

Summary of interview with **Mary Ellen Wolcott**

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Asheville, NC

Reid Chapman, interviewer

Mary Ellen Wolcott, an Asheville native, remembers the eve of World War 11 as "a hopeful time." After the hard hit dealt by the Great Depression WNC was beginning to feel some relief by 1937. Mrs. Wolcott had graduated from Lee Edwards High School and spent two years at Women's College in Greensboro, NC before returning home. She had just taken a job with the Asheville Citizen, the city's evening paper. She was a big fan of the Roosevelts, who she saw as "strong advocates" for the people.

"War to us was inconceivable. It never occurred to me that young men I went to high school with would die at Solerno." Two of them did before the war's end. In 1941 her boyfriend Billy Wolcott was called up. He was inducted into the 17th Field artillery based in Fort Bragg, NC. He later was sent to Camp Blanding, FL.

In April of 1942 they were married She moved to Jacksonville, FL where he was training. En route she saw a flag draped coffin at Camp Croft, SC and had her first "quiver of 'this isn't going to be good.'" While in Florida she stayed on the beach. Her memories of the time were quite fond: time off at the beach with Billy, singing with many of the other families. She remembers the camaraderie of the other wives, folks from Oregon, Michigan, Tennessee, and New England. This was all shattered when the 17th Field Artillery shipped out.

The women followed the convoy to Fort Bragg. Mrs. Wolcott and Billy rented an extra bedroom in someone's house for the night. She vividly remembers the stoicism of a general's wife, who "sat upright in the car" as the soldiers filed onto the troop train. "It pulled out of the train station and there we stood It was as if your world ended." In relating this memory, Mrs. Wolcott became teary eyed. "I guess I'm crying for the other girls." She related the story of one of those others, a woman from Oregon who was six months pregnant as her husband shipped out

Billy's sister lived in Raleigh at the time. Mary Ellen and four other women went to Raleigh. At the time she didn't know where her husband was going, but watched the newsreels of big convoys crossing the Atlantic, while an "absolute sea of ships were coming through Gibraltar." She recognized now the strain she would feel throughout the war. "I was anxious. For three years I never knew if I was a bride or a widow."

She returned to Asheville to live with her parents in Norwood Park and resumed work with the Asheville Citizen in the newsroom. Every day she caught the bus downtown. Lots of "old men" ran the paper during the war. She loomed over the ticker tape that delivered news to the paper. "They got used to me crying as I read names of those who died." She was assigned to cover the stories of returning soldiers and sailors. Every story she wrote was sent to Washington, DC to be

reviewed by the government censors. As she recollects, "the stories were milder when they got back home."

Mrs. Wolcott also wrote "people stories" for the paper. One of her most memorable assignments was covering a visit Eleanor Roosevelt made to Asheville. Mrs. Wolcott met her at the train station in Biltmore and then rode downtown with her to the New Deal office at the top of the Jackson Building. Folks in the South were at the time making light of Mrs. Roosevelt's activities. Across the nation women had formed what were called "Eleanor Groups." Mrs. Wolcott asked Mrs. Roosevelt if she sponsored these groups. Her reply was "No, but I'm honored by them."

Eventually she got word from Billy, discovering that he was first stationed not far from Salisbury, England before being convoyed to North Africa. He eventually fought his way through Italy. Never in his life would Billy return to Italy; he claimed he'd seen enough of it during the war.

Social life was very difficult for married women during the war. While single women went to dances at the various USO canteens, this was not appropriate for married women. To have a social outlet, she and many of the women she'd grown up with (including Mary Schail) formed the APO (Army Post Office) Wives' Club. Once a month, they'd meet, often at the Langren Hotel. Mrs. Wolcott wrote an initial article for the paper announcing the meeting. At each meeting they would have a guest speaker on a particular topic. Members contributed items they'd received from their husbands for a window display downtown.

This kind of support was very important among the women. Mrs. Wolcott distinctly remembers a trip to Myrtle Beach in June of 1944. She was there with four friends, including a woman whose brother was a paratrooper and was particularly "strained by the war." The news broke of the D-Day landing. This woman wanted a drink to calm herself. They found a cab driver who "knew how to find" good scotch. After several drinks, the woman decanted the remaining scotch and sent it to her brother in a Listerine bottle.

By summer 1945 most of Billy's peers had returned home, while he remained in Southern France. Finally, he returned on a 30-day leave to Fayetteville. Mrs. Wolcott took a bus and a train to arrive at his side. They got a hotel room, discovering quickly that after the years of separation "we hardly knew each other. He was paper thin. He had malaria, though he didn't know it yet." Throughout the war, Mrs. Wolcott had saved all her allotments. She and Billy took a trip to New York during his leave, attempting to spend all the allotments in one trip. While on the train to New York the war ended. "I was sort of sorry I didn't see Asheville when it exploded in celebration," Mary Ellen remarked.

They returned to Fort Bragg. Despite the late summer heat of the Sandhills, Mary Ellen had to pile blankets on Billy to keep him warm. It was at that point that they discovered he had malaria. He was transferred to Moore General Hospital in Swannanoa, NC, where Mrs. Wolcott could visit him.

As soldiers came streaming home, Mrs. Wolcott was kept busy detailing their stories. She wrote a full-page article on Logan Delaney, a local Tuskegee Airman. "Black men didn't get their just

turn in the war." She hoped to help rectify that. She was, like many other women, caught up in the wake of soldiers returning home and resuming their place in the workforce. After years of working in the newsroom, she was "made to go to the Living Section."