

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

#375

RUTH COPE

DEPENDENT WIFE, HICKAM OFFICERS' QUARTERS

**INTERVIEWED ON
DECEMBER 1, 2001
BY KAREN BYRNE**

TRANSCRIBED BY:

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**USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

Karen Byrne (KB): The following oral history interview was conducted by Karen Byrne for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial, at Hilton Hawaiian Village, Waikiki, on December 1, 2001 at 3:45 p.m. The person being interviewed is Ruth Cope, who was a dependent wife living at the officers' quarters, Hickam [*Field*], on December 7, 1941. For the record, please state your full name, place of birth and birth date.

Ruth Cope (RC): Okay. I'm Ruth Cope and I was born in Wilmette, Illinois and my birth date is 3-31-16.

KB: What did you consider your hometown in 1941?

RC: Well, I was going to [*the University of*] Cal[ifornia] at Berkeley and but my parents had just passed away. They both died in their forties. And I had lived in Orange County and so right midway through my college career, I went to Helena, Montana to live with an aunt and an uncle who were wonderful to me. They had no children of their own, so they took care of me. One interesting about that, about the aunt and uncle, is that they decided to take me to Europe in 1939, as sort of a gift for going through what I had gone through with my mother and dad, and of course we were on the last eastbound voyage of the *Queen Mary* and were caught in the war over there. We were supposed to come home from Italy and we had a terrible time getting home. Finally, two weeks later, got home out of Sweden with floodlights coming all the way across the Atlantic. So somebody said, "Don't let Ruth go anywhere, she starts wars wherever she goes."

KB: And what were your parents' names?

RC: Lindman, L-I-N-D-M-A-N. Ray and Betty.

KB: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

RC: One brother.

KB: One brother.

RC: Yeah.

KB: And where did you go to high school?

RC: In Santa Ana.

KB: And could you please describe the circumstances that originally brought you to Hawaii and when that was?

RC: Yes. It was in the summer of 1941 and four of the sorority sisters at Cal [*University of California*] decided that we would go over for a two weeks vacation. Mainly we'd go on the *Lurline* and wait for it to make a round trip voyage to San Francisco, and then when it came back the next time, then we would go home. And the first day we were there, all these young navy pilots, air force pilots, came down to the *Lurline* to look us all over and I met Bill [*Second Lieutenant William S. Cope, U. S. Army Air Corps*] that day and then a whole group of the boys came over to see us where we were staying. And [*Second Lieutenant Philip M.*] "Phil" Rasmussen [*U.S. Army Air Corps*], who was best man at our wedding, he and Bill went to flying school together, and he was in that group too. So—and I just said, you know, "I think if I don't go home with you, maybe [*Second*] Lieutenant Cope might ask me to marry him."

I'm very upset with him. It took him a whole month! But we got married at the Hickam Officers' Club. We were the last wedding at Hickam, December [*Note: later in the interview, Mrs. Cope says November*] 26, before the war in '41.

So then of course, we couldn't do anything at—well, I washed dishes at the hospital that day. Bill couldn't do—he had been officer of the guard the night before but he couldn't do anything because the Japanese got every plane at Hickam—all the B-17s that day. And so how I happened to stay and work for the Women's Air Raid Defense [*WARD*] was we were all told to have our suitcases packed, one suitcase, one makeup kit. And we were given twenty-four hour notice to go back to the Mainland. And so we hadn't heard anything, so on—and of course the security was so great that they couldn't tell us any more than that. And so I went over to Bellows Field where Bill was flying B-18s, after they losing the [*B-*]17s, and I went over there to give him his Christmas present and when I came back, they said, "Ms. Cope, what are you doing here?"

And I said, “Well, I live here.”

And they said, “We evacuated the women from the base today.”

So then before another ship came, they realized they shouldn't send wives home, that had no dependents. And so that's how I happened to stay because the Women's Air Raid Defense was formed right after Christmas. And we started the work up there where the famous radar station up in the hills, where the boys were confused by what was coming in. And then we moved permanently and worked in a tunnel at Fort Shafter. And that was so top secret that Bill didn't get to see where I worked until the fiftieth anniversary of Pearl Harbor. So that really upset him that (laughs) he couldn't do that, yeah.

KB: I'd like to hear more about your WARD experience, but if we back up just a little bit. If you would describe what you were doing just prior to December 7 and then how you learned of the attack initially.

RC: You mean there really wasn't any—everybody says, “Weren't you frightened that day?” You can't be frightened when you're so surprised. The aftermath of it and waiting for them to come back. I think for me, the worst thing was nobody, not anyone in the Mainland being able to know we were all right. I mean, we knew we were all right and they didn't and that was bad for all of the survivors, I think. Yes. So but of course I really wasn't trained to do anything like nursing or anything, like the young lady that was there that day, that I believe is going to be at one of the panels. But see, the only reason why we had to wash dishes by hand is because we lost the power at Hickam that day. So it was a pretty hairy day with the bombing of the central barracks and losing all those boys there and everything. So we saw the plane coming over that took all of the planes at Hickam because we had two-story quarters overlooking Pearl. And Hickam was built in 1939 so the quarters were, the trees were little and you could see. Right now, if you go to Hickam Field, it's so grown up that it's hard to see the harbor.

KB: So do you remember specifically when you first realized that the attack had begun?

RC: Well, the noise was terrific and Bill had been officer of the guard until midnight, so we were still sound asleep. And the noise woke us up and Bill said, “The navy is certainly practicing close to shore today.”

And then with that—I think when they hit Hickam on the second attack, I believe—and right then came the Zero right over our quarters, because we only lived a block and a half from the Hickam flight line. So you know. And so what do you do, you know.

I think I was more affected almost by watching them make the movie. But I was younger then and I think you take your things in your stride. And having been through the war in such a terrible time in Europe for me and not knowing whether we were ever going to get home and not speaking the language too, which is different than there. So but there were a lot of heroic people that day.

And then the WARDees, we really, we had a—it was a wonderful group of girls. And they were all dedicated, almost all island girls because they had sent most of the wives home. In fact, when they organized it, there was one navy wife that was living off base and myself were the only two that missed the boat that day. Of course, there’s nothing like being at the wrong place at the wrong time and I’m glad I was! (Laughs)

KB: Can you describe briefly explain to us what the WARD program was and then a little bit more with your experiences with the WARDees?

RC: The WARDees were very, very dedicated and we did the radar work for the islands. And we were on three eight-hour, twenty-four hour shifts, night and day. And I happened to be a supervisor because I was—having graduated from college, I was a little older than a lot of the girls that they got. And of course it was so top secret. Of course, when Bill went to fly in the Battle of Midway, he called and said, “I’m going to be away for a few days,” and he said, “but I can’t tell you where I’m going,” I couldn’t tell him that I knew where he was going, so that’s how top secret it was. Yeah.

So, yes, I remember those days as the island people, they were simply wonderful to us. They—the old-time families were so, so grateful. They made us feel like—you know, usually, having all this wonderful life in the

air force that I had for twenty years as a pilot's wife, but we always lived on quarters. We didn't really get very often to know the town people. But they were just terrific to us and had us to their home and it was great hospitality. Yeah.

So another interesting thing, Bill, we were talking earlier about the B-18s and up at Bellows Field and Bill lost an engine on takeoff and landed in the ocean and the pilots were so excited to get rid of a B-18. The plane floated and interestingly enough the only one that was sick was the pilot that came to rescue him, the navy pilot. But then it floated and they brought it in and it still worked again. So that was it. And I plotted him in that day. He called up and said, "Hey, I landed in the ocean."

I said, "I know. I plotted you in." (Laughs)

So it was two of the big highlights of my work there. Sometimes working 'til midnight, 'til eight in the morning isn't a lot of fun, but you know. Anyway, I was too spoiled anyway probably.

KB: Tell us specifically what kind of training did the women in the WARDe receive and did you direct any of that?

RC: Military training. We were considered officers. We were paid by the army. But very extensive training from the army. Yeah.

KB: Do you remember how long that lasted?

RC: It was training continuously because we had people coming and going. And so having been one of the first in the WARDe, it seemed like a long time. But on the other hand, we needed it, because none of us had been trained for it before. So there's a Mary Erdman who was in charge of all of us. I thought she was older. She probably wasn't as old as I thought she was, but she was a good supervisor. And the people that were in charge of all of us were island people. So...

KB: And how long did the WARDe continue to operate?

RC: Well, I came home at the end of '42 and they were still operating. And there's a book called—that tells about the story of the WARDs and I really think—and I'm not positive about that, but I know they were working through 1943. But I wasn't there then. Yeah.

KB: What do you remember about the days immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor? What are your memories of what you experienced and what the general environment was like?

RC: It was not very nice because the young kids that had the guns, you know, somebody would say, "Why are you shooting?"

And they'd say, "I don't know why I'm shooting. Everybody else is."

And it was very uncertain life. Very, very bad. 'Cause we didn't know whether they were coming back again or anything else. And of course most of the women were older than I because see, I was, I mean I had only been on the base at Hickam less than a week, having been married on the twenty-sixth of November, so I really didn't know anyone there. And of course the wives that were my contemporaries, they were gone before I had a chance to meet them, so it wasn't fun. No. But I had a wonderful life as an air force wife. Yeah. Yeah. All got back to us.

When Bill flew the Berlin airlift, we had a chance to live two years in Germany and then we had three wonderful years in England when he was attached to the Royal Air Force as an American instructor on the RAF staff college and that was a great duty. So I can't complain about it. Everything, all the bad things came first.

KB: Do you remember any of the rumors that were spreading immediately after the attack?

RC: No, I don't. I really don't. If they were there, I would've, branded a second lieutenant's wife and I wouldn't have been told anyway. Yeah.

KB: Well, any of the rumors that were circulating amongst the civilians?

RC: See, they were all civilians, mostly and they wouldn't know anything. Yeah. I know that they made us mind our Ps and Qs living up there at the base where we worked. And they wanted to know when we were going and when we were coming home and how late we got there. They were teaching us like we were kids in school, you know. That was what had to be. 'Cause none of us had been disciplined. You know, we weren't trained for discipline. So they took care of that. Yeah.

KB: And the WARDeS really had no predecessor of that type, you were the first women...

RC: No, the Women's Air Raid Defense was formed as I said, in the end of December, yeah. No, not that I know, because I hadn't been there long enough to know anything about that, but see, there wouldn't have been a need to have it before because we didn't know the seventh was going to happen.

KB: Right. Now, on the day of the seventh, you and your husband, do you remember when you went your different days on that day? He would've gone off to do his duties and...

RC: Yes. He—I tell a terrible story—Bill said, "It's the Japanese—" not exactly the word he used, but it's a word they used then a lot—and he was throwing on his clothes and then he's going down the stairway. And I said, "Come back, you forgot your neck tie."

Uniform was very important in those days. And he turned around and gave me a look that could've killed, you know. I mean, I remember if I'd lost him that day, I would always thought about thinking, "How could I marry such a dumb woman?" (Chuckles)

Oh dear. Yeah. So I remember that very clearly. Yeah.

KB: And this was early in the morning when the attack was really just begun.

RC: This was right immediately after the attack, when they realized we were at war, when he realized.

KB: And when was the next time that you saw him after that?

RC: Well, he was on the base at Hickam all day and I was over at the hospital most of the time. So really a lot of that day, I can't really say. All I knew is they called and said they needed me at the hospital and I went. And I knew he—and I didn't talk to him all day. It was a lot of chaos around there.

KB: And were you worried about his safety that day, while you were separated?

RC: Oh, I'm not going to let you know that. He might read, see this and then get the big head. (Laughs)

After sixty years of marriage, everybody says to me, "Which was worse, Pearl Harbor or being married sixty years to Bad Billy?"

KB: What would you—could you describe a little bit about what services you provided at the hospital that day and what you saw there?

RC: All I did was wash dishes. That's all I did.

KB: Okay.

RC: No power. Washed 'em by hand.

KB: And you, so you never actually saw any of the wounded there or...

RC: Oh yes.

KB: You did?

RC: We saw them coming and going and all. But no, I can't say anything about the _____ except being in the kitchen washing dishes. No. So pretty unglamorous, yeah.

KB: Well, do you have any other memories of during the attack that day or anything particular about the WARDS...

RC: No, no.

KB: ...that you want to...

RC: No, I think that's more than I even realized I remembered.

KB: Now you're a volunteer at the USS *Arizona* Memorial now.

RC: Yes. And we really love that and we're particularly interested in the fact that the third generation are the ones that ask us all the questions. And it's very rewarding. They come. It's not like a usual tourist group in Hawaii. They come from the ships and all and they're very respectful of the seriousness of the memory. And it's almost a fifty-mile drive for us to volunteer both ways. But we look forward to every Friday, just as though, you know, it was the most wonderful job we ever had, you know. We really enjoy it. And everybody is so appreciative. And ask so many questions, you know. So of course, Bill really can't talk about anything that happened at Pearl because we were at Hickam and so I remember once at a Pearl Harbor Survivors Association in California, in Fresno, California where we lived for many years, and somebody said, "Who is that?"

And somebody said, "Oh, you wouldn't know him. He's air force."

I don't think they thought that the air force was quite like the navy. Yeah. They don't think of the Air Force as being Pearl Harbor. Yeah. So they forgot about Wheeler and Hickam and all of that and those poor pilots coming in from the States that day and all of that.

KB: Do you and your husband bring these ideas up at the memorial with visitors? Are they generally interested in this if you bring it up?

RC: Oh, you don't have to bring it up. They ask questions all day long, yeah. They're very interested. And most of them say, "My grandfather was in the war," so the kids are really interested.

And they bring out all the children to the memorial from the schools in [*Hawaii*] and it's very nice. So, well thank you very much for asking me.

KB: Well, it's my pleasure.

RC: Yeah.

KB: If you would touch just a little bit more on what you and your husband did after the war, or after Pearl Harbor.

RC: Well, he's a regular officer, so he was on active duty. And I mentioned two of our stations. We lived everywhere. Yeah.

KB: Do you remember some of the other places that you went with him?

RC: I think about thirty states. Right. So it was an interesting life. It was a wonderful life, yeah. I opened a real estate office when Bill was ready to retire. I took a broker's license and opened an office in Fresno and had fifteen girls there selling real estate because I was so used to living on a base. And Bill was in charge of the Reserves for the San Joaquin valley and of course, they were all residents. They were civilians really, just keeping up their reserve status. So I thought, well I'll do something to keep myself busy and so that was very rewarding. It was fun.

I got a kick out of coming back [*to the Sheraton*] because I haven't been back here since I got out an award here in this —they called [*it*] a CRB, a certified residential broker, so that was fun. I knew where the Tapa Tower was, yeah.

KB: I understand some of the WARDs stay in touch with each other. Are you in touch with quite a few of them?

RC: I've always kept in touch with Barbara Thompson. And interestingly enough, she lives out at Kahala. And I said, "Barbara, you gotta come out and see the *Arizona* while Bill and I are working out there."

She had never been there. Never been there. And she's a local girl! I should call a local girl someone that's my age, but that's what she is, yeah. So she was fascinated. And most of them like [*Winifred*] "Bam" Sperry and Shada Pflueger and the girls and the two Dillingham girls [*Constance S. & Harriet B. Dillingham*], most of the local family girls that were from

prominent families, almost all of them. In fact all of them are gone, practically, you know. So that's it. Yeah.

KB: Prior to you and your husband working at the memorial, how often did you speak of Pearl Harbor?

RC: How did we what?

KB: Did the two of you ever discuss Pearl, the day of the attack, before you really started working at the memorial, or was it something you just really never discussed with each other?

RC: I think those of us who were there, I think you'll hear from everybody, we talked about it very, very little. Very, very little. In fact, most people didn't even know that we had been there and one time before I opened my own office, one of the brokers said, "Now, I want everybody to tell one thing about yourself that might make you all feel closer to each other."

And I said, "Well, not many people know I was at Pearl Harbor."

Well everybody, it's the first time they had ever heard that and that was not too long ago. So my claim to fame before that was that I was—I can't tell you that I was a theater major at [*the University of*] Cal[*alifornia*] even though I was, because you'll say, well what on earth is she doing this? Cal would be ashamed to have me on an interview like this, but at any rate, Gregory Peck—the theater division was very small when I was at Cal and always before, they said, "Did you know that Ruth Cope knows Gregory Peck?" (Laughs)

So, a really great guy. Really was. So it's been a wonderful life.

KB: Is there anything else that you want to add about the war?

RC: No. I've said more than I thought I knew! Right, yeah.

KB: All right.

RC: Thank you, anyway.

KB: Well, I want to thank you very much for coming down today. We appreciate it very much and for your volunteer service at the USS *Arizona* Memorial.

RC: Yes. I'm amazed that more people don't volunteer, but I also have to realize that a lot of them just don't feel well enough to. It's strenuous, yeah. But it's wonderful fun. It's good. Thank you.

KB: Thank you very much. (Off-mike) Did you want to follow up with anything?

?: No.

END OF INTERVIEW