

BETTY J. “BJ” STRINGER



**WOMENS ARMY CORPS (WACS)
1960-1992**

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Betty JoAnn Stringer was born on 21-MAR 1938 in St. Louis. Her father was Walter R. Stringer (1908-1999) and her mother is Florence E. Stringer (nee Cotton) (1909-1999). Betty had one brother; Ronald and one sister; Carol. According to the census in 1940 to 1950 the family lived at 4343 Bingham Avenue in St. Louis MO.

Betty attended Cleveland High School in St. Louis. At Cleveland High School she belonged to the Sharpshooter Club.

Editor's Note: Portions of the following biography are from the Veterans History Project interview in 2007 by Tori Vernau, herself an Army Veteran and member of American Legion Post 404 in St. Louis Missouri.



Row 1: Betty Stringer, Patricia Fertig, Connie Talley, Jean King, Carole Stever.
Row 2: Virginia Funke, Jean Funke, Sandra Richardson, Joan Miller, Norma Ebert, Mokray Ritts, Mr. J. M. Julian.

Note the .22 rifles the club is holding in their left hand.



Betty J. Stringer, left front row

At age 22 Betty joined the Women's Army Corps (WAC). When asked if she served because of family members, Betty responded, "No. My father had missed World War II because of his age. I just wanted to serve my country." Her brother, Ron (1933-2008) served in the Navy during the Korean War. When asked why she chose the Army, Betty responded, "Well, I really wanted to go in the Navy, but ah (sic), I didn't like where they were trained at so I joined the Army. I didn't want to go to Connecticut. I wanted to go south so I went to Alabama." Betty felt that the Army offered more opportunities at that time. She said, "I always wanted

to serve my country, so that was the only way I knew how to do it. 'Cause that was back in the '60's, so it was much harder to get in the service back then than it is today. And also, I wanted to get an education so I could find another type of job when I got out of the service; however, that didn't take place. I got a different job altogether. I went to work for a bank!"

"General Banks"

Betty joined the Army in St. Louis, and then took the train to Birmingham Alabama. "I picked up a black girl in Birmingham, she came in by bus, and we took a taxicab to Ft.

McClellan Alabama. We sat back there like two bumps on a log. We didn't know what to say to one another. That was funny.” Betty attended basic training eight weeks. “And so, we got to know one another and then um, she became General Banks.” When asked to explain about General Banks, she continued (In her own words):

“She became General Banks to us little recruits. So, because she was always doing stupid, not stupid things, but neat things, you know; so, we thought well, she'll be a general someday so, we'll call her General Banks. She was a recruit like us. We were both in the same boat. We didn't know what we were doing! We were scared to death. Didn't know what we were going to get into, and we got to Ft. McClellan and the sergeant from Fifth Platoon was out there (sic) rantin'and ravin'and saying, “Get over here. Get over there. Do this, do that”, we thought, what the (sic) hell'd we get into? So anyway, to make a long story short, on one of our bivouacs, we went out and we had to ah, camouflage ourselves and it came time that they took roll call and there was no “General Banks.” And she kept calling her name and all of a sudden she pops up out of a bunch of leaves, sittin'right next to me and scared me to smithereens! God that scared me to death! Anyway, we had a lot of fun. But I don't know how I missed her, but I didn't see her, she really camouflaged herself. I don't know how many times I walked by her. Didn't even step on her foot or her head.”

Boot Camp

Betty was asked if they did physical training (PT) back then. “PT back then was just marching back and forth from school to--you know to your platoon and ah, not to your platoon, back to your company, otherwise we just walked. We didn't do any kind of push-ups or sit-ups. We didn't, even our basic training was nothing like it is today. Even the bivouac was nothing like it is today. We didn't have much. The only thing we had was ah--um a night march and a day march, and that was all we had as far as bivouac. That was our bivouac training,” she laughed.

Besides physical training, Betty and the recruits “elected” to train on a rifle. Betty recalled, “I fired an M-1 and it about blew me off my feet on my butt! We didn't have to fire if we didn't want to, but most of us chose to fire, and um, we had a lot of fun, but ah, I could only do it lying down I couldn't do it standing up (sic) ‘cause it would knock me down. So I said, let me lay down. Cause at that time I was really a marksman on a .22 (sic) ‘cause I was a--um a sharpshooter in high school so I was pretty good with a rifle. Yeah, but ah, I couldn't handle that M-1. It was too big, and too heavy and too powerful. I enjoyed firing, that’s why I wanted to do it. That was part of your motivation to be in the Army. But the biggest thing was to serve my country. That was the biggest. I didn't really care what branch. I knew I didn't want to be in the Marines ‘cause (sic) I'd never pass basic

training. 'Cause (sic) they were tough, you know. Not to say that I couldn't be tough, but I don't think I could take it. I don't know how it was back in the '60's it may not be like it is today, but it's rough today."

Tori asked if they had to go in the gas chamber in basic. Betty said, "Yes. We had to say our birth date and social security number before we could take the mask off. We went in with our mask on, then take it off say our name, social security number and date of birth and then put it back on and clear it and then you could leave. By the time you got outside your eyes were burning so bad you couldn't see straight, you know, so. And then one time they said--what was the other gas they--there was another gas that was supposed to be in there but it wasn't. Cause they hauled us back outta (sic) there because they realized they didn't have it in there."

Betty was asked if all her drill instructor (D.I.'s) were female. Betty replied, "Oh yeah. Yeah. One we had an E-5; an E-8 and our commander was a captain. And they were super people. In fact, I still see Captain Love, but she's now a colonel. A colonel retired. I see her at the reunions. Dorothy Love. She's a super lady. She used to drive a Porsche, and you know the officers stayed up on the hill. All the officers lived up on the 'Hill. And every morning we could hear that Porsche start up, and we'd all say, 'Here comes Captain Love.' So, we all got back to where we were supposed to be because we could always tell when she was on her way."

After eight weeks basic training, Betty was now ready for her next station. She went to Ft. Gordon, Georgia for teletype training for another eight weeks. "And ah, met a fellow there from--that was from St. Louis and I was so good at typing he let me type, and we went and played 'Battleship.' 'Cause I passed all my tests, 'cause I typed at work so I knew how to type and I didn't have to learn how to do the machine, I already knew how 'cause my dad used to have a teletype machine at home and I used to play on it, so anyway, that was the size of that. And after that I was stationed at Ft. George Meade, Maryland."

Fort Meade, Virginia

At Fort Meade, Betty worked for the National Security Agency in the NCOs (Non-Commissioned Officers) Communication Center. Betty said, "I worked shift work, which I enjoyed 'cause (sic) we didn't have to have inspections. They let us people go. And I got to work with the Marines and the Navy and the Air Force, no Coast Guard, but all the other branches were there. And met a lot of nice people and our boss was really nice. And ah, it was just getting traffic out to where it belonged and where it needed to go. Bring it back in and pass it on or whatever we had to do with it. Whatever, it was all on tape, so we had to know how to be able to read the tape, and ah, they were the other people on the other side they would put all that stuff on, and we would take it and put it on the

transmitter and let her rip. We could go 24 at a time. I think it was about 24, I don't remember now it was so long ago. There was (sic) quite a few transmitters we had to watch.”

Betty continued, “While at Fort Meade, my old boyfriend called my mother one day and was trying to get hold of me and we decided to pick up where we left off and I got married and got outta (sic) the service. But now I wish I hadn't a done that, but--that's what I wanted to do at the time. And then um, I went to Okinawa from there to be with him, but I was only there a few months because it just didn't work out.” Betty returned home to St. Louis.

Back in St. Louis and the Reserves

Betty continued, “So, I came home and went to work for the bank, and stayed at the bank for a few years, then went to work for St. Louis Federal Savings, and got fired from that. First time I ever got fired. It's because I joined the Reserves. They told me they didn't care if I joined the reserves, but it was right after I joined that they fired me, so I figured it was because of that.

So, at that time, I went down to Ft. Leonard Wood to go to personnel school I was down there eight weeks, came back and was only back a short time, and they were getting together at that time a two-week basic training for the reservists so I had 189 day tour down at Ft. McClellan and went down to that. And then one of the gals down there said there was a job down at the Pentagon and I said, ‘Well, that's ok with me. I don't mind. I'll take a tour anywhere.’ So I came, I said I'd go home first and get my stuff straightened out, and I said I'll fill out the paperwork. I was home about three days, and somebody called me and said they were trying to get hold of me down at the Reserve Center, and I went down there, and they said they were trying to get hold of me up at the ARCOM (Army Communications) so I went up there and they hired me as an ASP. So, I didn't go to the Pentagon. So, I was there twenty-eight years, and retired in 2000. Retired from the Service in 1992.”

I wish I would have stayed in longer. As a civilian working for National Security Administration (NSA) but working in the Communication Center, was a lot of fun. It wasn't hard work; it was just a matter of pushing tapes. But I could have gone to Germany and Japan and didn't get to do that.

When asked what was her favorite thing about being in the Army, Betty said, “It was all a lot of fun. I didn't have one favorite thing, not really. I enjoyed meeting people if you want to call that a favorite thing, but other than that, no. It was all it was all a lot of fun. I enjoyed being there. I learned a lot, and um, your life just changes from being in the

military. I don't know what it is, but I guess it's just the way they put you through the training you just change. And so I was thankful for that.”

When asked how she was treated by the other service men Betty responded, “I wasn't around them that much.” When asked if she was equally treated, Betty responded, “Oh yeah. We were ok. We didn't have any trouble with them. They'd cut up a lot and I'd cut right back, but they didn't do anything derogatory or anything like that. They were all nice guys.”

When asked if she felt she was promoted at the same rate, Betty responded, “Oh yeah, oh yeah. In fact, sometimes sooner, but I didn't tell them that though. But, 'cause (sic) you know the other services promote much different than the Army does. You know, they didn't do it the same way we did. And we didn't really have to do anything to get promoted except from PFC to SPEC 4. Then we had to go before a board.”

Promoted in Pajamas?

Betty told the story of one particular promotion. “Yeah, we had to go before a board to get SPEC 4 back in those days, now you don't but and then you had to know a lot of stuff. But, um, one funny thing happened when I made E-4. I got promoted in my pajamas! A Major Farnhorse sent up the clerk who said she wanted me in the office immediately. ‘If you're in your pajamas, come as you are, don't take time to change your clothes.’ I said ‘Ok.’ And there was three of us that were on shift work, who were sent because we were going to work at midnight, and there were three of us got promoted in our pajamas. There was another bunch, later on that same year that got promoted on TV. They had some kind of deal up at Baltimore, some kind of a shuttle I don't remember now what it was, and they called ten people up on stage. They were scared to death; they didn't know what was happening! And they all got promoted to different ranks: PFCs, SPEC 4, E-5, whatever it was.”

Kotex and Johnson's Wax

When asked what was her least favorite thing about being in the Army, Betty responded “Least favorite thing? I didn't have a least favorite thing, I really didn't. Oh, I guess, I mean it would be KP. That would be the least thing. But I only had to do it I twice; once in basic and one time in Ft. Meade before I volunteered to drive the NCOs around. And mow the lawn. I had to mow the lawn too. I had fun with that too. Sorta (sic) like a ride mower, it pulled me around, I didn't pull it, it pulled me. I went flying across that lawn one day and the Commander was out on the front porch, and she said, “Are you ok? Are you ok?” I says (sic), ‘Yeah, I'm fine! I'm fine!’ But yeah, I did those two things and then I didn't have to pull KP. That was my KP.

When asked if she had to run a (floor) buffer, Betty responded, "In basic training I did. We used to sit on it. That way it would shine a golden aisle. In each floor there was row by the windows, a row on the other side, and there was a golden aisle, and a row on the other side of that aisle and a row against the windows. And we couldn't walk on the golden aisle, except to buff it and put wax on it, and mop it. So that was the only time we could walk on it. And you had to see your face in it or we couldn't pass inspection. So, we used Kotex and Johnson's Wax. It was marvelous! It did the job. And it also took up black scuffmarks, 'cause you know the boots we had were called 'Little Abners.' And they left scuffmarks all over the place so we were always picking up scuffmarks. So that was the best thing, Kotex and Johnson's Wax."

WAC Fashion

When asked if she was issued black boots, Betty replied, "Ah, no I didn't get black boots until I was in the Reserves. They were black. We had to dye 'em (sic) black. They were brown when they were issued but they were in the black things. See, when I got issued my stuff, I got one brown uniform and one green uniform. And my PT uniform was taupe colored, too. So, it was the old style, but we got issued a green uniform, but we also got issued a brown uniform too; and a brown overcoat and a brown raincoat. So, all that other stuff, all the new stuff came after I went into the Reserves. Where I had the black boots and all that stuff."

When asked if she had a brown dress uniform, Betty replied, "we had a brown dress, but we never wore it. The brown uniform we wore for parades and stuff like that. That was the Class A. The other one

was the PT uniform, which we wore to school all the time." Betty was issued a green duty uniform. "Yeah, well it was the same thing that you had but it was brown. And that's what we wore to school. We wore a PT uniform to school. It was just a brown shirt, a brown skirt and shorts. It buttoned down the front. And we did that when we had our PT. You know we did, walk around the gym and did some jumping jacks and that was about the size of it. It was all brown. Kinda (sic) a light, a light tan I guess you could say, a dark brown with a light tan. Yeah. And I still have my shirt. I still have my shirt. I still have my shirt



some where's (sic) all in shreds but I still have my one shirt, somewhere. We wore that every day. That was our everyday. Then on Saturday, we had parades every Saturday, so we would wear either our taupe uniform or we'd wear our green uniform, or we'd wear our raincoat with gloves, or without gloves, and they would change about every five minutes what we would wear; and maybe PT outfits. We never knew what we were going to do we just waited for anything. And if you--if you, um, got smart, they had the PA (public address) system open and they could hear what was going on up there. And it could be any kind of smart remark about how you were changing your clothes so many times then you got gigged. And the whole platoon got bad letters and whatever. But we were always good. We never complained."

When asked if the green uniform was fatigues, Betty responded, "No! It was my Class A. We didn't have fatigues. The only time we had fatigues, was when we went out to bivouac and they were issued that day and we turned them in that day. We had both a green and a brown dress uniform. We wore skirt and shorts mostly. It was warm in Alabama so we didn't need winter stuff. When I moved up to Ft. Meade though and that it was cold; we had our winter overcoats and we could wear that with our green uniform. We wore Class A's to work."

Underwear Allowance?

"Yeah, we wore our regular Class A's to work. Whichever one, the green one or the taupe one, whichever one we wanted. Then we had black shoes to go with it. Then of course, you know we had to go out and buy our heels in basic, which I never wore. They were always there for inspection, but I never wore them. I paid a whole \$12.00 for them. But that was part of the \$45.00 we got for our underwear. 'Cause we had to buy our own underwear with that \$45.00. Which was kinda' dumb but... We wore our boots with our PT outfit. That was what we wore with our PT outfit. We had the black shoes, but the ones there, they had the Coreforms (*Editor's note: possibly a synthetic leather substitute for shoes?*), but we had the ones you had to polish, and they had about a two-inch heel on it. I was issued the seersucker dress, which we never used."

Looking Back

When Betty was asked, would you do it again? Betty, replied, "Would I do it? Oh, no kidding I will, I would. I wouldn't want to go through Basic Training again though. I would never be able to pass the PT Test. That's the only bad thing. If they didn't have PT Tests-- I guess that would be one fall back. Oh. When I joined the Reserves they didn't have, well they had PT but it was only for people 40 and over. Um-hum. And then as time went on, they changed it where they had uh, a two-mile walk. And then that was for 30 and over. I was like, great; I don't have to do this PT stuff, because I'd of never made it. So then they

changed it again for 20 and over. That got me. Yeah, and that included me and that caught me. And God, I hated that walk! Cause I mean I was out of shape, I never exercised and God it took everything I had to make the two-mile walk. But I managed to get it done and ah, then of course I got a medical and didn't have to do it no more, which was all right. So. But then they changed the law and I got caught up in that. So that's how come I retired. They let me stay in until I got my twenty-one years. Otherwise, I would have been out at eighteen. So. I was thankful for that.”

When reminded that they changed the law about then to require all ASPs would also be reservists, Betty replied, “Right. They had to be reservists because they wanted them to be able to deploy with their unit. Well, I couldn't deploy with my unit anyway, I was medical. When they deployed for Desert Storm they only asked for certain MOS's. You know, we only sent 186 people to Desert Storm. And ah, now of course today with the Iraq War it's a lot different. Our units are still not going; they're still asking for certain MOS's. But they're asking for more personnel and more of the other but....and then there's one, the smaller units are all going but the larger units are not. Like I said, they're going by MOS; what MOS they need, and then they're attached to another unit, which is kinda' (sic) sad because you know, you're so use to drilling with your unit and then you go someplace else, you don't know nobody, you don't know what they expect, or what they do or anything like that so a lot of guys get disgruntled I think.”

Betty was in ASP for the hospital. “Yeah. I was also ASP for USAR school. I was only in three years my whole career. When I first came in, I was in the 25th MASH. And that's when I got all my schooling and stuff, and then I went to USAR school, and I got my job. And at that time, it was only temporary. And then I got a full-time job at the school. And then, um (sic), I stayed with the school, oh, from 1975 to 1981, when I went down to the 21st. I wanted to get closer to home because at that time my mom and dad were kinda' sick and I wanted to be close home because I had to go run home and see how they were doing. So that was one reason I did that. And then I didn't like the girl I was working with. She was in cahoots with the commander and I didn't like that so I wanted to get out of there.”

Advice for Our Youth

Betty was asked what she would tell an eighteen-year-old who is thinking about joining the Army. She replied, “Well number one, I'm not a salesperson, so I don't know what I would tell you.” But to someone who has already decided to join, Betty responded, “Well I would tell you what you would need to know, but the only bad thing is what I always told people like when they were getting ready to go to Basic Training or something like that, I say, they change this all the time, so what I tell you today, don't expect it to be that

way when you get there. Because if you do, you're going to be down on me when you get back. And I'm going to run in the other direction. So that's what I would tell you. And I would make sure that you understood that it just isn't that way, 'cause like I say, they change all the time." Betty offered another bit of advice: "Stay in. No matter what, do your twenty years or more."

From 1980-2017 Betty lived at on Milentz Avenue in Saint Louis, Missouri. Betty JoAnn Stringer died at the age of 78 on 13-FEB 2017. Sergeant First Class Betty J. Stringer was buried with military honors at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in St. Louis MO.