administrator's school for a while, right on the coast.

Q At the beginning?

A No, when I got . . . Fort . . . It was Camp . . . at that time. That was when I really had a very nice job. It was very good. I did a little shorthand.

Q What type of billets did you have in the various places outside of--

A You had the ordered barracks at Des Moines. I had a private room at Camp . . . and some other places. Like I said, when I went to Los Alamos we were living at first in this little cabin thing; there were two of us in a room. They used the old Army beds, but we had a room and we went out to a dining room where the boys, Indian type and Mexican type--and little Mexican boys waited on us. That was quite a thing after I had been in a fort. But, I never did K.P., never.

Q You didn't, not even in basic?

A No, never. The nearest I got to it was when I was in Des Moines for overseas training, they had some of the gals check the officers dining room to see they ate all the food on the plate; and you just looked at the plate and said, "Well, you can't leave with that plate; you have got something on it." You know what they did; they used to stuff it in a bag or something. That is the nearest I every got to K.P.

Q Now, when you were in France, in Paris, what were your exciting experiences or tragedies, or did you go AWOL or--

A No, no. I was too good, I guess. Well, we made a lot of trips. We could go in our uniform. I know we flew down to the Riviera, and we went up into Belgium, and went to England--took two weeks--and all.

Q This was after VE Day, though?

A Yes. That wasn't so exciting as the Japanese, you know, when we were . . . about it; it took four days, they celebrated all four days. I was in the hotel. We stayed in hotels in Paris.

Q Do you recall which ones?

A Yes. California was the first one.

Q That was off the Champs Elysee?

A It was off the Champs Elysee, and it was right across from the newspaper, the Stars and Stripes. And the boys all came over there and we came down and we, you know, had a little refreshment room in the basement, and they always came over and--and then I stayed in the, what was it, Princess something, and the Windsor, and the last place was the Celtic. And I lived there, and I was the housemother there; I had to see that they all got in on time. So, what else.

Q You were married before you went in, weren't you?

So you don't have any big romance or marriage in Paris.

A No, when I became a War Department civilian, I was secretary--they made a group and--let's see by that time there were ('47 or '46 even) there were a lot of the people that didn't get discharged and stayed over because you got a lot of money, you remember; I think I got one hundred forty dollars a month, and that was big money in '47. Then besides, your . . . and your billet and everything. I remember we did have pay for our meals, and that was forty-five cents, and all we had to do was go and call motor pool and we could get a jeep, and they wouldn't let us /pay/

I am going back to Camp Hood, if you want to hear this. Because I was a private secretary for the Adjutant I had to deliver all the mail that came "confidential mail". They didn't trust anything. Any orders that had to be cut on confidential, I had to go upstairs and cut those. So I would have had a vehicle out in front of the place every day for me, because, you know, Camp Hood is big and it has a north and a south camp, very big. So I think some of those boys wanted to play a trick on me one time. So, I went out with all my things in the morning to go up to the north camp, and I had one of those big reconnaissance things. I could hardly get into it, and I said . . . then I got into it, and I didn't know the shifts on the thing.

Q Oh, you were the driver?

A Yes, I had to drive myself. I had to take all these , take them to the--so here I was, and there was a ditch like this. I fooled around and couldn't find a reverse. And I thought, well, I am not going in there and call that motor pool; they are just laughing at me. So I went down that ditch and then up, and of course, they were made for that too; and every place I had to stop--I had a couple of places to stop--I would try to turn around so I wouldn't have to go backwards, because I didn't know how to go backwards. I finally got back, and I told the Adjutant; he said, "I know those fellows in the motor pool"

Another experience that I had, in Paris, was when they signed the Treaty, the Japanese had given up. We were over in Paris, but it took four days; we didn't know just when it was. And the boys came across the street to the California Hotel with a couple of jeeps, and got the girls and we all piled on top of the jeep--I think there was fourteen on one jeep--hanging onto the fenders and everything, and went all over Paris just shouting and everything. And we stopped at a couple of these wine bowers. I was used to champagne, and we had green champagne. I only had a couple of glasses of it; but, was I sick the next day! I could hardly hold my head up, because everything rolled around. Well, the next day they were still celebrating, because we didn't know whether it had been signed or not signed. So, finally it was, and that was while I was still in . . .

Q Did you say there was either a rat in the hotel--

A At the hotel when I first came out of the camp, I forgot the name of the camp.

Q Was that the California Camp?

A When we came over on the Queen Elizabeth and landed in Scotland, and we came by a little train that took us all day to come down to London, and then we boarded this ship and, oh--

Q You boarded in London?

A No, outside of London. We went through London, boarded it at Southhampton.

Q You boarded at Southhampton?

A I think so.

Q What month was that? Do you recall?

A No, I don't. I think it was May, April or May. I have forgotten

Q Was that just before D-Day?

A Yes, in June.

Q No, I don't think they sent women over before D-Day. I think women went over later.

A It might have been. I don't know, though. It seems to me I was in Paris on--

Q It's okay.

A I have kind of forgotten

Q We got into Rheims a week after the Germans left, and that was in September; and I doubt if they had the WAC there before.

A No, I guess not. I thought it was early, but it might not have been. I have kind of forgotten. Anyhow, when I got to the California Hotel, there was four of us in a room where it should have been two, and we had little German cots with straw, and there was mice running around on the floor at night, and I was scared to death that they would come in--with that straw, because since I was the new one coming in, I had to sleep on one of the cots that had the straw mattress. But one of the gals was brave, and she chased them into the little bathroom and killed a couple of them. Boy, that is what they were telling me, coming there new. But, one of the gals had waked up and one of the mice had had some babies down at her feet. And I was scared to death. There are probably a lot of things, when you stop to think of it.

Q A feeble thought that triggers something.

Did you use the benefits of the G.I. Bill?

A The only thing I did was, I went to secretarial school for eight months. I tried to get into U.S.C. and then, well, I think I tried U.C.L.A. too, but that was, the time I had come home--it was full of G.I.'s. And I took an entrance examination and I passed it, but they said I would be waiting about two or three years; and I thought, well, I had better settle down. So, I went to Sawyers over in Pasadena . . . attendance over there. I didn't finish out the two months, was because the County of Los Angeles was begging for people. They had changed over from one of the County . . . to the State; and the State couldn't handle it, and it went back to the County; so they wanted temporary help. So they came out to the school. So I went down and worked about six

weeks or so--they wanted anybody--and they wanted me to stay permanently. So from then on, I was in the County; I worked 22½ years with the County and retired from it.

Q Great

A I had a good assignment. I liked it. I /traded/ it. I was first with the Mechanical Department, left the Mechanical Department--I bought this place out here in San Gabriel. The only town you could get a transfer to was the County Welfare Department, so--but it was great. Marjorie and I both worked there, and I had a good job, and I enjoyed everybody I worked with. I tried to keep up my course over at Sawyers to finish out a year when it was finished, but it got terribly hot, and so hot working eight hours a day and working down in Los Angeles. I took a street car back and forth because it was too much to drive a car back and forth.

Q Sure, it would be.

A So I dropped my--I don't know, I didn't need it.

Q Did you buy your house on the G.I.?

A On the California . . . That was a good deal.
That was all I had on my thing.

Q We also want to know where you were born.

A I was born in Benton Harbor, Michigan.

Q You say you were born in Bar Harbor?

A Benton Harbor. Right across from the lake from Chicago. On January 5, 1900.

Q How many kids in your family?

A One, me. I have an adopted sister.

Q What kind of work did your father do?

A He was an actor.

Q Really!

A Yes. When I was younger, at first, after we came--

Q The old fashion ones. Your mother was also an actor?

A They didn't have agents or they didn't have script writers, or anything like that.

Q And they worked in the theater?

A They worked in the theater. One year they were with the Barnum and Bailey Circus.

Q They worked on the Orpheum Circuit?

A They worked on the Orpheum Circuit . . . Then my mother tells the tale of being in a wagon show. You don't remember what that is. All around--they went all through Michigan and Ohio. And they were in a medicine show at one time, and they got out. And that was when my mother got married, when she was very young.

(Marjorie: Your father knew Al Jolson; that's how much she is in show business.)

A Yes, Dad was on the same bill as Al Jolson when he was in vaudeville.

Q Were they still working when you were a baby?

A Yes. The same tradition that they talk about; they would put me in the trunk, you know. But, then when I was older I would stay with my grandmother. And they left show business when I was about seven or eight. And she mentioned a hotel in Toledo; and then we moved to Detroit. He worked for one of the hotels there for a while, then for Fisher Body Company. And then I got married, and we came out here.

Q What year did you come to California?

A Either '22 or '23 in November. My sister had kind of forgotten . . . I think it was '22 because I was married in '21 and she was married six months later. I think it was '22. We were talking about it when she was up here.

Q What did you do as a child during World War I

A I was in school. But I know that I got a job in a moving picture place that was right around the corner from us. I think I was about seventeen, I guess, and all the boys would come in. There was a school right near there for sailors, and the girls that worked in this candy shop would come up to our apartment; and I played the piano, and we sang, and we had a lot of fun. My Dad and my Mother were pretty strict, but we had--

Q . . . theater. They ran a theater?

A That was after the war, after I got married. They, my sister got married, and he had been in the Marines and came out. And I got married; then later on, my sister got married; she was just eighteen then. Then we all came out here. It took us a whole month to get here. We had a lot of fun along the way. We lived together. We were only going to stay until May, and this was in October, and we rented a furnished place and all six of us lived together. And the boys-- it was three with my Dad--all of them went down and got jobs, and so they liked them so well. And my mother went back to Michigan, Detroit, and packed up things she wanted. And we had rented our apartment, we had a six-room apartment there, we had rented it to a newly married couple that we knew, the boy had been in the service with my husband and they were very close. And so, she went back and brought the furniture out here, and my Dad and Mother bought a place on Avenue 57 in Highland Park, and we lived there until we moved over here.

Q How did the Depression affect you?

A I was working for the Telephone Company at that time, and I remember that there were days that we didn't work. We would go to work --I was working downtown, and we would go down and work--and they would say so many girls had to be let off. And, after we paid our carfare and everything--and you know, you didn't have a lot of money either, but--

Q That was 1929, right? Or 1930?

A 1930 I would say, yes. I was still married at that time.

- Q Some place along the way you must have had dancing lessons, didn't you?
- A Oh, I did. I took four years of dance when I was in high school, in private dancing class, and I wanted to continue. But my Dad always said, "You are never going on the stage." And I remember when I was a little kid--I was about four years old--a show came to town, and they wanted a little youngster to pop out of an egg--what was the name of that show--and I was the one that got to pop out of the egg and walk across the floor like a little chicken. My stage experience!
- Q You stage debut.
- A Yes. So, I never did anything with my dancing and my music, and I should have.
- Q You certainly enjoyed it, I know.
- A Oh, yes. And I love to dance now. Every place, I hope I can dance. Just lately, somebody came up, and asked me to dance, and I sure did!
(Marjorie: Yes, at the Republican Clubhouse with Dave Smith.)
- A Oh, yes.
- Q Jitterbug?
- A Yes. I didn't jitterbug, I was too--
- Q I remember seeing you doing the Irish jig on Saint Patrick's Day.
- A Well, my Mother taught me the Irish jig when I was only five years old, but I don't remember it any more.
- Q What antionality were your parents?
- A English.