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Phyllis Sprague, interviewed by Kristen Frey, Part 1

Phyllis M. Wheeler Sprague

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NA 3242 Interviewee: Phyllis Sprague

C2351

CD# 2368

Student: We're interviewing Phyllis Sprague for women in the military and I'm going to ask her some questions my first question is when and where were you born?

Sprague: I was born in Newbury N-E-W-B-U-R-Y, Vermont July 6th, 1943.

Student: Okay. What are your parents' names, occupation, and educational background?

Sprague: Okay, both parents are deceased my father's name was Joseph Edgar Wheeler. My mother's name was Geraldine Mary Brown. My father was a common laborer. My mother was, well she raised eight kids but she also worked for the college.

Student: Okay. And this is when you were still living in Vermont?

Sprague: Yes

Student: When did you move up to Maine from Vermont.

Sprague: I joined the service and met my husband in the service and he was from Maine so we retired here after we retired after about 23 years of service.

Student: Okay. When and where did you serve?

Sprague: When and where. In 1961 I had my basic training at Fort Mcloughin(?) Alabama for eight weeks. Went (?) Huston to the medical school and transferred to Fort Belva, Virginia where I got out in 1963.

Student: Okay. In what branch of the military?

Sprague: Army.

Student: Army?

Sprague: (wack?)

Student: okay. What were the sentiments in your community and in your family towards the war?

Sprague: Towards the war. My family at that time I guess felt like we should be there because we were calling all the service people and getting them ready to be shipped to Vietnam and then after we got there of course everybody said well that was probably the wrong move. But when you're in the military you do what you're told to do. A lot of people are patriotic and some people are scared and

Student: Okay

Sprague: In the beginning, they totally backed the military.

Student: Okay, how did your friends, family, and neighbors respond to your enlistment into the military?

Sprague: I didn't hear any derogative statements. I don't think my father wanted me in there. But at the time I was, I was young and I wanted to just get away from home and I had tried the air force, the army, the navy and just wanted to go in and I wanted to become a nurse but it didn't go that far I just became a medic.

Student: Okay. You said you started your basic training where?

Sprague: Fort Mclaughlin, Alabama.

Student: Okay, did you feel that your training in basic training prepared you for your job in the military?

Sprague: Yes, yep

Student: Can you describe what a typical day in the military was like for you?

Sprague: During basic, or after?

Student: Both.

Sprague: Alright, during basic we had military justice school we had what we call physical therapy-PT. We did jumping jacks we did women's sit ups we did marching we did all kinds of things. We learned how to take a rifle apart, put it back together. We went on (?) simulated war. Went through the gas chamber, did a lot of marching. And then I went to fort San Houston and learned internal medicine. Went, worked on the burn ward a little bit. And then you needed my mos a former of (?) Virginia, I went there and worked labor delivery, post partem, pediatrics. So, I had a lot of military experience.

Student: wow

Sprague: Yeah, you know medical.

Student: Did your military training experience help you in later life?

Sprague: Yeah it did, especially the medical. And it, it taught you to be patient, it taught you to I never was prejudice anyway but you gotta work, if anybody was prejudice people that I knew they, they got over it. And you work together you live together like a family.

Student: Was it, were you basically all the women together or was it, during basic training did you kind of go through your basic training as men and women together? Like coed or was it

[track two]

Sprague: No, no it was separate at that time. All the women were based in barracks by themselves and the men were on the other side of the post in their own barracks.

Student: So, there was no time in that that you guys ever came together?

Sprague: Only if we were allowed to go to the USO club. And that was if you had a big inspection. Everything had to be tip top shape you got gigged you didn't get to go out. If you passed it you go out for a couple of hours. So that was about it.

Student: Okay

Sprague: That was during basic.

Student: Alright, let's see did you change your attitudes about the military or government while you served in it?

Sprague: No, I don't think my ideas changed I think I became more patriotic while I was in there.

Student: What was your response to the peace movement at home during the Vietnam War?

Sprague: I think I was torn with it because even though I'd been in at the beginning of some of the years at Vietnam I was married to a man that was in Vietnam and I was afraid everyday of somebody coming to my door and saying that he was killed in action. And it really, really hurt me with all the peace demonstrators.

Student: Okay, what were your thoughts about the politics at the time? At the time during the war?

Sprague: The politics even though I was patriotic I really didn't want to see anybody go over in Vietnam and get killed. But, I also knew that as long as they were in the service they had to go. There was a lot of them that were really eager to go serve their country and there were others that were afraid, but they still went. I'm afraid I had a couple of friends, my husband and I did, they were young and they got killed over there. So, that was kind of hard to take.

Student: Yeah, so did you say that you wanted to go over and there was a reason why you didn't or

Sprague: No, I didn't have to go over, but I had my shots one was the bay of pigs- the cuba invasion. I had shots then and I was on orders to go to Florida and then from there on I didn't

know where I would be going. And I personally got kind of scared. I didn't know what was going on.

Student: Yeah. What, if any profound change did you see during the 1960s and 1970s or 1980s or 1990s compared to during that time? How do you think the war changed everything compared to like government and just society as a whole.

Sprague: Society as a whole I think there were viewpoints and there were a lot of splits there were a lot of arguments and fights at home that people went awol people fled to different countries. Canada and everything. And I think back then they didn't hold a lot of esteem for the military but even though these guys had to go they were more or less shunned and it wasn't like World War Two or World War One where they were heroes they were more or less called baby killers and this and that and I think it was hard for them to come back do that.

Student: Did you was there a big difference to the reaction that society had before Vietnam like before they sent people over compared to when they sent people over to the Gulf War? Do you see any different like if anything was I know people were thinking back to the Vietnam war that this was going to be another Vietnam war do you think that they were thinking that during the Gulf War?

Sprague: I, I, I think they had some thoughts about that but I think when the Gulf War started and then we had a few casualties over there and when they came back there was a good response to the people and they were welcome back not like the Vietnam war.

Student: What was your funniest moment in the service?

Sprague: My funniest... I don't know personal experience or?

Student: yeah or anything, something that was really funny

Sprague: See, I don't know so I'll have to think about that one.

Student: Alright, we can come back to that. Looking back on your experience would you do it again if you had a choice?

Sprague: Yeah, I would. Yep.

[Track Three]

Student: How did you spend your leisure time in the military?

Sprague: I didn't have, when I was in the military or when I was married?

Student: When you were in the military.

Sprague: Okay, I didn't have much leisure time you had swing shifts and if I worked the night shift I usually spent most of the day sleeping. Or if I had a few minutes I would go out and lay in the sun cause it was down south or I'd go swimming or whatever. But, I never really did have a lot of leisure time and I'd read but there was also either filling in for somebody else or, I never went anywhere. You had to stay right there in the barracks.

Student: Describe in general terms the relationship between men and women in the military.

Sprague: Men and women... I don't know about today but back when I was in there there was sort of a line drawn back then the I don't think the men really thought that the women could hold their part up as far as women soldiers. And some of the, some of the male soldiers made a lot of remarks to the women soldiers and some of them weren't very nice. There were a lot of nice guys but there were some others who it was probably the way they were brought up or their temperament. But there was certainly a line drawn between the women and the men.

Student: Alright. Describe the relationship between women, like women and women in the military.

Sprague: The relationship between women?

Student: Like if it was like, was it kind of like they're competing or how they acted towards each other.

Sprague: I don't know of any rifts between I think everybody treated each other fairly. There were, there were groups like the basketball players or the sports nuts they would all go to hang out together because they'd all be going on the bus to the games and everything and the rest of us that were just too tired to do stuff like that.

Student: When you were in the military how did society view women in the military?

Sprague: I think it depended if whether or not you were from I don't want to say old school but some of the men that had that were thinking of the old ways didn't think women belonged in the military and I think part of the problem with the young guys in there is that it was carried down through to them, but I think women can serve just as well as a man can.

Student: What, what areas in the military did you mostly see women like obviously not in combat but.

Sprague: Not back then most of them were in medics they were medics they were nurses, stenographers, secretaries, dental assistants, lawyers, dentists, but not you didn't see anybody actually going into combat

Student: Alright. Were the promotional policies fair for women in the military like compared to men where could they say if there was a man there and there was a woman there was there any problem with the women getting higher ranks than the man or was it kind of neutral.

Sprague: I think it was neutral back then I think it was fair.

Student: Okay, do you still keep in touch with the people that you served with?

Sprague: No, I can't even remember their names. I remembered my rank number for years and years and years and now I can't even remember that.

Student: Do you feel as though you got a close bond with them when you were with them because you were with them so much?

Sprague: Oh yeah.

Student: Do you think you had closer bonds with them because you were in the military with them than you do with someone who was outside?

Sprague: When I was in there?

Student: Yeah, (?) because you guys were together so much that you formed like tighter bonds in the military or do you feel like it's the same.

Sprague: we, we did at the time because I didn't know any civilians but I can, I can make just as tight a bond with civilians. Even if I had known them then I could have been just as tight with them.

[Track Four]

Student: Okay. Do you think all military jobs should be open to women?

Sprague: All of them? I don't know. Because I, I don't know every military job that they have. I think basically 90 percent should be yep.

Student: Because I know, we've been talking a lot about women in combat whether they should be allowed in combat and that's just one thing that cause the younger generation that we are it's hard for us because obviously I don't know really that much about the military, but do you think that they should be allowed if they want to go and I was just wondering how you felt about that or if a draft was made if women should be on the draft to go to combat if there ever was one?

Sprague: I, I yeah I think if there's a draft that women should be drafted too.

Student: Okay.

Sprague: I think that they have just as much capability as a man they can shoot probably as straight as a man, you've got women pilots. Yeah, they should be able to.

Student: Okay. Do you have anything else that you'd like to say about

Sprague: no, I just wish that I'd stayed in so I could collect my retirement right now. See, see back then if you were a woman in the military and you were married you couldn't stay in if you were expecting a baby.

Student: oh really

Sprague: Now you can you can have dependents, but back then you couldn't. So when I got out, I was married six months and then I got pregnant so I had to get out. But, I really wished I'd stayed in and become a nurse.

Student: Really?

Sprague: Yeah.

Student: Alright

Sprague: I did like the military life

Student: You did?

Sprague: Yeah even after I was married because everything was set up on a post you got everything for your kids within walking distance, you've got the bowling alley and they've got swimming, they've got movies, they've got golf, they've got horseback riding and everything is patrolled by military police and they've got team clubs nice safe places for them and I really do miss it not that I don't like civilian life but I did get used to it after 23 years.

Student: So, as a woman you didn't feel like overpowered by men. Nothing like that happened, you didn't see very much sexual harassment or anything?

Sprague: No, no I didn't see any.

Student: okay

Sprague: Of course ours were kind of calm and shy so, so I didn't see any, nope.

Student: Alright, well if you don't have anything else to add

Sprague: Nope, okay thank you

Student: Yep.