



## *U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program*

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### Interview of **SPAR (LTJG) Harriet Writer, USCGR (W)** World War II veteran

Conducted by C. Douglas Kroll, Ph. D., U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary

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Palm Desert, CA

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#### **Biographical Summary**

Born Harriet Radlay on 2 February 1920 in Gardiner, Massachusetts, Harriet Writer grew up living with an aunt and uncle in various cities in the Midwest and New England. Upon graduation from high school in Clinton, Massachusetts she entered Boston University. In the fall of 1942 she dropped out of Boston University to volunteer to join the Navy WAVES. The Navy sent her to the University of Wisconsin where she attended radio school. On graduation day it was announced that the Coast Guard needed 10% of the women serving in the Navy to switch service branches. Harriet was one of those who volunteered and became a SPAR (the nickname given to the Coast Guard Women's Reserve). Her first assignment as a SPAR was to the Aids to Navigation office in the Boston district office. After two years she was sent to the Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut for officers' training. Graduating four months later she was commissioned an Ensign and assigned to Seattle, Washington where she was tasked with writing a history of the Aleutian Islands. She later asked for a transfer back to Boston. She was reassigned to Boston to work with the then top secret LORAN program for the Northeast Atlantic Chain. She met her husband, Lee Writer, while serving in New England and they were married in 1946, the same year she was discharged from the Coast Guard at a Lieutenant (junior grade) and he from the Navy as a Lieutenant (junior grade).

After the war the couple moved to southern California, Lee Writer's home. Harriet Writer eventually went back to school, commuting to University of Southern California one night a week while raising three children. It took her nine years, but she graduated with a degree in education in 1957 and taught as both as a substitute and full-time teacher for several years.

Her husband, Lee, died in 19 May 2012. She currently lives in Palm Desert, California and has three children, Linda, Tom, and Steve. She also has seven grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.



**Lieutenant Junior Grade Harriet Writer, USCGR, (W)**

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**INTERVIEWER:** Could you tell me about childhood and your life before you entered Boston University?

**WRITER:** I was born in Gardiner, Massachusetts and spent a lot of summers in Old Orchard Beach, Maine. I actually lived with an aunt and uncle. There were five people in my family. For some reason or other my aunt

and uncle lived in Des Moines, Iowa and had no children. I went to visit them and I loved the train trip. When my aunt went back to visit her mother in Massachusetts I asked if I could go on the train trip again, to sleep again and eat on the train. She said I could and that's when I started living with my aunt and uncle when I was about three or four. Nobody ever actually told me how old I was, but from then I continued living with them the rest of my life.

**INTERVIEWER:** With your aunt and uncle in Des Moines?

**WRITER:** Yes, I lived in Des Moines but then my uncle got transferred to St. Louis, so then I lived in St. Louis. I actually went to thirteen different schools by the time I got to Boston University.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did you graduate from high school in St. Louis?

**WRITER:** No, I didn't graduate from high school until I got to Clinton, Massachusetts, but always spent summers in Maine, because that's where my aunt's mother was. When she passed away she still went there because my aunt's sister lived there, who was my mother.

**INTERVIEWER:** So you graduated from high school in Clinton, Massachusetts?

**WRITER:** Yes, but my first three years of high school were spent in Plainfield, New Jersey. I also lived in Scranton, Pennsylvania before that and went to school there, too.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you go straight from high school to Boston University?

**WRITER:** Right.

**INTERVIEWER:** What motivated you to drop out of Boston University and join the U.S. Navy?

**WRITER:** I went only two years to Boston University and while I was attending I got a job at Daniel Lowe's Store [Daniel Low and Company] in Salem, Massachusetts. It was a very famous store at the time, but I don't know if it is still there. I was there to be a trainee from Boston University in selling glassware and china. My pay was \$15 a week and I lived on that and bought everything I needed, my clothes and did everything. Anyway, when I went to Maine that summer after my second year I was dating someone my folks were not very happy about. The war had just started, so I said to them, I guess I'll join the service. So I went into Boston from Salem and was one of first thirteen women to join the Navy there. They sent me to the University of Wisconsin for basic training and radio school. We didn't have uniforms when we began at the University of Wisconsin. It was interesting. You made friends with how other people were dressed. Once everybody was in uniform, the friendships all switched around and they really made friends with people who they liked or had something in common with.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did you choose to be a radio operator or did the Navy assign you to that?

**WRITER:** No, once you signed up the Navy just assigned you. So I went to radio school and on the day of graduation they said the Coast Guard would like ten percent of the WAVES to become SPARS. I raised my hand because I didn't want to sit at a desk with headphones on sending and receiving Morse code. So then they [the Coast Guard] sent me back to Boston to work in aids to navigation, which I really loved and I had a wonderful commandant [District Coast Guard Officer] in charge of the whole program. I was there for almost two years before he sent me to the [Coast Guard] Academy [for officers' training].

**INTERVIEWER:** Did you apply to become an officer?

**WRITER:** No, he just selected me and sent me. While I was in Boston, though, I worked with nautical charts that showed the location of buoys and other navigational aids in the harbor. I had to keep watch of the nearby lighthouses. If a lighthouse went out, we'd find out why they were out. Was it a momentary thing, or was it 24 hours? I also became the first woman Quartermaster in the Coast Guard or the Navy. That was a right-arm rate that was not normally available to women.

**INTERVIEWER:** While you were in Boston and the rest of your time in the service as a SPAR, how do you feel you were treated by male Coast Guardsmen?

**WRITER:** It was wonderful. I think the men in the service maybe didn't respect us totally, but they respected us enough to be nice to us.

**INTERVIEWER:** What was your life like at the Academy for SPAR officer's training?

**WRITER:** They kept you busy all the time.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did you have any classes or training with male officer candidates or was it exclusively with SPAR officer candidates?

**WRITER:** It was just SPARs.

**INTERVIEWER:** What type of courses or training did you have while at SPAR Officer Candidate School at the Academy?

**WRITER:** All I remember are general officer training, sitting in classrooms.

**INTERVIEWER:** About how many SPAR officer candidates were in your class?

**WRITER:** I don't remember exactly, somewhere between 50 and 100.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you remember when you graduated from officers' training and were commissioned?

**WRITER:** That must have been 1945 and then they sent me directly to Seattle. I lived with eight other SPAR officers on Mercer Island. When I went to work the first day the officer in charge said the commandant [District

Coast Guard Officer] wanted a history of the Aleutian Islands. Honestly, I didn't even know there were Aleutian Islands, I started researching and reading about them and I started making notes about them. Then my folks got sick and I asked for a transfer back to Boston to be near them.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did you ever finish the book?

**WRITER:** No. I don't if the next person finished it or not.

**INTERVIEWER:** It was your aunt and uncle that raised you that became sick that was the reason for your request to be sent back to the Boston area?

**WRITER:** Yes. When I got back to Boston they assigned me the Aids to Navigation again, but this time in the LORAN program. I was in charge of sending people to them and reading their daily reports. Every day they had to send in whether they were off operation and if so why, and for how long. That was such a big, top secret thing at the time and now it is absolutely nothing. Quite often the men didn't want to be sent to Greenland, they wanted to be stationed right along the coast here in the United States.

**INTERVIEWER:** What was your typical day back in Boston as a SPAR officer?

**WRITER:** I would go to work and read all the reports from the LORAN stations or if someone got sick we would have to replace them and seamen would come in to be interviewed to see they were capable to going or had enough training for a LORAN station.

**INTERVIEWER:** I know you went to Nantucket. What did you go there for?

**WRITER:** To see a LORAN station, actually in operation and it was the closest one to Boston. That's the one all the boys wanted to go to. My husband was with the Navy air/sea rescue crash boat, but he ate his meals with the Coast Guard Station on Nantucket. He was a Navy ensign. Their boat was docked there and they went out rescuing all the pilots that went down in the area. I met him at the Coast Guard station. While I was there a storm came up that shut down all the boats to get off of Nantucket for several days. We met there and then he later pursued me to Boston. I never went back to Nantucket. He just recently died. We were both ensigns at the time but I was promoted to Lieutenant (j.g.) a month before he was so I technically outranked him. As the war was ending he asked me to marry him. He was planning to go back to southern California where he had come from. We got married in Salem, Massachusetts.

**INTERVIEWER:** When did you get married?

**WRITER:** June 2, 1946.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you remember anything about the Nantucket LORAN Station that you visited?

**WRITER:** Only that there were between 4 to 6 seamen assigned there.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you remember what day you were discharged from the Coast Guard?

**WRITER:** I think it was 15<sup>th</sup> of June, but I was on terminal leave for a few months after that.

**INTERVIEWER:** So you moved to southern California with your new husband?

**WRITER:** We came across by train.

**INTERVIEWER:** What do you think was your most memorable experience in the Coast Guard?

**WRITER:** I enjoyed working in aids to navigation: a daily thing with the nuns and buoys, and the lighthouses -- all had to [be] shipshape for all the boats coming into Boston. There actually were some German submarines in the area that were never publicized, but it was true.

**INTERVIEWER:** After you moved to California how long was it before you started attending USC on a part-time basis?

**WRITER:** My husband had one semester to finish at USC which he did after we moved there. While he was doing that, I was thinking that I could do it too. I could finish my two years. So I started going by bus from El Monte. I took evening classes and it took me nine years to finish up my last two years of college.

**INTERVIEWER:** So you lived in El Monte when you came to California?

**WRITER:** Yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** From the newspaper article I know you graduated in 1957, did you go into teaching right away?

**WRITER:** I only taught as a substitute for a couple of years at the beginning because my children were still little. I then became an 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher in El Monte.

**INTERVIEWER:** When did you retired from teaching?

**WRITER:** I only taught 7 years. They sent me to Ramon School, the 8<sup>th</sup> grade students I had were all from state homes. They didn't want to learn to read, or learn. I finally quit.

**INTERVIEWER:** While you were in the Coast Guard did you have any interaction with Coast Guardsmen of races other than you own?

**WRITER:** No.

**INTERVIEWER:** In dealing with other Coast Guard officers did you notice any difference between CG Reserve officers and Academy graduates?

**WRITER:** No. The Coast Guard has been so wonderful to me. I've been back to Washington twice to changing of the guard. I was invited again this year, but my husband was too sick for me to go. We were invited to the christening of the *Stratton* ship [WMSL-752] and again here in March for its commissioning. But again I couldn't go because of my husband's health.

**INTERVIEWER:** How did your wartime service affect your later life?

**WRITER:** I think it made me more determined to do the right thing at the right time. When you're in the Coast Guard do it because it's the right thing to do.

**INTERVIEWER:** Another general question. When you were in the Coast Guard, what were the relations between Coast Guardsmen and other armed forces? Were there rivalries, animosities, or did you all get along well?

**WRITER:** I know when I got my right arm rate [Quartermaster] and walked around in Boston a lot of Navy fellows would look at it and even come up and ask me "How did you get that?" "Why do you have that?" I told them that I worked in aids to navigation in the Coast Guard.

**INTERVIEWER:** What comments, impressions or thoughts would you like to share? What areas have I missed? What do you think are important for future generations to know?

**WRITER:** I think young people, both men and women are joining the Coast Guard, they like to think it is just going to be a local thing for them, but it quite often isn't. I tell young people that they can go to school and finish if they want to, all they have to do is have the desire.

**INTERVIEWER:** Anything else you'd like to share about your WWII experiences? Where did you live when you were stationed in Boston? With other SPARs as you did in Seattle?

**WRITER:** I got to live with my family [aunt and uncle] in Salem and took the bus into Boston every day. When to the big statehouse building there and took the elevator up, and there I was at work.

**INTERVIEWER:** Thank you very much for sharing your memories with me.

**END OF ORAL HISTORY**

