

Lancaster County Historical Society
African-American Veterans Oral History Project

Interviewer: Carole LeFever

Interviewee: Wilkerson, Ruby and Spencer

Location: Home of the Wilkersons

Subject: Military experiences

Date of Interview: February 13, 2006

Transcription Date: February 23, 2009

Transcriber: Miles Shugar

[] indicates uncertainty of what was spoken

Ruby Wilkerson (W): Ruby M May Wilkerson.

Carole Lefever (L): And where were you born, Mrs. Ruby?

W: Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

L: Oh I was from Harrisburg most of my life as well! And you came to Lancaster about when?

W: 19...I forget the date.

L: Well we're looking at your veteran experience; it must have been then after you completed your military experience?

W: Oh yes. It was after the war.

L: After the war, well that's good, that's good enough to pin it down. Was it right in that time pretty much right after the war?

W: No, it was not right after, it must have been about three, four years after that.

L: Alright well let's go back a little bit. What made you decide to join the military? That wouldn't have been a normal thing for an African American woman at that time, you were one of the first. What made you decide to go that route?

W: I wasn't the first African American that joined the force.

L: But you were one of them.

W: But I was one of them.

L: That's it.

W: But my mother fretted about her family in the West Indies, about her children she had helped raise which her cousin's children. She just wished that she had someone to do her share, so I was going to work one day, I worked in Middletown, and I happened to look up and saw the recruiting sign down the street, so I ran down the street and asked them how you signed up.

L: Okay.

W: And they told me what I had to do, so I went on to work, and I went back home after work and I told my mother I was going to join the army.

L: Ooh, what did she say?

W: So she said, well she was thrilled and I guess it's both ways.

L: Mmhm.

W: I guess that she really didn't want it but she was thrilled too, because she said that she had no brothers or anybody to take her share in the war and so much was going on in her country that she wanted someone to take her part ya know.

L: Ah, so you took it out.

W: So I went there.

L: Did anybody else in your family become a member of the military?

W: No.

L: You were the only one?

W: I was the only one. I have two sisters and—

L: Now what was your mother and your father's names?

W: My mother was Emma Louise Wilkerson, Emma Louise Wilson and my father was Henry Jones Wilson. And my father was long dead, my father died when I was 17.

L: Okay, now you were born in the islands, or here?

W: I was born here.

L: Okay.

W: In Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

L: Aah. What was your very first memory that you could actually call a memory of becoming or being a veteran, past your recruitment? What was your first experience that you might describe as a member of the military? Was it basic training, was it the trip there, the trip back, where did you take your basic training?

W: Des Moines, Iowa.

L: Oh, well that was a trip out of town!

W: It was the first time I'd ever been away from my home, I was 19.

L: Describe it, can you describe it?

W: Well I was scared.

L: Did you have other friends going with you, or were you just all by yourself going?

W: No. I was by myself and I was scared, I'd never been out of Harrisburg, so I didn't know what was what.

L: What was the high school you went to in Harrisburg?

W: John Harris High.

L: John Harris. And so you went, do you remember the year you might have gone to Des Moines? Was the war already begun?

W: Yeah, the war had already started.

L: Right. Describe the trip, did you take a train, a bus, how did you get to Iowa?

W: On a train.

L: And what was that experience like?

W: Well, like I said, when I got to Chicago, I left Harrisburg, when I got to Chicago I was scared. I didn't know what to do and I had a long wait for the train, and I sat right by the door at the station. The steps that go down to the train, I sat right by that door.

L: You didn't want to miss it, haha.

W: I wouldn't move for nothing. And like I said, I was only 19, I'd never been away from home. And a porter, one of the fellows that worked around in the station?

L: Mmhm.

W: Came and spoke to me and I told him that I was going to wait for a train and he said that "It was such a long time to wait, would you like to see the town?"

L: Ooh! Hahaha.

W: And I said to myself, "See the town?" I said, "No thank you, I'll stay right here." And I sat there until the train came and then when the train came I got on and I road to Des Moines, and when I got off the train, see I had never encountered a lot of prejudice between black and white.

L: Mmhm.

W: And so I wasn't prepared. And when I got off the train in Des Moines, I think it was Des Moines, it was like a country area you know? You know how those little stations are in the country.

L: Right, right.

W: And when I got off the train there was a platform there and I had to go to the bathroom. And I looked around and it said it had a sign up here that said "Black Only." It was dark. And a little farther down where the light was, that was for the whites. And I thought, "Oh." So whatever it was I had to do I held.

L: You didn't go to either place!?

W: I wasn't going nowhere.

L: Had nobody warned you this might be the case?

W: No. And so I was getting really nervous, so then an army truck came up and this woman was, she was military, she was coming to look for me.

L: Oh.

W: And she came to pick me up and took me to the camp.

L: So you were the only one on the train that time?

W: I was by myself, yeah, because I was just going in and I was by myself.

L: So tell me about your induction once you got to the camp where you were going. What was your first impression or experience of having arrived at basic training?

W: Well I once I got to camp I felt better because there were more like me.

L: Mmhm.

W: You know we were all together, and so it didn't bother me then. It was a new experience, ya know. And I enjoyed it.

L: Well tell me about your training, what was involved in your basic training?

W: Just like the men get.

L: A lot of marching, following orders?

W: A lot of marching, climbing the different obstacles and things that you had to do, just like the men trained.

L: And how long was that, was it a short period or did you have basic training in more than one place?

W: No, basic training in I think it was Des Moines, Iowa.

L: Mmhm.

W: I was in so many places I forget which one was which. But when you think about it, I'm almost 82 so a lot of those things I've forgotten.

L: Your memory is wonderful, I have trouble from yesterday sometimes!

W: Yeah, well anyhow, what did you ask me?

L: Well I was asking you to describe any other training that you got in the US once you left Des Moines.

W: Well once I finished my basic training—

L: Oh, that was your basic training then.

W: —I wanted to get into the motor vehicles, you know.

L: Alright.

W: Those that drove the trucks and things, because I wanted to learn how to drive.

L: But you didn't know how to drive?

W: No.

L: Okay.

W: But they taught ya.

L: Okay.

W: And that's what I wanted. And so I signed up for it, after my basic training was over, and so anyhow when the orders came down mine was for more like secretarial work.

L: Your orders were not for...

W: Not for motor pool.

L: But you did put in for the motor pool.

W: Yeah, I put in for motor pool. So I questioned it, and he said no, your grades were too high for motor pool.

L: Oooh!

W: Haha, yeah, so I went into, well anyhow I used to fix maps, keep up the maps for troop training movement and stuff like that.

L: Alright.

W: Yeah.

L: Cartography maybe, is that what they called it?

W: No, I don't remember what they called it, but uh—

L: But you worked with updating and working on the maps for the troops?

W: Keeping up with the troop movement—

L: Now this was in Europe, the troop movement, you're talking about?

W: No this was in the States.

L: Oh okay.

W: And wherever they were keeping—

L: All the different bases.

W: Yeah, they kept a troop movement for the different places; I imagine it was here in the United States I guess. I don't remember.

L: Well how did you get to, what happened when you were finished with the map part, because I know that's not where you ended up? What was the next step after you worked with the maps?

W: Well, that was what I did the whole time that I was there in Des Moines, Iowa. I took care of the maps and the officer or the whoever it was in the office, I did the typing for I think it was a book and I would type all the material.

L: Like a manual?

W: Yeah, I did the typing.

L: Now had you been a typist before, or is that something you learned from the military as well?

W: No, I had a little typing before, but it wasn't much, but at that time I didn't need a lot of typing because I did it on my own. You know, I went to work and I did whatever I had to do as far as maps were concerned, sometimes I'd have to set up the maps for the soldiers coming in for discussions or whatever it is that they wanted, you know.

L: Mmhm.

W: And when I was free from mapping, I would go and do this typing for this gentleman who was, I think if I remember correctly he was writing a book or something.

L: Was it a military subject?

W: He was military, but I thought he, I don't remember what it was, I just typed the stuff up.

L: You typed it because he asked you to?

W: Yeah.

L: Haha. A good secretary.

W: Haha, yeah.

L: Well what would be the next step then, since again I know you ended up in the European stage?

W: Well after that, it came down, but I don't remember dates or anything.

L: Don't worry about dates.

W: Oh, but I moved from Des Moines Iowa, that was my basic training, and from there we went to—

(Phone rings)

L: Okay, we're going to continue now. So you, do you have any more memories from your Des Moines experience, your basic training? A story about something that sticks in your mind, an everyday experience?

W: No, not necessarily, as far as work, no, I just did the job that I was told.

L: You didn't make a lot of good friends?

W: Well yeah, I had friends there, I made friends there. I think only, I only had one good friend there.

L: Who was that?

W: You have to forgive me because I had a stroke and I don't...

L: Now is this somebody that you kept contact with after the war?

W: Yes, for a good while, and then you kinda lose touch.

L: I do know that. Now was this a woman in the same unit that you were in, is that how you got to know her?

W: Yes, uh huh. I just can't think of her name right now.

L: What was your rank when you left basic training, do you remember that?

W: Private.

L: Private?

W: Private.

L: And she was probably another private then, too?

W: Yeah, mmhm.

L: And what caused you to leave that area, did you just get new orders, did you put in for new orders?

W: No, they moved us from Des Moines, Iowa we went to South Dakota.

L: And you'd never been out of Lancaster before?

W: No, nuh uh. I forget, but my basic training was somewhere else first, and then I went to Des Moines, Iowa. From Des Moines, Iowa, I went to South Dakota. And from South Dakota I went to the ship to go overseas.

L: Now tell me about what happened in South Dakota. Do you have any specific memories from that experience, that part of your experience?

W: No, just waiting for whatever we were going to do.

L: So you were just kind of going through drills, you didn't have a job?

W: No no, just the regular army routine.

L: Training?

W: Uh huh.

L: Training.

W: Training.

L: Was your friend able to come with you, the one you had made in Des Moines?

W: Yes. We all went.

L: Oh, okay. About how big was that group of women?

W: Oh I don't know how many.

L: Would you say it was a company, what was the unit? Do you remember that?

W: No. If I had know you had wanted all that, I would have—

L: Oh, I didn't even know I wanted all that, it just jumped into my brain.

W: I'd have to look it up. I have it all in that book over there.

L: Well we can look at that later. Do you remember anything about your officers when you were at Des Moines, or in Dakota?

W: Charity Adams was our commanding officer.

L: Oh, alright she was your first and continued to be your commanding officer?

W: Yes, that was when I went overseas.

L: Okay.

W: Charity Adams carried us overseas.

L: Okay, so you connected with her on the ship perhaps, is that the first you saw here?

W: No. I don't remember.

L: So you might have met her in South Dakota?

W: I just can't remember where we met, whether she, I don't know whether she met us here in the States before we left or not.

L: Tell me something about Charity Adams, I've heard that name before. Tell me who she was.

W: She was our commanding officer.

L: But your husband had mentioned that she was one of the first women of color to be a commanding officer.

W: Oh yes, well that's what I said, that's her book there.

L: Oh okay.

W: It gives her the whole story of the time that we were in the service.

L: One Woman's Army, this is the story of Charity Adams.

W: This is the story of when we went overseas.

L: Okay.

W: This is not, now in this book she has thoughts of her stay in the States, and becoming an officer and all that, but I'm not in it until way in the back of it.

L: But you are in it.

W: Yeah, where we, she came to be our commanding officer going overseas.

L: Well what was her rank do you remember that? I think I heard your husband mention she was a major.

W: Yeah, major. Major Adams.

L: Mmhm, Major Adams, okay. Now tell me about your trip overseas. That must have been an experience, on a ship!

W: Oh yeah.

L: You were never on a train, now I'll bet you were never on a ship before!

W: No, and we were I think going over, was it going over or coming back? I forget, I get confused as to which was which.

L: What is it that you remember about the trip you're talking about?

W: Now when you ask me, you know I forgot all about going overseas.

L: Did you get seasick?

W: I was seasick the whole time I was on the ship.

L: Oh! I would want to forget that too, haha.

W: Yeah, I think it took us 7 days to go get over there, and we were chased by a submarine going over.

L: Oh. Now had did you know you were being chased?

W: Well you know, we got information on shipboard, you know.

L: Well how did you have to act differently when you knew that you were being chased, was there any different kind of change in the routine because of that?

W: No, my routine was the same, it was just that we knew something was up. Something wasn't right.

L: How did that make you feel?

W: Well at the time, tell you truth, I wasn't afraid, it didn't frighten me. It was just a fact that we knew that there was ships out there, I mean submarines out there in the sea, you know, and it was just that we came across one or something like that.

L: But you felt confident in the army that they would get you through this, is that part of the reason?

W: I never thought that we wouldn't get there.

L: That's what I'm wondering.

W: I'll put it that way.

L: Mmhm.

W: I never thought I wouldn't make it over there, you know.

L: Now we'll get to your experience coming back, but what is it you do debarked from, and where did you land when you were in Europe?

W: We left from, I wish you'd told me you wanted all of this.

L: Hahaha.

W: Because my lord, this is how many years?

L: I know.

W: Um, I think we left from New York.

L: Oh so you left from the east coast then.

W: Okay, and we got on the ship?

L: Do you remember the name of the ship?

W: I remember the name of the one ship was the George Washington. I can't remember whether that was the one we went over on, or whether that was the one we came back on.

L: Got ya.

W: But one of them was the George Washington, I forget the other one.

L: Now were there only women troops on this ship, or was it a combination of both men and women?

W: Men and women.

L: And how did they allow to fraternize, did you interact with them at all?

W: We women had our own area, and the men had theirs.

L: So you were kept separated?

W: Yeah.

L: Do you remember a story about that trip over or back, the ship experience, put it that way?

W: Let me see, going over. Like I said going over was only the fact of they were running at one time from as they said, an enemy submarine and we knew that. I understand we were told that we lost some soldiers going over, down below us, though I didn't know the ship went that far down. But they were down below us and when we were getting off the ship we saw where the ship had been damaged, and the beds, men had beds that were up along the side of the wall of the ship, you know, their bunks were made up along the side of the wall.

L: So the enemy actually did engage your ship on the way over and there were casualties, is that what you're saying?

W: Yeah we did have casualties going over, on the men only, I forget how many it was.

L: Were these all troops of color on that ship, or was it a big group of all kinds of different...?

W: No, I think it was all kinds, like I said I don't really remember or I can't think of it, yeah, it was mixed because they used to make us go up on shipboard, up on deck. They used to make us go up on deck because we got seasick and we wanted to stay in our bunks and they'd force you to go upstairs on deck every so often, you know. And I remember I used to go up there and hang over the rail because you were sick, you know. And I remember there was a white soldier beside me one day and we were both over there puking over the rail, so it was both.

L: Aha. What do you remember of your first sight of Europe?

W: When I first got to Europe, we landed in England.

L: Okay.

W: Oh, let me see, I forget what part of England. I wish my husband was here.

L: Well we'll catch him when he gets here.

W: There he is.

L: Okay, now that Mr. Spencer Wilkerson, the other half of this dynamic duo, is here to finish the story, uh, Ms. Ruby you were saying that there was another part of your military experience after South Dakota. Where did you go before you went to Europe after you were in South Dakota?

W: Oglethorpe, Camp Oglethorpe.

Spencer Wilkerson (S): Camp Oglethorpe.

L: And that was where?

S: Georgia.

L: Georgia. Well now was that experience being in the Deep South, you'd said you hadn't met much prejudice before your train ride out there, what would you tell me about that experience at Camp Oglethorpe?

W: I can't tell you much about that, except what work I did all day on camp, because I never left the camp.

L: Aha.

W: They didn't treat you nice on the base.

S: Okay, mmhm.

L: So you knew it would be much better off!

W: And so you didn't go into, I wouldn't go into the city.

L: You never did?

W: No, I never went into the city. Some of the girls went into the city but they had to get a bus, and take 'em in, and then the bus would stay at a certain spot, and when the girls were ready to come home they got that bus and came back.

S: Yeah, prejudice, yeah.

W: It was so prejudice down there.

L: Can you remember any of the stories some of your mates told you about their experience?

W: No, they, I wasn't in contact with some of the people that went into town, but I knew what happened when they went there.

L: And that's what kept you on base?

W: And I wasn't going on base even before they went.

L: Ah.

W: I just wasn't going, I was south. I wasn't going, period, haha.

S: Tell her.

W: When they told me I had to get a special bus, to go into town and wait for that special bus to come back, I said, "Never mind, just tell them I can't."

L: That's too much.

W: Because they weren't to pleasant to you on the base. There were white WACs, there was a white WAC sitting there in Georgia, and they weren't pleasant at all, so.

L: Now when you say that they weren't pleasant, was it that they were rude or was it more than that?

W: I guess you'd say just rude, they just ignored you, you know.

S: How about—

W: And to tell you truth, some of the officers on that base were terrible. I can't remember their names, but they were terrible.

L: Now when you say there were terrible, how do you mean?

W: Prejudiced. Very prejudiced.

S: Mmhm.

L: Just the way they addressed you, or ignored you, or?

W: That's right, I remember, I don't know whether it was there or not. But in one of the camps I remember going to sick hall and the doctor was very nice, that doctor was very nice, but I understand he got chewed out because he put me off work for a day or two, ya know.

L: Because he actually allowed you to be sick and not?

W: Yeah, more or less.

L: So he got into trouble, this was a white doctor I gather.

W: He was white.

L: For allowing you to be sick for a minute before you got better?

W: Yeah, you know that was after we were married, I think.

S: That was in France.

W: Was that in France?

S: What you were talking about, yes.

W: Oh, yeah that's all overseas. In the States, no. It was just normal prejudice in the States.

S: They had the—

W: Like I said, I didn't go, she asked me about Oglethorpe.

S: Yeah.

W: Georgia.

S: On the way there you had trouble getting on the train, right?

W: Oh we are way past that.

S: Oh you're past that.

L: Oh now tell us about that, getting on that train.

S: They put you behind a coal car?

L: This is coming to South Dakota from Oglethorpe?

W: No.

S: Is that when that happened? You went to get on the train that you were accustomed to getting on—

W: Oh that was in—

S: —Up around here.

W: Oh that was when I came home on—

S: Furlough.

W: Furlough, before going overseas.

S: Oh.

W: And when I was going back.

S: Yeah.

W: Yeah.

L: Well Ms. Ruby, tell us about that story when you had trouble getting on the train. Now you were coming home from furlough?

W: Yeah, and I had never travelled before.

L: Mmhm.

W: And I came into Des Moines, I guess it was from Oglethorpe.

S: Take you time.

W: And my train came into Des Moines where I should have stayed, but the girls that were with me didn't know you had to go over to the other station to get your train to come this way.

L: Mmhm.

W: So I didn't know so I went, because I didn't have any money to get back, and I found out I couldn't leave other there.

L: They wouldn't let you get on that train?

W: Well I didn't have, I didn't know I could get on the train but I didn't have money to go back over on the other side to get on the train, which would bring me home. So I had gone to the, what did they have there?

S: The Red Cross?

W: Red Cross, and asked them could they help me, give me enough money to get home and then I could reimburse. Nah.

L: Oh the Red Cross wouldn't even help you!

W: Nah, the Red Cross wouldn't help me.

L: Mm.

W: And so I spoke to the people at the train where you get your ticket.

S: At the station.

W: So I showed him my ticket so he said, "Well what we'll do, we'll reroute you." From where I was, they rerouted me, I had to go all the way down to where? South Carolina? No.

S: Washington?

W: No.

L: You took the long way.

W: Well anyhow, they rerouted me a way where I had to go further south, and then come back north.

S: Mmhm.

W: That's the way I had to do it.

S: Okay.

W: So that when I left from my furlough, I would have to pay my way from up here down there.

S: And it shouldn't have been that way.

W: And then my army ticket would take over and carry me the rest of the way.

L: And the army wouldn't even help you to make this right.

W: No, no.

L: How did you feel, were you concerned about going south, was that your first Deep South trip?

W: Well I was only concerned in that fact that it seemed like it was so much a bother, and the first time that I had ever been where you had that much prejudice because when I got into what was that city?

L: In the south?

W: It's in the south, what is it that's close?

L: It doesn't matter.

W: I forget, but wherever it was—

S: Alabama?

W: No, it wasn't Alabama. It seemed to me it started with a "C."

L: One of the Carolinas, maybe?

W: No, Cincinnati?

L: Charleston?

W Cincinnati?

S: Cincinnati? You might have gone to Cincinnati on a reroute.

W: Yeah.

S: Cincinnati, okay.

W: Yeah, well wherever it was.

S: When they rerouted ya.

W: Yeah.

S: Okay.

W: And I remember when I got to the station I went to get on the train and the quarter, I mean the—

S: Conductor.

W: —Conductor was standing up at the, you know how they're standing up there as you come on?

L: Mmhm.

W: Well he was standing up there so I went to get on the train, he didn't say nothing, and, haha, I call him "Stepin Fetchit." Remember the film?

L: I do, haha.

S: That's alright, go ahead.

W: Oh. He come runnin' down the station, black man came runnin' down the station and all I can remember is his feet going this way.

L: Haha.

S: Haha.

W: And he was telling me, "You don't belong there, you don't belong there. You can't get up there." And this conductor or whatever that was standing up there, he never said a word.

S: Right.

W: And he says, "You come with me, I'll show you where you belong."

L: Stepin Fetchit said that to you?

W: Yeah. So I stepped down off the step and followed him, and he took me down to a coach, which was right next to the engine.

L: Dirty.

S: All the smoke and everything came in there.

L: Yeah.

W: It was right next to the engine.

S: Yeah.

W: And when you came in, it was like a boxcar that had been added on, and when you went in there, you went in the door here, and there were seats that were along here.

S: Yeah.

W: And then there was an opening that went into another part of the coach and I was scared then. So I sat here, all by myself, I said, "I'm going to just sit down and wait close to the door."

S: Ha!

W: Because I was right up against the engine.

S: Mm.

L: What time of year was this, was it summer time?

W: Yeah.

L: Mm.

W: So anyhow, that's where I sat, that's where you put that, and I sat there and then people started getting, other negroes started getting on the train, and they got on with live chickens, they had other kinds of animals that they brought in.

S: Ducks.

W: Yeah, they had ducks, they had ducks in there, live chickens, and I forget what else.

L: These were civilian passengers?

W: Yeah. And they all went in this other part, because there wasn't enough room for them there where I was, it was just one, what's the name, and I was scared, haha, I'd never seen anything like that ya know? So anyways, that part of the coach was just full with people, it looked like they were out buying or whatever.

S: They went to the market probably.

L: Mmhm.

W: Yeah, so then I rode all the way to—

S: To the next camp.

W: No, from Cincinnati I rode all the way to, oh yeah to Cincinnati I guess, and got off. What else?

L: Well now Spencer Wilkerson, you just joined us right when we were actually, we got the whole way to England, didn't we?

W: Yeah!

L: We were talking about the damage done to ship on the way over and so on, but you want to go back to landing in England, what you thought of the first foreign country you had even been in? What did you think about your first experience or impressions in England?

S: Birmingham.

L: Oh it was Birmingham.

W: Birmingham, that's right. That's where we went.

L: See that's why we needed you, haha.

W: Yeah. I just don't remember.

L: Haha.

S: I understand.

W: I went to Birmingham, England.

L: Mmhm.

W: Mmhm, that's where we were.

L: Describe your first impressions of Birmingham.

W: I liked it. It was like, to me it was like being home. It's no different than being home, you know. Buildings and things are different, but it's just, you know.

L: Mmhm.

W: I liked it, I didn't mind it.

L: Did you meet any prejudice when you were in England?

W: No, no.

L: So that's part of why you felt it was like home.

S: It was a lot of work.

W: Yeah, I guess, I guess.

S: It was a lot of work.

W: I never bothered much with the prejudice that they did show because we were there to work and it didn't bother me because I didn't bother them, they didn't bother me.

L: So you were able to keep yourself out a lot of that, that other people who might have interacted more might have ended up feeling because you stayed with your job and you stayed on your base and you tried to avoid it in other words.

W: Yeah, I mean, they didn't want me around, I didn't go. You know.

S: But in Birmingham you were there to do the job.

W: Yeah, we were there—

L: What job might have that been in?

W: We took care of the mail for the whole European theatre of operation.

L: So what did you call that unit, or—?

W: We were the, what was our special?

S: 68th.

W: 88th.

S: 88th Central Postal Directory.

W: Mmhm.

L: And how would you describe that job?

W: That was a job of finding mail, of finding soldiers—

S: Soldiers.

W: —Who had not received their mail. We used to get mail in stacks like this for one person, and we were there to see that the mail got out to the individuals.

L: So because of troop movements, and maybe they were wounded or something, it wasn't catching up with them.

W: Yeah.

L: And you had to disperse that then.

W: Yeah.

S: Some of them been hospitalized, some of them had been killed—

L: Alright.

S: —And they had were relocated and so they come out of the hospital.

L: What do you remember most about the routine of that job? The part you liked or didn't like?

W: Oh, there wasn't anything not to like.

S: We worked different shifts.

W: Yeah we worked in shifts.

S: Right.

W: And I was in the first 700 that went over. There was 800 of us that went over.

L: So you were one of the first--?

W: Yeah, to go overseas.

S: Mmhm.

L: Okay.

W: We worked in shifts, three shifts, and it was just getting the mail out, but when we went in there we had an area that was about as tall as that doorway.

L: Mmhm.

W: No, it was taller than that doorway and wider, and it was full of mail bags, you know those big mail bags that we have here?

L: Mmhm.

W: You know big mail bags?

S: Mmhm.

W: From floor to the ceiling. Just covered the room. And we finished that mail in what was it, three months or two months?

S: I think it was three months.

W: Three months.

S: I think it's in that book.

L: So when you say you were one of the first ones of the group, does that mean of the postal unit or of the colored troops, or both?

W: We were the only postal unit over there.

L: And you served the whole theatre.

S: Mmhm.

W: Yeah, the only black postal unit.

L: Oh okay.

S: That's it.

W: There were whites over there before, but they weren't doing their job.

L: Hahaha.

S: Yeah.

W: That's how we got the chance to—

S: That's in the book.

W: That's how we got the chance to go.

L: Oh, okay.

W: Major Adams got a chance to take us overseas.

L: Now do you remember if that was her decision to do this, or if she just stepped up to it, did she just feel that she could do this or did they just ask her out of desperation?

W: No, I think she asked.

L: She volunteered perhaps.

W: Yeah, something, mmhm.

S: Who, mean Major Adams?

L & W: Mmhm.

S: Okay.

W: Well, you read through it, I didn't, tell me.

L: Well tell me about Major Adams, how would you describe her, what do you remember about her, even about you first meeting with her. What did you think of this woman who was your officer?

W: She was strict.

S: Mmhm.

W: She was strict, and she didn't take any foolishness but we didn't see that much of her, just the women there that were our officers.

L: Okay.

W: Officers that were under her to take care of us.

L: And who was your officer, do you remember?

W: I forget her name.

S: Lieutenant Scott?

W: Who?

S: That was one of them, wasn't it?

W: I don't know.

S: It's in the book.

W: I don't remember, nuh uh.

L: Well tell me what a day was like when you're sorting through this mail. How did you find the troops, you had to coordinate a lot of different things to be able to find these soldiers who had lost their mail.

W: Well it's like I guess a post office here.

L: Mmhm.

W: You had big drawers, I mean big cases like that you work from, you know it had all the names in it. Maybe each of us had maybe one or two what's the names, and you just went through and tried to find where they were, that's all.

L: So as soon as you had a piece of mail, you would make a file for that soldier and then if you found more you would add it to it, is that what you did?

W: No, the mail was there in bags.

L: Mmhm.

W: Okay? Alright. Each day if we didn't have a bag, each one of us would get a bag, and we'd get so much mail, I mean we'd be working out of that bag, and you would get the mail and look for the address for the soldier and then you would, how did we have it?

L: You'd know where to start looking for him then because he must have been at that address at one point, is that what it is?

W: Yeah, yeah.

S: Did you have a locator file?

W: Yeah, we had a file or something that we would go through.

S: Right.

W: You'd find a soldier, and then when you found a soldier you'd put the mail, I forget now where it was, we'd put it somewhere where it was going to go out.

L: Mmhm.

W: It'd go out to the soldier, okay. But lots of times we'd find mail that we had mailed, we couldn't find them.

S: Well I know that.

W: And so that would go one place. Then we had mail where that one soldier was getting so much mail that you had stacks of them for that one soldier.

S: Duffel bags full.

W: And so that would go out another way.

L: Well now tell me something else about your experience in Birmingham, do you have any other memories other than getting started in this postal unit?

S: You heard the bombs going off all night.

W: Oh yeah, we were fifty miles out from Birmingham, what's it called, do you remember the town in England?

S: London?

W: London, we were fifty miles from London, and you'd hear bombs going off all night long.

L: Every night?

W: Yeah, mmhm. And one time I remember we were, it was just beginning to get dark and we were all in the barracks fooling around until it was time to go to bed. And I remember we had always had the negro soldiers that guarded us where we stayed.

L: Men you mean?

W: Yeah, men, they guarded us where we stayed. And I remember—

S: I guess so.

L: Haha.

S: Those weren't women.

W: And I remember this one night these soldiers came in and they were very abrupt and at the time I thought very rude and they would tell us, "Get in your rooms, and sit down!" You know, they were just very rude, you know. But what it was, there was a plane coming over, and they thought it was an enemy plane, and so they were making us go into our rooms and sit down and be quiet.

L: But they didn't tell you why at the time?

W: No, and they turned on, all the lights were off.

S: Mmhm, a blackout.

W: Yeah, it was a blackout.

S: A blackout.

L: So you figured it out why the lights went out then, why they were being rude.

W: No, we didn't figure it out, they just told us to go in there and sit down, and they turned the lights out.

S: They didn't know.

L: Oh, and you didn't know why!

W: So we're sitting there in the dark, and then after a while we heard this plane, and this plane came over and I remember where I was sitting on the side of my bed, I was facing the window which was over that way, and I could see this light as it came.

L: The plane light?

W: The plane light, and it came and it passed right by that window, almost to me it looked like it was on the ground, that's how low it was.

L: Mmhm.

W: And it went on, then they turned the lights on.

L: Did you ever find out if it was the enemy?

W: We found out it was an American plane.

L: Oh okay.

W: But it had gotten lost, and that's what had happened, the plane had gotten lost, was off course.

L: Alright.

W: And they thought it was an enemy plane.

L: About how many women would you say were in your barracks, in a barrack, and what was that like, what did it look like?

W: What do you mean?

L: In your barracks, did it look like your normal barracks in America, was it any different?

W: Well I don't know what the barracks were like in America.

L: Well for example, when you were in basic training was it any different from your accommodations there? Similar situation?

S: They had built bunks for you, sweetie.

W: No, we had beds.

S: Oh you had beds.

W: We had beds in England.

S: Mmhm, in England you did, yeah okay.

W: Mmhm, we lived in, I know what she means, we lived in a—

S: It was in a hotel.

W: A school.

S: A school.

W: A school.

L: Oh so they converted it.

W: It was a school.

L: Into barracks, okay.

W: It was a school that wasn't being used.

S: Uh huh.

W: Because the school, there was a school next to us.

L: Mmhm.

W: And that's the one that was being used, we were housed in this one, and we had our own, I think it was like four to five to a room, I forget, it was something like that.

L: Mmhm. How long were you in, uh, England then?

W: I was in England three months, was it three months?

S: Approximately, yeah.

W: Yeah, three months.

L: So what happened—

W: So from there we went to—oh, I was in England when Roosevelt died.

L: Oh alright, and how did you hear about that news and what was the reaction?

W: We got the news and we had a ceremony for him right outside where our barracks were.

L: Mmhm.

W: That's where we stood at attention, and where the flag was—

L: How did you feel when you heard of the Roosevelt?

W: Well, you know, sad because I did know about him, you know.

L: He was a president you and your family admired then.

W: Yeah.

L: Well tell me about how you ended up then going to France.

W: Well when we finished the mail in England, we had, in other words, we were supposed to have been, what do you call, given a, what is it?

S: Huh?

W: What is it they give you when you do good work?

S: Uh, uh.

L: Commendation?

W: Yeah, we were supposed to receive commendation, which we never did receive.

L: How did you hear about it? How did you know you were supposed to receive it?

W: I forget, the officers or someone told us, but anyhow we finished the mail up in three months, all that mail that they had.

L: Mm.

W: All we took over to France was bags of no record mail. No record mail is mail that you can't find people for.

L: Oh so you took it with you?

W: Yeah, we took it with us.

L: To see if you could find them from that base?

W: No, it's just, well I—

L: They just didn't want to leave it behind for anybody.

W: They didn't want to leave it behind. When we left the mail went with us. But I guess we, yeah we worked on it in France.

S: In Rouen.

W: Yeah. In Rouen.

L: Why were you moved to France? Do you know that?

W: No, I don't remember, I don't remember.

L: Tell me about your trip there, or your first impressions of France. Something about the beginning of that experience.

W: Well to me, England and France was always just nice, I enjoyed it. People were nice to ya.

L: Even if you couldn't speak French, or they couldn't speak English, they were still nice to you?

W: Yeah, yeah. They were nice to you, and I remember we crossed the, what is that?

S: Hmm?

W: What channel did we cross?

S: The English Channel.

W: Yeah, we crossed the English Channel. We crossed the English Channel.

S: Again.

W: Yeah.

S: Again yeah.

W: We crossed the English Channel, and I remember we used to stand on deck and could see the bombs, not bombs.

S: Mmhm.

L: Depth charges maybe?

W: Yeah, the—

L: The enemy—

W: No, not enemies. What were they, the great big?

S: Oh, out in the water.

W: Uh huh.

S: Uh.

L: But that was there in defense of the Allies?

W: That was for defense, yeah.

L: Okay.

W: And the great big, it was like great big bombs.

L: Just floating in the water.

W: No, they weren't exploding. They just bumping up and down.

L: Floating.

W: What were they called?

S: Uh...

L: Now was this defense against U Boats?

W: Yeah, this was—

L: Okay.

W: --This was the Americans' defense against the enemy. But you went through them, you could reach out and almost touch 'em.

L: Mm, mm, mm.

W: That was going from England to France.

L: Now did you get seasick in that trip?

W: No, on the English Channel I didn't get sick.

L: Ah.

W: I ate my way over.

L: Hahaha.

W: They had, I remember they had a fruit cup like we get here, but their fruit cup was different, and it was good. Now we could eat it by the bowlful, and I hate fruit cup all they way across the English Channel. Haha.

L: Well other than getting past the defenses of the Allies, did you have any other excitement on your trip over?

W: What do you mean, over to France?

L: Over to France.

W: No, nuh uh.

L: No excitement going to France?

W: Yeah, it was pretty uneventful crossing the English Channel.

L: Mmhm. Now tell me about your base in Rouen, France. It was Rouen, right?

W: Yeah Rouen, France. That was more or less uneventful, except for the time that we had the, we had gone out for I think it was right after we got there, and we had gone to station to bring in the bags.

L: Train station?

W: Train station. And I was on my detail, and when we came back I remember I was standing in the downstairs in the hotel where we were housed.

S: Mmhm.

W: I was standing in the hotel talking to a friend that I had made in the service, she and I were standing there talking. And after a while, I heard “crack crack,” you know, “crack crack.” To me it didn’t mean nothing, I had never heard gunfire before so I didn’t know. So I was standing there talking to her and I had turned my head and I when I turned back she was gone, and I looked around to find out where she was and then someone was saying to me, “Get out of there, get out of there!” Hehe. And I looked to see who was talking and then I saw coming in the door was these two, was an American soldier and it was, I think it was an American sailor. It was a sailor and a soldier anyhow. And the soldier had his gun on the sailor and they were coming in and I remember someone saying, “For God’s sake, get out of there!” Well I was standing near the door because the, you know the, what do you call it the, oh it’s hard for me to remember. The desk you know where you sign up to come in? You know?

L: Mmhm.

W: Was right near the door.

S: Orderly?

W: No not orderly, a hotel. You know how you go into hotels and theres a—

L: Reception.

W: Yeah, reception.

S: Reception.

W: It was right there by the door, and that's where I was standing.

S: Mmhm.

W: So when they said, "For God's sake girl, get out of there!" or something well then I got scared, because then I saw them coming in and it was a soldier after a sailor, I think.

L: So he was chasing him?

W: But it was, what happened was when I'd turned, this German prisoner came running at me, and that's when I got scared.

L: I guess.

W: He ran at me, and I dropped down at my feet, and he said, "Help me!" or something like that.

S: Mmhm.

L: In English?

W: Yeah, and I'm standing right out in the open, haha, and he scared me and he said help me, and all I did was I remember, I just turned my body, and said, "Hide over there." So he got up and went over there and crouched down, and that's when I heard them say, "For God's sake, girl, get out of there!" or something. That's when I ran, and when I ran, I ran right in the line of fire.

S: Mmhm.

L: Oh!

W: I crossed the hotel lobby to the other side of the room and when I got over there, there was nothing but steps over there and I couldn't go nowhere on the steps, and some of my other girls were on the steps over here, which were behind me.

L: Mmhm.

W: And they was telling me, "Come on, come on!" and I ran back across, haha, and fell up the steps—they had to pull me up the steps. Hahaha.

S: Hahaha.

L: Oh! And there was shooting going on at this time?

W: There was shootin' going on.

L: After this German soldier?

W: No not after the German soldier. This sailor or soldier, I forget if it was one or two of them, I forget, but they were after the German, and the German had been on detail to help us bring the bags in.

L: Oh a prisoner, this was a prisoner who was helping you!

W: Yeah!

L: Oh I'm getting it.

S: A working detail.

L: Okay.

W: Yeah!

S: Yeah.

W: Uh huh.

S: German soldier working detail.

W: Yeah, and he was helping bringing the bags in and these two came down and they were after this German soldier, and so anyhow I told him where to go, he ran back there. And uh...

S: And he was a POW.

W: Yeah there was two types.

S: POW.

W: POW, which was a prisoner of war, a German, now they were just a lot of men who really didn't want to be in the service but their country made 'em.

L: Right.

W: Then they had the PPs.

S: Right.

W: I can't remember what they called it, they were the PPs.

S: They were treacherous.

W: They were treacherous.

L: Like political prisoners, maybe?

W: Maybe so, I don't know.

S: What was that?

W: Political prisoner? Was that it?

S: Oh I don't know, I can't remember myself.

L: Mmhm.

S: Maybe you're right, I can't remember.

W: That might be, but anyhow they were called PPs.

L: The dedicated ones.

W: Yeah.

S: Oh yeah, they would kill ya.

W: And they were terrible.

S: They would kill ya.

L: And none of them were ever part of these work details—

W: No.

L: —You just worked with the common soldier.

S: You couldn't trust them.

W: Nuh uh.

L: Now tell me this, did that soldier get away or did you see him be captured? The German that they were chasing.

W: He was shot.

L: Oh they killed him?

W: Yeah, I think he was shot.

L: Oh. How did you feel about that?

W: I ain't worried about him, all I wanted to do was get out of the way!

L: Hahahaha.

W: That's the only thing that I could remember that happened in France that was kind of upsetting.

L: Well I can think of something else that at least changed your life if it wasn't upsetting it was unsettling. I understand that's where you met your husband, Mr. Spencer Wilkerson sitting here beside you, is that not true you met him in France?

W: No I met him, we were going together in the country.

S: We met up again, yeah.

L: Oh so you knew him before you went there?

W: Oh yes, mmhm.

L: Where did you meet him?

W: In fact I had gone to see his before I went in the service—

L: Okay.

W: —I had went to see his Mom and Dad, and his Grandfather.

S: Mmhm.

W: And we were talking and they said something to me, I forget what it was, and I said, "Oh I'm going," they had said something about Spencer, and I said, "Oh I'm going over to bring him home."

S: Hahaha.

L: Do you think that might have helped influence you to sign up to enlist?

W: No, I went because of my mother.

L: That's right.

W: I told them, "I'm going over to bring him home." I had already accepted.

L: Sounds like you did.

W: Yeah!

L: Tell me about your French experience with your husband-to-be at that point. Did he come over? Tell me about it.

W: Well he was in Cherbourg most of the time.

L: In France.

S: I was in Italy when you came over.

W: Yeah.

S: Italy. Naples, Italy.

W: Yeah.

S: And I'd just left for North Africa.

L: What branch of the service and what unit or how would you describe the unit you were within in North Africa? What was your job, what did you do?

S: Oh, we had just gotten off the boat in North Africa, Casablanca. So then we came on up to—

L: Morocco.

S: Naples, Italy I think.

L: And when you say we, what branch of the service were you in?

S: Army. And uh...

L: Well you were a member of the Buffalo Soldiers, were you not?

S: Yeah, yeah.

L: What was their—

S: The second cavalry.

L: That's what I'm after.

S: Which was, I was one of the young ones in 1943.

L: How old were you in 1943 if you don't mind my asking?

S: Oh I guess about 20, 19, 20 or something like that.

W: He was 20 because I was 19.

S: Yeah, yeah, mmhm.

L: What do you remember of Africa?

S: Oh, haha, [color beaches, casbah]. Haha.

L: Hahaha.

S: Oh, I know it was dangerous, and uh, we were told not to associate too much with the women, especially the ones that had the veils on their faces.

L: Did they tell you why?

S: Ah, most of those were married and some of the fellows not in our company did pull a couple veils.

L: Ooh!

S: To see, you know, and uh...

L: Haha what was under them?

S: The next morning they were dead, the Arabs had got 'em.

L: Aha.

S: And they don't know the Arabs got 'em, but they will get ya. They'll kill ya.

L: If you insult their women, was what you were told.

S: You don't fool with their women. And then from Casablanca, then we went to Oran, Algiers, all up the line.

L: Mmhm.

S: 'Til we got to Italy, either Sicily or Italy, I can't remember which one came first. Maybe Sicily first, I don't know, and then we went to Naples, Italy.

L: Mmhm.

S: And then from there, two times eventually, we went to many parts of France.

L: Were you a fighting unit?

S: I was in more or less, I was in a service outfit which unloaded bombs all night. I was in a pork battalion, and we unloaded two thousand pound bombs all night long for the, ya know, for the Arab planes to bomb, ya know.

L: How many men did it take to carry a 2,000 pound bomb?

S: Well we unloaded off a ship, ya had to, you couldn't carry it.

L: Oh it was with equipment, right.

S: You couldn't carry them. They were down in the hold.

L: Mmhm.

S: And you had to take 'em up with what they call a wench. You take 'em up off and out of the ship. And that's what we did at night time and some parts of Italy or Sicily, I don't know what it was, a couple places.

L: So it was defensive that you did at night so that it wouldn't be seen or was there another reason?

S: Beg pardon?

L: Because you did it at night was that a matter of defense?

S: Oh at night time, yeah.

L: That's why you did it at night.

S: Yeah, we did it at night, yeah. Uh huh. And also at night, the German planes would come over night.

L: Mmhm.

S: And try to bomb the ships, and then later on I was put on a replacement center for the Anzio Beach beachhead. For the soldiers that were being killed up there, we were there to replace them. But before that, I didn't know she was in the service. So, I found that out in Naples, Italy that she was in the service and I didn't know that.

L: This was through the mail, or through a contact?

S: I'm glad you mentioned that word. They had put me on a detail of sealing the letters, all the mail that had to go out.

L: Mmhm.

S: Every soldier would write a letter, but he couldn't seal it because the mail had to be censored.

L: Mmhm.

S: So you left it unsealed so they put me on the detail to seal the letters on that particular day.

L: After they'd been censored.

S: Yeah, and while I was sealing the letters, this one letter, a picture of the WACs came out of this guy's letter, and I'm trying to figure out, I looked at the picture and here it was her group getting on the boat in New York City.

L: Wow.

S: To come overseas.

L: And you didn't even know she had joined.

S: I didn't know that. So I contacted this guy, I looked at his return address and then I got a hold of him, his name was Morehead, Robert Morehead. His wife was in the WACs, the same outfit that she was in, and we didn't know each other but then later on I met up with him.

L: Alright.

S: And then he told me his wife was there in the WACs, so eventually we got—this was in Italy—and eventually we got to France, and then he contacted his wife, she met Ruby, and then Morehead and I became friends. And he wanted to go see his wife, oh, I'm ahead of the game. This is before they came to France, they were still in England! Right?

W: Mmhm.

S: So he always told me that he wanted to go see his wife in England, and me trying to be a friend of his, I told him that there's so much up there, I'm going to get him to England to see his wife. And he said I couldn't do that, and he was trying to figure out how could I get him to England to see Jane, Jean. So anyway, I pulled a few strings because I was in the position of doing that. And a special order came down for one man to go to England on furlough and I saw that he went to England, not me, I sent him.

L: But you already knew she was with this group his wife was in?

S: At that time, yeah.

L: Mmhm.

S: So then he went to England to see his wife, I could have gone but I saw that he went.

L: Mmhm.

S: So in the meanwhile, another order came down for another man to go to England, so in the meanwhile he came back to our company and he saw me all packed up, he said, "Spence, where ya goin? What are you doing all packed up?" I said, "I'm going to see Ruby, I'm going to England!" So he says, "No you're not." And I said, "What do you mean I'm not going to see Ruby?" He says, "You're not going to England to see Ruby," so he says, "Ruby's here!" And I said, "You're a lyin." He says, "Honest." He said, "My wife Jean is here." I said, "You're lyin!" He said, "I'm not lyin!" He said, "All the WACs that were in England are here in France!" I says, "You're a lyin!" He says, "Honest, I'm not lying, they came over on one boat, he came over on another boat, and they all docked at Rouen, France." And that's how he, and he was telling me about the WACs who were in France but I didn't know that.

L: Mm, mm, mm.

S: And I felt bad about it because I didn't go to England, because another soldier could've gone if I'd have known that.

L: Oh, so nobody went then in that place.

S: Nobody went, so I didn't go to England to see her because she was already in France. So we met up again in France, we met up in France.

L: Tell me about that first meeting in France.

S: About the what?

L: Your first meeting of each other in France after all of it.

S: First of all, he was trying to get a chance to talk to his wife in Rouen, France, and in the meanwhile I figure if he talked to his wife, she would get Ruby, and I would be able to talk to Ruby over the telephone.

L: Telephone, okay.

S: But then it took us over an hour, maybe two hours, to get through, and they had the old-type phones that you had to crank 'em, and it had to go through all these different countries to get to Rouen. Probably Paris and everywhere else to get to Rouen. But anyway, when he finally got to the WACs official office, they ask him, "Is this official business? Military business?" And he said, "No." Ha. So then we had to start all over again.

L: Haha.

S: Crank, crank, crank, crank. So finally we got through, and I think he did that twice, and they cut us off again. So in the meanwhile I thought about this and I thought to myself, "Morehead, when they ask you is it military business, tell 'em yes!" And then we got through. But in the meanwhile, they got Jean, which was his wife, and they got to talking and she went and got Ruby, and we got a chance to talk to 'em. We hadn't seen, I hadn't seen Ruby yet, but he had seen Jean.

L: Mmhm.

S: But I didn't know that they were in France. So anyway, eventually we were a hundred and twenty, or a hundred and fifty miles away from Rouen, so every week or every other week we got a chance to run a truck down to Rouen.

L: You and Morehead?

S: Yeah, and we had soldiers that wanted to go see the women, the WACs, and we got a chance to take them down to Rouen with us, and that's how we met, I met up to see Ruby again.

L: Well now, Ms. Ruby, you've got to tell me what you thought when you saw this man again when you didn't expect to!

W: Haha.

S: Haha.

L: Tell me about that first meeting.

W: I don't remember.

L: Oh!

S: Well, where they were in Rouen was a big place, oh man. They had ten or twelve foot iron gate out front, you couldn't get in because—

L: Was it an estate, or—

S: —You couldn't get in where they were.

L: Okay.

S: They were behind. Ha!

L: Protected!

S: They were behind, all they had were women in this big area. But you couldn't get in there, they had guards on that gate, MPs, you know.

L: Mmhm.

S: And the guys wanted to climb over this gate to get in there!

L: Haha.

S: They hadn't seen American women for several years!

L: Ah.

S: You know. And they wanted to, haha, they wanted to get in there but you couldn't get in there. Anyway, we would run a truck down every weekend or every other weekend and I could get in because I knew Ruby, and some of the other soldiers could get in, and I had a chance to eat dinner with her on Sunday. So, if you know what an army mess pan looks like, it has two parts to it—you can take the one part apart.

L: Mmhm.

S: So I would go in, and she would give me half of her mess pan and she would keep the other half, and then I would go through her chow line and eat with her.

L: So she knew that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, huh? Haha.

W: Yeah.

S: So then, later on I was getting ready to go to Japan, so we decided to get married before I left France to go to Japan. See the Japanese hadn't surrendered yet.

L: Mmhm.

S: I found out that I couldn't marry her at that particular time, I had to submit a letter to her company commander, Major Adams.

L: Mmhm.

S: And ask permission to marry her.

L: To ask for her hand in marriage you had to go to Major Adams.

S: She had to give me the “ok.”

L: Mmhm.

S: All in letter. So in the meanwhile, I didn't have to go Japan, because the Japanese had given up.

L: Mmhm.

S: So by the time I got the “ok” to marry her, that was October the 10th.

L: 1945?

S: And then we got married October the 10th, 1945.

L: In France?

S: In France, Rouen France.

L: Tell me about the wedding Ruby.

W: Oh my, that was something wasn't it?

S: Yeah, there it is over there, when we got married.

L: So this is the picture of you standing in front of what building when you got married in Rouen, France?

W: That's where my barracks were, that's where we lived, the WACs lived.

S: And she was in her dress uniform.

L: Alright, you two make a wonderful couple. Is that flowers I see, I can't quite tell, that was the wedding day then?

S: Yeah!

W: Yeah!

L: Oh, wonderful, it was! Okay, so you were married on October—

W: 10th.

L: —10th, 1945. And then what happened, were you divided up or were you able to be together?

S: Later on, we caught the train, I don't know where it was, in Rouen, France somewhere, and we went to—

W: We went to Paris.

S: We went to Paris for honeymoon.

L: Oh! What do you remember of Paris?

S: And what hotel we stayed at, I don't know. I can't remember that.

L: Ms. Ruby. Tell me what your memory of this wedding or your memory of your honeymoon in Paris. What do you remember from that moment?

W: Well...

L: Who was in your wedding, were they people in the military with you?

W: No, it was just my commanding officer.

L: Oh, so Major Charity Adams was in your—

W: No, not Major Charity—

L: Oh your commanding officer, I see.

W: Yeah.

S: Yeah.

W: She took us—

S: Lieutenant somebody.

L: Mmhm.

W: And we went down to the Magistrate's Office in Paris, Magistrate.

S: Mmhm.

L: Oh so you had a civil civilian—

W: Yeah that's right, we had two marriages. There was two of them. We had to have one French, and then one American.

L: Wow.

S: By a chaplain, a military chaplain.

W: Mmhm. We had to, first by the French government.

L: Municipal in other words.

W: Uh huh, and the other one was by the American chaplain.

L: Wow.

W: That chaplain.

L: No stories from Paris on a honeymoon? That sounds like it might be, did you have a special meal, or take a walk, or see a sight that you remember?

S: We had a good time, we walked all over Paris and then—

W: We had a good time on the Seine.

S: —up to the Eiffel Tower, and along the Seine River. I have a picture of you sitting on a bench by the Seine.

W: But it wasn't anything special.

S: It was wartime, you know.

W: Because of—

L: Wartime.

S: Yeah.

W: You couldn't buy food, I mean restaurants and stuff like that.

L: Mmhm. Were they rationed? Were they on a ration system in France, is that why you couldn't go to a restaurant?

W: Well they just didn't have it, I don't know if they were rationed—

L: They just didn't have it.

W: Yeah they didn't have it.

L: How was wartime France different from wartime England?

W: We didn't see as much damage I think in France, as I saw—

S: Not like Italy.

W: Not as much as I saw in England.

L: In England, right.

W: England was really damaged and especially those churches, those beautiful churches they had. But I didn't see as much where we were, I didn't see as much. We were in Rouen, and that's a small town.

L: It wouldn't have been as much of a target—

W: No.

L: Okay. There was nothing there in other words.

W: No.

S: But Italy was damaged heavily, especially Naples.

L: Mmhm.

S: By the black Tuskegee Airmen.

L: Oh, alright.

S: They really tore up Naples, Italy and they did a great job in Italy. I can tell you about a little bit of that. When I got into Italy, I guess Naples, all the buildings were all blown apart, and the streets were all rubble, and I had asked an Italian girl, "What happened?" So she could speak a little bit of English, not much, and she said to me, demonstrating an airplane (makes airplane noises).

L: Mmhm.

S: And she said, "Similar to you." And I didn't understand her at first, and I kept trying to figure out, (makes airplane noises), "Similar to you." And then it dawned on me. It was the Tuskegee Airmen that tore up Naples Italy.

L: Mmhm.

S: And Benjamin Davis, he's in this book too, told his fliers that make sure you hit your target, and the men flew low and made sure they hit their targets, and they really tore up Italy.

N: That's how they knew they were colored troops? Because they could see them they flew so low?

S: Yeah, Benjamin Davis was in there, this was—

L: Now who was Benjamin Davis?

S: He was the Afro-American Commander of the Black Squadron during the war, Fighting Squadrons during the war.

L: Mmhm.

W: Yeah the colored, they couldn't fly with the regular white fliers. They were on their own, they were like a company of their own, weren't they?

L: Mmhm.

S: Yeah.

L: Now they were able to have colored officers then too?

S: Uh, in that air squadron, yeah, they did. And Benjamin O. Davis was the head of the whole thing, oh hear it is. If you could see this picture, Major Adams is shaking hands with Davis. She met him overseas.

L: Alright. Major Charity Adams.

W: Mmhm.

L: Right.

S: Then later the 68 88th, Central Postal Directory, were transferred, they were moved to Paris, France. And a special order came down later on that all married women could be discharged, and being that she had just gotten married in October, she was able to come home December, Christmas Eve on 1945. She came home in 1945, Christmas Eve.

L: And you were discharged at that point, Miss Ruby?

S: Mmhm. I came home three months later.

L: And then you settled in Harrisburg area?

S: Mmhm. Harrisburg. Because we're from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

L: And what civilian jobs were you able to go into then?

S: She was a government employee, Middletown, or Olmstead Air Force Base, which was called Middletown Air Force Base, which is now part of Harrisburg Airport, which is actually Middletown.

L: Right.

S: Uh huh.

L: I'm from Harrisburg too, that's how I know.

S: That's right, I forgot. Haha.

L: Haha. So, and what did you end up doing then, you went right into the funeral business?

S: Later, I worked at Olmstead Air Force Base also.

L: Okay.

S: But later I went to school in Philadelphia to Eckels College of Mortuary Science to become a funeral director. And then I was with the funeral home, Hooper Memorial

Home in Harrisburg, for 7 years before coming to Lancaster and opening up and starting up the Spencer Wilkerson Funeral Home. That was in 1957.

L: And what made you decide on this profession?

S: That's a good one.

L: Haha.

S: Well in life there's two times you can't help yourself. One is when you're born.

L: Right.

S: The other one is when you die. And you need help. So I became a funeral director.

L: Alright. And you began to—

S: And she became a nurse.

L: A nurse, alright.

S: One of the first African American registered nurses at the Harrisburg Hospital.

L: Wow, and when was it you became a nurse, what year, do you remember that?

W: Fifty—

L: Where did you take your training, at the hospital?

W: Harrisburg hospital.

L: Okay.

W: No, no. I took my training in Freedman's....Freedman's...

S: Freedman's Hospital in Washington D.C.

W: Freedman's Hospital in Washington.

L: Okay. Okay, wow.

W: It was one of the—

S: But you were one of the first African American registered nurses to be employed by the Harrisburg Hospital.

W: Mmhm. That was in, what, 19, uh, when did I come out of school? When did you come out of school?

S: You came out around '50, or something around there.

W: Around '51.

L: Right.

S: '50, '51, I guess.

L: Wow. Well alright.

S: Coming to Lancaster, she didn't want to come.

L: You made that decision?

S: I made that decision to come to Lancaster because I wanted to open up my own funeral home.

L: Now were you affiliated with someone in Harrisburg when you first went into the business?

S: I was affiliated with the Hooper Memorial Home in Harrisburg—

L: You did say that.

S: —For seven years before I came here.

L: Mmhm.

S: And when I came here I was still working at Olmstead Air Force Base. I did both. I ran the business and I also worked at Olmstead Air Force Base until the phase-out.

L: Phase-out?

S: Yeah, Middletown closed.

L: Oh, oh, alright, ok.

S: Yeah, it was called a phase-out.

L: Mmhm.

S: And after a phase-out, to make the story short, later on I eventually got a job in the post office here in Lancaster, and that's where I retired from.

L: From the post office to full time.

S: All together, 30 years of government service.

L: Ah, so when did you retire then? Do you remember that?

S: 1980.

L: 1980.

S: Yeah, haha.

L: And you're still involved in the funeral business, is that correct?

S: Yeah, I'm still with Groff Funeral Home, ever since 1988.

L: Now that's Fred Groff?

S: Yeah, Fred Groff Funeral Home, because our last funeral home was at 1045 East King Street.

L: Mmhm.

S: And before that I was on Christian and Chester.

L: Now you were independent at that point, and then you joined with Groff Funeral Home?

S: Mmhm.

L: And Ms. Ruby, what did you do in Lancaster, did you continue with your nursing?

W: Yeah—

S: Private duty, right? You did some form of duty.

W: Not much.

S: Uh huh.

W: But yeah, I nursed up until we moved, he moved. I stopped, no, we had our first child.

S: Mmhm.

W: And that's when I stopped nursing.

S: And then she volunteered for private duty.

W: I used to, yeah, I used to.

L: What hospital in Lancaster did you work with?

W: I didn't work at any hospital.

L: Oh okay, so when you volunteered, what you were saying.

W: I didn't work in Lancaster at all.

L: Okay, you did no hospital duty in Lancaster or nursing duty.

W: Did I nurse in—?

S: You volunteered down there for Little Joe and some schools.

W: Oh yeah.

S: Yeah.

W: I volunteered—

L: As a school nurse?

W: No, just to help. Like when they had the nurse in the school.

S: Mmhm.

W: They'd have something going on. I'd go down and help, that was all—

L: Now what school was it?

W: —they'd get shots or stuff like that.

L: Now what school would this have been?

W: Uh.

S: Burrell's? Was that when Little Joe went to Burrell's?

W: No. That was...

S: Or Lincoln?

W: I guess. It was in Joanna's school.

L: Now Little Joe is your eldest son?

W: That's my daughter.

L: Oh! Goodness!

S: Haha, Joanna!

L: Joanna, okay. And this is your eldest?

W: That's the youngest.

S: Youngest.

L: Okay.

W: My son's the oldest.

L: How many children do you have?

W: Two.

S: Two.

L: Oh, so you had a son and a daughter and the daughter was—

S: Yeah, our daughter Joanna L. Wilkerson and our son is Spencer F. Wilkerson, Junior.

L: I hear you.

S: Hahahaha.

L: Alright. Spencer Wilkerson, you wanted to read some information about Major Charity Adams and I'll let you go ahead right now.

S: When American entered World War II, it was not confined to men. Congress authorized an organization of the Women Army Auxiliary Corps. Later renamed Women Army Corps, in 1942, and hundreds of women were able to join the war effort. One of those women was Charity Edna Adams, who became the first black woman commissioned as an officer. Black members of the WAC had to fight the prejudice, not only of males who did not want women in their man's army, but also of those who could not accept blacks in position of authority or responsibility, even in the an effectively segregated military. With [unblighted] candor, Charity Adams Early tells of her struggles as [I said] as a WAC first black officer and as a commanding officer of the only organization of black women to serve overseas during World War II. That organization, 6888 Central Postal Directive Battalion, who broke all records for redirecting military mail, despite early rejection of the group of military personnel she commanded the group through the moves from Birmingham, England to Rouen, France, and Paris, and stood up to the racist slurs of the general under whose command the battalion operated. As women in black assume important roles in American military, the stories of the first service women need to be preserved unless they be lost to time. Charity Adams Early had written "A One Woman's Army" as a tribute to those courageous women who paved the way for patriots regardless of color or gender to serve their country.

L: So she is the one who is the author of this book, "One Woman's Army."

W: Yeah.

L: Okay.

S: Okay.

L: How old would you say you are, Ms. Ruby, in these pictures—about 19?

W: 19.

L: And what was your rank when you left the army?

W: POC.

L: Do you remember how much you earned at that time?

S: Beg pardon?

L: Do you remember how much that you earned, pay wise at that time?

W: 50...50...

S: About 40 or 50 dollars a month.

W: 50 dollars.

L: A month!? Oh!

S: Haha, yeah!

L: Hahaha.

S: This is but a glimpse of the world. We lived to serve our country. I cannot attempt to remember all the women in the corps I knew, but from my review, the records I am sure of the following list of pre-service jobs royal. Some were beauticians, some were business school operators, [sheropitas], clerical workers, college professors, cooks, counsellors, defense workers, dieticians, domestic workers, factory workers, farm workers, government employees, home economic teachers, hotel maids, house keepers, housewives, insurance agents, law students, musicians, newspaper staff members, nurses, office assistant, office manager, postal workers, production inspector, recreation workers, salesperson, summer school teachers, seamstress, some were secretaries, some were social workers, textile workers, and some were waitresses.

L: Well I thank you very much and how fitting it is that today we have this interview one day before Valentine's Day. This is February 13, 2006, I'm Carole Lefever and I very much appreciated both of you sharing your story of your military experience. Thank you very much.