

Transcription: Willard Heath

Today is Tuesday, July 3rd, 2012. My name is James Crabtree and this morning I'll be interviewing Mr. Willard Heath. This interview is being conducted in person in the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and it is in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much, and to all your family that's with you today for coming all the way here to Austin to do this interview. It's an honor for me and for us to be able to interview you. The first question I always like to start with is please tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went in the military. It doesn't have to be long, but what are some of your memories of your childhood.

Willard Heath: Well I was born up on a farm, and we walked to school about three miles, and anyway I was raised on a farm. It was a pretty good life.

What town was that?

Willard Heath: Normangee.

And you still reside there today.

Willard Heath: Yeah, still there.

So you grew up on the farm. Was there anybody in your family ever in the military before you?

Willard Heath: Yeah, I guess I had some cousins in the military. They stayed in there about 30 something years. Of course I don't know, there was two or three of them went into the Navy. Some of them was in Normandy.

Where were you when the war started, when Pearl Harbor was bombed? Do you remember where you were at that time? Were you working on a farm?

Willard Heath: Yeah, I was in Normangee, 1939.

OK, and how long was it before you went into the Navy? Were you drafted shortly after that?

Willard Heath: I don't remember just exactly. Dorteen was on. She was a baby running around.

So what made you go into the Navy?

Willard Heath: Well, I didn't like the Army. I didn't want to walk. I wanted to ride. So I got in the Navy.

Did you sign up at a local recruiting office?

Willard Heath: Yeah, Houston, out of Houston.

So you went out of Houston. Where did they send you for your basic training?

Willard Heath: San Diego, California.

Do you remember much about that?

Willard Heath: Yeah.

Tell us a little bit about your memories of boot camp in San Diego.

Willard Heath: They had me going pretty good there in Diego. We done a lot of, that's where I got myself hurt there in Diego. Well, I made it through the camp and they tried to get me to, wanted somebody to do an operation on my hip, but they never did do nothing. So I made it. I had the measles and got a few days rest. Then I'd taken the mumps, and I got a few more days there, so I made it out of there, but my officers told me I needed an operation on my hip but I never did get it.

So you injured your hip somehow during training.

Willard Heath: Yeah, when I was taking calisthenics.

Did you know when you were in boot camp what you were going to be doing once you graduated, did you know what your specialty was going to be at that point?

Willard Heath: No, I didn't know what it was going to be.

So when you graduated, what did they do with you next? What assignment did they give you?

Willard Heath: I was assigned, I guess to the USS Morocco.

So you went straight to the Morocco.

Willard Heath: Yeah.

Tell us about that ship.

Willard Heath: Well we had about 20 something planes we flew every day in and out, and I was rattle catcher when we chewed 'em off, and I'd taxi 'em down and tie 'em up. I'd been on for a matter of time and we'd have flight operations and I might get to eat a bite during the day, might not. It was one plane after another. There was the bombs going out.

What type of aircraft was it that they flew?

Willard Heath: EE115 and TVM's.

And you worked on the flight deck?

Willard Heath: Flight deck, yeah.

So you were responsible for launching and recovery of the aircraft.

Willard Heath: Yeah.

Tell us a little bit about your memories of that. Any particular moments stand out in your mind?

Willard Heath: I don't know what you mean. There was a lot of it that stands out.

Sure, well share with us whatever you want that you remember from your time aboard there.

Willard Heath: It was all memories. You can see on mine how you did and what you did and how they got rough and we were in a storm once there, 100 mph winds that tore up the hangar and knocked the engine room, it knocked all of the engine room out. We had to go in, we had to bring it in to dry docks when we come in. But it was tore up pretty good and rode up all hang side the catwalks, you know, old shipper boated and bust and mashed it in. But we were coming back from overseas when that happened. I think it was in Guam or somewhere.

Pretty much it was a typhoon I guess, right?

Willard Heath: Yeah, it was 100 mph winds.

And that was on your way back to the United States.

Willard Heath: Yeah.

Where all did your ship go during the war? Do you remember some of the different areas where you went in?

Willard Heath: We went everywhere we ____. We spent about six months going. We went everywhere. We was in Britain. We was all everywhere. We crossed the equator and I don't know where all we went. We was out there. I'd see land once in a while.

So you were in the Pacific then?

Willard Heath: Yeah.

OK. Did any particular battles that you remember?

Willard Heath: All I knew about is I was loading guns.

So you were focused on your job.

Willard Heath: Yeah, I was all on there.

How about the Japanese, did you ever see much of their ships or their aircraft?

Willard Heath: Yeah, well I never seen too many of them, but they was a little too far off for me.

Well that's a good thing I guess, especially with the kamikaze missions and that sort of thing later on.

Willard Heath: I seen a plane laying in Guam. They was laying everywhere.

So you got to Guam then.

Willard Heath: We got to Guam, south end Manila, went all through there.

Did you ever get to go ashore at all? Did you ever get liberty?

Willard Heath: Yeah, I was over there on the shore, yeah. We landed and got off. Yeah, they was landing everywhere. Some of them sleeping in the caves, some of them sleeping just everywhere. They had a cave where they'd cut like this down here and they'd sleep up here, you know, and then walk down here.

Yeah, the whole cave system that they had.

Willard Heath: Yeah, 5-inch mounted right outside.

By the time you got to go ashore at Guam, I guess the fighting had been pretty well taken care of.

Willard Heath: There was a nurse officer got killed I knew. They had one in a cage, a Jap in the cage.

Yeah, prisoner of war. Tell us a little bit more about your ship. Do you remember the ship's captain?

Willard Heath: No, I can't think of his name. I knew him real well.

How about some of the men, some of the sailors you served with? Are there any that stand out that you remember?

Willard Heath: Yeah, Blagg and Bird was working me. We stayed together nearly all the time. I think they was, I believe they come out of Austin here, Blagg and Bird.

So a buddy of yours was from Austin.

Willard Heath: Yeah.

Because the way I understand it, on a ship you have a lot of men, a lot of sailors, especially on a ship that you were on, but you worked in an individual department, right? So you would work daily with these men night and day.

Willard Heath: Yeah, we spent our time together most of the time. We'd get off on like get a relieve or something, we'd meet again.

I imagine every day was pretty much like the next. There's no days off, there's no holidays or weekends. Would you work 12-hour shifts? Do you remember what type of rotations you all would do? The ship obviously is going all the time.

Willard Heath: All the time. Our flight operator might be from sun-up to sundown, yeah. You might get a sandwich, you might not.

Tell us about being on the dock when the planes are landing because I know that's a pretty dangerous time.

Willard Heath: Yeah, you just, you got, you can't when the old ship's going this way, you got to learn how to walk on it.

Where would you be when the planes were landing? Was there a particular area where you could kind of go for a little bit of shelter?

Willard Heath: In land, I'd be on a fly jack rather than being on a cat walk.

OK, just a little bit beneath the captain's side.

Willard Heath: A little bit lower. They'd come in land, when I was shooting 'em off, well I was down there where they had a catapult and I put that cable on both sides ___ and I'd put it on there and shoot 'em off right over me. I'd jump in a net and they'd shoot 'em off. Then they'd load the 500-pound bombs and all that stuff.

Were those steam catapults?

Willard Heath: Yeah I guess. I never did get down below. I worked on top.

So you'd hook those things up and then make sure you were well out of the way and they'd launch them off.

Willard Heath: You got officer up there, got a telephone and he tells 'em when to shoot, yeah.

How many men on your crew would it take to get a plane ready to be catapulted? Was it a couple of you that would be working on rigging it up?

Willard Heath: Yeah, I guess. There'd be one officer there. He was doing the talking, and I was doing my other work. I'd hook 'em up.

With that bridle, when the plane would take off, would that bridle fall into the ocean?

Willard Heath: They'd catapult and then the officer up there would radio down there and they'd tell him when to shoot it, and he'd be ribbed up about ready to go, and he'd tell 'em and he'd shoot 'em right off, at about 90 mph.

Sure, I just didn't know if part of the bridle, like the part that goes on the wheel, I didn't know if that went off into the water?

Willard Heath: I had a frog out there to catch that wire when it come over, and I'd get it back.

OK, makes sense, that way you could use it on the next one. OK, that's what I wasn't sure how that would work.

Willard Heath: You see when it come by there the frog would catch that bridle and then I'd go around and pick it up and put it on another plane. It was just a choker is all it was.

Do you remember any launches where there were problems and the planes ended up going in the ocean and you had to retrieve the pilots?

Willard Heath: I seen one in the ocean on another carrier, but during ours, we had 'em go on a catapult and I never did see one go in the ocean. They had one go on the catapult and wings in the water, but -

When the planes were landing, when you were retrieving them what type of system did you have? Was it a bunch of cables on the deck?

Willard Heath: Had one cable here, on down here had one, and when they land, well on down here they had two. I watched it come in and bounce and hit this and the tailpiece didn't catch settin'.

Because you had a hook on the tail.

Willard Heath: Yeah, a hook on there and you just set him down there. Well if you miss that in the middle, he'd go off.

He's going right off the end.

Willard Heath: Yeah, we'll he'd go off on that catapult. That's where one went. I saw one we lost. We didn't lose him, lost the plane. It didn't hurt the plane too much, but the bug tore out. They put a new one on her. Went over the side.

Did you have any times that planes were landing where they had something wrong with their landing gear, that sort of thing, and you had to put up kind of like a big net to catch them? Did you ever use that?

Willard Heath: No, we never did have to do that. I've seen that done. It was on another carrier. All we had trouble with is the sea would get too darn rough.

Too hard to land when the seas are that heavy.

Willard Heath: Yeah.

Did most of the flight missions, were most of them in the day time? You didn't do many at night did you?

Willard Heath: No, we did it in full night.

You did some at night?

Willard Heath: Over night, yeah. In the evening about day's out of _____. When you're getting daylight good, he'd come in, late in the evening and land, top down.

But you wouldn't really have many missions at night, would you, flying the planes?

Willard Heath: No, we didn't have none then.

I would think that would be at that time too hard for the pilots to have really seen the -

Willard Heath: You have to have light some way because you just shaking out there on the ocean, that little old ship ain't very wide to come sailin' in there on them waves.

Well I know nowadays they land on carriers at night, but I didn't know in World War II if they did or not.

Willard Heath: We didn't, I don't know.

Radar was a little different.

Willard Heath: Yeah, they got a different deal now.

They have a lot of it that can be automated that can help them land. Then I think it was pretty much all visual. So where was your ship home ported? Were you out of Honolulu or out of San Francisco?

Willard Heath: I guess it was out of San Pedro, California I guess, I don't know.

But you were on the ship for how long?

Willard Heath: Six months.

So when you went to boot camp, at some point when you graduated they said hey, you're gonna be assigned to a carrier and you're going to be working on the flight deck. What did you think about that when they first told you that? Did you know what that was?

Willard Heath: No, I didn't know, had no idea. But it didn't take me long to learn.

Were you married during this time?

Willard Heath: Yeah, I had two children.

How long had you been married at that point?

Willard Heath: Been married three or four years maybe, or five years, I don't know.

I imagine it was difficult leaving home, leaving your wife and children.

Willard Heath: Yeah.

We're looking at a picture now of you and this was talking about how you crossed the 180th meridian on the USS Morocco during World War II and had been initiated there into the Oriental mysteries of the honorable ancestors of the golden dragon. Do you remember that?

Willard Heath: Yeah.

Tell us a little bit about that.

Willard Heath: Some of them here.

Tell us about the initiation ceremony. Do you remember much of that?

Willard Heath: Oh, yeah.

I see some great photos here. We're looking at pictures now of a bunch of the sailors, and the leigh, skirts, that's great. You were on the Morocco for six months. Where did you go to after that?

Willard Heath: I come home after that. We landed, let's see, San Pedro, California I guess.

So you did the six months and you got to come back home? Was the war over at that point?

Willard Heath: It was over, yeah.

Where were you when you learned that the war was ending? Were you aboard the carrier? Do you remember that day at all when they said the Japanese had surrendered?

Willard Heath: No, no.

I see a bunch of great photographs in here I recognize of Hawaii. And there's a neat Christmas card here from the Morocco. Now is this one that you sent home to your family?

Willard Heath: Yeah, I did.

Did you have any brothers that served?

Willard Heath: No, I'm the only kid.

You're an only child. What did your folks think about you being off in the war?

Willard Heath: I don't know what they thought about it.

How about your wife? Were you able to get letters regularly?

Willard Heath: Oh yeah. I wrote home every day.

That's great. So I imagine when you got home it was a pretty happy reunion after having been gone, been a sea in the war. She had to have been worried about you every day. Tell us about what that was like when you got to come back home finally.

Willard Heath: That was a good feeling.

Did you take a train back home?

Willard Heath: We headed back to San Pedro, California, and got off and then I come home. I guess I come home and caught a bus out of there back home.

OK, and were you able to call your wife and let her know you were on your way?

Willard Heath: Yeah.

Your daughter is shaking her head no.

Willard Heath: Yeah I did.

(Daughter). I remember when you came home, dad.

Willard Heath: Yeah, when I come I called her from Dale, California.

(Daughter). OK, and she didn't know exactly when you was coming home or anything like that. I know it was raining that day and I seen him come across the field. And I told mom, I says there come dad. And she says no he ain't, and she opened the front door and sure enough she run and met him.

So how old were you, ma'am, when that happened?

(Daughter). I was about 4 or something. I remember it very well because I was laying there on the cot looking out the window when I seen him coming across the field and it was raining.

And it was ya'll's farm? Were you the oldest?

(Daughter). I'm the oldest.

So you remember that day, that's great. Was he wearing his uniform?

(Daughter). I don't know. He had a rain thing over his head because it was raining so hard.

Willard Heath: Yeah, I was wearing my uniform.

That's great. Well I love all these different pictures you have.

Willard Heath: All this, and I come out of Manila, Guam, Saipan and China.

That's great.

Willard Heath: In China there was kids starving to death.

So you spent a little time in China.

Willard Heath: You could see their little ol' ribs and they come up to you, no papa, no mama, no chow-chow, and they'd pick 'em up next morning and throw 'em on the back of the truck and haul them with garbage on it. They was dying there, starving to death.

I imagine that had to have been heartbreaking. How long was your ship and your crew in China?

Willard Heath: Oh, I don't remember. We stayed there a few days. I can't remember just how long.

Was that towards the end of the war or after the war was over that you stopped in China?

Willard Heath: Yeah.

Those are great pictures. I think some of these other ones are just other family photographs. We'll go back to some of the World War II ones here.

Willard Heath: I think that's my ship there, I don't know.

Yeah, well this looks like maybe a company – did you work for Magnesium? Yeah, Dow Magnesium out of Velasco.

Willard Heath: I worked for Dow.

How long did you work for them?

Willard Heath: Oh, several years. I operated for 'em. I don't everything for 'em. I welded for 'em for years.

Now this here is pretty neat because it's dated October 8th, 1943, which I imagine is before you went into the Navy because it says here that you, J.W. Heath, has contributed as an employee to this company in winning the Army-Navy production award for excellence in war production. Tell us a little bit about what you were doing then for them before the war.

Willard Heath: Oh, I operated at the plant, and I welded for 'em for years.

OK, and this was in Velasco, Texas.

Willard Heath: Yeah, Velasco, that's down by Freeport, in Velasco.

That's great. Did you go to work, go back to work for them after you got home from the war?

Willard Heath: No, I don't think I went back to work for 'em anymore. I sort of made a mistake there. I quit them and went onto construction because they paid more on construction, Dow did, but I went to welding for a home construction. They didn't want me to and I wished I hadn't better then.

How did you learn to become a welder?

Willard Heath: Oh, I went, me and my cousin, we were working at Todd shipyard and we'd get off, and we'd stay over, they had a welding shop over and we'd stay over and just practice. And we practiced there and we learned how to weld.

And you did all different types of welding then?

Willard Heath: Oh yeah, all kinds of welding. I was doing _____, I done it all, yeah.

So you did that pretty much after you got back from the war you worked as a welder. Was that kind of like the ship channel, Houston ship channel area?

Willard Heath: Yeah, I worked for Todd shipyard there when I was a welder, and I worked for Dow as a welder, and I worked everywhere, Abilene, Lubbock, ____, just everywhere.

That's great. Tell me a little about some of these photos here. These photos are in the front of this album.

Willard Heath: That was William Bird there, and then -

His last name was Bird?

Willard Heath: Bird, his name was Bird.

And he was from Austin?

Willard Heath: I don't know whether he was from Austin, I believe he was. And some of them there -

Are you in this photograph, because that's you there, right?

Willard Heath: Yeah there, I guess that's me there.

Who were some of these men?

Willard Heath: Oh they was in the Navy with me. I don't know where they were from all now. Some of them was from during ____.

Where do you think this photo was taken?

Willard Heath: In '45.

Do you think it was taken in Hawaii?

Willard Heath: Yeah, it was taken over there.

Because everybody's got kind of the palm -

Willard Heath: It was over there in Hawaii.

That's great. Did you stay in touch with any of them after you got home?

Willard Heath: No, I didn't. I have heard from one of them once or twice, but I haven't heard no more. But I had one in there, he was Heath, same as mine. But he had one letter, he stayed right ahead of me, he had one letter in his name that put him a little ahead of me. We called him Little Heath. He was a small feller.

That's great. What were some of the men like that worked in your division, like did you have a chief that was supervising you or kind of in charge of you and your men?

Willard Heath: Yeah, I can't think of his name now. But we had a chief.

What was it like living on the ship day to day in terms of how you would sleep and eat. I imagine you slept in a pretty small space, right?

Willard Heath: It was pretty good sized. Your bed, you had a pipe around us, one of these frames in the middle and your little old mattress on that. And you may be up -

Three or four high, they'd stack it pretty high because of lack of space.

Willard Heath: I slept on the top bunk up there.

How was the chow, how was the food?

Willard Heath: It was most of the time it was good. Well, we got some over in China, you could take that meat and you could make soup out of it, and you'd eat that soup pretty good. With meat on deck, it would bounce pretty good.

Rubberized meat.

Willard Heath: It was pretty tough, like it was caribou I imagine. I mean it was made out of caribou.

How would the men pass the time when they had any down time? Did you play cards?

Willard Heath: Oh we played, we had a place you play ball, and you play, you had a theater, and you'd go see a show.

So it was a big enough ship then that there were some things you could do to occupy your time when you weren't working.

Willard Heath: Oh yeah, we had 1,000 men aboard.

Big ship.

Willard Heath: Yeah, we had plenty of playing, and we had some old boys would play, you know, they playin' the Grand Ol' Opry was in there.

Really? They came out to perform for you?

Willard Heath: Yeah, well they was in the Navy.

Oh, they were in the Navy.

Willard Heath: Yeah, they was drafted in there, too, you know. And they played their instruments in there.

Wow, that's great. When you get that many men together I guess there's going to be some with some talent.

Willard Heath: They put on a show up there. We had a big deal up there you could get down and had chairs down there and you could sit and watch it. They put on a pretty good show.

That's great.

Willard Heath: It was just like you're going over to the Grand Ol' Opry. And they would watch them play, too, but they were just like me, they was in there.

Yeah, they were there. I was curious, too, about when you went in the Navy, do you remember if you volunteered to go in or if you were drafted?

Willard Heath: I volunteered.

I was going to say with kids and a spouse, you probably would have been exempt from it –

Willard Heath: I might have been, but I didn't like old Hitler.

Oh sure, well that's good. We're glad you did volunteer to go. It helped make a difference. Every man and woman that served helped make a difference.

Willard Heath: I wanted to get rid of old Hitler.

And also the Japanese who fought even longer than Hitler. I was going to ask you a little bit more about the planes because I was fascinated about the fact that you worked on the flight deck. What was your favorite plane if there was one?

Willard Heath: Both of them, that TVM and F6F was good planes. Well the TVM had the bombs. F6F, they used the fighter plane. They was both good planes.

Did you ever get to talk much with some of the other crew members, the pilots and that sort of thing?

Willard Heath: Oh yeah, we'd go up in just like this room here and set around and talk about it, yeah.

That's great. Well sir, I really appreciate you sharing some of these pictures and some stories with us, and I see you got the Navy hat on. Where did you get your hat?

Willard Heath: Oh they got it for me. I got my old hat at home.

When you got back home did you ever get involved with like the American Legion or the VFW?

Willard Heath: VFW, yeah I belong to the VFW, lifetime member.

That's great. Did you get involved with them pretty much right after you got back home?

Willard Heath: Yeah, I guess I done it.

Do you have a lot of folks that ask you about your time in the Navy?

Willard Heath: Not too many now. That was back, that's been too many years ago.

You've got a good memory though and you're 94 now, right?

Willard Heath: 94.

That's excellent.

Willard Heath: Born 1918.

So you've seen a lot of change not just from your time in the Navy but just in life in general.

Willard Heath: Oh yeah. Went through the Depression, all that.

And growing up on a farm during the Depression I'm sure was pretty rough.

Willard Heath: Eating cornbread.

I'm sure that was rough. And you live today in the same town that you were born in.

Willard Heath: Yeah, I was born, you know where Rockdale, I mean you know where Normangee is, don't you? You was ever at Hilltop Lakes?

No.

Willard Heath: They got all that resort out there.

OK, how big of a town is it?

Willard Heath: Oh, it's not too big. I don't know how much population.

(Daughter). 660 I think.

Willard Heath: About 600 or 800. I guess Hilltop Lake's got about as many people as Normangee in it.

What happened to the farm that your folks owned? Do you all still have that in the family or did they sell that?

Willard Heath: Oh, they rent them. My uncle now he's had that farm out there when I was a kid, and I was staying, I was working for them most of the time. They still got that farm.

That's great. Have you ever had a chance to go back to San Diego?

Willard Heath: No, I haven't been there. I haven't had that chance.

I think it's fascinating that you were on a carrier in the Pacific for that time. I was going to ask you, I know in the 1950s there was a very popular television series called Victory at Sea. Did you ever watch any of those episodes, Victory at Sea programs? It's all about the Navy in the Pacific in World War II.

Willard Heath: No. I seen some of them on television yeah, but I don't know.

What about the Morocco, did they have any sort of alumni group or anything like that that you were ever involved with? Like reunions or that sort of thing from your ship?

Willard Heath: No.

I know with some ships they were like alumni groups or reunion groups and they would get together occasionally and visit. I didn't know if your ship had ever had one or not.

Willard Heath: No.

You've got here today your daughters are with you, right? Tell us a little bit about your family and your kids.

Willard Heath: Well they're all here.

What are their names?

Willard Heath: That's Diane, that's Bonnie__, that's Carol Lee, and my daughter Jean.

You have four daughters?

Willard Heath: Yeah, and two boys. And one of them got killed and the other he's in Colorado now.

So four daughters, I'm sure that kept you busy as a dad.

Willard Heath: Yes, they were then.

I've got three little girls myself, so I know -

Willard Heath: You know what it's like.

When they get old enough to date, I know what my job will be, make sure that daddy's little girls will always be that way. I tell you, I really appreciate them bringing you all this way today to talk to us. I don't know if they told you or not, but we're a state agency. We're part of the General Land Office, and we have documents here in this building in our archive that go back to the 1700s. We have the original register, it's called a Registro, that Stephen F. Austin kept of the settlers that came to Texas. It's a big huge book. And we have the land grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at The Alamo. So we have all these great documents that are hundreds of years old that we're preserving for posterity, and we're also putting these interviews into that archive with the idea being that hundreds of years from now after we're all long gone, people might be able to listen to these interviews and learn something from them just as we do today with the old documents. With that in mind, is there anything you'd want to say to somebody listening to this interview long after you and I are gone, about your service or your time in the Navy or any of that sort of thing?

Willard Heath: I don't know what you mean, say something better -

Think for a second like right now this interview could be listened to by somebody a hundred years from now, two hundred years from now, just like today we look at the stuff from The Alamo, we look at Stephen F. Austin's register. People today can study these documents and learn from them. With that in mind, is there anything you'd want to say to somebody in terms of advice or whatever, to somebody listening to this interview a hundred years from now?

Willard Heath: Well, I don't know.

I know it's kind of putting you on the spot there, but I didn't know if there was any words or wisdom or advice or memories that you wanted to pass on to folks. I know that by listening to these interviews though that people will be able to learn a lot. Your story, just like all the other veterans we've interviewed, it all kind of comes together like a patchwork quilt and everybody can learn from those individual stories, and by you coming here today and showing us these pictures and just talking for a little bit, it lets us put your story into that growing list of other stories. So it's an honor for us to have you here to do that. I wanted to ask your daughters since they are here, is there anything that you all think I should ask him that I'm forgetting or I don't know about?

(Daughter). Dad was in the CCC camp.

Oh you were, you were in the Civilian Conservation Corps?

Willard Heath: Yeah.

So tell us a little bit about that because I know that wasn't a military organization but it was kind of run like one, so tell us a little bit about your memories of that.

Willard Heath: Oh, I was over there in Madisonville and we worked in building fences and terracing land, first one thing and then another. I was in the tree army. Yeah, I done all that. I stayed in there a long time. We built lots of fences for people.

How long do you think you were in there for, a year or two?

Willard Heath: Yeah.

They ran that pretty much like a military outfit, didn't they?

Willard Heath: Yeah, just like a military, yeah.

Where would you live?

Willard Heath: We was in Madisonville, we had a camp in Madisonville.

So you were in a tent camp basically, right?

Willard Heath: I was in camp.

And you'd go out and work building projects?

Willard Heath: We'd go out in trucks, load up, go out and work on fences all day and come in, yeah. And I was in Richards One, we just, well we cut all them old hardwood trees away from them pine trees, girdled all that. I was all through that.

That was a lot of hard work then, a lot of physical labor.

Willard Heath: Yeah, it was all labor, man yeah, we girdled them, we worked those hours. They fed us good and we earned it. I got \$5 a month and my mother got \$25.

Were you still under 18 I guess?

Willard Heath: Oh yeah.

So your mom got you said most of it.

Willard Heath: Yeah.

I'm sure that you all were grateful for that though during the Depression to be eating and earn some money.

Willard Heath: During the Depression you was proud to get that, you know, and I was proud of getting my \$9.

How many men were in that camp with you? Was it pretty good sized?

Willard Heath: Yeah, let's see, we had four barracks, I mean just 20 men in, 30 men maybe in each barrack.

So maybe about 100 or so in your camp.

Willard Heath: Yeah.

How did you get involved with that? Did you just go sign up?

Willard Heath: Yeah, I signed up. I went to Madisonville and signed up.

Once you were signed up, do you remember how long you had to be with the program? Was it kind of like enlisting in the military where you had to serve with them for a year or so, or could you quit whenever you wanted?

Willard Heath: I think you could just quit when you wanted. Yeah, that's the way it was. Most of 'em stayed though because that was during the Depression and they had to.

That's right, a good gig to get.

Willard Heath: Yeah, that was good money then. You'd get good eats. Some of them might be the first light bread you ever eat anyway.

So when you went to boot camp then, you'd already kind of had that experience of being in the Conservation Corps so you kind of understood what it was like to live in a military type environment I would guess.

Willard Heath: Yeah, we had barracks we stayed in there.

You had someone who was kind of in charge of you I guess.

Willard Heath: Oh yeah, you had an officer. And we worked 8 hours. We might girdle more hardwoods away from the pine trees, or first one thing, another, whatever was, building fence or anything like that, we can be there. They put us on a truck and carried us out there on somebody's and we'd pitch fence.

How long did you do that for, a couple of years?

Willard Heath: Yeah, I imagine.

That's great. Anything else?

[Daughter]. Only he got two discharges, went to two CC camps. One at Richardson and one at Madisonville.

So your daughter's saying you went to two different CCC camps.

Willard Heath: Yeah, one's in Madisonville and one is in Richardson. Out in Madisonville we'd build fences and terrace land. Out in Richardson we done different things. We was there girdling trees away from all that forest.

Yeah, that's a lot of work.

Willard Heath: Yeah.

Well sir, I tell you, I really do appreciate you all coming in today. It's a real honor and we've got all this recorded now, and what we're going to do is make copies of it, and like I said before we started the interview, we'll make copies of it onto CD's which they look nice, and we'll mail those out to you probably in a week or so, so that's why I wanted to make sure we had the address correct. So we'll send those off to you along with a letter and certificate, and then at some point if I can get copies of these pictures, I'd love to have copies if you can just email them to us or whatever, because we like to get photographs. You've seen the website so you know that the pictures always add a lot to it, and especially the one here of you in your uniform with the little induction card or whatever you would call that, that's the Order of the Golden Dragon. That's great. And it's got your name printed on here, Willard Jess Heath, so Jess is your middle name?

Willard Heath: Willard J.

Whose signature do you think that was on here? Is that the ship's captain?

Willard Heath: Yeah, might be the captain.

That's great. It's a neat thing that you have those. I would guess it's probably a captain or maybe a senior chief or someone like that that had signed it.

Willard Heath: The ____, what is his name, I forgot. See if you can make it out. He signed it.

Yeah, it looks like C.D. Fonaneal or Fonashel – that's great though. And this picture here looks like it's taken the same time as all these others because it's got the palm tree background, you're wearing your whites.

Willard Heath: Pearl Harbor.

What did you end up doing with your uniform, do you remember? Did you keep those or did you get rid of them when you got back home?

Willard Heath: I think my wife made a dress in ____.

She made a skirt out of it, yeah.

Willard Heath: This one here, but they might have some ____, I don't know. I think my wife made a dress -

Still got some use out of it then.

Willard Heath: Yeah.

Well great.

Willard Heath: That's been a long time ago.

Oh sure, that's true. I was just curious if you had any of your uniform items still today. Well sir, thank you again very much. I'll walk you all out, but this ends the interview portion, but again, thank you sir, on behalf of Commissioner Patterson and everybody here at the Land Office, we want to thank you for your service to our nation and this is just a very small way from the state of Texas saying thank you, so we're honored that you are here today so that we could thank you.

Willard Heath: Good Lord taking care of that.

Yes sir, thank you very much.

[End of recording]