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What Did You Do in the War Mummy?

By Maria Judge

Eleanor Frances Hanna was a 21 year-old resident of Dorchester, Massachusetts when she joined the WAVES in 1943. She had Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels to thank for the opportunity.



Twenty seven years earlier he had asked the question “Is there any law that says a yeoman must be a man?” The yeoman he was referring to were the clerks in the Navy. Upon hearing that the answer to his question was “There is no such law,” he issued the following directive: “Enroll women in the Naval Reserve as yeomen and we will have the best clerical assistance the country can provide.”

The start of World War I sped up the recruitment of women so that enlisted men could be put on active service. By war's end more than 11,000 women yeomen were in naval service; all were released from active duty in 1919. After that, the Naval Reserve Acts limited service to men.

Until the next war, of course. In July 1942 Congress passed, and President Roosevelt signed into law, the Navy Women's Reserve Act. The organization's official name became Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, or "WAVES." This time, women's military roles were no longer restricted to clerical and stenographic work as they previously had been. They now welded, staffed the control towers of naval air stations ... and they sang.

My mother first heard about the Singing Platoon on a cold January morning in 1944 as she and another WAVE recruit posed for the cameras atop a pile of suitcases at Boston's South Station before boarding a train for boot camp. Her father, who worked for the Herald Traveler, arranged for a photographer to take a picture of her before she got on the train. The other WAVE – who must have had a relative at the newspaper, too - told Eleanor she planned to audition for the Singing Platoon, and that gave Yeoman Hanna the idea. (The newspaper ran the picture and a few days later she received fan mail from two prisoners asking her to become their pen pal. Her sister Mary was equally impressed by the picture and told all her friends that her big sister Eleanor was now the poster girl for the WAVES)

Boot camp for the new recruits was held at Hunter College, affectionately referred to as "USS Hunter" for its ability to handle the 2,000 new seamen recruits who entered every two weeks.

Eleanor auditioned for and was assigned to the Singing Platoon whose members marched as they sang a familiar tune - The Notre Dame Fight Song – with new words:

*We are the Navy, Women's Reserve,
Fighting for our country to serve
We are dressed in navy blue,
For the duration and six months too*

Singing Platoon members also studied to become Seamen Second Class, but the only course my mother remembered taking was Airplane Recognition, memorable perhaps because of the lack of skill she displayed: she couldn't tell one plane from another.

"Where were the planes you were supposed to identify?" I asked her when she told me this story. I pictured her standing on a New York City rooftop, staring at the sky through binoculars.

"On a screen," she told me. "They showed us films and we had to identify which plane was which. At a minimum I should have been able to tell one of ours from one of theirs, but they all looked the same to me."

After flunking out of Airplane Recognition, she was free to enjoy her work with the Singing Platoon, and the musical portion of basic training became the highlight of her boot school experience. The WAVES wore original uniforms designed by the American fashion designer Mainbocher, and sang another song with original lyrics set to someone else's music, this time Irving Berlin's.

*This is the Navy, Seaman Strong
They say your skirts must now be long,
They were appealing but this is war,
And they won't be revealing any more.*

She was thrilled the night Leopold Stokowski conducted the Platoon in a performance of the Star Spangled Banner at a big Red Cross dinner at the Waldorf Astoria.

Upon finishing boot school, Eleanor applied for further training and was accepted into Yeoman's School. She was assigned to train in Iowa and traveled there by train through Canada.

"Why don't we just head directly west," she asked a fellow passenger as their train crossed the border. "This seems a very roundabout route to Iowa."

"Haven't you heard?" the woman said with a laugh. "They don't want Hitler to realize what a formidable foe he's up against with all these women on the march. So we're tricking the Nazis by taking the long route."

Yeoman's School was held at Iowa State Teachers' College in Cedar Falls. For two months, Eleanor learned office procedures, and she learned them as never before. Two years of high school typing had brought her speed up to 25, and a year of Junior College increased it to 45 wpm. Her teacher said some people just plateau at a certain speed and never get beyond it. But after two months at yeoman school, she was up to 75 wpm. The military's secret? They taught their students to type to music.

"What did they play for you," her sister Mary wondered. "Benny Goodman?"

“No,” Eleanor told her. “It was Strauss waltzes that did the trick.”

Two months later she was ready for action and eager for her first posting. Boston had no WAVES barracks at that time, so local girls were offered a posting there so they could live at home and spare the Navy the chore of housing and feeding them. Armed with her rank of Yeoman Third Class, she was assigned to her next posting in April of 1944. She reported to Group Operations, Office of the Commander of the Eastern Sea Frontier, in the Headquarters of the First Naval District, whose operation involved routing ships. Naval captains who took command of ships at the Charlestown Naval Yard would come in to her office on Causeway Street to get their routings, to check on the weather and to find out what obstacles were in the way. For the latter they relied on Yeoman Hanna, since one of her duties was to type up lists of buoys found in the harbor.

Sixty seven years later, she can still remember one item on her list:

Flashing red buoy rendered permanently white by seagulls.

She also remembered a young Naval officer named Jerome Judge who stopped in to the office in August 1945 to get routing for his ship. He was due to sail for the South Pacific in August though his orders were canceled when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Eleanor could have left the WAVES that May when the European war ended in but, she signed on for another year, which increased her rating to Yeoman First Class. She was still stationed at Northern Group on V-J Day, August 15, 1945. She and a friend walked through crowded Boston streets, filled with people rejoicing in the victory. She stopped at St. Cecelia's Church to say a prayer of thanksgiving that the war was ending.

After leaving the WAVES in the summer of 1947 she did a year in the Naval Reserve. Assigned to the Naval Air Station in Squantum, she spent one weekend a month and two weeks a year there performing her yeoman duties. But she got a little variety one weekend when she was asked to help several pilots who needed to log some long distance flying hours. She and a fellow WAVE sat in the bubble covered gunners section of a plane, behind the pilot, and flew with them to Port Columbus Naval Air Station in Ohio. They left Friday night in the middle of an electrical storm, with thunder, lightning and rain all around them. The landed safely in Ohio, stayed two nights in the WAVES barracks, and flew home through clear skies on Sunday morning.



Eleanor prepares to take flight