Once a WREN always a WREN. You can go into a place and you meet a total stranger and you find out she’s a WREN, you’ve formed an association right then and there.

My name is Janet Hester Watt. I was born in Onoway, Alberta. It was while I was in Vancouver then, in 1945, I joined the Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service, otherwise known as WRCNS.

My parents, when I came home and said that I had joined the Navy, they weren’t surprised. I think they felt all along there was just a matter of time. So, they were very supportive. So, there was four of us then in the Navy — my two brothers and my sister Jean and I.

This is when we were on basic training in HMCS Conestoga. This is the [General Service], wagon and we had to go and pick up the garbage and dump it in there.

What I found the hardest, first of all, was taking orders. Your orders were just shouted at you and you know you had no way of coming back.

We were sent then to shovel snow and then after that we went for our shots, you know, on each arm. So, then we were told to soak our arms and in hot water, have a good hot bath and go to bed early. Well, next day most of us could hardly move our arms, but you keep going.

When we were sent to scrub floors, well, we scrubbed floors like we really meant it. Well, then we’d move on and then another group of Wrens would come out and they scrub the same floor we had just scrubbed. So, we learned to just skim it off and keep going.

But when I first joined I didn’t really know what I wanted to do. I thought I’d be doing the same as my sister Jean and go for a SBA, sick berth attendant. And then they phoned one day and said that there was a new category being introduced as Dental Assisting and wanted to know if I’d like to do that, and so that delighted me.

This is Elizabeth Robertson. I’m the middle, Janet Watt, and then this is Mary Robertson from Winnipeg. We were the last draft of WRENS to be trained and we were this new category of dental assistants. We did simple chair assisting like putting on the bib and handing the instruments to the dentist and mixing the fillings, and so that was our main job.

I am this one right on the end. See, we were housed with the Army girls at Harbord and St. George [streets in Toronto] and every day paraded to the dental clinic. And the very first day that we were there the dentist chose me to be a patient and I was rather nervous, but he was delighted that I was nervous. And then he discovered that I needed to have a filling and then he started to do the anesthetic, and I started to faint. The ammonia capsule is so big and then just press it gently, it pops, and then just waft it back and forth under a person’s nose. Well, the little girl, the young girl had — she was trying to bang it on the edge of the safety breakage thing. A thing about this wide. Well, I get farther and farther fainting. Everything was going wrong and he was so happy because it was the very first day of teaching us. And those dentists were awfully nice, my goodness, they were patient with us and they were really nice. They gave us really good training. At the end of the course we were sent to various stations and 17, no 18 of us were sent to HMCS Cornwallis on the Bay of Fundy.

Cornwallis was newly built and was the largest base in the British Empire. There were about 20 dentists. Their assistants up to that time had been men and then the WRENS took over. A lot of people - I think it’s the first time they’d ever been in a dentist and most people have a terror of dentists.

Most people we saw were on their way either to be going on board ships or coming back off board ships ready for demobilization. So, our first patient, I don’t think he had ever been to a dentist before in his life, and he was about 17 and a half years old. Finally, it was time to shut off the water. Well, next thing I know, what did I do? Instead of shutting it off I turn it on full blast and this piece of hose shot out of my hand and it drenched this poor fellow from head to toe. Well, that was fine. We got him mopped up. And I heard this awful crash, looked over in there, that chair collapsed and there was our patient, on the floor. So, we got him picked up and the chair put back together and we gave him a chit to come back in a few days time to have the sutures removed. We never saw him again. He was going down that gangway — no Olympian could have ever caught up to him.

I never once had any problem with being a female in the Navy. The men generally treated us with a great deal of respect. Never once had any sort of insult or innuendo about women in the Navy. They were they were very, very kind to us. And one thing about it — there were about 10,000 men and only about 7,000 women and there was never such a thing as a wallflower at a dance.

Cornwallis was a very large base and it was wonderful. It had three swimming pools and it had bowling alleys and I learned to bowl while I was there. Dancing, there was always a dance somewhere, and movies.

When you went shopping you tore this off and then the storekeeper kept that and then they could turn it in to get… So, suppose you bought sugar, and they would turn those into their warehouses to get their rations. And I don’t know about this one here, but they were for tea and sugar. I don’t remember if there was coffee, but I know sugar was one of the main ones.

Narrator: <<At one minute after midnight tonight, Tuesday the 8th of May, we may allow ourselves a brief period of rejoicing. >>

I had the day off from the dental clinic and so I was catching up on my rest. So, they put out a call for people to make sandwiches. So, I decided that I’d go and help make sandwiches. For the whole afternoon I buttered two slices of bread, pass them over, two slices of bread, pass it over, two slices of bread, pass it over. And so then in the evening the place was crowded – it was held in the drill shed. So, as we were at the dance, there was a young sailor, kind worse for wear, he was kind of moving up his way to ask me to dance. And these two men stood in front of me and gently encouraged him to go in another direction. And then my brother Gordon turns to me he says to me “Darn you, Janet! Don’t do that again.” And I said, “What did I do?” He said, “You looked at him.” And I thought, “Oh, these protective brothers!”

Well, after the war I went back to my original job. I considered going into dental work. I really enjoyed the dental work, but my old job paid better than dental work. Now, I worked for H.J. Heinz company of the 57 varieties, you know, ketchup, soup. And each Heinz employee who came back to work at Heinz following the war were given one of these lighters signed by Mr. H.J. Heinz, the second.

Well, I found it a little difficult at first. You know you get used to the routine, and you have to make up your mind each day when you’re in civilian life [about] what you’re going to wear, where in the Navy you knew what you’re going to put on. I was the chatterbox at home, but out in public I was the shy one, backed up against the wall. So, this brought me out of my shell a lot. Just being there and wearing that uniform and getting used to being ordered. I found it very helpful for me.