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Anne Tenney, interviewed by Elizabeth Bunten

Anne E. Howes Ferris Tenney

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Interviewer Elizabeth Bunten
/Depositor:

Narrator: Anne Tenney

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Description: 4200 Anne Tenney, interviewed by Elizabeth Bunten, May 7, 2003, in Castine, Maine. Smith, age 81, talks about her decision to join the Navy (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) in World War II; her basic training experiences; being assigned to New York City; her anti-submarine work; marrying and leaving the service after her pregnancy; remarrying another WWII veteran as a widow; public perception of women in the Navy during the war; minorities in the military; and changes in the role of women in the military.

Text: 6 pp. transcript

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Notes

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Interviewee: Anne Tenney

Interviewer: Elizabeth Buntin

Transcriber: Elizabeth Buntin

Date of Interview: May 7th, 2003

[Begin Tape 1, Side A. Begin Session I.]

Elizabeth Buntin: My name is Elizabeth Buntin; this is for my women's studies 201 class. This is May 7th, 2003 and I'm interviewing Anne Tenney from Castine, Maine. When and where were you born?

Anne Tenney: I was born in Northampton, Massachusetts, 2/21/22, which makes me eighty one.

Buntin: What are your parents' names and occupations?

Tenney: Well both my parents are deceased. My mother's name was Florence Wesley Howes and my father was Wallace Addison Howes and my mother died just before I started college so this is part of the preview of why I joined the WAVs.

Buntin: When and why did you join the military?

Tenney: Well first of all you have to have a feeling of what it was like in the forties. There's a lot of support for the services now but there's a lot of antagonism to it too. There really was none of that in the forties. Everybody supported the war because we were being, well we knew what was happening in Europe and the idea was to get rid of Hitler. And so everyone felt like doing something to support the war. But I had two brothers, an older one and a younger one, and the older one, it was right at the end of the

Depression too, which is a very important part of it all. And my older brother actually went to Mass Maritime Academy and I could remember him bumming rides back and forth from Boston to Northampton which is about a hundred and thirty miles. And so I was very aware of him being in the service. Before Pearl Harbor, he became a member of the Navy and was assigned to a submarine as the senior engineering officer and that's another story which I'll get into later but that had a big effect in my doing this. Secondly, I had been engaged to a wonderful guy who went in the service ahead of me. He had gone to Worcester Polytech. And then was a navigator on a P-39 which was assigned to Africa and they made missions to Italy. And he was lost in the service. Well, I had lost my mother just before I started college and then I lost my boyfriend and here's my brother, and I was thinking, "What am I going to do?" Well, at Smith College, one of the first things we all did was we were airplane spotters. We used to go out onto Calvin Coolidge Bridge and spot airplanes and report them and it would get cold in the winter when we were on that bridge, but it was fun and everybody, not everybody, but many of us did that. I majored in English Literature because I always liked reading and the stage, and I remember accelerating my senior year - it was the first time they'd ever had an accelerated program at Smith - and I decided to do that so I would get out and join the WAVs. It was so funny that summer you could only take two courses and they were very concentrated and one of them was in Shakespeare and the other one was in drafting for the war. I figured I needed something practical. I really didn't know what was going to happen but about half of the class accelerated and of that half, I would say at least half, decided to go into officer training for the WAVs at Smith College. This was the only place in the country where they trained women to be officers in the Navy. The idea being

that we would release men to go to sea who might otherwise have desk jobs. We had to march through the campus and this was so new and I remember a funny story one time we were marching through the campus and they made me a platoon guide to set the pace for the platoons, because I was the shortest one, but I always walked fast. We were marching through the campus and here is half of my class still going to classes on the campus and here we are in our uniforms marching through the campus and the platoon leader says, "Platoon, eyes right," this is in late February, "See robin, eyes front." We all just about stifled laughs to the bottom of our feet it was so funny because there was snow on the ground. Here we're trying to be so formal. So we went through all the training and we had studies, we had to learn Naval law, Naval ships, Naval history, I've forgotten the things but it was all memorization and it was such a change from college where we had been taught to think and to reason and to write our own ideas and examples of things as opposed to regurgitation. But we did it. I had a roommate, I was the shortest one and she was the tallest one. I was the youngest one and she was the oldest one. There were some girls who had come up from the ranks that were assigned to it, but a lot of them, most of them, were college graduates who had decided to do this. And we had to clean our rooms, we lived in the dormitories right on campus. We had to clean our rooms and foot the blanket at the foot of the bed, which is the Admiral, and you had to have your bed made perfectly so you could bounce a quarter off of it and she was tall and I was short and she did all of the top things like going over the windows and so forth and I made the beds because I had been a good Girl Scout and I knew how to make corners. We were a pair. Lights would be out at ten o'clock and we would brief each other on what we had learned during the day because we couldn't have our lights on. We both

liked fresh orange juice and we had our uniforms, we had horrible lyle (sp?), you couldn't get nylons at that point, and there was no such thing as a seamless stocking, they all had seams. We had to keep these seams absolutely straight and it was so hard and such a silly thing that it was so hard. Most of us had page-boys, that was the way to wear your hair then. But we all had to have our hair cut short or else. Your hair couldn't touch your collar. That two months training was totally different than what I'd had in college but interesting and they were such dedicated people. There wasn't a lot of horsing around. Everybody was very serious because it was a serious thing that we were training for. I ended up getting assigned to Eastern Sea Frontier Headquarters in New York City, so here's this little gal from Northampton being sent to New York to find her own quarters. I knew where I was going to work but that's all and I had sort of nightmares about, "How am I going to find a place to live in New York and what am I gonna do?" We got paid two hundred dollars a month which may seem like a lot but we had to buy our own uniforms, we had to get our own housing, it was to cover everything, so you really didn't have a lot of money. But the attitude of everyone at that time was so supportive. I think I saw every play and opera and ballet in New York because my job was briefing the captains and the executive officers of the escort ships that went up and down the East coast. There were all kinds of submarines; it was a very dangerous time. But little old me, here I am in New York City and I'm up on the eighth floor of the Federal Building at 90 Church Street and, of course we had badges, and there were Marines who would take us up and oftentimes you'd find the Admiral of, you'd find the Head of the whole Eastern Sea Frontier Headquarters riding in the same elevator and it was really exciting. I don't know whether I said this earlier, but my mother had died just

before I entered college, then my fiancée that I was nuts about was in the Army as a navigator on a P-39. I didn't think I'd ever fall in love with anybody I just thought this was my one and only and this is the way life is. So all these captains and execs after I briefed them, here I am this little short gal in this big room with a big long table and I'm sitting at the head of it trying to tell these captains and execs where the enemy submarines were. I'd talk a lot but I never talked about that, but I never talked about that, it was all so secret, except in the board room and when I was at work. The captains and the execs had come in from the grueling time at sea and they were in New York City and they would want to see a play or they would want to do something so they'd say, "Would you go with me?" And I'd say, "Well, as long as you don't get fresh." I had such fun and it turned out a lot of them were married and they just wanted somebody to go out with and I just had such a good time. We never had to worry about clothes because you always had your uniform and I had to get special permission when I got married to not wear a uniform from the Admiral. I met a gal in communications division of Eastern Sea Frontier Headquarters and she had an apartment in the Village and she asked me to share it with her and the wife of a Navy guy at sea. So there were three of us sharing this apartment in the Village and that in itself was fun. We took the subway to work, we'd go to Wall Street from the Village and then walk across through that wonderful church and cemetery where all the patriots were buried and it was fun. This was February of forty four.

Bunten: What year was it that you actually joined?

Tenney: In February of forty four. When I was in New York it was probably April because it was February and March for two months training for an officer. I never met

nicer people. Here I had this snobby idea of Smith and prep school girls that were there and people who came from families with lots of money and had all sorts of privileges. At Smith they kept stressing is what you have to do is help your community, that no matter what you that's your first priority, other than being a good wife and mother, which is what women, that's all women did in those days for the most part. I had two Yeomen working for me and our job was to make sure that all the ships had the paper information and book information that was available, plus they sent me to this anti-submarine warfare school in Brooklyn. There were two women and the rest were all men. We actually learned how to drop depth bombs on supposedly submarines. A lot of it was by machines that we looked into. But that was fun and exciting and you felt like you were really learning something and doing something. The man who figured out where the enemy submarines were was a Princeton graduate who had studied under Harry Hess, he was Geology major and Harry Hess knew more about what the bottom of the ocean looked like. He's since died but was very famous in knowing about underwater things. Fred had been sent to Casa Blanca for two years to help the Americans and the British figure out where the enemy submarines were. And he really had it down to a science – he knew when ships were leaving Germany and how long they could stay out and what they could do. When he was over there, they sunk I think three submarines while he was there. Anyway he gets rotated back to Eastern Sea Frontier Headquarters and he's the one that I had to get information from.

Bunten: And what was his name?

Tenney: Fred Ferris. Well, he used to ask me out and I would say no and then I'd say, "Well, I'll go up to the officer's mess with you, we can have some orange juice. And

they always had fresh squeezed orange juice in the officer's mess and that was fun to do. Finally I did start going out with him and his sister and another naval guy and eventually we got engaged and got married on May 5th, forty five. He's still at Eastern Sea Frontier, I'm sent to Washington to the Bureau of Naval Personnel and I'm supposed to do a budget – keep track of all that's being spent. Well, it's funny you do what you have to do and I guess I learned how to do all that. I remember one time, Fred and I were married and I was in Alexandria and he was there and I had found a room in a house – this is typical of what was happening then – found a room in a house where there was a mother and a daughter living and there had been a son who was in the service, he was in the Army, and so she was renting out his room to a WAV, which worked out fine for me. One day I'm standing up explaining this budget and there's an Admiral on one side of me and an Admiral on the other side of me, and all of a sudden I fainted. I had never fainted in my life. The two guys, they're standing there, I mean I just went down like a stone I guess, and they call these Yeomen over and the Yeomen, two WAV Yeomen, took me down to the Bureau's health center. And I remember, apparently I fainted twice more on the way down, it's the only time in my life I've ever fainted. And I remember coming to in this long hallway where all you saw were doorknobs, you know marble floor, but all these doorknobs and doors going out from this corridor and the two Yeomen saying, "Oh Mrs. Ferris, we're gonna have to get you a wheelchair." I said, "Don't be ridiculous!" Well, it turned out I was pregnant and I didn't know it and I was anemic. So I put in to get out of the service. The war was really, we'd already had D-Day no, what do I mean? When we won the war in Europe, we were still at war in the Pacific. The day I got my papers that September I got papers to be a Lieutenant JG but I also got papers to get out

because I was married and we couldn't be pregnant in the service then, that was another thing. But that isn't why I got pregnant; I never even thought about that, it just happened.

Bunten: What year was it that you got your Lieutenant JG papers?

Tenney: Forty five, September of forty five. I just want to impress upon you the fact that you were admired strongly for going in the service. Betty Duff, who used to live here and I don't know if you remember Betty Duff, she used to take the train into New York City that I took in during the summer of my first year that my aunt lived in Riverside, Connecticut, and she didn't want me to be in New York. I had an eight to five job, wasn't a nine to five, eight to five, but just during the week so I had weekends off so she wanted me to live out in Connecticut with them and go to the country club and stuff. But Betty said she saw this WAV that would be taking the train into New York everyday and then we met each other here in Castine umpteen years later, so funny. I remember we collected fat when we were at Smith, and we did this after the war too. I don't know why we collected fat, people would save bacon fat or whatever. It went toward something and we all did it. So it's interesting...then my first husband died in seventy three and four years later I met David Tenney who had been captain of a patrol bomber in the Navy, a PBY Catalina. And he had fascinating stories to tell what happened in the Pacific and rescuing people, it was exciting.

Bunten: I had a question for you...

Tenney: Good. This is much too personal but for somebody who's going to sea maybe, I think it's good for you to know.

Bunten: How was the feeling in general toward women being in the Navy?

Tenney: This is funny, I wrote to my brother and told him on the submarine that I was gonna join the WAVs and he wrote back and he said he didn't want me to and all he knew is that he had heard a lot of stories about women in the Army and how they were supposedly had loose morals and he didn't want his sister doing anything like that. You know I never ran into that, and he was proud of what I was doing as it turned out later but I think it took some doing for the average women/homemaker to see women going out and working with men. It was a different society in those days. Just think back, that was in the early forties. Life has changed so drastically since then. But I think it's wonderful that women have made their way in the world. Things happen to women, you can't just be married and have children, life has changes for you and you need to be able to work.

Bunten: Definitely. Were there any people of minority groups in your training?

Tenney: Some, but they were almost all enlisted girls although there was an officer from South America – where did she come from – that was a WAV officer, I remember her having her parents throwing a big party for all of us in a lovely Brownstone, I don't know whether they were consulates or what, but they had some position of authority. I don't remember, you know a lot of my other classmates, you've heard the song "Rosie the Riveter?" Well a lot of them went and worked in war factories.

Bunten: So you never went overseas?

Tenney: No, WAVs, our job was to release men to go overseas. We were supposed to do the paperwork behind. I think some of the men resented it too, although I never heard anybody say it.

Bunten: Because you had the clerical jobs and they had to go overseas?

Tenney: And they had to go overseas and leave their family. Yes, I can understand it.

Bunten: What do you think about the military now and the options for women?

Tenney: Well I think the options are unlimited for women probably in the service.

Just look at the television shows, look at that one that's on about the Marines, the lawyers and the Marines, I've forgotten the name of it.

Bunten: Jag?

Tenney: Jag. But that's a good show of what women can do in the service. I have my first son's, second son's wife, has a sister who's married to a Brigadier General in the Army. He happens to be in Washington right now and his job he was in Belgium for three years I think, but his job was sort of a deployment of troops overseas and it's fascinating to talk with him. He decided to stay in the service, he didn't know whether he should or he shouldn't but he finally decided to and he just thinks the world of the troops and they've lived on Army bases all over and it's a different life to be married to someone in the service because you don't stay in one place. But people don't stay in one place much anymore anyway.

Bunten: That's true.

Tenney: Life has changed so. I never flew on a plane until my sons were in prep school, I mean I was that old before, you took the train or your drove, but you didn't fly.

Bunten: You mean women?

Tenney: Women, well I mean anybody, but look at how that's changed our lives. You go anywhere anytime.

[End Tape 1, Side A. End Session I.]