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Following is a copy of material submitted to Louisa Sando, W5RZJ, YL editor of CQ Magazine which she published in 1956 and later incorporated in her book, "CQ YL". Originally written by Esther Given, W6BDE.

Toward the end of 1944 in World War II the United States Army picked a group of WAC radio operators to be trained for duty aboard Army hospital ships. Since the women's services were on non-combat status, WACs were ideally suited to serve aboard hospital ships because there were other women aboard, Army nurses, and the ships travelled under the Geneva Treaty as neutral vessels and were therefore unarmed and fully lighted at night.

In order to qualify for such an assignment the WAC had to attend a special Army school in Brooklyn, New York, where she "unlearned" all the procedures in which she had been trained as an Army operator and learned regular peacetime commercial procedures. She also had to attain a code speed of 35 WPM and be able to send and receive blinker signals at 12 WPM. In addition she was trained in servicing batteries, the use of lifeboat emergency equipment, and other duties peculiar to ships at sea.

Radio operators on Army ships during the war were all enlisted personnel. Most of the WACS who went to sea held ratings of Technician Fourth Grade or better. The fourteen WACS who sailed as marine radio operators on Army hospital ships were: Lucy Alter, Katheryn Barnes, Lillian Browning, Elaine Corrum, Esther Given, Lorraine Hand, Virginia Kidd, Bernadine Kurtz, Del Kumnick, Rose Landrey, Alice Loree, Terry Mezzanotti, Regina Rice, and Paula Sanborn. The first group of three WACs sailed in December 1944 from Charleston, South Carolina, aboard the U.S. Army Hospital Ship "Louise A. Milne".

Sergeants Given, Hand, and Loree were assigned aboard the U.S.A.H.S. "Chateau Thierry" a converted transport which was equipped to handle between 480 and 500 patients in addition to some 400 crew and medical complement. Their first trip began April 1, 1945 with the ship sailing from Charleston to Bristol (Port of Avonmouth) England,

For this first trip two of the ships former radio operators remained aboard to act in advisory capacity to the "sparkettes". The chief operator's first official statement to the WACS was that a "spark" stood his/her 4 hour watch regardless of mal-de-mer and that he and the other operator were just going along for the ride. The WACs were expected to take over fully, however, the men would be there in case of dire emergency. (It was later discovered that these two enlisted men had worked out a schedule between them so that they would be able to stand 24 hour watch when the experiment of having women radio operators failed.) Much to the credit of the gals--they proved to be as capable as the men operators on the assignment, were in many cases more attentive to the job and most conscientious in its pursuit.

No indoctrination could be more wicked than that of landing on a new job assignment in entirely foreign surroundings as G.I. guinea pigs with two strikes against them because they were YLs, with the added feature of the elements brewing up their juiciest North Atlantic storm of the season. The first two days at sea were pure misery for the gals, two of whom were prairie raised and had never been aboard a ship before. Each four hour watch was an eon of sitting with cans on the ears copying press at 30 WPM for the skipper's morning news with a bucket clamped tightly betwixt the knees. By the second day it was obvious that something had to give and it was not about to be the YL guinea pig so it would have to be the bucket. Thus ended the mal-de-mer session. So successful was the "experiment" with women radio operators that the men who "went along for the ride" did just that and were transferred to other ships upon the return to Charleston. At this time S/Sgt. Esther Given was named the first YL "Chief Spark" in U.S. history.

Among duties of a radio operator aboard ship is the care of batteries and the emergency distress equipment in the life boats. Probably the most tedious job for these WACs on hospital ships was this particular duty. The "Chateau Thierry" had two life boats containing such equipment which were slung some 30 feet above the deck and had to be serviced each week. A long extension ladder was placed on the deck and reached to a boom which ran parallel to the swinging life boat. The radio operator climbed to the top of the ladder, straddled the boom, and waited until a list of the ship swung the lifeboat near enough to jump in. All the time the OP was holding a can of distilled water and a hydrometer. The only change in the descent was that the hydrometer and water can could be lowered to the deck by means of a rope. However, the problem of getting back on the ladder was greater than that of getting into the boat since the boom was a much more difficult target to reach than the lifeboat. It was no help when a full audience of ambulatory G.I. patients was on the deck below giving humorous "advice" and yelling "whoops" and "look out" at tense moments.

In addition to the normal routine of being "sparks" the girls ran into many amusing incidents resulting from the fact that they were YLs in a heretofore strictly male occupation. At one stop in Eniwetok shortly after the war in the Pacific had ended the ship came into the lagoon, contacted the shore station by blinker and after the ships business was completed the shore operator asked on blinker, "Are you WACS?" An affirmative reply was blinked back and immediately 150 ships moored in the lagoon who had been "reading the mail" were furiously blinking for a QSO. These were the first YL radio operators to visit the Pacific and the operators on other vessels had been in the Pacific for two years in some cases. The three WACs spent all night at the two blinker light positions in QSO with the other ships moored in the Eniwetok lagoon. After establishing the YL's home QTH, the next question was inevitably, "Are you a blonde or brunette?"

On one trip from England back to Charleston with a load of patients and travelling with all the ships lights ablaze, as required by the Geneva Treaty of a neutral ship, a voice came booming out of the depths of the night over a megaphone, "Turn off your lights and stand by or we'll blow you out of the water". Unknowingly the hospital ship had sailed straight into the center of a Canadian convoy and was silhouetting each of their ships to any enemy who might be scouting about. Needless to say the lights were turned out and the ship stood by. Next morning when daylight came the hospital ship stood alone in the middle of the Atlantic with no signs of the hundreds of ships she had unknowingly jeopardized the night before. It will be remembered that during WW II radar was considered a "weapon" so hospital ships could not be "armed" with such navigational aids. As soon as the war ended this equipment was immediately fitted on all hospital ships.

All traffic handled aboard a hospital ship was in CW and was chiefly concerned with navigational, hydrographic, position and ETA reports, and of course press. Service vessels handled no commercial messages to or from ship's personnel or patients aboard.

Life aboard a hospital ship was never dull. The ship's job was to care for and transport the sick and injured. It carried the best supply of food afloat, current movies were shown nightly, chaplains and Red Cross workers planned extensive recreational programs, games, and entertainment for the patients and ship's complement. Also a hospital ship returned to the states every month or two which meant a replenishment of rations, new movies, and other stateside luxuries which most ships and overseas stationed personnel could not enjoy. Many patients were ambulatory, but some were restricted to bed and in those cases most of the ship's personnel made it a point to get acquainted, have gab fests, play cards or do something to cheer the fellows who were bed patients below deck.

The greatest joy on a hospital ship was the day when the U.S. mainland hove into view. Most patients aboard had been in situations where they doubted that this moment would ever occur for them and it was a real thrill to be part of a unit that was making this dream come true for them.

At the close of WW II, Army radio operators were being replaced by civilians on Army ships as quickly as possible. When the "Chateau Thierry" came into the Port of San Francisco in December 1945 the WAC operators were informed of this fact. At this time each of the girls had sufficient points for discharge from the Army and the S.F.P.E. was having a hard time finding enough civilian operators to fill these vacated posts. After several contacts between the Signal Corps, Water Division, and the powers in Washington, D.C., it was arranged that the three girls could sail as civilian operators if they all sailed together on the same ship and were the full radio complement aboard. The day after this decision, the WACs went to Camp Bealle, California, received their honorable discharges from the WAC as sergeants, came back to San Francisco and signed aboard their ship as Lieutenants in the Army Transport service as civilian operators on civil service status. (This was the first and to the best of my knowledge the only employment of female radio operators on civilian status as ship's personnel in the history of United States marine operations.)

There was no uniform designed for women in this capacity since there were no predecessors and no provisions for female ship's officers dress, so the 3 ex-WACs made a quick trip to purchase Navy nurse uniforms, Army Transport insignia, and white shirts. Being Army veterans with ribbons from many theatres of occupation, these gals made quite an impressive sight. Once, in Honolulu, a Navy shore patrolman had to be shown Army discharge papers, ship's papers, Coast Guard identification, et-al before he was convinced they were not "impersonating and officer of the U.S. forces".

In mid 1946 the "Chateau Thierry" made her last trip as a mercy vessel and was decommissioned to float out her days rusting in the Seattle <sup>MUD FLATS, A</sup> graveyard of worn out ships, and the three YLs returned to life on the land. Meanwhile the other eleven WACs had been replaced with civilian operators and they too had become civilians. By now most have married changing their names and contacts have been lost, but none of them will ever lose the feeling of challenge and service that was theirs ~~as~~ being liaison between the rest of the world and a mercy ship.