

**Vivian Eagan
Veteran**

**Mike Russert
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New York State Military Museum
Interviewers**

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MR: Could you give us your full name, date of birth, and place of birth, please.

VE: I am Vivian Theresa Eagan. I was born in Schenectady, NY on July 25th, 1922.

MR: Ok. What was your educational background prior to going into the service?

VE: I graduated from the Academy of Holy Names as a boarder in Albany, NY and I graduated from business school in Albany.

MR: Ok. Do you remember where you were and what you remember your experiences or your feelings when you heard about pearl harbor?

VE: I can't remember. I've tried to backtrack in my mind and I can't remember.

MR: Ok. Now, why did you end up joining the Navy?

VE: My best girlfriend said, "Best join the WAVES." And I said, "what's the WAVES?" She said, "That's the navy women." And I said, "Oh, what do we have to do?" She said, "Pick up an application at the post office." I said, "Is that all?" She said, "Yeah." So, within the week I went down and picked up the application, filled it out, sent it back. I think within a week I heard from them. And they wanted me to come to NY and be sworn in. And I had never been to New York before, so my dear father said he would go. But, the catch was you had to be 21 or 20 with your parents "Ok." And my mother wouldn't sign for me. She said if I wasn't happy she didn't want me to blame her for it. So my dad was in World War I and said he would, so he did.

MR: So you were twenty years old at this time then?

VE: Yes. So he brought me to NY and when we got there and got to fill out the papers and all that, they said, "What's his name? VeeVan?" And I said, "Well my birth certificate says one thing and my baptism says the other so they said they couldn't take me because my name wasn't Vivian. We had to have sworn statements that I was born and we were the same person. So my

dad and I went out and we found a notary republic and got the “Ok” that VeeVan and Vivian were the same person. And we went back and we filled out the papers and that was the beginning.

MR: Ok. Now you told me something amusing on the telephone about what your father said about you being 20 and not 21. Could you tell us about that?

VE: Well, you had to be 21 as I said. You had to be five feet. I was 5’1. You had to weigh 100 pounds. I weighed 102. So because I just skimmed under, my father always introduced me, “This is my daughter Vivian. She’s a Ripo because she’s too small to be a WAVE.” And he’d always sign his letters, “Dear little Ripo.”

MR: Now, when did you enlist in the WAVES?

VE: In February 1943.

MR: Ok and where did you go for your basic training and could you tell us a little bit about that?

VE: It was amazing. I went to the Bronx, NY. No, Hunter College. I had gone eight years to Catholic boarding school where we had to wake up at six o clock in the morning, make our bed by 6:30, go to mass. While we were at breakfast at seven, Sister would go and check our beds and if they weren’t made right, they were ripped apart. Bootcamp was a cinch to me, it was just a continuation of boarding school. And from there we left NY and every conceivable miserable day. There was rain, sleet, hail, snow, everything. We went to Stillwater, Oklahoma. The sun is shining, the grass is green, the flowers were bloomed and birds are singing. It was like from hell to heaven. And then, of course, in Bootcamp we weren’t allowed to talk to the sailors. I mean, they could sit right next to you and you couldn’t talk to them. We go to OK, we sit at the same table with them. Oh, and another funny thing, I would not eat with our kitchen silverware at home because it tasted tiny. But, Bootcamp, the trays are tin, the cups are tin, the silvers tin, the plates are tin. And when I wrote that to mother, she laughed. She felt I was gonna feel a big change. Then we got to OK, we had OK, there were maple tables and chairs, beautiful floral arrangements in the center of the table. It was so different. The sailors are sitting right there, and of course, they knew every time a new contingent of WAVES came in because we would keep our eyes straight ahead. You know, we would glance over but we wouldn’t talk. Then we realized, before too long, that we could talk to them. So, I did my own training in Stillwater.

MR: Now, is this the first time you had ever been away from home?

VE: Well, no because I went eight years to boarding school.

MR: That’s true, yes.

VE: But, that’s the first time I went away from home and couldn’t see anybody.

MR: How did you feel? Did you feel homesick at all?

VE: Of course. I had so many things that came up right then and there you wanted to tell your mother but you couldn't. But, my mother had been in bed for six years and that's why we had to go to boarding school, my sister and I because she couldn't take care of us. So, boarding school prepared me for the service.

MR: Did you get any special training at all while you were in the camps?

VE: At the school?

MR: In your boot camps and so on, did you get any kind of specialized training?

VE: The only thing that was different, we were trained by marines. And we were trained right in front of the reservoir. It was awful. It was freezing. It was rainy. You'd go to bed at night, your clothes were soaking wet, you'd wake up and put the same soaking wet clothes back on. And the marines even said that they would never have to drill in the weather that they had to drill us in. So that made us feel good. And then, when we got to OK and we saw the sailors drilling, we did circles around them. So we were glad the Marines taught us.

MR: What did you do after Oklahoma?

VE: I went to Arlington, the Bureau of Naval Personnel, which they referred to as BUPERS. And, they had put up special barracks for the waves and it was more like a hotel. They had strictly GI barracks. We had carpeted floors, a bed, a bourgeois chair, a regular closet, and a little dresser with a mirror. The hallways were carpeted, we had indirect lighting on the floor. It was terrific. At the end of each one was a lounge and of course, that was long before television. We could sit out in the lounge and have our discussions and talks and listen to the radio and write down the road were strictly GI barracks. Well, that only lasted a short time and then too many WAVES came to Washington. They had no place to put them. So, we had to share our room. And, in order to do that and accommodate the WAVES, they had to have so many cubic feet of air and light. And then, we had to share our closet, share our dresser, share our little chair and everything. So, again, being in a boarding school where you had to share everything anyway, that helped me. But, the thing is giving something and then taking away from it wasn't very nice.

MR: What kind of assignment did you have while you were there?

VE: My first one was working with family allowance and if they could've fired me they would've. We typed up these forms for them to receive the allowance and you were supposed to proofread your own. I can proofread somebody else's, but my own, I would read what it should have been and not what I typed. It was awful. So, they put me in the class of family relief. That was wonderful but it was sad. When you had to inform a sailor's relative of how he was killed, how it was abort ship and how it was torpedoed, or how it was bombed. It gives me the chills even talking about it now.

MR: Now with this, how did you contact the families? Did you have to do it personally?

VE: They were foreign letters. The name of the ship and what happened to it. And then after that, I was a red cross navy relief but I made up a lot of my own letters. I'd find out details about the sailor and then I'd write them my own personal letters filled with sorrow and regret. It was hard to do because you could put yourself in their position because I had someone who was only four years older than me who was in the marines and he was killed. So, when they told us he had been wounded and they let us know that they were going to send him home and instead of sending him home they sent him back out and he was killed. So I could relate to all of these letters that I had to send. But, you had to go on because the next one was just as bad.

MR: Now, where did you do this? Did you work in an office?

VE: Yes.

MR: Where was that?

VE: At the Bureau Naval Personal.

MR: Did you make any close friends while you were there?

VE: Oh yes. Only one of which I remained friends with, until she died last year.

MR: Now you said that one of the persons you remember was a lieutenant smiley.

VE: I just remember the name and it didn't suit him at all?

MR: Why not?

VE: He never smiled. Never never smiled. I said of all of the names in the world that was the most misfit one.

MR: So that's basically what you did for the entire time you were in service.

VE: But, I did take tap dancing as a hobby. And had special permission from the Navy to dance out but I had to wear my uniform to and from.

MR: Did you do this in the USO shows or shows in hospitals or just to entertain?

VE: Wherever. It was more for my own. It was my hobby. As a child, my parents couldn't afford to give me lessons so instead of going out drinking and doing things like that I took tap dancing.

MR: While you were in the service?

VE: Mhm.

MR: Where did you tap dance?

VE: We danced at, I can't even remember. Just different places that the dance teacher would dance. She even taught us how to do the hula. And I did that and caught pneumonia for having bare feet. I made up my own path to go home. And coming back, well the sailors were always

good to me because I was small. That's the advantage of a woman being small, they always took good care of me. The trains would be jampacked full all of the time. And I never had to stand, they always made room for me. And one time, they even had to stand sit between the cars and one offered me a suitcase, the other offered me a jacket and everybody took good care of me. But anyway, that particular time, I caught pneumonia but I had to go back because I would have been AWOL and I walked around with pneumonia for weeks and weeks. I was living out on subsistence at that time and that's when my best girlfriend, we had become roommates in this Jewish home. She was Jewish. We shared a huge bedroom. The bedroom was bigger than this room. Anyway, she and the landlady kept telling them that I was sick and they kept saying, "Send her in." So finally one day the landlady said, "If you don't think she's sick, you come out and check on her because I'm not going to be responsible for her." And that's when they sent me to the hospital and I did have walking pneumonia. It was during the time of polio and there was a gal in there who had polio and of course, we couldn't go near her so we'd go walk by her room and we'd stand at the door and talk to her. She was the sweetest, she hated to ask anybody anything. And then she got better, well enough that we could go in her room. She said to me, "Would you please move this tray? I can't turn and I don't want the pharmacist maid to." And that's how sweet she was. Then there was this other gal that complained about everything. She had an elevation, the rest of us had temperatures. So, when you compare the two, the one that had everything in the world constantly complained and the one that had nothing never said anything. So it just shows you, different types of people.

MR: You were in the Washington area when President Roosevelt died, do you remember the reaction to his death?

VE: I think even people that probably weren't in favor of him felt badly. But, he certainly did a lot for this country. I had a cousin that was in the CCCs and I still have the toothbrush holder that was his, the metal one. And when I'd go through the airport, the metal detector always went off. So now, I leave it in my handbag so I can just show them what it is. But, they had metal soap dishes and metal toothbrush holders and that was such a wonderful thing to do for these young fellows before our country too. Because it help put us back on our feet when we can't advise things like that today.

MR: How did you feel when you heard about the VE day?

VE: Very excited.

MR: How about the surrender of Japan? The Same?

VE: Yes.

MR: Do you remember your action to the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan?

VE: Not really.

MR: You returned home in 1946, what did you do after you were discharged?

VE: Well I was pregnant, so.

MR: Oh, you were married?

VE: Yes.

MR: When did you get married?

VE: While we were in service.

MR: Now was your husband in the military too?

VE: He was in the Navy. But it wasn't one of those love stories. Being in the Navy and seeing the world. We lived on the same street and our sisters played around together.

MR: Oh so he was from the same area you grew up in? And you knew him from?

VE: The same street.

MR: Did you ever keep in contact with anyone that you served with?

VE: This one gal, my roommate. When we were in service, we had made a pact that if we went out together we came home together. And when we'd go to USOs if somebody asked me if I'd like to go out someplace after, I'd ask him if he had a buddy. If he didn't, I'd say no, I'm with my girlfriend and we stick together. If he did, then we'd go the four of us. And then, when we'd introduce ourselves and say our name, and as soon as she said her name was Goldstein you could see the faces change. My heart ached for her so often. Thinking of what she must go through when she said her name just because she was Jewish. She was the same person that she had talked to them before they knew her name. It was awful. People are so biased.

MR: Did you ever make use of the GI bill at all?

VE: No, my husband did but not me.

MR: How about the fifty-two twenty club? Did you or your husband ever make use of that?

VE: No.

MR: Did you join Veterans organizations?

VE: Not then. I've been in the American Legion now since 1988 and I've been chapelling most of that time. Last night we went to a Legion man's wake.

MR: How do you think your time in service affected a change in your life?

VE: It made me appreciate my life. It made me appreciate the country I live in. When I joined, I can't say I joined because I was patriotic. I wanted to help out, but I also wanted the adventure. But after I was in and had to send those beautiful sad letters to people, then I realized that I really

wanted to be patriotic and if I were young enough today to join, it would be for patriotism. We never went to war, we never participated like the women of today do.

MR: Do you have some photographs to show us? Could you show us your first one in uniform?

VE: Yes.

MR: If you hold it up to the camera, Wayne can focus on that.

What year was that taken?

VE: 1944. Indianapolis.

MR: Do you have an example of mail that you wanted to show us too? What is that?

VE: That's a Vimeo to my uncle that was in the Marine.

MR: Now, you told us about something you do today that's kind of connected with the VA hospitals. What is that?

VE: Anyone that's treated at a VA hospital can participate in the VA creative national arts festival. And that either with art material, whatever it may be. One fellow had a piece of wood, but it was all different kinds of wood and every type of wood was symbolic of a phase of his life as a person of war. Every different color wood was different. That was so unique and so touching. But any kind of talent can be entered and unfortunately, not everyone that receives a gold medal they don't choose to send to the festival. But if you are, it's awesome. It's very emotional.

MR: Now have you been sent to any of these festivals?

VE: This October will be my fourth one.

MR: Could you show us that? What is your creative talent?

VE: Tap dancing.

MR: That's you in the lower right-hand corner? Right here. Tap dancing.

VE: Yes. The other gal is the one I told you about. Last year, we did Me and My Shadow and at a point, I went off and did my own thing and went ahead of her. Then she chastises me and tells me to go in the back. When I got in the back of her, I gave her a dirty look. And just then the cameras zoomed in on me and the audience all laughed so hard.

Shane Powell is fantastic. Every one of us, she sits down and talks to us. And has her picture taken with us, all hundreds, everyone. She sits down with every single one of us.

This is Bo Derrick. She has just gotten involved.

These are pictures when we danced for the auxiliary.

MR: And who is that in the top picture?

VE: At the top, is a gentleman that sang cabaret and Hellen and I danced with him. And down below is Doddy and I. Now, Hellen was supposed to go this year because Hellen is a veteran, Doddy is not. Hellen had made plans to go to London and take a cruise and she knew that they were going to be close and the festival was a week earlier this year. The festival was the sixth and she wasn't coming back until the ninth. The music therapist contacted the national if Doddy could go.

MR: Now, where will this be held this year?

VE: Oklahoma City, OK.

This was last years. That's when we did Me and My Shadow. This is where she's chastising me. The bottom one is where she's telling me to go back in my place.

This is how we dressed for Me and My Shadow. That's actually on stage. I think that's it.

MR: Well, thank you very much for your interview.

VE: Thank you.