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U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program

Interview of **SPAR Lillian Vasilas, USCGR (W)**

Conducted by **Scott T. Price, Deputy Coast Guard Historian**

August 1, 2007
Alexandria, Virginia

INTERVIEWER: Hello. Would you please tell me your full name and spell your last name for me?

VASILAS: Yes. Lillian Vasilas, V-a-s-i-l-a-s.

INTERVIEWER: Would you tell me a little bit about your background, where you grew up?

VASILAS: Yes. I grew up in a small town outside of Erie, Pennsylvania. So I was around water a whole lot, did a lot of swimming and ice skating, because it's cold up there. The town is called Corry. I went to -- when I graduated in 1939, I went to work for the city and the county combined, collecting taxes and until I left home for the Coast Guard.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. So you enlisted in Pittsburgh, did you say?

VASILAS: Yes, I went to Pittsburgh.

INTERVIEWER: And did the recruiters swear you in, or do you remember who actually, you know, when you --

VASILAS: I think the recruiters must have done it. I frankly don't remember.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. This is the other question we were talking about earlier. What did your family -- what did your friends think about you joining the military?

VASILAS: The kids my age thought it was great, and the older people did not think it was such a great thing to have girls in the military, including my parents. They weren't all that crazy about it, but later on, they were quite proud.

INTERVIEWER: But not right at the time you decided to --

VASILAS: Not at the time I went.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you end up going through recruit training? Do you remember?

VASILAS: West Palm Beach.

INTERVIEWER: West Palm Beach. Yeah. I'm always fascinated by the fact that the fellow that owned that hotel offered it up to the Coast Guard.

VASILAS: Oh, really?

INTERVIEWER: Yes. He wanted to rent out the whole hotel. I mean, better money for him that way, I guess. It's called the Biltmore. It just looks like it --

VASILAS: Yes, it is.

INTERVIEWER: -- would be a nice place to go through basic training or boot camp. If you have to go through boot camp, I could think of worse places.

VASILAS: It wasn't bad. I understand they tore down some walls and things, and we had -- there was three bunk beds in the room I was in. So there was six of us in there, but being a first-class hotel, there was a bathroom for the six of us and shower.

And boot camp wasn't difficult. There were guys running through, inspecting how you made the bed and all, and --

INTERVIEWER: Oh?

VASILAS: -- I think they liked to appear macho. But we would march down to the water, and we had to prove whether we could swim or not, and we did that in a pool -- in a swimming pool. And if we could swim good enough, then they'd let us go in the ocean.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

VASILAS: Boot camp, I think, was four weeks. I was there two when they posted a sign saying they wanted drivers. Well, I grew up in a garage -- and

had been driving. So I applied for that and left. So I was only in boot camp two weeks.

INTERVIEWER: So you got out of boot camp early?

VASILAS: Yes. And that was nice. And they sent me to Miami to the recruiting office, but I did these other things, as I said. Because I was on the road so much, I was on S&Q. I didn't live in the barracks. The barracks there was a hotel also.

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

VASILAS: And this kind of van I had, I kept it where another SPAR and I lived. It was great duty.

INTERVIEWER: That sounds like it.

VASILAS: It was great duty.

INTERVIEWER: So this was in 1943? I just want to make sure we got --

VASILAS: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

VASILAS: And one day, the old man, as we called him --I'm not just sure what he was. He called me up, "Spalding," which was my name then, "Come up here." So, of course, he said, "You're going to radio school!" And I said that "I don't want to go to radio school. I don't know anything about radio," and he kept on and on. And I told him that "I'm happy doing what I'm doing, driving and going to the different Coast Guard stations along the ocean." It was --

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

VASILAS: -- very nice. He said, "Well, you're doing a good job, but there is no advancement for a driver. We have no rate for a driver. So seaman first class is it." I said, "Well, I'm happy." He said, "I think you're going to radio school." Well, at that point, you know what I said, "Yes, sir."

INTERVIEWER: The needs of the service, you know, the --

VASILAS: Exactly. I was quite unhappy about it, because I was sure I couldn't do it. Turned out I loved it.

INTERVIEWER: You loved radio school?

VASILAS: Uh-huh – I loved Morse Code.

INTERVIEWER: Your commanding officer at the time in Miami knew that the Coast Guard needed radio operators?

VASILAS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: You were there, obviously, and so he made the choice for you?

VASILAS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: You didn't get the choice of which --

VASILAS: No. No.

INTERVIEWER: -- type of rating?

VASILAS: I didn't even know they were doing it. I had --

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

VASILAS: -- taken him from Miami one time to Tampa, and with two people driving in a car, you talk a lot, you know?

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

VASILAS: But so he knew me, sort of. He had --

INTERVIEWER: That's interesting. Okay. Because a lot of times, they did have a choice. You know, once they got through boot camp, you could make up your mind if you wanted to go be a coxswain or --

VASILAS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: -- you wanted to -- a yeoman or whatever rating. But, okay, so that's how you were -- well, that's interesting.

VASILAS: And so off I went to Atlantic City.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, so it was in Atlantic City. Tell me a little bit about that.

VASILAS: About Atlantic City?

INTERVIEWER: Atlantic City and the school please.

VASILAS: It also was in a hotel.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, really?

VASILAS: But we -- Morse Code is a little hard, and some people can't do it. You got to almost got to use it to tell the difference in it, and I did like it then, but we went to school from, like, seven in the morning until seven or eight at night.

INTERVIEWER: Twelve-hour days.

VASILAS: Yeah. Long hours.

INTERVIEWER: How long was the whole training?

VASILAS: You know, I think it was about three months.

INTERVIEWER: Three months worth.

VASILAS: Uh-huh.

INTERVIEWER: That sounds about right.

VASILAS: And if you could then do 18 words a minute, you graduated, so to speak, with a third class rating.

INTERVIEWER: Now, was that receiving 18 words a minute or transmitting 18 words a minute?

VASILAS: We did both.

INTERVIEWER: Both? You had to do both?

VASILAS: Oh, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

VASILAS: We graduated as a third class radioman, and they gave us our choice of where we wanted to go, that they needed us. Well, three that I -- girls that I became acquainted with there, we all said we'll go wherever we can go together. That turned out to be Washington headquarters.

INTERVIEWER: Coast Guard headquarters?

VASILAS: Yes, but they're not in the same place now.

INTERVIEWER: No.

VASILAS: But, anyhow, I lived in Washington. But that was only teletype. I wasn't happy with only -- I'd felt I was smarter than that, because I --

INTERVIEWER: Would you explain for us what you mean by teletype versus just standard regular radio?

VASILAS: Well, I wanted to do the Morse Code and take messages from all over the world.

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

VASILAS: And the teletype was -- the radiomen here at Washington Radio Station in Alexandria, we teletyped the message to headquarters, and they did with it whatever. Actually, they needed radiomen down there. So they sent the three of us down there that had graduated from school.

INTERVIEWER: To Alexandria?

VASILAS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

VASILAS: The Washington Radio Station, the headquarters for Coast Guard radio. It's still there, but they don't do that any more -- Morse Code is obsolete.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

VASILAS: I liked that, but all the messages were coded anyhow.

INTERVIEWER: So you didn't know what the messages you sent to headquarters were? Do you remember what level the code was for these messages? Was it usually Top Secret or just Secret or all kinds?

VASILAS: I don't think that was on ours because it was coded, and it wasn't anything to read anyhow. It got sent to headquarters by teletype and to decoding.

INTERVIEWER: So you all were stationed down in Alexandria?

VASILAS: Yes, on Telegraph Road.

INTERVIEWER: On Telegraph Road.

VASILAS: Yeah, big station out there. It's still there. [TISCOM]

INTERVIEWER: They're still there. Where did you live?

VASILAS: Right there.

INTERVIEWER: On the station itself?

VASILAS: Yes. Upstairs and we worked in the radio shack downstairs.

INTERVIEWER: What was the division amongst men and women there? How many men, how many women were --

VASILAS: Well, there was only three women operators, and there were probably three or four yeomen up in the old man's office.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And then how many men were there?

VASILAS: Oh, there were a lot. I don't know how many men.

INTERVIEWER: It was a big station.

VASILAS: There was -- the chief operator of the watch I was on was a man, of course, and I think there were two -- the three girls and two men operating --

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

VASILAS: -- in a room.

INTERVIEWER: Would you go over a typical day for us?

VASILAS: Well, we stood watch at different hours, usually about four hours a watch. You got to break to get some coffee. We made our own coffee and stuff there, but --

INTERVIEWER: So it was four on and then eight off, and then you'd go --

VASILAS: Yeah, and then you're --

INTERVIEWER: -- for another four hours?

VASILAS: -- back on, again, different shifts.

One of the best things about it, other than the fact that I liked it, was we'd go on at midnight, and they'd give us dinner. Oh, there would be five of us, and the chef, so to speak, or the cook, enjoyed cooking for five. He could be more creative than cooking for the whole --

INTERVIEWER: The whole crowd.

VASILAS: And we got great meals.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, really. Well, I was going to ask you about the chow. So there's one question out of the way!

VASILAS: The chow was great.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Chow was good.

VASILAS: Chow was good.

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

VASILAS: There or altogether?

INTERVIEWER: Well, while you were in uniform, or do you have one?

VASILAS: I don't think -- I enjoyed it all. I don't think there was anything any more memorable.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have a worse experience, one that you --

VASILAS: I had a couple of my -- only once. One of the questions is did I feel any resentment from men?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. We're going to get to that whole issue in a little bit, but if you want to bring it up now, that's fine.

VASILAS: Okay. Well, at the Coast Guard Station, I was promoted to Second Class after a while and then took the tests and the stuff about antennas and everything and passed for First Class. The Chief did not like it, and I don't blame him. I did the job all right and I knew it, but that wasn't his argument. His thought was he had spent 20 years or so in the Coast Guard getting to be Chief.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm. Yeah. The pre-war Coast Guard --

VASILAS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: -- it was notoriously -- all the services were notoriously slow in promotions --

VASILAS: Well, sure, and the war brought it on. But he was Regular and I was Reserve.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm.

VASILAS: And here this girl in two years makes First Class, Chief being the next step. Well, he -- and I had to work with him daily. I went up to the old man, and I said, "Please, don't make me First Class."

INTERVIEWER: Really?

VASILAS: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: This was after you took the test and passed the test?

VASILAS: Yeah. And it's going to be a little bit of a problem. He said, "Why?" I said, "Well, the Chief doesn't like it, and I don't blame him," and I didn't blame him. I felt he was a bit justified. I can understand it.

Commander Dawson says, "One more word out of him, and I'll make you Chief tomorrow afternoon." Now that would have been terrible.

INTERVIEWER: Oh.

VASILAS: So I took First Class.

INTERVIEWER: You took it --

VASILAS: Yes. And after the war I was discharged as a First Class Radioman.

INTERVIEWER: Wow.

VASILAS: But that was actually the only time, and I don't think it was necessarily a resentment, the fact that I was a girl.

INTERVIEWER: Just --

VASILAS: It was just that I got promoted so quickly.

INTERVIEWER: Well, so did so many, right?

VASILAS: And I don't blame him.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. I mean, they always --

VASILAS: But I'm sure that happened with all the girls.

INTERVIEWER: My grandfather resented all the -- well, he was Regular Army infantry.

VASILAS: Mm-hmm.

INTERVIEWER: And the ones that joined the Army Air Force, you know, you had colonels that were 23 years old. So they all, you know, resented the fast-paced promotions common during the war --

VASILAS: Sure.

INTERVIEWER: But that was war, I guess?

VASILAS: Well, yes, of course.

INTERVIEWER: What about the pay? Here you had a decent-paying job. Was it a decent-paying job?

VASILAS: Yeah, well, I -- it was fine.

INTERVIEWER: It was all right?

VASILAS: We had no expenses. You were fed and clothed and, you know, I was satisfied with the pay. I don't remember what it was.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm.

VASILAS: And I'm sure it must have increased as I went up.

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

VASILAS: But I don't remember what it was.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. But you weren't starving and any -- like you say, you were fed and you're clothed and housed.

VASILAS: And what else?

INTERVIEWER: So whatever was in your pocket you could spend.

VASILAS: Well, what else would you like to know?

INTERVIEWER: Well, that brings up the whole kind of question of liberty. Did you -- tell me a little bit about any liberties you took. Did you hang out with other Coast Guard men, or did you like other SPARs, or did you have friends in the other services?

VASILAS: Well, because I was at the station, it was kind of small, and there were only three SPARs down there.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm.

VASILAS: We didn't do much hanging out. They did run a liberty bus into the USO, here in Alexandria, but I was -- it wasn't 9 to 5, and the liberty bus would go at 6 or whatever, and I wasn't free often. Sometimes I was standing watch at that time or sleeping or whatever. I didn't go into the USO very much. I did eventually have a boyfriend there. I married him. But, no, we didn't do too much.

INTERVIEWER: No?

VASILAS: He and I would just take a ride or something when I would have time off. He was a radio technician, but he worked 9 to 5 or regular hours.

INTERVIEWER: And you met on the base?

VASILAS: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: What was his name?

VASILAS: Emanuel. Vasilas. He was pretty good. He already had the store here in Alexandria. And he went to enlist, and they said he was too short. He was shorter than I am. So, at Coast Guard, at the headquarters in Washington, and what do you do? I'm a radio technician, always. And they said, "Just one minute." They went out and saw whoever was in charge there and said, "Look, this guy is" -- so they gave him a special enlistment, sent him down here to Washington Radio. His home was Alexandria, and he kept begging, "I want to go somewhere" --

INTERVIEWER: Can't get away from here, huh?

VASILAS: But he put up the big antennas and stuff that are still up down there, and they wouldn't let him go. So that's where he was.

INTERVIEWER: Interesting!

VASILAS: He had the store, and he had a partner that ran the store during the war. Then, after the war, I was discharged on Monday and married on Tuesday and came to work here Tuesday afternoon, in 1946. But times were tough, no honeymoon or any of that foolishness.

INTERVIEWER: No. What did you think about your uniform?

VASILAS: It was okay.

INTERVIEWER: I know there was a lot of questions about the design and, you know --

VASILAS: Oh, no. I didn't -- well, it fit well and looks trim and nice. I thought it was very appropriate, very neat looking.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

VASILAS: I thought I looked pretty good in it.

INTERVIEWER: Did you encounter any overt sexism?

VASILAS: No.

INTERVIEWER: No?

VASILAS: I did not. Yeah. Well, at radio school, it was all girls. Down here, because of the hours I worked and the smallness of the station, I guess maybe there wasn't opportunity or whatever. No, I didn't find that a problem.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Well, that's good. I wanted to say there were some stories about older Chief Petty Officers and regular officers who didn't want women serving in the Coast Guard which was that attitude they had, you know, before the war that it was a male organization --

VASILAS: I think so.

INTERVIEWER: So that's why I always ask that question -- just to see because, you know, you were the first to really, actually --

VASILAS: I think that probably existed but --

INTERVIEWER: You didn't run across it?

VASILAS: -- I don't remember being --

INTERVIEWER: Well, that's wonderful, I guess.

Captain Dorothy Stratton related in an interview she did that one of the problems that she had was a lot of the older Coast Guard officers felt that the Navy was getting all the qualified women and that they were just passing along the less qualified to the Coast Guard. Did you run across that?

VASILAS: I felt just the opposite.

INTERVIEWER: Just the opposite?

VASILAS: I felt the Coast Guard was more elite, and we had a better class, I guess, and not a nice word to use, but I -- no, I felt just the opposite.

INTERVIEWER: Wonderful. Well, like I was saying, all of the SPARs, you were trailblazers. You were the first women to really do this, and they had a few in World War I, but not to any great extent.

VASILAS: Not the -- no, not the --

INTERVIEWER: But, you know, 10,000 joined the Coast Guard and served during World War II.

VASILAS: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: And then, basically, there have been women in the Coast Guard since that time.

VASILAS: Yes. I was very proud of them.

INTERVIEWER: And just a general question that, you know, future generations would probably like to know, what it was like to transition from civilian life to the uniform life as a woman in a time when this really wasn't common.

VASILAS: Yeah. I didn't think that was a big deal.

INTERVIEWER: Really?

VASILAS: It was different, but I didn't find it bad or hard to do.

INTERVIEWER: Exciting at all in a sense, being one of --

VASILAS: Well, yes, it was exciting. One of the most exciting things maybe didn't have to do with the Coast Guard.

We left Corry by train and to Union Station and then transferred to go to West Palm Beach, and I walked out the train, and you're feeling very patriotic anyhow. I walked out the train, and there was the Capitol building, you know, at Union Station. And I never forgot how proud I was of it, how pleased I was and thought I got to do my best.

INTERVIEWER: It's for your country.

VASILAS: Yeah, for the country. Yeah, I got to do my best. That's wonderful. Then we got on the train and left.

INTERVIEWER: Were there men in the service that actually reached out to help you, that actually took care of you, took you under their wing, showed you the ropes or taught you how to handle the bureaucracy and, you know, that kind of thing?

VASILAS: Well, the --

INTERVIEWER: Or were you on your own?

VASILAS: The Chief -- pretty much on my own, but the Chief, the Radioman was --

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember his name?

VASILAS: -- no, I don't.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned the commanding, a Commander Dawson?

VASILAS: Yes, Bill.

INTERVIEWER: Was your --

VASILAS: William B. Dawson.

INTERVIEWER: William Dawson was your commanding officer --

VASILAS: Uh-huh.

INTERVIEWER: -- of the station, itself?

VASILAS: Uh-huh. He was also an Alexandrian.

INTERVIEWER: Really?

VASILAS: Or else he stayed here, maybe like I did. I don't know whether he was like my husband, an Alexandrian before the war, but he was very proud of the girls. He was very good to us.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that's interesting too.

VASILAS: There was a little bit of animosity between us, the radio girls and the yeomen. They thought we got special privileges.

INTERVIEWER: Really?

VASILAS: Well, we all lived upstairs over the radio shack. A shack? Nice, big, brick building. [Laughter.]

There would be inspection of the quarters. It might be that we were in bed asleep, and so they'd be very quiet not to awaken us because we had to get up and go on watch again. And we got a little special treatment that way because of our hours, and I think the yeomen kind of resented that.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh.

VASILAS: We were able to do our -- well, we had a washing machine, even. We were able to do our laundry anytime that we were free, and the special meals that we had before going on watch, they kind of resented it. But Commander Dawson was all on our side. He was very fair, a very nice guy.

INTERVIEWER: Was he an Academy graduate? Do you know?

VASILAS: Probably. But in any case he was all right. Manny got discharged before I did. Let's see. The war was over in August of '45, and Manny had enough points to get out September or October. He came back to work here. I re-upped for six months, which was all I could do because we were disbanded in the spring --

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

VASILAS: Well I had to talk him into getting married. I was having a little trouble with him.

[Laughter.]

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay.

VASILAS: Well, because, as you could tell by that name, it's a Greek name.

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

VASILAS: But he was born in Brooklyn. But he had parents here that he had to take care of. His father did not speak English, but his mother did very well, and he just wasn't sure how a wife would take to the care and money that he had to spend on his parents.

INTERVIEWER: And the parents lived here too as well?

VASILAS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

VASILAS: I am in the house that he bought before the war. And his parents were fine. They were very good. But I guess by May I convinced him that --

INTERVIEWER: You wanted --

VASILAS: -- I wasn't going to throw them out on the street or anything, and they were fine. More discrimination I got after the war than I did during the war against Greeks.

INTERVIEWER: Really?

VASILAS: Yes. My name was Spalding, English, you know, Anglo-Saxon.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, sure.

VASILAS: And we had Spaldings and baseball bats.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

VASILAS: I was still in uniform. I had been discharged, but you wear it until you can buy some clothes, a couple weeks or so. I went to rent an apartment here, and he tore the paper up when I said it was a Greek name. I'd only been married one day. She said, "We have to be sure our tenants are decent."

And I came back to the store, and I said to Manny, "Look, if we're going to have sons, they're going to put up with this discrimination?" And he was used to it. He knew about it, but I hadn't. And I said, "Let's legally change our name to Spalding. You could do that."

Well, he would do anything I wanted, but his parents were living with us and, well, I thought they'd be hurt by it. And I said, "No, I won't do it." So I kept Vasilas. Now it doesn't matter.

INTERVIEWER: No.

VASILAS: Most I have to do is spell it once in a while, but now it doesn't matter.

INTERVIEWER: Now, is that more of a Southern discrimination or --

VASILAS: No. No.

INTERVIEWER: -- it was at that time period --

VASILAS: All over.

INTERVIEWER: All over? So, if you had a foreign-sounding --

VASILAS: In Corry. In Corry, my parents, they didn't like that either. My mother would never introduce me as Lillian Vasilas. "This is Lillian, my daughter," anyplace, never could say that awful word. The Greeks here didn't like it. The non-Greeks there didn't like it. We liked it.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, obviously.

VASILAS: He was a nice guy.

INTERVIEWER: Did he encounter any of that while he was in the Coast Guard?

VASILAS: No. I don't know whether he did or not. I don't think so.

INTERVIEWER: Nothing that he spoke to you about?

VASILAS: No. He didn't say that he did, and I don't think he did. No, I don't think so.

INTERVIEWER: While you were in the service, did you serve with any other races or any African Americans that you remember?

VASILAS: No, not that I was conscious of.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

VASILAS: I'm sure there were some there.

INTERVIEWER: How were you perceived by the general public? When you were talking about -- a lot of times during wartime, you walk into a bar in uniform, and civilians will buy you drinks all night long.

VASILAS: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Same kind of thing in that time period?

VASILAS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Really?

VASILAS: I didn't go in bars.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay.

VASILAS: I didn't happen to like that, but, no, I think, except in Corry, you know, where they didn't like it for a while, I think the general public accepted us and were good to us that way, and they would treat you well.

My mother -- at the railroad station in Corry was a big train station thing, troops would come through. The ladies made a kind of a place with some coffee and cake they'd have for the boys on the train. I go home on leave, and my mother wanted to show it to me.

We go down there, and it's locked and at the moment no trains in. And she says, "Well, I've got a key, but it's only for military to go in there." "Mother, look at me." She said, "Oh, yes. I'm sorry." But small-town stuff, I certainly am glad I'd gone there.

INTERVIEWER: They were okay. So what were the relations between the various services like? The photo you showed me earlier, maybe talk just a little bit about that, between how did you feel about the other services, the Army, Navy.

VASILAS: Oh. It was fine. The Coast Guard, I think, takes a little bit of a ribbing.

INTERVIEWER: Did you get --

VASILAS: Well, Hooligan Navy and --

INTERVIEWER: Right.

VASILAS: -- running up and down the Potomac, you know, and that kind of thing. But it was good-natured. This was particularly from Navy guys, but not malicious.

INTERVIEWER: No?

VASILAS: No. I don't think there was, and I'm sure now that doesn't exist at all.

INTERVIEWER: There's still the ribbing.

VASILAS: There is some?

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

VASILAS: Well --

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. "Why do you have to be six feet tall to join the Coast Guard? So you can walk to shore when your boat sinks," that kind of thing, you know.

VASILAS: Well, where I swim with a -- there was an ex-World War II Navy guy there, just a seaman, and he starts giving me some "Hooligan" stuff. "Don't you ever say that to me."

I went over to another guy at the pool, and it's a Navy ex-admiral, and I said he's bad-mouthing the Coast Guard. And that's not really bad-mouthing.

INTERVIEWER: No.

VASILAS: And he said, "Well, I'll go tell him what I think. I admire them tremendously," and I -- you know, no, we can't do that. But we're friends now, but he doesn't do that.

INTERVIEWER: Now, you mentioned that you did date and end up marrying your husband, but was there a policy on whether or not SPARs could date, or was that even brought up in the Regulations at all or was it --

VASILAS: No, it was not mentioned.

INTERVIEWER: It wasn't mentioned at all?

VASILAS: No.

INTERVIEWER: Did you get a feeling from -- that they don't want you dating other service members or --

VASILAS: No.

INTERVIEWER: -- they didn't care?

VASILAS: No. I don't think they cared much.

INTERVIEWER: They didn't care much.

VASILAS: They didn't. As I recall, when we went into boot camp, the only lecture we got on this business of what the girls are there for, you know, was remember all eyes are on you, behave as you would in your hometown, don't do anything you wouldn't do at home, and everything will be fine. And that was about the extent of what they said --

INTERVIEWER: That sounds like good advice.

VASILAS: In boot camp.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

VASILAS: And I think we felt that way. I think we felt proud of ourselves and we wanted to prove that we were useful.

INTERVIEWER: Sure. Well, especially being a radio operator as well, didn't that give you a little bit of added satisfaction?

VASILAS: Yes. Yeah, I -- of course, the yeomen did wonderful things.

INTERVIEWER: Sure. Right.

VASILAS: But I think --

INTERVIEWER: And so do the water tenders and --

VASILAS: I think my rate was a little better.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

VASILAS: Well, isn't it a right arm rate, like yeoman, like a --

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

VASILAS: -- boatswain's mate?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, I believe so.

VASILAS: I think it is.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

VASILAS: That's considered a little better, isn't it? It's considered line of command --

INTERVIEWER: Right. How did you feel about the people we were fighting at the time, the Germans, the Italians, the Japanese?

VASILAS: I didn't like them.

INTERVIEWER: Right. You didn't?

VASILAS: I still don't.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

VASILAS: I thought I'll never drive a Japanese car. But I will take you back to the railroad station in my Honda. I have mellowed a little bit.

INTERVIEWER: A little?

VASILAS: Yeah, but not much.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

VASILAS: They caused a lot of trouble. Yeah, they changed lives completely. But I can't think of a bad word that I could possibly say about the Coast Guard. They treated us very well, treated me like a lady.

INTERVIEWER: So you felt like with respect and --

VASILAS: Yes, I did. Yes. I can't think of any incident that was really bad. That one with the Chief, I understand.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh.

VASILAS: No, there was no other one. No other one.

INTERVIEWER: So a lot of good memories then?

VASILAS: Oh, yes, absolutely. I wasn't one really to date very much. So I didn't go out with many guys. One thing, I was engaged to an Army guy.

INTERVIEWER: And that didn't last, though?

VASILAS: It lasted, like, seven years.

INTERVIEWER: Seven years, but --

VASILAS: Soon as I met Manny, it was --

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

VASILAS: Yeah, that's okay. I had to go home and tell him that I'm sorry, I'm going to marry somebody else.

INTERVIEWER: That happened a lot, I think.

VASILAS: I think it did, too. World War II really changed us. I would have been in that small town in Pennsylvania, probably collecting taxes. And if the Coast Guard says that I did good for them, my life changed for the better because of them too.

I don't know about the people that had a rougher service time than I did with combat duty and this thing, but, of course, the girls didn't do it then. But, no, as far as I'm concerned, it was great.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think about women in combat now?

VASILAS: Oh, I don't think it's a good place for them.

INTERVIEWER: No?

VASILAS: No, I don't. No, I don't think so. I don't know that you ought to be mixed together that much anymore. I admire the work they do and what they do. I'm sure they can do just as well as the boys can do, but, no, I don't think combat is the place for them.

INTERVIEWER: If you had the chance to stay in the Coast Guard, if the Coast Guard had given you the opportunity to make it a career, would you have considered it?

VASILAS: Yes. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: And done 20 years and --

VASILAS: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Are you sure?

VASILAS: I think so. Yeah, but I'm very proud of them. Here, I read in a book that they gave me at one of these dinners, what the Coast Guard does in one day, the lives they save in one day. I'm pleased now that I think people are beginning to really realize that and give the Coast Guard the credit it deserves.

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

VASILAS: I read a book about the Coast Guard. That was the name of it. It said that the largest percentage of casualties in World War II was the Coast Guard. Nobody knows that.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

VASILAS: And I think the reason for that was because of the landing barges. They manned these landing barges, particularly in Asia, and they're sitting ducks.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

VASILAS: The Japanese are up here, and the Marines are landing, and they're standing there. Then I think that's part of that reason.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember your last day in the service and your transition back into civilian life? Like you said, your husband had enough points to get out --

VASILAS: He was out --

INTERVIEWER: -- quickly, so --

VASILAS: -- in September or so.

INTERVIEWER: In September of '45.

VASILAS: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: So you stayed in?

VASILAS: I did too. But, yeah, of '45. But I could re-up for a little over six months. I re-upped until May. It was --

INTERVIEWER: Of '46?

VASILAS: -- as long as I could.

INTERVIEWER: And so you stayed in till May of '46?

VASILAS: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: And then got out. And do you remember that final day? Anything you remember about it? Any melancholy -- about giving up the uniform or happiness or joy?

VASILAS: Well, I hated to leave the Coast Guard, but, of course, this was another adventure I was going on. But I was discharged in Philadelphia.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh.

VASILAS: I had tonsillitis, and the Coast Guard said they would take care of me. I could stay, and they'd see to my tonsils in the hospital in Philadelphia or I could go home.

Well, I chose to go home. I came here and got married the next day because I either had to get married -- I didn't have a place to live -- or go home, and I didn't want to go back to Corry at that particular moment. So I came home and had my tonsils out.

INTERVIEWER: Wow.

VASILAS: And so that's not much of a memory.

INTERVIEWER: No. No, I guess not.

VASILAS: But, you know, it took care of the problem anyhow.

INTERVIEWER: Most of the veterans I talk to, you know, couldn't wait to get out and couldn't wait to get back to being a civilian again, so --

VASILAS: No, I don't think so.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

VASILAS: I was very happy and very proud of the Coast Guard and felt I did a good thing.

The day that I made First Class and the Chief was so upset -- he wasn't upset too much at First Class -- I made a big mistake in receiving stuff. We'll say it's the only one I made. You would copy these messages, and it was coded. It was all numbers, and you'd go over to the teletype and type it in, and then you'd take your paper that you had copied. You copied it onto a typewriter. We called

it a "mill," and you'd hold it up along there and compare because one number off might change the whole mess.

This was after the war, though, and plain language was coming in, and that was interesting, getting messages from -- I'd call my mother, I'll be home, you know. I get this message from a guy in the China Sea someplace asking for, I think it was, \$5,000 for a repair so he could come home, to repair his ship. I put the paper up there, teletype, electronic typewriter ran away with me and added two zeros.

INTERVIEWER: So you went to a half-a-million?

VASILAS: So the next day -- every morning, Mr. Dawson went through the messages that had come in, particularly the plain ones. Otherwise, they went up to the coding. But man the speaker down -- "What the hell is Spalding trying to do? Buy him a whole new ship?"

[Laughter.]

VASILAS: He checked it, and he fixed it and sent it out.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay.

VASILAS: And then was no --

INTERVIEWER: That's good.

VASILAS: -- repercussions, but somehow I remember that.

INTERVIEWER: That was your one --

VASILAS: One, my error.

INTERVIEWER: One error?

VASILAS: My one big mistake.

INTERVIEWER: One big mistake.

VASILAS: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: But it was caught in time, so --

VASILAS: And the Chief kind of liked it. [Laughter.]

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay. But that's generally what would happen was you were getting messages from the field directed to your --

VASILAS: Office, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: -- office.

VASILAS: Uh-huh.

INTERVIEWER: And then you would then -- and they were already, during the war --

VASILAS: Coded.

INTERVIEWER: -- encoded?

VASILAS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: And then you would forward them by teletype, on to Coast Guard headquarters.

VASILAS: To headquarters, where there was coding girls. I think girls did that, too, some of them.

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

VASILAS: That would be a great thing.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, I would think so too. Well, I talked to other radio operators that were sent to South America to intercept enemy radio transmissions--

VASILAS: Uh-huh.

INTERVIEWER: They would forward those on too.

VASILAS: Sure.

INTERVIEWER: So they were doing quite a lot of that, which nobody knows the Coast Guard was involved in.

VASILAS: I think that being a radio operator in a situation like that would be more exciting than what I was doing.

INTERVIEWER: Sure. Right.

VASILAS: Much more. But you do what you're told.

INTERVIEWER: We covered a lot here. Is there something I've missed or something you'd like to put in the tape?

VASILAS: You know that I drove a Jeep every noon on Saturday to the recruiting thing.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, tell me about that. Yeah, I saw that you were actually recruiting men and women or just women for SPARs?

VASILAS: No, just women. Women.

INTERVIEWER: Where would you go and how --

VASILAS: I would drive from Miami to along the Tamiami Trail --

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm.

VASILAS: -- to Tampa, and --

INTERVIEWER: This is before you went to radio school. You were still down in Miami doing the driving?

VASILAS: Yes. That was right out of my short life in boot camp.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

VASILAS: And I would -- I remember there was a Coast Guard base on the Tamiami Trail somewhere, or there was then.

I remember the first time I drove this same officer that sent me to school. We got there, and he got out, and he said to the seamen that were taking his baggage or whatever he had, "Take care of her, and be sure she gets something to eat." Somehow that struck me. Funny things like that stick in your mind.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm.

VASILAS: I thought it was very nice. He was concerned that I wouldn't have any dinner, but I went on to Tampa -- he stayed in Tampa -- and then around the north -- or I remember a Bok Tower down there. It's a very famous thing in Florida and into Fort Myers and then back down the coast.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm.

VASILAS: To Florida or to Miami. No, I would set up a recruiting station.

INTERVIEWER: Where would you pick, to the post office --

VASILAS: Community post office.

One time, I had a lady officer with me. I'm not sure what she was doing. Maybe she was recruiting too. She said if -- we were staying in a motel, and she said about going down to a bar and drinking. And I had this car that said "Coast Guard Recruiting" on it, and I didn't think it was the thing to do. And I -- she was an officer. I told her I wouldn't drive the car down there. I didn't think the ladies would like it if they saw "Coast Guard Recruiting" girls in a beer joint.

INTERVIEWER: Going in for a drink.

VASILAS: And a car saying "Recruiting" on it too. Somehow I didn't think that was right.

Well, of course she reported me when we got back to Miami, and the guy listening to her complaint, when I told him how I felt, he dismissed it. And from then on, I drove alone mostly --

INTERVIEWER: Really.

VASILAS: -- by myself. But I didn't think that was right. I didn't want to do anything to cast any shadows at all on the Coast Guard. I think they were very good to me, and I'm sure they were good to most of the girls.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have much luck recruiting?

VASILAS: Yeah. I don't know that it was much. There was the same problem that I had in Corry. The mothers didn't like it, but I did recruit some, yes. I hope they were happy with what happened.

That's Question No 42. They says I got -- I wrote it down. I got much to say about, on Question 42.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think about today's Coast Guard?

VASILAS: Oh, about today's Coast Guard, I think I've pretty well covered that area.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, you sure did. You covered a -- I didn't have to ask you a lot of these questions because you went right into them.

VASILAS: I'm sure lately -- now, here for 60 years, thereabouts, I never hear from the Coast Guard. Here, in the last six months, I went to two dinners at

the Women's Memorial. I went to this thing Tuesday, a VIP reception in Navy Archives. There's some kind of a -- and I think it's redundant to what we have done -- a lunch in early September where the SPARs are supposed to get up and tell their stuff.

INTERVIEWER: We haven't heard about this.

VASILAS: Yeah. Well, then today -- every day something comes in. Today something came.

INTERVIEWER: See, you're on a list now somewhere, and --

VASILAS: Yeah, I'm on a list. That in November, the 10th anniversary of the Women's Memorial or some sort of a big --

INTERVIEWER: That's probably right.

VASILAS: -- four-day thing.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Yeah.

VASILAS: Well, we -- and the last thing, they had us up singing there. We had a song of our own.

INTERVIEWER: The SPAR song?

VASILAS: Yeah. Do you know it?

INTERVIEWER: No. I don't know the words, myself, but I do you know Betty Splaine?

VASILAS: No.

INTERVIEWER: She was in the SPARs. She ended up being the first female warrant officer.

VASILAS: No.

INTERVIEWER: She stayed in through the '40s, and I guess -- there was a period where she had to get out but came back in when -- they opened it up to women again in the '50s, and so she's around. And so she's quite the active spirit, and --

VASILAS: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: -- she's sung it for us. And then we've got the SPAR song book --

VASILAS: Oh, is there?

INTERVIEWER: Yes. If you don't have it, I'll make a copy of it for you, and I'll send you one. Now, what was it, the "Three Years Before the Mast," the book about --

VASILAS: Oh, yes. That was -- there was that. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: So we've got that.

VASILAS: I don't have it, but I know that that existed. It was like [singing]: "Well, when a Coast Guard girl walks down the street."

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm.

VASILAS: That one. I don't remember where I would have learned that, since I was always at these small stations, but maybe boot camp or radio, where I was with other girls.

INTERVIEWER: It probably was radio school. Did you have to march to class every morning from the barracks?

VASILAS: Oh, it was in the same building again.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, it's all in the same building?

VASILAS: Yeah. We did march, as the picture showed, and tried to -- some nights we'd be through by about 7, and we could go down and swim in the ocean if we wanted to.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm.

VASILAS: I don't happen to like ocean swimming. I don't like the waves. Here, Lake Erie doesn't have such -- it does have, but --

Not a lot of marching. Of course, we marched in boot camp and then some in radio school, but, no, set more to working and then -- which was the object anyhow. I didn't find it hard to get into military life or come from civilian. I didn't, and --

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, it sounds like you made a relatively easy transition

—

VASILAS: -- it was very easy. I think I was so pleased with myself. Maybe that was it, yeah, and the desire to prove to the people in Corry that we were useful.

INTERVIEWER: Did you get any recognition from your hometown at the time or --

VASILAS: No.

INTERVIEWER: -- were you written up in the paper at all?

VASILAS: Oh, yeah. In the end, they were fine.

INTERVIEWER: So your parents came around, too, eventually --

VASILAS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: -- and supported you?

VASILAS: There was -- they said something to my mother like, "Well, Mabel didn't have any boys to send to war, but she did good with her two girls."

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm.

VASILAS: And she was kind of pleased at that. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: There was a lot made of the SPARs at the time that you were brought on so that men, other men could give up these desk jobs and go to sea.

VASILAS: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: And did you hear that at all or did you --

VASILAS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: -- hear a lot of about that?

VASILAS: I knew the guy that I relieved, and he went to sea.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, yeah? Did you?

VASILAS: The radioman. Uh-huh.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

VASILAS: I met him, and off he went. When I went down there, he left.

INTERVIEWER: When you were reported, he left?

VASILAS: Yeah. And a couple others that the other girls relieved too.

INTERVIEWER: So you were probably among the first SPARs then because you came in 1943. So you were a brand-new commodity.

VASILAS: Well, it was the second class of SPARs at the Biltmore, and I think maybe the --

INTERVIEWER: So you were in the second group?

VASILAS: Second. And I was in the second class at radio school too.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. So you were still really pretty much right there.

VASILAS: Yes, still pretty early.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

VASILAS: Yeah, that's something.

INTERVIEWER: And you said that radio school wasn't -- was Coast Guard run?

VASILAS: Yes, it was Coast Guard only.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. I was going to say the sonar operators, as I understand it, had to go to a Navy school, so --

VASILAS: We didn't do that, but we learned the signaling flags.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

VASILAS: But I don't know why. We weren't going to be aboard ship to use them.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm.

VASILAS: But it was just part of the Navy discipline.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever meet Captain Stratton?

VASILAS: No.

INTERVIEWER: No?

VASILAS: No. I didn't travel in those circles.

INTERVIEWER: No. I just read in her interview that she would try to get -- whenever a class graduated from A School or, you know, whatever training school, she tried to be there.

VASILAS: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Obviously, she couldn't make every one.

VASILAS: No, of course not.

INTERVIEWER: Did you make any of the SPAR reunions over the years? I know there was a big one for the 50th.

VASILAS: Yeah. There was a big one in Crystal City not long ago.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

VASILAS: But, for some reason or whatever, maybe one of my sons was on vacation, at any rate, I'm pretty well stuck here.

And I remember feeling that the other two girls that I was at Washington Radio with are dead. Who would I know?

In boot camp and in radio school, you're too busy to really get friendly and have good times out together and stuff. You didn't do it. So I didn't have that kind of a relationship in the Coast Guard. I didn't get very close to a lot of girls, the three of us that came from school together, and that was it. So I wouldn't have known anybody anyhow.

INTERVIEWER: So how long were you at the Washington Radio station? Would have been late '43?

VASILAS: Yeah, I been -- been what?

INTERVIEWER: Late '43?

VASILAS: Yeah. I went in -- yes, late '43. I left in '46.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, not quite three years?

VASILAS: Not quite three years, must have been two and a half years down there.

INTERVIEWER: That's a pretty long duty.

VASILAS: Yeah, and being in one place.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. But you were needed at that station, right? Was there any talk of ever transferring you anywhere else?

VASILAS: No. There were other radio stations, of course. What's it called? Loran Stations?

INTERVIEWER: Sure, the Loran Station started coming out in '44.

VASILAS: Yeah. But, no, apparently, I was meant to stay --

INTERVIEWER: You were needed.

VASILAS: -- right there. And why change when someone knows the routine and they -- with the way you do. Commander Dawson was very pleased with the girls.

INTERVIEWER: Good.

VASILAS: He was good. And then in about six months that Manny was not there but we were dating, he put up a notice that -- he was a civilian then, but then that he could come and pick me up for our dates.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, Commander Dawson let him?

VASILAS: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Let him back in the gate just to --

VASILAS: Let him back in the gate. The word was let him in anytime, but he knew everything down there anyhow. He put up the antennas and done all the secret stuff. But Commander Dawson was a good guy.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that's interesting. That's good to know.

Anything else you'd like to add?

VASILAS: My whole experience was good, as --

INTERVIEWER: It sounds like it.

VASILAS: -- you can see. I enjoyed the girls. I enjoyed the whole thing. And, as I say, it changed my life for the better. Better off here than in Corry, which has gone downhill since.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm.

VASILAS: A small town. It's a town of old people now, nothing for the young to do. They've left.

INTERVIEWER: So where is it?

VASILAS: Just outside of Erie, about 30 miles.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

VASILAS: A little bit southeast of Erie.

It was a great place to grow up because of the -- I did a lot of ice skating and those kind of sports, and I think, inadvertently, the life there and the sports and stuff that went on there that I did -- because it was what you did and then the Coast Guard.

I decided I would try to smoke to be macho like -- because I'm a sailor or, you know, and I didn't like it. So I didn't smoke. And the exercise that you take, what you did get there, drilling and whatever -- and since then I go, I've been going to swimming now almost 15 years, every day. Inadvertently, I did the right thing.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm.

VASILAS: And the Coast Guard played a big part in that for me. Oh, they -- they're great.

INTERVIEWER: It sounds like they almost, in a way, opened a new life, obviously.

VASILAS: Sure, they did. Sure, it did, but I think it must have for everybody.

INTERVIEWER: For so many.

VASILAS: There must have -- probably most of the girls came from very -- not maybe as small as Corry but small towns and never saw anything as beautiful as the Capitol that day. No, it changed my life for the better, and I hope I did them some good.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, I know you did.

VASILAS: You know that?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

VASILAS: No, it was great, and I'm very, very proud of them now.

And Tuesday -- I've seen the woman [Vice Admiral Vivien Crea] before, and we've talked. It's a nice, casual thing at these groups they have that you can talk to the officers where otherwise it's "yes, sir, no, sir," and, you know, on business hours.

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

VASILAS: But I saw her again Tuesday, and she hollered at me and we were talking. She's a vice admiral.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. Vice Admiral Crea?

VASILAS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. And she was a LANTAREA commander, and now she's up here at headquarters as the Vice Commandant.

VASILAS: Yeah. "If I was going to be an admiral, I'd like to be the admiral in charge of vice."

INTERVIEWER: Oh?

[Laughter.]

VASILAS: That's what she said.

[Laughter.]

INTERVIEWER: Really? Well, she hasn't told us that joke before but --

VASILAS: Yeah. No, she's very nice. But, normally, I couldn't have become that acquainted with her, but I think that's very nice.

There was a four-star Marine general there the other night, and I wasn't quite sure where I was going. So I go in the door, and I said to him, "Am I in the right place?" to the general. He said, "You're very much in the right place. Get something to eat and some drinks." Yeah, I like that.

INTERVIEWER: Well, good.

VASILAS: I like that. It's great. I'm very glad. My sons are kind of proud of both of us, Manny too. That we were both Coast Guard, even if he was too short. How tall do you have to be to be in a foxhole? What if he was Army?

INTERVIEWER: That's a good question. I don't know what those standards -- where they come up with the limitations?

VASILAS: Why, he was like 5'5". Yeah. Who cares?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

VASILAS: But they didn't have a uniform to fit him. They sent him immediately down there to fix some stuff that needed fixing. Well, he was in civvies. So he gets kicked off the chow line a couple times and complained, but he had to have tailor-mades, because they didn't have --

INTERVIEWER: He wasn't tall.

VASILAS: That seems too short to be in. They didn't have pants for him. But that's all right. It worked out very nicely, and my life has been very good.

INTERVIEWER: And the Coast Guard impacted you in a positive way.

VASILAS: I think so. Absolutely.

INTERVIEWER: Not only did it get you out of your hometown, you found who you ended up marrying, and he --

VASILAS: And he was good.

INTERVIEWER: You helped him build this business.

VASILAS: Yeah, he was fine. Yes.

The other day a customer came in, and it might have been the day I brought those pictures in. And he saw them, and I was telling him. I'd known him for some time, and he said, "Coast Guard saved my life not long ago." I said, "Goody. How did they do that?"

South of here on the Potomac, quite a ways, he was in a sailboat of his own, I think, that tipped over, and he's holding onto the side of it, and a Navy something-or-other was there. And they went to rescue him and got stuck.

INTERVIEWER: They did?

VASILAS: Because I guess the Potomac was a little shallow there, and they get stuck. So somebody else called the Coast Guard. They came and rescued the Navy and the guy.

INTERVIEWER: And the guy.

VASILAS: I thought that was great. [Laughter.]

INTERVIEWER: That's a great story.

VASILAS: I'm sure they aren't telling it hither and yon, but I was so glad the guy told me: Coast Guard rescued the Navy and the guy.

INTERVIEWER: That happens quite a lot.

VASILAS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Anytime they run into the shallow water like that, they're always in trouble.

VASILAS: Yeah. I got a thing they put on Coast Guard Foundation's sake.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, there you go.

VASILAS: Someplace. It was -- where I'd get them? It was probably at that dinner the other night.

INTERVIEWER: That dinner. Yeah, that sounds like a Coast Guard Foundation-sponsored event.

VASILAS: The next day, after the foundation dinner, my daughter-in-law got with me, who was in the Navy. A woman came in the store, and she says, "Are you Lillian?" "Yeah." "Were you a SPAR?" "Yeah." She says, "I know that." She says, "You were at that dinner the other night. I saw your name on a list." She says, "I work for the Coast Guard." She said, "You know, they raised, like, \$300,000 somehow for that dinner." She said the -- it was a \$500 a meal.

Well, I've had those good meals for \$20, but the food was good. She said some guys paid as much as \$5,000 to be there at that dinner.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, yeah.

VASILAS: I said, "Who on earth would do that?" Ship owners and shipping yards that the Coast Guard does things for. Possibly -- now this is my idea -- possibly, the Coast Guard saved other lives that, you know --

INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh.

VASILAS: -- and -- or else they just want to get on the good side of them.

INTERVIEWER: Right. They want a contract or --

VASILAS: Sure.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, sure.

VASILAS: So they paid the \$5,000. It was big. There was a lot of people there in line, but a \$5,000 dinner. I didn't pay the \$50 even. Yeah. They're great. They're great.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Well, thank you very much, for letting us talk here, and like I said, the process is we'll get this transcribed.

VASILAS: Yeah. When this came up that you was going to do this, I couldn't think that it was exciting enough.

INTERVIEWER: It's history, and it is important history --

VASILAS: It is history, but, you know, it wasn't exciting as I was sitting in a chair, "diddly-dotting" all day.

INTERVIEWER: That was just as important as so many of the other jobs --

VASILAS: Oh, yeah, it probably was very important.

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

VASILAS: A lot of the messages I know that were coded came in were from weather stations. I don't know whether the -- apparently, the Coast Guard had some ships running around in a circle, doing weather stuff.

INTERVIEWER: Yes -- they were called "weather stations" at first and later "ocean stations."

VASILAS: A lot of it was, I know, weather reports coming in.

INTERVIEWER: I've talked to a few of those guys, and that was very boring duty.

VASILAS: It was?

INTERVIEWER: Oh, yes. Plus, you get the constant rocking and rolling motion, you know, and you're steaming in circles for weeks at a time.

VASILAS: -- that's where the messages came from that I copied, from these guys going around in this, with the weather stations. I think that was the bulk of the things, though I did get one S.O.S.

INTERVIEWER: Oh?

VASILAS: It scared the daylights out of me.

INTERVIEWER: Was it from an Allied ship?

VASILAS: They never -- I never really found out. I called the -- I called the supervisor. I wasn't -- I couldn't handle it. I wasn't supposed to.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

VASILAS: But to hear "dit, dit, dit, da, da, da, dit, dit, dit." Wow, it scares you to death. Oh, well, I like it.

INTERVIEWER: And you can still read Morse Code?

VASILAS: Oh sure. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: I guess if they ever -- they don't really use it anymore.

VASILAS: No. Once it -- all right. Just let this other stuff break down like in Katrina, like in New Orleans.

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

VASILAS: Who did they holler for?

INTERVIEWER: The Ham Radio operators.

VASILAS: The Ham operators. Absolutely. It's an extra thing for Boy Scouts. So I teach Boy Scouts sometimes.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, good.

VASILAS: Yeah. I've got a little radio -- it's only about this big.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm.

VASILAS: It's battery powered, but it makes sound, and the speeds, you can vary the speed. And I'll sit at home sometimes and copy a whole page, just to do it, just to keep up, just because I like it.

I don't go on the air much. I don't like their conversations, and it's a waste of time. All the Hams talk about is, well, how high is your antenna; what kind of a rig have you got. That's boring. I want to know about your life there.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm.

VASILAS: Wherever you are. So I don't do that. And besides that, my antenna is down, and number-three son doesn't put it up again. But I've still got a valid Ham license. I can use it, if need be.

INTERVIEWER: That's interesting. So the Coast Guard gave you a life-long hobby too, as well. They gave you that interest in the radio that you still have today?

VASILAS: Yeah, that I never would have had one. Who in Corry would think of wanting to know Morse Code?

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

VASILAS: And, you know, that guy that did that was pretty good, Morse. There's a method to his madness, the way he did it, of the letters. When we learned it real quick. E, I, S, H, 5, and T, M, O. And immediately, in one day, you've got eight letters. Those are the dits: E, 1, I, 2, S, 3, H, 4, 5 is a letter 5. E, I, S, H, 5, dit, dit, dit, dit.

INTERVIEWER: I see.

VASILAS: T, M, O is the dashes. T, M is 2, and O is 3. Well, that was pretty good. Found out there was a system to it.

INTERVIEWER: And you learned that system in three months at the training center?

VASILAS: An extensive three months.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

VASILAS: That was a hard three months. A lot didn't make it, and I think you had to maybe have some -- I don't know. Maybe some rhythm or some musical abilities.

INTERVIEWER: Some kind of eye-hand coordination or some --

VASILAS: Yeah, kind of that. My mother was a piano player for silent movies. I didn't inherit her ability to play the piano, but I think there's some connection in the back of your mind that way that you can separate the -- if it comes in real fast, "dit, dit, dit, da, da, da, dit, dit, dit," you got to be able to separate it.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. I mean, I've heard the messages before. I couldn't do it. It's too fast.

VASILAS: But my teacher was pretty smart. He had a system. He didn't just make up noises.

INTERVIEWER: Interesting.

VASILAS: Yeah. And look how long it lasted. Look how long it [Morse] was in use.

INTERVIEWER: Till just about ten years ago, and I think it still is, as you said, with the Ham operators.

VASILAS: Well, Hams. And I also think there's some private vessels that still have it.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, sure.

VASILAS: Well, possibly can't afford a computer or something.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

VASILAS: I've been concerned about where are they going to get an answer if the -- but I think there's still some of those that are using it. But that was part of history, and it's old like I am, and that's it. But, no, things are great.

INTERVIEWER: Well, good. Again, thank you very much.

VASILAS: You're very welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

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