

Interviewee: Phyllis D. Gallant
Interviewers: Charlene L. Martin and Maureen Ryan Doyle
Transcriber: Pat Masiello
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Abstract: Phyllis Gallant was 95 when she was interviewed. After growing up in Holden and Worcester she went to nursing school at Holden hospital She and her sisters danced professionally in the area during her youth. She shares her memories of being a Navy WAVE during World War II and describes her work at the Norfolk Naval Hospital, the living arrangements, and recreation during her two-year involvement. When she returned home she married and had four children. She is an active participant in the American Legion, carrying the flag for her post for 75 years, and still bowls in a league.

MRD: Do we have your permission, Phyllis, to record your oral history today?"

PG: Yes

MRD: Ok, it's November 17, 2016. So if you could tell us your full name including your maiden name and your married name.

PG: Phyllis Doris Collins, that was my maiden name. My married name is just Phyllis D. Gallant; I ended up with a French name [laughs].

MRD: When were you born?

PG: I was born on March 8, 1921

MRD: What year did you marry your husband?

PG: I was married in 1948

MRD: Do you have children?

PG: I have four children. I have three boys and one girl.

MRD: And do you have any grandchildren?

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PG: I have seven grandchildren, and I have—I don't know how many great-grandchildren—I must have at least 14-15 great grandchildren.

MRD: Can you tell us a little bit about your early years as a child growing up. Did you grow up in the Worcester area?

PG: Gosh. Well, I was born in Fall River and we came to Worcester to live with one of our relatives. I was five years old and stayed with her until we found a place in Holden. So we lived in Holden for a number of years. I went to school in Holden from about the 3rd grade. Because I lived in Millbury, (when we came to Worcester) and I went to the 3rd grade in Millbury and when we moved to Holden I was there 4th grade to first year of high school and then for high school came back to Worcester.

MRD: Forgot to ask you, do you have siblings, brothers and sisters?

PG: I have two sisters, both—well one just passed away this past week; she lived in California. My other sister had six children; lived out of town.

MRD: Where are you in.....are you the youngest?"

PG: I was the oldest and my two sisters are younger than me and they're both gone now.

MRD: Aw, that's too bad.

PG: So when we came to Worcester, I went to school in Worcester, graduated from South High in Worcester, and all this time, from the time we were in Worcester until after high school, I took dancing lessons, and so, I was a dancer. Me and my two sisters entertained in Worcester for a long, long time.

MRD: Do you mean professionally?

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PG: Yes, well sort of.

MRD: What type of dancing did you do?

PG: We did everything. I was an acrobatic dancer. [laughs]

MRD: Really? That sounds like a lot of fun.

PG: Yeah, and the other two were more or less tap dancers. We enjoyed that. My mother and father really went along with it. They were the ones that took us different places to do these things.

MRD: So where are some of the places that you would have performed?

PG: Oh gosh, it was all over Worcester. We were always called upon to do that. I mean, it was like variety shows and different programs like that—churches.

MRD: So, were you a teenager?

PG: Yeah, I was taking lessons. I took dancing lessons until I was 18, from 5 years old to 18.

MRD: You must have enjoyed it

PG: But in between times, I mean, we had to move here, there. After that I graduated from high school. I tried to get into nursing at the hospital in Worcester, but they were filled up so I took the next best thing and went to Holden Hospital. I graduated from there.

MRD: Did you really? What was that like?

PG: It was short, it wasn't a four-year course, it was an LPN [Licensed Practical Nurse] course, but I graduated from there. And then I worked for, maybe a few years after that, and then I

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entered the service. I went in the Navy, the WAVES [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services, the World War II women's branch of the United States Naval Reserve]. At the time it was the WAVES, now it's all Navy.

MRD: It's changed. So what was your thought process before you went into the WAVES? What made you think this was something you would like to do?

PG: I don't know, at the time the war had just started.

MRD: What year did you enter the WAVES?

PG: I went in the WAVES in 1944, and I spent my whole time in the hospital at Norfolk, Virginia, the Naval Hospital there where the ships come in there—the port.

MRD: And what was that like, to be working at the hospital at that time?

PG: It was very—at times it was kind of hard to take, but you see these people coming in to be taken care of from other parts of the country and it's heartbreaking a little bit but you kind of manage to get through it anyway. While at the hospital they had entertainment for some of the patients. They could see the entertainment, and in fact I think they—I'm not sure whether it was the third or fourth anniversary of the WAVES—they had a program. They got together some of my girls, the girls that I was with, to form a program for our anniversary and we made a big thing of it.

MRD: And you danced?

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PG: And I danced in that one. I did that, but then they also had times when some of the patients came in and those that were receiving medals honoring them, we'd take them on a gurney, wheelchairs, and stuff, and go in and made a big thing of it.

MRD: Were these soldiers who had been wounded during the war at Norfolk Hospital? Soldiers wounded in combat?

PG: They were; [they] came from combat from different places. That's where the ships came in; the hospital ships came in there.

CLM: When you first signed on to go into the Navy and be part of the WAVES, was that hard for you when you had to move down to Norfolk and leave your family?

PG: No, I was raring to go.

CLM: Really? Tell me about that.

PG: I really wanted to go and be part of it.

CLM: Did you know other women that were going too?

PG: I didn't know anyone that was going; didn't remember anyone that was around in this area that went.

MRD: How did your parents feel about you going into the WAVES? Were they supportive of that?

PG: Well, my father was a World War I veteran and they hated to see me go, but yet they knew I was doing something to help so they didn't mind too much. My father was a very—he was

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English and he was a very—a person who never showed his feelings too much, but in fact, while I was in, all the time I was in, he sent me a note every week, the whole time I was in. And I still have all those letters.

MRD: Do you really; how fantastic.

PG: Still have all those letters and he always called it—a log? What the heck did he call it? I don't know what the heck it was from, how he called it, [but it] was something from a logbook. He was in the Navy too so it was just a note from—he'd tell me what was going on at home. The only thing I regret is he always asked me to write home and I didn't write home often enough and I kind of feel bad that I didn't because he was very faithful in writing to me but other than that....

CLM: You were probably a little bit busy with your work and helping all the sick people, so you probably didn't have as much time to think of home I suppose. Did you find the

PG: I think I should have made time but I just didn't. I was busy doing other things.

CLM: Did you find that your work was hard—was it hard to see all the sick or wounded young men?

PG: Of course I was used to that when I was in training. I mean I kind of took that as—I don't know how you would say it was. I took it as it was my usual work.

CLM: When you graduated from nursing school did you work in a hospital setting before you joined the Navy?

PG: I worked at a hospital, yes.

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CLM: So you had seen things.

PG: Worked at a hospital, it was a small hospital. Of course I was an LPN then, I wasn't a registered nurse. So I did work, you know, for a short time. I think I had one private case and that's all.

CLM: You feel that training prepared you well for the work you did in the Navy?

PG: Ah, yes.

MRD: When you were at Norfolk Hospital did you make good friends with the other women, the other WAVES that were there?

PG: Oh yeah, I did make friends.

MRD: What was that like?

PG: It was nice being able to be with people and when you had your time off you kind of took off somewhere.

MRD: What did you do with your time off; what did you WAVES do?

PG: Usually we went into town and went out to eat you know, and had some different kind of food. We enjoyed going out a little bit, seeing the things. There was one thing—at one time the hospital was on a highway like, off a highway, called Hampton Roads and we used to have to take the trolley, or the bus, the trolley I think it was and at that time there were people—the black people had to sit in the back at that time.

MRD: And that was certainly very different.

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PG: And I wasn't used to that but there were a few incidents that cropped up now and then, you know.

MRD: What kind of things?

PG: Well, differences of seating and there was a lot of difficulty, but you got used to that. We were only allowed to go in certain places there, at that time.

MRD: What type of places could you go?

PG: Well, I mean it was out of bounds, if they told us it was out of bounds, so we didn't go.

MRD: And was that to keep you safe; was that the cause?

PG: Yeah, it was because of the racial type of thing, but we got through that.

CLM: How about when you were on the base, near the hospital, did you live on a base with other people?

PG: Yes

CLM: So, say when you went to eat, did you eat with the men and women; was everybody all mixed?

PG: Oh yeah. Yes, just stand in line and wait.

CLM: How did the men treat the women in the military?

PG: Very good. I didn't find too much trouble with that. In our spare time, when you were off duty, you usually practiced, and we had basketball games. I was on a team for basketball. I mean the activities were pretty good. And then, I had a girlfriend; the two of us were more or

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less together a lot and you know you had a buddy, really. And we went one time, the two of us, we each bought a bike, a bicycle, and on our time off we wanted to ride so we'd go riding around, off the base and, in fact, I still have my bike downstairs.

CLM: Do you really!

PG: And other than that, I mean, we enjoyed some of the time that we were off. But it was a little bit—seeing, doing the job we had to do, it was a little bit difficult seeing all the things that happened to them. They'd come in from different areas and they'd be off the battlefield, and they'd come in with casts that were messy looking; they had to be changed, and all that, but I was able to take that OK.

CLM: That part was the hardest part I would think.

PG: Yeah, and some of the times there were accidents that did happen on the base. There was one on the base, an accident. There was a fuel truck that exploded and the patient was hospitalized with a lot of burns and so that had to be taken care of. And there were also, there were people, actors and actresses, mostly actors, that came down and they would visit the hospital. We met some of the celebrities that came to see us.

MRD: What famous people did you get to see?

CLM: Do you remember one in particular?

PG: I can't remember his name.

CLM: Didn't Bob Hope go....didn't Bob Hope go overseas a lot?

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PG: No, we didn't see Hope; he was more or less overseas. I can't think of the names of some of them.

CLM: But big names of the time.

MRD: So when these celebrities came did they go to the hospital to greet the patients one on one or did they come to perform?

PG: Well in fact I was the one that took one of the celebrities to see the patients.

MRD: Oh, did you?

PG: Yeah, and I can't remember his name. [laughs]

CLM: That's OK; the patients must have enjoyed that; that must have been nice. So for you what was the best part of being in the military? What was your favorite part about it?

PG: Best part about what?

CLM: Being in the military.

PG: I never really thought about it, I just did what I had to do and I wanted to do it and I wished that I, what I know now, I wished I had stayed in, for a while.

CLM: Really?

PG: I have a cousin who stayed in for 20 years but she moved out to California so I never saw her.

CLM: How long were you in the military?

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PG: I was in two years.

MRD: Now, why do you wish you had stayed in longer?

PG: I think it would have—I don't know. I kind of felt that where they weren't sending the women overseas at that time, I mean the WAVES when I was being discharged they were just sending the girls overseas, over to Hawaii, and I would have liked to have gone there. But things didn't turn out that way.

CLM: Did the WAVES have ranks, like Captain or Lieutenant, or things like that?

PG: They had the ranks that the Navy had.

CLM: They did; so what was your rank?

PG: I was a Pharmacist Mate Third.

CLM: Pharmacist, like a pharmacist that gives out medication, that word?

PG: No, that was just a name they had because you worked in the hospital part of it. I worked in different departments of the hospital depending on where they needed me. I worked in the maternity ward for a while.

MRD: Did you like that?

PG: Yeah, I enjoyed that. Most of the time I worked with the personnel, you know, the patients [soldiers] that came in, but I worked about three months in the maternity ward because there were a lot of the high-ranking people, their wives were coming in having their babies.

MRD: How large a hospital was Norfolk Hospital?

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PG: I couldn't tell that I don't know.

MRD: Quite large?

PG: Oh yeah. There were a lot of different areas, like the orthopedic section, maternity section, internal medicine, a good-sized hospital. I had a friend, the two of us—I think we met there, she was from New Hampshire, no Vermont,—after I got out of the service, I usually kept in touch with her and visited each other a lot of times. And then years later she died of cancer. So at least we had somebody to be with, as long as they weren't transferred away [laughs] but we enjoyed each other.

MRD: Now while you were at Norfolk Hospital, the WAVES that you became friends with, were they from all over the country, from various states?

PG: You got along, but of course you had different jobs to do; they were in different areas and we'd see one another once in a while. We'd see one other but we all lived in the dorms that we had, and that's where we knew each other, but then after that when you go to work you go in different areas.

MRD: I see.....what were the dorms like; how were the facilities? Was it a small area where you lived or was it spacious?

PG: Where we lived we had a good-sized dorm; oh yeah, they were fairly new buildings. I have pictures of those but don't know where they are.

CLM: Did you share with one other person?

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PG: No, we had—the dormitories had bunk beds; we had cubicles. It was like good-sized long buildings and they had cubicles and each cubicle had bunk beds; I always had the top bunk. [laughs]. But the living quarters were real large and we had a good reception area where people come to visit.

CLM: Could boys come to visit the girls?

PG: They could, yes.

CLM: Could you date?

PG: Yup, you were able to have friends, boyfriends, and stuff. I mean there were a lot of men that just wanted to go out with someone; be coupled up with someone. On your time off you wanted to go somewhere, so when we had time off we did that and different occasions where, if there was something going on, some big elaborate thing going on, we'd have someone, you know, get together with maybe three or four couples and we'd all go out together. There was nothing serious, some of them were married, just wanted to have a good time someplace.

MRD: While you were away and you were working at Norfolk Hospital, were you homesick at all, or were you.....

PG: I never got homesick,

MRD: You never did?

PG: Never got homesick; I knew what was going on at home because my father would write to me, so I knew what was going on at home and I heard from them so I knew everything was OK, so and I never got homesick.

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CLM: When you did get home you married your husband a couple of years after you got home.

PG: Well I knew my husband in high school; I knew the family.

CLM: So when you came back.....

PG: And he was in the Merchant Marines and he saw a lot of activity, because he was over in Europe and he was in England. Being in the Merchant Marines, they carried all the stuff that they needed, the supplies and they're the ones that carried supplies. I think they were more in danger than the others were; they knew they had to be careful.

CLM: What was his name again, your husband's name?

PG: Seymour.

CLM: So how did you end up dating Seymour when you came back home and he came back from the war; .how did that happen?

PG: Well, the thing is, I was going with his brother [laughs].

PG: I went with his brother. As a group we used to go out together on Saturday nights after we got home. And his brother was in the Merchant Marines too. He had a brother who died, just died this last year, he was 101. And it was the other brother that I was going with. But then when I got home, got out, I went to secretarial school first and only went there for about a year. And, I don't know, we used to—I don't know what he was doing. I think he was working in the pharmacy at that time when he came out. One time, being school friends, one rainy day I think I met him in Worcester at the corner of some place and we got together that way and, because we had been in school together, not the same year, but he and I, we met and dated. Made a date to

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go to something, something that he wanted to go to, and I accepted it and then later on he told me if I hadn't accepted that invitation he was all done [laughs]. But I accepted it and from then on we went together for a couple of years.

MRD: You dated for two years and then got married?

PG: Oh yeah, probably a couple years and finally got married in 1948, so we were married 63 years.

MRD: Wow, that's wonderful.

PG: And had four children.

CLM: Nice life.

MRD: Great.

PG: But I think I was very fortunate, very blessed with my life because I was listening to my sisters talking about their families and all that and I felt very blessed because they had more problems with their families than I ever had so I felt very good about that.

CLM: Did any of your children go into the military?

PG: My son, my oldest son was in the Vietnam era. He wasn't stationed there, he was stationed in Korea during that time, and then I had a cousin who was in the WAVES. She's the one that got me in. She passed away a few years ago. She was in the WAVES and I have an aunt that was in the WAVES just after I went in I think she went in. She was stationed in the submarine in Connecticut—Newport—I don't know, I think it was Newport.

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CLM: Can I ask you about this [picture] you carry the flag on; is it Veterans Day, on Memorial Day?

PG: Yeah, I don't know where they got that picture, but I know that was just a picture of the platoon I was in I guess.

CLM: Do you do that every year? Do you carry the flag every year?

PG: I did, I did. I carried the flag for 55 years.

MRD: Oh my goodness.

CLM: Memorial Day?

PG: Memorial Day or any time. See, I belong to the Legion, Legion Post 279. I spent ten years with the women's post in Worcester, then when I transferred to the other Post, that [women's] post fell apart. Then I joined the Post here [in Auburn]. I've been carrying the flag ever since—it's almost 60 years. My oldest son who is a Vietnam veteran, he belongs to this Post here and he is Past Commander. And he took over flag bearing because the last two to three years I've ridden in a car.

MRD: Now, your son who was in Korea, was he Navy also?

PG: He was in the Army.

CLM: I'd like to read this so that we can record what it says here, OK?

PG: That was the Sons of the Legion that gave me that Citation.

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CLM: The Citation is from the Sons of the American Legion, Chester P. Tuttle Post 279 in Auburn, Mass and it says, “During the March 12, 2016 Auburn Special Olympics Event we of the Post Color Guard had the honor to hear a prepared statement from the Sons read to the audience. Thank you for your service Phyllis. And it says, ‘We would like you all to honor a special legionnaire today, a woman who proudly served her country during World War II as a Navy WAVE nurse, a woman who for over 75 years has carried the American Flag, first as a member of Worcester’s only all-female American Legion Post and today as our Post standard flag bearer. Please give a round of applause for Phyllis Gallant who turned 95 this past week; she is a true American hero.’” That’s beautiful.

MRD: That’s wonderful.

PG: That’s a citation that was given to me this past year and I was just trying to get a thank you note, for that and I haven’t done it [laughs]; been trying to get that done.

CLM: We’ll probably be wrapping up do you have any last.....

PG: The pictures in there are the women that belong to the women’s post that I belonged to before.

CLM: This has been wonderful. Your story is really one we really wanted to hear.

MRD: I have one question, is there anything else that you would like to add Phyllis, something that you would like to add to this that we didn’t ask you about?

PG: I know one thing. When I belonged to the all-women’s post in Worcester we were fairly new you know, and there weren’t too many women posts around, ones that were just women.

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This post, we started the—what is it, the Downs Syndrome people—we're one of the first ones that used to give them a Christmas Party every year; that was our main thing that we did.

MRD: Part of your mission of the Post to do that, to do the party?

PG: Yeah, all the girls, us women, we'd all make cupcakes and we'd have a good-sized party. We'd have a Santa Claus there and all that, and we were one of the first ones that started to recognize those people. And it was something that we did. We also had the men from different posts used to come and help us and they were called our auxiliary [laughs].

CLM: And what's your average bowling score, I hear you're a good bowler.

PG: Yeah, my average was around 85 but sometimes you don't do that.

CLM: So you still go almost every week?

PG: Yes

CLM: Nice.

MRD: Great.

CLM: Good for you.

PG: I enjoy bowling, it's one main thing—of course I did a lot, in high school I was in sports a lot too.

MRD: Oh really; what sport?

PG: I was in the basketball and I played field hockey, those two things I did in high school. In fact I had a letter. I got my letter S for South High. Never put it on a sweater [laughs].

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CLM: Nice. This has been a great interview.

MRD: Wonderful, thank you so much.

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