

Oral History Interview

June Reilly Leonard

WAVES

Mrs. Wright: This is Kathleen Wright. Today is December the 8th, 2001. This interview is taking place at Bethany Lutheran Church in Fredericksburg, Texas. I am interviewing June Reilly-Leonard. This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife for the preservation of historical information related to this site. We are going to begin our interview with Mrs. Leonard. Where were you born?

Mrs. Leonard: I was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota. My birth date is June 8th, 1923. We had seven children in our family, four girls and three boys; I am the oldest. My father's name was Eugene Miller and my mother's name was Evelyn Farmer. We lived in Minneapolis during the depression. My father worked for the streetcar company, but was laid off. There was no welfare then. We had four children at the time and a new one on the way. We had a big back yard which my father dug up and planted a garden. He raised rabbits and chickens for meat. We had a large garage which he insulated and used it for an ice house. We had no refrigerator in those days. I had a red wagon and would deliver ice to the families on the blocks around us. My father always wanted to open a bakery, so his sister helped him get one started in Excelsior, Minnesota. We moved there when I was in the sixth grade. I helped take care of my brothers and sisters and also helped in the bakery. I graduated from Excelsior High School in 1941. I wanted to work

in an office, but none were available. I worked in a drug store, had a job as a nanny, clerked in a grocery store, then back to the bakery.

Mrs. Wright: Where were you on December 7th, 1941?

Mrs. Leonard: I was in the window of my father's bakery decorating it for Christmas. I heard the news and just couldn't believe it.

Mrs. Wright: Did you know where Pearl Harbor was at that moment?

Mrs. Leonard: I think I did.

Mrs. Wright: I've heard that many people didn't know where Pearl Harbor was and kept right on doing what they were doing.

Mrs. Leonard: I remembered from my geography in school. I worked until I was twenty, then joined the WAVES. I felt it was the patriotic thing to do. Two of my high school friends joined also.

Mrs. Wright: Where did you have to go?

Mrs. Leonard: boot camp was in Whittier College, Bronx, New York. We were there about six weeks. We were issued our uniforms, got our shots, learned to march and

attended classes, took tests, learned a lot about military life. After that we were sent to school or duty stations or bases. I was chosen to go to Storekeeper's school in Milledgeville, Georgia. The school was held at the Georgia State College for Women. It was a lovely campus. The food was excellent, we had southern cooks; I gained ten pounds. We attended classes every day; we marched to and from all classes. When on a weekend pass in August I met a young army man, he was going to a medical corpsman school. We had a whirlwind courtship and married when school ended. We had a short honeymoon in Atlanta. I was sent to Washington, D.C. After my husband's school ended, he was sent to England. We didn't see each other again for two years. We had been married three months.

Mrs. Wright: Were you able to correspond with your husband?

Mrs. Leonard: I could when he was in England, but he didn't stay there long. He was assigned to General George Patton's tank battalion. I never knew where he was. I would get a letter maybe once or twice a week, then it would be months. He went through a lot, went through the Battle of the Bulge, captured and escaped; he was wounded, blown down stairs, awarded the bronze star for bravery; they liberated a German prisoner of war camp. After he got home, he was never the same.

Mrs. Wright: What did you do in Washington, D.C.?

Mrs. Leonard: At first I was stationed at Arlington Farms, it was the WAVES barracks situated in Arlington, VA. We had to cross the bridge to get into D.C. When the barracks got full, some of us were moved into an old hotel, not a far from the Capitol. Our bathroom was infested with cockroaches; we got rid of them in a hurry. We had to be very neat, our rooms were inspected. We had officers over us, they kept track of when we went out and when we returned.

Mrs. Wright: How many were in a room?

Mrs. Leonard: There were two of us and we got along very well. I learned how to do some handiwork as we had time on our hands after work. We had most weekends off and we spent the time visiting the museums, Smithsonian Institute for one, the beautiful monuments, parks, zoos, churches, art galleries; so many things to see.

Mrs. Wright: What were your duties in Washington?

Mrs. Leonard: I worked for the Bureau of Supplies and Accounts in the Navy Department. I worked in a large office; my job was to record all the government contracts in a large book. I had other duties from time to time.

Mrs. Wright: Was security high in Washington during those years?

Mrs. Leonard: Yes, it was. No one was allowed near the White House. No buildings were lit up at night. Everyone had to have security background checks. The WAVES had guard duty at times. Two WAVES would go together to one of the big office buildings. We each had a billy club. We had to go in each big office and inspect it. I was quite nervous; you can't do much with a billy club.

Mrs. Wright: What kind of uniform did you wear? Did you wear skirts or slacks?

Mrs. Leonard: We wore skirts. We had a navy blue uniform for winter and a striped seersucker one for summer. Our shoes had to have a certain heel height. We had to have short hair, just above the collar.

Mrs. Wright: Did they provide your meals, or did you have to buy them out of your pay?

Mrs. Leonard: When we lived in the hotel we had to buy our own meals; we got an allowance for them. I don't remember how much we were given.

Mrs. Wright: What did you miss most during the war, creature comforts, relationships, or whatever?

Mrs. Leonard: I made a lot of nice friends, we were all there for a purpose and we made the best of it. We would get together to walk to dinner, go roller skating, or go to the theater.

Mrs. Wright: Where were you when the war ended?

Mrs. Leonard: When the Germans surrendered there was no change. We knew we still had to defeat Japan. I had hoped my husband could come home then, but I got a letter from him saying he would be sent to the South Pacific. That was a shock for me, I cried for hours.

Mrs. Wright: That was a long two years for you, having him so far away. I think it's remarkable that so many women volunteered their services, and then to have their husbands away also. Were any of your brothers in the service?

Mrs. Leonard: Yes, one brother was training to be a pilot on an aircraft carrier; another brother was in the Navy aboard ship. They both came home safely.

Mrs. Wright: Well, good.

Mrs. Leonard: Praise the Lord for that.

Mrs. Wright: Absolutely. I often think about parents that had multiple children serving their country and how difficult it must have been for them too. Where were you when the war ended?

Mrs. Leonard: I was at work when we got the word, the offices were closed and people went out into the streets and went wild. Some went to church to thank God. People paraded up and down the streets, laughing and crying and hugging one another.

Mrs. Wright: Did it take a while for your husband to get home?

Mrs. Leonard: He got home quite fast; he came to Washington. My father offered him an apprenticeship, learning to be a baker. I had to go to Great Lakes Naval Training Center to be discharged. We started our married life together in Excelsior, Minnesota. Adjusting to civilian life was difficult. We bought a small cottage by Lake Minnetonka and started winterizing it. Places to live were hard to find. January 1947, our first child was born, a daughter. My husband could not adjust to working in the bakery; he wanted to go back to Maine where he was born. We put everything on a trailer and drove cross country. We lived with his grandmother for a while, then bought a house. He found work in a commercial bakery. That didn't last long; he decided he wanted to go back into the service. He enlisted in the Air Force. He was stationed at Fort Slocum, New Rochelle, New York. We lived in a rented room for a while, then bought a row house and rented rooms to military people. The base was closed and we transferred to McQuire Air Force Base in New Jersey. I had had our second child, a daughter, born in Long Island, New

York in January, 1949. There was no housing in New Jersey; we ended up living in a remodeled chicken house out in the country. I found out I was going to have another child. We had another daughter, born on the base in September, 1950. Life was hard, pay not good and living conditions were very poor. We finally got a new apartment on base. We were there about a month when I found out that we were going to have another child. To add to our problems, my husband got orders to go to Korea. He would be gone a year. I moved back to Excelsior, Minnesota to be near my parents. I lived on the second floor of a private residence. Our son was born in August, 1952. He was six months old when my husband returned.

Our next duty station was in Orlando, Florida. My husband was not happy, poor living conditions, poor schools and he didn't like what he was doing. He got transferred to Sedalia, Missouri. He wasn't happy there either. A job in recruiting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin opened up and he was accepted. He was happy there and we stayed for eight years. His time was almost up when he could retire, [but] they sent him to Germany. He was going to be there two years. There was no housing, so we couldn't go with him. After a year there, he had a nervous breakdown. The children and I settled in Maine before he left, as he wanted to retire in Maine. He was sent to a base in Bangor, Maine to finish his time. We had bought a big old house that needed a lot of work. I had to work part time to make ends meet.

When my husband finally retired, his uncle helped him get a job in Portland Post Office. He worked there for seven years, first as a mail handler, then in the office of quality control. He came down with brain cancer in 1976. It was a terrible shock. He went through brain surgery, radiation and chemo therapy. Finally, I decided to move to

California for the weather and to be near my sisters and a brother and an aunt. When my aunt passed away she left me her mobile home, car and furniture. We then sold our house in Maine. My husband lived for seventeen years; the last years were very hard as he could not do anything for himself. He passed away in 1994. I took him back to Maine for his funeral and to be buried. I was a widow of three years. I had a lot of friends in the mobile home park and had joined the Baptist church. One of my friends in the park introduced me to a man who had lost his wife.

Mrs. Wright: It has been just actually fascinating talking to you and I am so glad you came. I know you came with your husband to the 60th anniversary of Pearl Harbor. Right? Could you just tell us a little bit about him?

Mrs. Leonard: He was born in Kansas, the oldest of six children. He had five sisters. He grew up doing farm work during the depression. After graduating, he and a friend drove to California, hoping to get into the Army Air Corps. Gene had learned to fly the light plane and wanted to be a pilot or work on the planes as a mechanic. A Marine recruiter talked him into going into the Marines. After a year, Gene finally worked his way into a Marine Air Group, stationed at North Island N.A.S., California. He finally got to work as a mechanic on planes. The group was sent to Ewa Field, Hawaii. It was about ten miles from Pearl Harbor. When the Japanese came they set all their planes on fire. Gene was strafed going across the field. Gene married during the war; he and his wife had four children. After the war, he got out of the service and then re-enlisted in the Air Force. He stayed six years. He eventually owned his own garage in Chula Vista,

California. A mutual friend from our church introduced us. We had a lot in common and it didn't take long for us to decide to marry.

Mrs. Wright: Oh, that's wonderful, just wonderful.

Mrs. Leonard: We have had a wonderful four years. His oldest son works for American Airlines and we can fly space available. We have been to England, Alaska and all over the United States. Two of my children live in Maine and one daughter lives in Georgia. My oldest daughter lived in Maine, but she recently died of breast cancer.

There had been a lot of bumps in the road called life. Sad time and happy times. I have been blessed with four grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. The Lord had been good. I still have my three sisters here in California and two brothers in Minnesota. Gene's family has accepted me as a member of the family. I still correspond with four of my girl friends from high school. Two of them were in the WAVES also. Betty Jalley now lives in England; Frances Rojina still lives in Minnesota, Geri Uran lives in Longville, California and Susan Gibson lives in Virginia. We had a reunion eight years ago and I hope to do it one more time. It has been a good life.