Anna Clark: Through the Lens: A Navy Career and a Fight for Fair Benefits

U.S. Navy • Late 1960s–2009, active duty and reserve service

Anna Clark's naval career began far from the ocean. Raised on a farm in North Dakota, she attended a one-room schoolhouse before continuing her education in town. When she graduated from high school in 1967, she hoped to become a teacher, but paying for college presented a challenge. Hearing a Navy recruiter describe educational opportunities led her to enlist. What initially looked like a short path toward a degree became a military career extending across thirty-eight years.

Clark trained as a photographer and served at Naval Air Station Alameda, California, where she photographed activities for the base newspaper, The Carrier. Her work offered a distinctive vantage point on naval life: instead of operating a ship, she documented the people and activities surrounding it. Later, as a reservist, Clark received a commission as an intelligence officer. She rose through leadership assignments and recalled becoming the first woman to reach a senior administrative level in the Naval Reserve Intelligence Command.

Her interview also shows that service members can confront institutional inequality outside a military installation. As a student using veterans' educational benefits in the 1970s, Clark discovered that the rules for additional benefits for a female veteran's husband differed from those for a male veteran's wife. She challenged the unequal treatment with help from a member of Congress and the Veterans Administration. In Clark's account, she recognized that the rule might not change her own household's immediate circumstances, but felt, "this is just not right." She recalled helping bring about a policy change; the precise legal history should be independently documented before any stronger institutional claim is published.

Clark pursued education and teaching alongside years of reserve service and retired from the Navy in 2009. She later participated in veterans' organizations in Las Vegas. Her life demonstrates how a veteran can help create the historical record as a photographer, push against unequal rules as a citizen, and build a long career as military institutions change.

Source Anna Clark, oral history with Barbara Tabach, April 4 and May 18, 2023; Veterans' Voices: We're Listening (UNLV, 2024).

Transcript of oral history

Anna Clark

U.S. Navy | Naval Reserve intelligence

Breaking Barriers in Naval Intelligence

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VETERAN Oh, back when I was at LCC [Lansing Community College], just a little side thing, I joined this fraternity; it was Phi Theta Kappa, and Phi Theta Kappa, they elected me president. One of the programs that I instituted at LCC was we read books, the college textbooks, we read it to the blind students and recorded it so they could go on, and future ones could come in and read it.

INTERVIEWER That's worthwhile. That was cool.

VETERAN That was a big thing. But the GI Bill, because I was in this special program and I never got out of school, they put me all the way through my master's because I was in the program.

INTERVIEWER You get your undergraduate degree in what, in education?

VETERAN Elementary education. Then I got a bachelor's degree in math and science and education, and then I got a master's of language arts, so I got a lot of bases covered with this stuff. I told my husband that I was thinking of joining the Reserves because I missed the Navy. He hated the Navy. I missed it. Well, he was in the Army. Anyway, he told me, "If you join the Reserves, I will divorce you." Well, after that lady was in my apartment, I decided I will divorce you, and then I will join the Reserves. I drove an hour and a half to this base. Never been there before. Never knew what exactly I was doing. I tried to sign up, and they took me.

INTERVIEWER Where was this base?

VETERAN It was right outside of Detroit. It was Selfridge Air National Guard Base. After we got all the paperwork done and everything, I checked into the photo lab. This cross-eyed Navy chief, he said, "You're coming here!? If God had wanted women in the photo lab, He would have made them men." He said that to me. I worked for him for a couple of months. Then this career counselor chief, Don Lawson, took me by the hand and introduced me to the intelligence community and said, "This young lady is a photographer. She belongs over here in intelligence." I don't know why, but he said that. They called a direct commission board. Barbara, this was horrible. I am so busy learning how to be a teacher and just getting through college and everything. Like you said, what do you know about world affairs? I

knew nothing about world affairs. I just knew how to teach my subjects, right? Anyway, they put six Navy captains in a semicircle, and I'm sitting here in the middle. They bombarded me for an hour and a half with questions, all sorts of questions. "Well, if you're here, how far is it to Japan? Who is the world leader of…?" And they would name some country I hadn't even heard of. Just all these questions. I did the best I could. I get out of that meeting, and this one guy comes up to me, and he says, "Well, you're not going to make it. They really didn't want you." But they did. When the vote came down to it, they voted me in. They gave me a direct commission.

INTERVIEWER What happened, do you think?

VETERAN There were some people that knew me from when I was just in the unit that was assigned to the photo lab, and they stood up for me, and they vouched for me. The Reserve Intelligence Program officer saw something in me that he fought for me. This other guy that was also a teacher explained to the group what I was going through at the current time. I was going through a divorce. I was just starting out teaching. I didn't have a lot of time to read newspapers and stuff. He says, "She's got potential." They took me. Then my whole life changed. I went back to the photo lab, and I said, "Hey, chief." Well, when I made ensign. I was dressed as an ensign then. I went back to the photo lab, and I said, "Hey, chief, God couldn't make me a man, so he made me an ensign." "Yes, ma'am. Yes, ma'am."