

Transcription: Laurie Henderson

Today is June 27th, 2008, and this is Joe James. I am interviewing Ms. Laurie Foster Henderson. This interview is taking place by telephone. I am at the Stephen F. Austin Building in Austin, Texas. Ms. Henderson is at her residence at 12463 Los Indios Trail, #207, also in Austin, Texas. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. OK, Ms. Henderson?

Laurie Henderson: Yes?

Let's start with and I apologize if this is indelicate, but we'll start with some biography questions here and um, when is your birth date?

Laurie Henderson: I was born the 30th of July, 1924.

And where were you born?

Laurie Henderson: At uh, St. Luke's Hospital, Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

OK, and were you living in Iowa when you uh, joined the military?

Laurie Henderson: No, I was not.

Oh, OK. Where were you?

Laurie Henderson: I was in New York City.

Oh, OK. How did you come to be in New York City?

Laurie Henderson: Well that's uh, kind of a long story.

Any of it that you care to share I think it might be interesting for folks.

Laurie Henderson: Well, I don't think that that particular details are of any real importance uh, to this whole story.

OK, and um, what were your parent's names?

Laurie Henderson: My parents were, my mother was May Rosetta Bair, B-A-I-R, and my father was uh, Floyd Percy Foster. They were both born in Iowa.

OK, and you joined the Navy.

Laurie Henderson: Yes.

OK, and you were living in New York. When did you join the service?

Laurie Henderson: In 1945 in about April, I believe.

OK, and what made you want to join the service?

Laurie Henderson: Well, as I told your head honcho in this review, I was a little bit of, at loose ends. I was not happy with the job I was working at and I happened to see a poster of a Wave launching a weather balloon, and it was just inspiring.

Interesting. Now where were you when you learned of the Pearl Harbor attack?

Laurie Henderson: I was in a car with my family on the way to Iowa City to see a friend of my older brother's. He was in the hospital and was recovering from injuries uh, from a farm injury, and they were both attending Cornell College the previous year, and saving up for, for uh, the sophomore year.

OK, and how did you feel when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

Laurie Henderson: Of course it was shocking, of course it was shocking. I thought when Bill and, when Bill turned on the radio that uh, we were all hearing it for the first time. However, he and my mother had heard it earlier on the radio that morning, but my younger brother and I had not heard it yet.

And did your older brother go into the service?

Laurie Henderson: Yes, only a few weeks later he went into the Navy.

Did that affect your decision to go into the Navy?

Laurie Henderson: Well, it probably had some influence. Most of my relatives uh, were Navy people. My uncles and then for WWII, my cousins on my father's side all went in the Navy, and in fact, my older brother and my oldest cousin on my father's side happened to run into each other in Hawaii, not knowing the other was there. So that was a most interesting time for the two of them. And of course we all got letters from all of them from time to time telling about their experiences, not in much detail, but uh, enough to let us know that they were safe and had had interesting experiences.

Did you work in the war effort before you joined the Navy?

Laurie Henderson: No, I had not.

OK. You kind of got to experience the war both in the service and as a civilian.

Laurie Henderson: Yes.

Would you talk a little bit about your experiences as a civilian before you joined the service?

Laurie Henderson: Well, of course we had to uh, sacrifice quite a lot. We couldn't get butter, but a very little bit from time to time, and uh, we didn't own a car. My mother would, had been widowed for many years by then and uh, she didn't ever learn to drive and so uh, my uh, maternal grandparents took us where we need to go. They and my mother's brother and wife would take us to Cedar Rapids from time to time if there were something that we really needed.

And then in 1945 you joined the Navy and I have that your specialty, you were a draftsman?

Laurie Henderson: That's correct.

A draftsman. What was involved with that?

Laurie Henderson: Well uh, when I was attending Cornell College at Mount Vernon, Iowa, I was an art major and I was never very good at most kinds of math, and so I elected to take engineering drawing instead of another math class as a requirement for graduation which I did not graduate from there. It was much later on the GI Bill here in Austin, Texas at University of Texas that I completed my Bachelors Degree and then my Masters Degree.

Oh, excellent. So um, let's see, you joined in New York and uh, went to training?

Laurie Henderson: Yes, I went to boot camp there in New York City at Tamonter College, uh, in the Bronx, and we trained. We did our marching around the neighborhood. There was a huge number of large apartment houses nearby and in fact that was where we were quartered in those apartment houses which had been vacated for that purpose. We had one or two battalions at a time at boot camp there.

About how many people were in a battalion?

Laurie Henderson: If I'm not mistaken, I think there were a thousand. I could be wrong.

Did you train with a group, or - ?

Laurie Henderson: Yes, uh, we were sorted into 20-person platoons, and so that was how we marched and uh, how we did our other training by uh, by platoon.

OK, and about how long were you there?

Laurie Henderson: Oh, I think probably three months.

Any personalities or experiences stick out to you from that time?

Laurie Henderson: Well, we were uh, we had physical activities and training and uh, then we had some other classroom things such as uh, the history of the war and uh, the, well airplane recognition, which I was not good at at all, are the two things that stand out, and then toward the end, why we were all given a test for aptitudes to decide what, where we would be stationed, and as a matter of fact because of that, uh, engineering drawing course, I made the highest score they had ever had on mechanical aptitude.

Fantastic.

Laurie Henderson: Yeah, well then when it came to my interview for job placement, uh, they first wanted to put me into airplane mechanic, and that really didn't appeal to me that much. I'm short and uh, so I wouldn't been able to crawl around and get into spaces where maybe some other people couldn't have, besides anyway that uh, that was rather quickly discarded, and uh, so then there was something about my social skills and other things to do with it that they then wanted me to be a nurse and go to Bethesda, Maryland, and we had heard lots about that being

such a terrible climate and so on and so on. And we really would not be graduate nurses. We would be nurse's aides and the graduate nurses did not treat the aides very well, so uh, that was not something that appealed to me either. Then they said that they had an opening for a draftsman on the West Coast, which happened to be San Francisco Bay, the middle of the bay, Treasure Island, which is a one mile square island, man made, for the purpose of an international exposition World's Fair. And many of the buildings were still there, but of course the uh, odd features that were to be such big attractions, I didn't see any of those. But anyway, it's attached to Yerba Buena Island which was called Goat Island because it was very steep and there was a ramp road going from the highway that the bridge that crossed from San Francisco to Oakland was halfway there, and anyway this ramp went down around and to the gate of the uh, base. And uh, so anyway, then I guess I was one of the first women that had served in that capacity, and then shortly after I was there, why two more women who were also assigned my cubicle and dorm, we were roommates. They also were assigned to that particular kind of job. So we worked in the same office or room or whatever you want to call it. We were doing the pen and ink file drawings of the rough drafts of radar which were designed by the engineers, and of course radar was still fairly new and still being developed, and so the drawings that we went were, that we made were uh, reduced, photographed and reduced and put in textbooks, but in the meantime, why they would enlarge them and use them in the classrooms. And so we also did a rather odd kind of work in that respect. They had blackboard-sized forms or blackboards for us to make very large drawings of the same thing with uh, paint and enlarged sets, uh, of materials with which we made the drawings, just regular paint like you would use on a house or something.

But you were one of three women who was doing that. How about how many total draftsmen were there?

Laurie Henderson: Uh, there were probably 6, maybe sometimes 8 and sometimes the uh, engineers would be in the back of the room working, too.

You touched on you were one of the first women to serve in the Navy.

Laurie Henderson: Oh, no, no. In the capacity of a draftsman.

The Wave program that you were in was relatively new at that point.

Laurie Henderson: Well no, this was very much toward the end of the war so it wasn't all that new by then.

Talk a little bit about what it was like if you would to be a woman in the Navy at that time.

Laurie Henderson: Well, it was a good experience. We were respected on the whole, and uh, we were also trained in boot camp to conduct ourselves in lady-like fashion, and of course they were very particular about how we dressed and what we wore and we had the uniforms. In fact our basic uniforms were designed by the famous designer, Sky Perelli, so they were quite sharp.

What time did you get assigned to Treasure Island?

Laurie Henderson: I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch that.

When you went to San Francisco, what point was that?

Laurie Henderson: Well that was right from boot camp that we were put on the train at uh, New York City, uh, changed trains at Chicago and went uh, through Los Angeles and Bakersfield. This was a Navy train basically, personnel train with Navy enlistees, and there were men as well as women on that train.

At any point did you encounter any Germans or Japanese or Italian prisoners or - ?

Laurie Henderson: Well, we saw German prisoners being marched here and there. In fact back in my home town in Iowa, I think that I could be mistaken, but I think that there were a few German prisoners who were, who marched everywhere they went.

Did you encounter any of them directly, or what were your thoughts when you saw them?

Laurie Henderson: Well, I just kind of took it for granted and went on, just didn't think much about it except to note that they without having a leader, they knew exactly where they were going and would march in unison.

Did you have any favorite officers?

Laurie Henderson: Any what?

Favorite officers?

Laurie Henderson: Oh, yes, uh, the uh woman uh, at the radio material school where I was stationed or assigned was a lieutenant I believe, and she was a very, very nice, considerate person, and uh, we had to get her permission to do almost anything out of the ordinary such as get married.

Now did you do that?

Laurie Henderson: Yes I did. I met my husband to be right after uh, the Japanese surrender, and it was a rather intense courtship and he was very persuasive, and less than a month later, why we were married at the chapel there at Treasure Island, an all military wedding.

Wow. Now you mentioned the end of the war. Where were you when you heard that the war ended?

Laurie Henderson: I think I was, well I know that I was there at the uh, station at Treasure Island. I was about all the women who were uh, out on leave or anything were called back to the base because the, as expected, there were pretty riotous celebrations in town, so for our own safety we were called back to the base, but I was already there so that didn't affect me. It was strange though because a week or two after that, why I broke my wrist and was going around with a sling, my arm in a sling, and people had sort of assumed that I had been ashore, what they call ashore, meaning away from the base, and had got caught in some riot and had broke it there. Not true, not true.

And going back just a little bit further, where were you when you heard about the atomic bomb?

Laurie Henderson: I guess that uh, we had been married for some months and uh, my husband had, well oh, no, no, that was before the surrender. I don't remember that really specifically, but uh, we were really happy that that happened and that the end of the war was projected to be very soon, and we heard a lot about how many lives were being saved on both sides by the use of that bomb. So we were, we were glad. Of course it was a tragic thing and uh, as far as I'm concerned, I'd never want it to ever have to be used again because it could mean the end of civilization, but uh, at the time, it was probably the best thing that could've happened.

So the war ended and you had an all military wedding. Was your husband also in the Navy?

Laurie Henderson: Yes he was. He had been overseas in the Navy on a destroyer, a Fletcher class destroyer as a radar man before we met, and -

Is that how ya'll met?

Laurie Henderson: No, we met through a, one of my roommates uh, had gone to what they called the Geeda stand, which is soft ice cream, and so he and a couple of friends of his, buddies of his were at this stand and they got to talking and they asked her to set up a double date. Well, uh, I was most reluctant to go. I met another fellow who was stationed there and was very serious about him and so I was not going out any, and of course there were lots, lots, lots more men than women at that station, and so most of the, most of the gals already had dates or were serious about somebody else, and so she couldn't get anybody and couldn't get anybody to join her on this double date. And she kept after me and kept after me to go, and so finally I gave in and decided OK, just once, and uh, so that was how we met, on a blind date.

Where did ya'll go?

Laurie Henderson: We went to a movie there on the base and then it was arranged that we were to go into San Francisco to a movie the following, uh, the following Monday I believe it was, or Sunday night, must've been Sunday night. So anyway it turned out that one of them, I think his buddy couldn't go at that time, and so uh, anyway, my roommate and I whose name was Phyllis Jewel from uh, Seattle, the daughter of a dentist incidentally, who was called Billy, well now I've lost my train of thought.

Ya'll were going out to a movie.

Laurie Henderson: OK, so anyway uh, we, they, oh yeah, OK. We, she and I went into town on Saturday and spent the whole day and didn't get back until 2:00 a.m., the last bus for Wave's going back to the base, and so it was quite late when I got to bed. Well, at 6 o'clock on Sunday morning, that Sunday morning, the phone rang in the barracks and they hollered that it was for me. So I went and answered the phone, and it was my date. And so he said that uh, the other fellow couldn't go and could just the two of us still go? Well, I was so sleepy, he couldn't understand a word I was saying, and so he finally just said well, he'd come over and pick me up at 6 o'clock or some specific time and uh, we'd go or not, you know. Well, he sounded so wonderful on the phone. He had a wonderful telephone voice, and uh, so if it weren't for that, I probably wouldn't have gone. And so he came over every afternoon after work, uh, for the next several weeks, and then he uh, said that there was a special program, an outdoor theater production of Hansel and Gretel up at the far end of Golden Gate Park, and could we go into town for the weekend and see that and we would each stay in the service dorms, and so that's what we did. And uh, OK, we went to a movie, well no, we went up to uh, that production and I

was rather impressed that he would be interested in a sort of theatrical sort of thing, uh, and so anyway, we, afterward, why we went to a Howard Johnson café on the upper end of Market Street and he sat me down and started asking me to marry him. Well, actually he had uh, started asking me that that first evening on the blind date.

Didn't waste any time.

Laurie Henderson: Not at all, none whatsoever. As a matter of fact, he told me later that when I came out of the barracks into the waiting room, Billy and I were talking and laughing and smiling, and I kind of flashed a smile in his direction, and that just was like uh, they say in the uh, the Godfather, the lightning or they were that way. And he made up his mind at that moment that he was gonna marry me. So when he started asking that at the movie or after the movie that first evening, I thought you got to be kidding. But then I also felt he was serious. So that was kind of a different experience.

So you had to get permission to get married.

Laurie Henderson: Yes, I had to go to Lieutenant whatever her name was and uh, ask permission. Anyway, that uh, that evening at Howard Johnson's, why he, as I said, he sat me down and started to persuade me, and that went on for about two hours or so and he would get up and get another cup of coffee or have it refilled and back at the table without missing a beat. And uh, so finally, well, he said some things that were impressive, and then of course in the meantime, why during those weeks, every evening why we would be finding out more about each other and I knew that he was from a pretty good family and uh, an educated family which matched my family, although we were very poor because of the, my father's death when I was so young, but uh, anyway it was, I knew that the family was a good family and he seemed like a really good person, too, and he said that we may not have a whole lot of money, but we would have fun. And that kind of caught my attention, and then uh, just, it just suddenly dawned on me and I said to myself, Laurie, you fool, nobody else in the world will ever love you like this. And so I said yes, and he had gotten up and refilled his coffee and sat down and asked me one more time, and I said yes and then, and then he kept right on trying to persuade me, and all of a sudden he realized that I had said yes.

Oh that's great.

Laurie Henderson: And so uh, we thought at first we would get married in a month, and then every evening he would try to move it up a week, and ended up getting married about a week later. And so uh, that was, that was a very nice wedding. We didn't, we just told our friends and acquaintances to come to the church, we're getting married such and such a time, and uh, didn't send out invitations or anything. The ladies mother's club had a chapter there and they offered a wedding dress, but I elected to just go ahead and marry in my uniform.

Oh, great.

Laurie Henderson: So uh, so of course they, somebody there had a camera and they took, took pictures of the uh, weddings that were held there, so I still have that picture of course framed and on the wall here, and uh, so we went on a very short weekend honeymoon and uh, back to work on Monday morning.

And how long did you remain in the Navy?

Laurie Henderson: Well, just a few more months because I had got pregnant immediately. They, the doctors called it a, a uh, Pullman baby, getting married on one's honeymoon implies going on a train, that was a Pullman car and so anyway our son was born nine months and eleven days later.

And did your husband stay in the Navy?

Laurie Henderson: No, uh, he got out as soon as he had the points, uh, which was in February of uh, '46 then, and uh, we came back, we came to Austin then about February 21st and, and they had delayed the beginning of the semester at the University of Texas for service men to be able to get there and get enrolled that semester.

Excellent.

Laurie Henderson: So then he started right in the Monday after that weekend we arrived.

And you've been in Austin since?

Laurie Henderson: Yes. We had two children. We had a daughter about two and a half years later, and she and her family live in Austin and my grandchildren and great grandchildren are all around this general area.

Oh, that's wonderful.

Laurie Henderson: Mm-hmm.

This is one of the questions they give us to ask, but did you see anyone famous while you were in the service?

Laurie Henderson: Anyone famous?

Yes ma'am.

Laurie Henderson: I don't remember anyone in particular. The one thing that did impress me though was, was uh, I think it was when I was on the way to uh, discharge station, the guys that picked me up, uh, to go had a little extra time and so we ended up going across the Golden Gate Bridge and back, and there was the fleet, the fleet was standing out to sea as far as you could see. And that still gives me a thrill thinking of that sight.

Do you recall any humorous events while you were in the service?

Laurie Henderson: Oh yeah, uh, one of my platoon buddies was a very talented gal, and she could sing and uh, kind of play these, uh, play act these uh, kind of funny songs, and so that was a lot of fun.

Looking back, how do you think your military service has affected your life?

Laurie Henderson: Well, of course I would never have met my husband. And we had 55 years together before he died, and so uh, that's a pretty good, pretty big influence.

Yeah, I think so.

Laurie Henderson: I would say, mm-hmm.

What do you think the hardest thing about being in the military was for you?

Laurie Henderson: Well, I guess getting dressed up so stiffly every day. I mean with such precision and so forth, and I remember that evening after, uh, after he took me to the women's, military women's dorm, there was a living room and where people would sit after they came from dates and stuff, and uh, of all things, we sat on the floor in front of the couch, took off our shoes, and that felt like the most freedom one could imagine.

How was the food? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt.

Laurie Henderson: Well, let me, let me finish that.

Yes, please do.

Laurie Henderson: The uh, anyway then at the curfew hour, why I went upstairs to my dorm bunk and he went on to wherever it was that he was staying, and he told me what time he would be picking me up in the morning. And somehow or other, I slept very soundly and woke up precisely in time to be ready. So I felt like gee, I must have done the right thing. I wouldn't have slept so, so well and been ready precisely on time if it hadn't been right. So well, to go back to your question about the food, we had excellent food. Really, really good food. They steamed the vegetables and everything was just delicious except for one strange thing. This was at the Treasure Island station. Every Friday of course we had fish, and to go with it we had lemon meringue pie, but you have never see meringue like that in your life. You couldn't cut it with a fork. I think it must have been made from powdered egg whites. It was, that was just unforgettable. I had never had certain vegetables before like cauliflower and I immediately liked it because it was cooked just so perfectly. Actually I learned later that the Waves were given the same as the officer's food. So we had exceptional dining.

That probably helped.

Laurie Henderson: No doubt.

Do you follow the Navy and the different roles that women get to serve in now?

Laurie Henderson: To a certain extent, yeah, not too closely, but of course when there's a, something in the newspaper, of course I read it.

How does that make you feel to see now that women are actually even serving on the combat ships?

Laurie Henderson: Well, of course I had some qualms about it, but not, not much. Oh, there's something about enlistment and boot camp that I need to tell you in on. Women at that time could not be mothers and be in, and actually uh, several women in my battalion had had their parents adopt their children so they could go in.

Really?

Laurie Henderson: And these days of course, uh, they made that ruling on discrimination, and uh, so these days I would not have been discharged for being pregnant.

Do you think if that had been an option you would have stayed in the service?

Laurie Henderson: No, I think not. I think everybody was ready to get out.

Do you know what motivated the women who had children and had their parents adopt them?

Laurie Henderson: Well some of them were, were military wives, and uh, wanted to assist in the war effort. What we were told was that we were releasing a man for combat, OK? We would do a job that a man had been doing so that they could be sent overseas and be actually in the war.

And that was a big motivator?

Laurie Henderson: Well, I don't, I think probably for, for some of the women it probably was. That had very little to do with me. But anyway that was part of the patriotism that we were told that we were contributing.

If there were one thing that you could tell a current group of soldiers or sailors, what would it be?

Laurie Henderson: Would you repeat that please?

If there were one thing that you could tell current soldiers or sailors, what would that be?

Laurie Henderson: Oh I don't know. The war right now is so controversial and uh, so I really wouldn't have much to say about uh, current military because of that.

Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

Laurie Henderson: Well I guess just that I was glad that I went in and well I guess one other way that it influenced my life was that uh, the last house that my husband and I built or bought, was on my GI Bill, and also I was able to finish my education by these of, of my final months that I still had retained. By that time, why it had been discontinued and then reinstated because I was almost 40 years old. I lacked just a couple of months of my 40th birthday when I completed my Bachelors Degree. I had gone for another year and a half between having the kids, but I still had GI Bill left.

It was a good program for you then.

Laurie Henderson: Yes. Yeah, and that program bought not only paid tuition and so forth, but bought books and supplies.

Certainly.

Laurie Henderson: The text books and supplies.

Was there anything else you'd like to add before we conclude this?

Laurie Henderson: Well, I'm I guess just to say that I appreciate your interest in it for future generations and, and uh, that I'm glad that I went in and glad that uh, that there's an interest in what women did as well as just the men who experienced frightening things in combat, such as my husband did.

Certainly. And if there's anything that you want to add, please feel free to contact us if anything occurs to you. We're obviously very interested and I very much enjoyed speaking to you. You've

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Laurie Henderson: Oh, it's been fun for me.

Your perspective is obviously a little bit different from what we normally hear and it's very exciting and very interesting and I think it really does add to what we're trying to do.

Laurie Henderson: Oh, well good. I'm glad to hear that.

And on behalf of Commissioner Patterson and the Texas Veterans Land Board, I'd like to thank you for your service to our country. It's very much appreciated here.

Laurie Henderson: Thank you for, for your interest.

Certainly. I'm gonna turn off the recorder now.

[End of recording]