

National Museum of the Pacific War

Nimitz Education and Research Center

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

Miss Norma Cook

Date of Interview: September 16, 2007

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Interview in progress.

Larry Rabalais: Testing...and I...I will make a statement first. This is Larry Rabalais. This is the 16th of September, 2007. This interview is taking place in Fredericksburg, Texas. The interview is in conjunction with the Texas Historical Society, Texas Historical Commission, in the preservation of history with the National Museum of the Pacific War. The interview is taking place at the Fredericksburg High School and the interviewee is Miss Norma Cook. And for...with that we'll let her go on from this point.

Miss Cook: Okay, well I was born in 1932, February 1932 and I was born in London; lived there with my parents just for six months and then we moved to Liverpool which was very well hit during the war, and lived there till I became very sick with diphtheria and they suggested that we move out of the valley that we lived in because all the pollution from Liverpool was sent...setting in this valley.

Larry Rabalais: Were you at school at that time?

Miss Cook: No I was...no I was...

Larry Rabalais: That was before school?

Miss Cook: Yes, before school. And I...so I think was about six when we moved to...to Cheshire, a place called...oh, come on...it was in the Weril (sp?)

between...between Hoylake and West Kirby. And I...we lived there till we left in 1952 to come to the United States.

Larry Rabalais: What kind of work...what kind of work did your father do?

Miss Cook: He was a tool and die maker. He worked for J. Bibby and Sons in Liverpool and spent most of his evenings during the war on top of the building guarding it from anti-aircraft and what have you.

Larry Rabalais: Was there blackout at that time?

Miss Cook: Oh yes, definite...blackouts, yes, all...all over England. And...

Larry Rabalais: Did...did you experience some bombing yourself?

Miss Cook: Yes, yes. We had a huge anti-aircraft battery behind where we lived and the planes used to come from the...over the coast...over the River Dee to get to Liverpool which was on the River Mersey. And they were...the bombings were unbelievable. You could...

Larry Rabalais: Were they frightening to you as a small child?

Miss Cook: Oh yes, very frightening! And one evening the...one of the planes was hit over our area where we lived and it dropped all of its incendiary bombs...and so it lit up a lot of houses on the street! And we had big stack of...sandbags up against the chimney...two story house, and there wasn't one left in the morning...everybody had taken them to try to (unintelligible)...

Larry Rabalais: So ya'll lived in a smaller town or...

Miss Cook: Yes, yes...village, yes.

Larry Rabalais: ... or village or small town near...not to far from Liverpool?

Miss Cook: That's right...across the river from Liverpool...there's Birkenhead was the next big city and then it...then we...that's where we lived...in...in the Wirral.

Larry Rabalais: Was your father's tool and die work associated with the ship building...?

Miss Cook: No, no; it was...it was engineering...that's all I know...that I can remember. And...

Larry Rabalais: Okay. Now in terms of food stuff, was there somewhat of a shortage in some places?

Miss Cook: Oh heaven's yes! We were rationed; we were rationed. Our clothes were rationed; our food was rationed and we would save all our coupons so we could have one sizeable piece of meat on the weekend.

Larry Rabalais: Did...did your mother try to grow some type of a garden?

Miss Cook: Yes, we had potatoes; we had lots of fruit trees and black currants and things like that.

Larry Rabalais: So...so ya'll weren't sharing a house with someone you knew? You just had your own home?

Miss Cook: Oh no, no. But every morning after there'd been a big fight over Liverpool, you know, big...fight, we would wake up and the street would be lined with people who had been bombed out...

Larry Rabalais: Displaced?

Miss Cook: Displaced, and we were asked to...to take whatever we could or whoever we could in and most of them were children because their parents didn't want to leave...where they lived, so there was mostly children. And we had a...we first had a...first shelter we had was underneath our pantry which was by the

stairway...underneath the stairway and that's where we spent most of our nights until they gave us a shelter for the house...for the living room which was...

Larry Rabalais: I was going to ask you where did ya'll take shelter from the bombs?

Miss Cook: Yes, that's...

Larry Rabalais: In...in that seller or...underneath the...?

Miss Cook: ...yes...underneath the stairway.

Larry Rabalais: Uh-hmm.

Miss Cook: And they had put mattress...Mother and Daddy has put mattresses in there. There was just two kids...there was just me and my brother.

Larry Rabalais: When you say they gave ya'll a shelter later, did they have some outside shelters...?

Miss Cook: Yes there was some shelters...were built outside but we didn't want to go out there. They...they were just bricks so they gave...if you didn't want to do that and they gave you a big huge piece of steel...and...and it had...and it was a frame so you could...we put it in the living room when we could go in there if it was really bad, 'cause that give you a little more protection.

Larry Rabalais: Oh I see. After some of the bombing runs, I assume most of them were night time probably.

Miss Cook: Yes, hardly any day time.

Larry Rabalais: Were there little fragments and pieces of explosive...either from anti-aircraft or stuff like...was any fragments around?

Miss Cook: Yes, yes...streets, yes. And...

Larry Rabalais: So I guess as kids you might have gone outside maybe and...

Miss Cook: Picked them up.

Larry Rabalais: Maybe...maybe picked some of that.

Miss Cook: That's right!

Larry Rabalais: Yeah, especially the boys would.

Miss Cook: Yes, don't have any of it left. Any anyway I went to grade school and then when I was about sixteen I went to a business college to learn a trade.

Larry Rabalais: Was the war over by then?

Miss Cook: Uh, the war was over when...in 194...?

Larry Rabalais: '45.

Miss Cook: '45...no, no. I was...I was in...no I was only about twelve, thirteen then, so then when I was sixteen I went to business college.

Larry Rabalais: Did...did ya'll have regular school session during the war period?

Miss Cook: Yes, yes, pretty much unless the school was hit for some reason, yeah, we did it. They tried to keep everything as normal as possible for the kids.

Larry Rabalais: Now there was a program early in the war to move a lot of the children out of London to rural areas...

Miss Cook: Yes.

Larry Rabalais: ...even to Canada and...

Miss Cook: Yes.

Larry Rabalais: ...and different places. Were you aware of any of that?

Miss Cook: Yes. Well we were planning...right before war started, we were planning on immigrating to the United States...but the war started. And then a big ship filled with women and children were torpedoed...

Larry Rabalais: I remember that.

Miss Cook: ...and my mother said, "I...we'll stay here; I'd rather do that."

Larry Rabalais: Did you have brothers and sisters?

Miss Cook: I had one brother who was a few years younger than me.

Larry Rabalais: Younger than you.

Miss Cook: And then after the war, my mother and daddy had a...a brother and a sister. So there's four of us altogether right now.

Larry Rabalais: Okay, did they stay in England after the war?

Miss Cook: No, no. My father immigrated first...because I had an aunt and uncle who had been in the United States since 1919...

Larry Rabalais: So they sponsored you?

Miss Cook: Yes, and they lived in Dallas. And we...my...my father went first...we shipped out on a...light steamers. They were...cargo passenger ships. And my uncle was a cotton merchant and he shipped his cotton on these boats so we were able to get a...you know, a free ride almost.

Larry Rabalais: Well during the war then...friends and neighbors...any friends and neighbors that you know of that were killed in...in action overseas...in a way...did ya'll have any of that kind of tragedy?

Miss Cook: Yes, I...my...my mother's brother was...was a merchant marine and I don't remember the name of the boat he was on but he used to go between Australia and England with food and he was torpedoed on the way...

Larry Rabalais: Was he lost?

Miss Cook: Yes, lost at sea. That's the only...the only relative that we...you know that we lost but I'm sure there was a lot of people that lost a lot more. But anyway that was...that was our only tragedy, so...

Larry Rabalais: Was it a...a...frightening period of time during that early war period when you were quite small and not...probably fully understanding...what it was all about?

Miss Cook: No. Well as long as my mother and father seemed to be...

Larry Rabalais: Were...were there, so you were fortunate in that respect.

Miss Cook: Yes, yes.

Larry Rabalais: You didn't have them...sort of mentally sheltering you...

Miss Cook: No, no. And my father was unable to...join the forces because...

Larry Rabalais: I was going to ask you why was he not in the service; was he too old?

Miss Cook: 'Cause...he...he had had...scarlet...not...no...

Larry Rabalais: Rheumatism...rheumatic fever or...?

Miss Cook: A...yeah, one bad disease when he was a young man and it did something to his heart so they wouldn't accept him. That's why he became...he was a member of the home guard...they were taken that.

Larry Rabalais: Okay, that's why (unintelligible). Did he practice doing that?

Miss Cook: Yes, oh yes.

Larry Rabalais: They had group things and...?

Miss Cook: Yes, this was...where he worked in Liverpool, at the company that he worked for...he was there to try to protect that. (laughter) So...

Larry Rabalais: Okay, in the air raids themselves...I guess a lot of them are late at night but you heard...you could hear the aircraft (unintelligible) above?

Miss Cook: Oh yes.

Larry Rabalais: Certainly you could hear the anti-aircraft?

Miss Cook: That's right, and you could see them...you know, if you...if you were brave enough to go outside you could see the planes.

Larry Rabalais: Did you see the search lights?

Miss Cook: Yes, yes.

Larry Rabalais: (Unintelligible) lights?

Miss Cook: Yes, plenty of those. The whole city was...or the town was all lit up.

Larry Rabalais: The government...did they have...you know...information...radio that made you, you know, I don't want to say hate the enemy but...but really...really dislike the Germans...and the German people...and that kind of propaganda...not really?

Miss Cook: If...if there was I...I never heard it.

Larry Rabalais: Okay, you never felt that?

Miss Cook: No, never felt that, no, no...too young.

Larry Rabalais: I'm sure you...

Miss Cook: Didn't hate anything really.

Larry Rabalais: Yeah, I'm sure your parents certainly had some feelings.

Miss Cook: Oh they did, the definitely did. But every air raid...my mother and father and...and another couple from down the street would come on over and they would play cards while it was all going on...so... (laughter)

Larry Rabalais: Brave people!

Miss Cook: Yeah, that's right! But anyway...

Larry Rabalais: Do you have any mementos from during the war itself? You said, of course, you didn't pick up any of the...

Miss Cook: No.

Larry Rabalais: ...fragments or anything like that, but like posters or...or any of that stuff...?

Miss Cook: No.

Larry Rabalais: ...you were small then...

Miss Cook: Yeah, we didn't have much of that. I was given a...my uncle came on...home from one of his trips to Australia...he brought a koala bear with him. And...

Larry Rabalais: A real one?!

Miss Cook: No, no a stuffed one.

Larry Rabalais: A stuffed one.

Miss Cook: And...it's funny on our last trip to Australia they were all over the place. But anyway my mother had given that toy that really was given to us to an airman to take with him as...we had a big air force base...oh, probably about two miles from where we lived...

Larry Rabalais: Oh really, from where you lived there?

Miss Cook: Yes, yes, big air force base and that's where they used to come to be deported to wherever they were going. And she gave it to one of the young men that

she had met...she and my father had met as a...as a...what do you call those things?...the..good luck charm...and so that was the last time I saw him because he was shot down unfortunately.

Larry Rabalais: Oh he was?

Miss Cook: Yes.

Larry Rabalais: Okay.

Miss Cook: He was just a young man. My mother and father used to entertain a lot of the boys when they...when they were stationed...they used to meet them and they would...Mother and Daddy would invite them over for dinner and...

Larry Rabalais: Do you know if it was fighters or bombers there...the big planes or the little planes?

Miss Cook: I never went near there.

Larry Rabalais: Oh you never went in...okay.

Miss Cook: No, no I never went in...I don't know...I just know...

Larry Rabalais: That was exclusively a British base...

Miss Cook: Yes.

Larry Rabalais: ... or were there Americans there?

Miss Cook: No they were British.

Larry Rabalais: Did you see...have any contact with Americans there very much?

Miss Cook: Yes, yes. Not...not an awful lot because they weren't stationed any one...base...

Larry Rabalais: They weren't based there.

Miss Cook: ...anywhere where we were.

Larry Rabalais: Yeah, some cases...there was huge American bases...

Miss Cook: Oh yes!

Larry Rabalais: ...near some of the towns and they pretty much enveloped the towns...

Miss Cook: Yes, that's right. No we didn't have that. They was mostly in the south of England that that went on.

Larry Rabalais: Well that's true. So Liverpool is more central or further north or...?

Miss Cook: No, it's northwest.

Larry Rabalais: Northwest...oh, northwest, right.

Miss Cook: Northwest, it's a...you can see...you an see Wales...from...from the river.

Larry Rabalais: From the river.

Miss Cook: Yes.

Larry Rabalais: Okay...big ship building?

Miss Cook: Oh yeah, well it's not any more apparently.

Larry Rabalais: No, not...not anymore.

Miss Cook: Anymore...that was...that's where they built (unintelligible).

Larry Rabalais: Industrial and factory...

Miss Cook: Uh hum.

Larry Rabalais: Wonder if the pollution is still like it used to be?

Miss Cook: No.

Larry Rabalais: No, it's better?

Miss Cook: No, no it is much better.

Larry Rabalais: Much better.

Miss Cook: They...they got rid of that somehow. I don't know how they do it.

Larry Rabalais: And so you then went to a technical or trade school when you were still relatively young?

Miss Cook: Sixteen.

Larry Rabalais: Sixteen; and...

Miss Cook: To learn a trade and I became a secretary.

Larry Rabalais: How...how did ya'll end up in the U.S.?

Miss Cook: Well my aunt and uncle had lived in Tex...lived in Texas since 1919...it was my mother's sister. And like I say we'd been trying to come to the United States right before the war started but then we...we didn't after that boat was torpedoed. And so as soon as the war was over...well actually the war had been over a little while...in 1952 is when we got our orders to where we could...

Larry Rabalais: Were things economically sort of tough in England at that time...in '52?

Miss Cook: Uh-hum. Germany was doing much better; France...all of...all the European countries were doing much better than us.

Larry Rabalais: (Unintelligible)...where Britain struggled so much.

Miss Cook: Yeah, we...we were rationed till...well when we left in '52, we were still rationed.

Larry Rabalais: That's what I meant...that there were still...hard times there.

Miss Cook: Yeah, yeah.

Larry Rabalais: And did your father...obviously with that...that much skills should not have had any problem getting work.

Miss Cook: Oh no, no. He worked for Dresser Industries when he came over here. But my father was not a union man and he...

Larry Rabalais: Had a problem?

Miss Cook: A problem, yes. It was...he just...they...they were not unionized when he...went to work for them, but then the union tried to...tried to infiltrate, and my father was...they respected my father tremendously and they...he was able with a group of people to keep the union from joining...from being involved in Dresser Industries. Of course I don't know what they're doing now.

Larry Rabalais: Where was that...in the Dallas area?

Miss Cook: Yes, in Dallas. Yeah.

Larry Rabalais: So you sort of continued your life there in the Dallas area?

Miss Cook: Yes, and then when I was...in 1957, I married my first husband who was in the cotton business and moved to...on the west coast of Mexico...Sonora.

Larry Rabalais: Really?!

Miss Cook: Yes, and we lived there for a year and then our first child was born there...girl. Then we moved to Brownsville, Texas where his...his business was...was. And then we were there just a little while and then we moved to Mexico City and lived there for six years.

Larry Rabalais: Wow!

Miss Cook: And that was...very interesting. (laughter)

Larry Rabalais: Yeah, I'll bet! Was...that would have been in the early '60s?

Miss Cook: '60s, yes.

Larry Rabalais: Was it fairly comfortable life there...?

Miss Cook: It was, it was. I mean I'd never had a maid in my life and...and I not only had one, but I had two or three (laughter), and we were well taken care of. The company that he worked for was a big...a big American company off the east coast of...the United States.

Larry Rabalais: There wasn't quite the violence there is today...

Miss Cook: Oh no, I...I won't go back to Mexico right now. I...we used to...my...Jack and I, my husband now, we used to go...about every other year because I had left...left some very good friends there. And we really used to have a wonderful time, but it...its really scary...even the Mexicans will tell you...my Mexican friends will tell you it's not a place to travel...unless you have to.

Larry Rabalais: Not any more, that's for sure.

Miss Cook: It's a shame.

Larry Rabalais: Well...

Miss Cook: It's a beautiful country.

Larry Rabalais: It is and there are parts of it especially...really stunning. Well in...in speaking of England itself, when you were there during the war...obviously it was wartime conditions...did you travel around much?

Miss Cook: No.

Larry Rabalais: Not really?

Miss Cook: No, no. If...

Larry Rabalais: Did ya'll own a car at that time?

Miss Cook: No, never had a car till we came to the United States. We had great bus service! (laughter)

Larry Rabalais: Good...good public transportation!

Miss Cook: Very good, yes...and underground.

Larry Rabalais: And the trains.

Miss Cook: Yes, the underground trains...and...

Larry Rabalais: There was...there was underground even when...?

Miss Cook: Oh yes, yes.

Larry Rabalais: ...that Liverpool area?

Miss Cook: Yes. In...from...you could take the train from Birkenhead...which would be outside...and then it...then it would go under the River Mersey and would come out in Liverpool.

Larry Rabalais: Everybody hears about the tube in London, you know, but they...they don't realize that they had it elsewhere.

Miss Cook: No, oh yeah. I don't know if...if they were the first people to have it or not; I really don't know.

Larry Rabalais: But they did have it.

Miss Cook: Did...did have it.

Larry Rabalais: And so...but...but ya'll were not able through either rationing or whatever reason...travel around very much...the country?

Miss Cook: Oh...right now in the country itself, we were able...we had family who lived in Somerset which was southern...south England.

Larry Rabalais: South...yeah, south.

Miss Cook: Yeah, south. And my mother would take us kids there every once in awhile just to get away from...there was no fighting there.

Larry Rabalais: (Unintelligible) area there...Somerset.

Miss Cook: It is lovely...just lovely!

Larry Rabalais: That's what I understand.

Miss Cook: We just...they...just to get us out of the...continuous bombing.

Larry Rabalais: Uh-huh. What about to the north in Scotland? Did...did ya'll every go...?

Miss Cook: No, I...I've been Scotland since...

Larry Rabalais: I mean at that time...during the war?

Miss Cook: No, no...never went...went south. If we went anywhere, we went south.

Larry Rabalais: Went south, okay. Just out of curiosity, what was the weather like in the winter...in Liverpool? Was that a cold (unintelligible) area?

Miss Cook: Cold, cold, cold! We had that...we had that damp coldness!

Larry Rabalais: There's not any snow or anything like that?

Miss Cook: Yes, we had snow.

Larry Rabalais: Occasionally you had snow?

Miss Cook: Yes, yeah. Some mornings we'd wake up and...

Larry Rabalais: A wet...a wet snow?

Miss Cook: So, yeah, and it...oh, it was so damp! I mean it just went through you and never...you know I've been back to England numerous times to visit. I have an aunt and uncle who still live there, and I mean I just forget how cold it is!
(laughter) So...

Larry Rabalais: Well of course the houses were built somewhat differently...

Miss Cook: Yes.

Larry Rabalais: ...probably had a lot of stone or brick.

Miss Cook: Well you know we didn't have refrigerators.

Larry Rabalais: Oh?!

Miss Cook: We had no refrigerators.

Larry Rabalais: Did ya'll have iceboxes?

Miss Cook: No, all we had was a stone...pantry. The pantry was made out of concrete and you could put a stick of butter in there...

Larry Rabalais: And it would stay cool at least.

Miss Cook: ...and it would stay cool; I mean it...now...now sometimes it melted if it got hot, but it hardly ever got hot. But no, we had no refrigeration...and the only heat we had was from a fireplace.

Larry Rabalais: Wow!

Miss Cook: And we had...the only way we had hot water is if we had a fire in the fireplace. It had a boiler behind it and if we didn't...couldn't get coal...

Larry Rabalais: So coal was the principal...

Miss Cook: Yes.

Larry Rabalais: ...items that ya'll...was it sort of hard to get coal?

Miss Cook: That's right. Oh well, it was rationed!

Larry Rabalais: It was rationed also?

Miss Cook: Yes, everything was rationed. So if you didn't have coal to heat the water, the hands on the stove would go like crazy! So anyway...

Larry Rabalais: So...not...not necessary...well if you were small, it might have been fun times, but...

Miss Cook: Yeah.

Larry Rabalais: ...imagine as an adult it would probably (unintelligible)...

Miss Cook: Oh I know of people...were a lot worse off than...than the English people, you know. I mean I...I was never in the bombings like they had in London which...I've seen pictures which were just horrific, but I know the Europeans...I mean I'd hate to of been in Poland during those times!

Larry Rabalais: Or Dresden or...some of those places...

Miss Cook: Dresden, yes, awful...just terrible!

Larry Rabalais: Okay, well Norma, that pretty much covers the period of the war is what we're primarily interested in.

Miss Cook: Yeah.

Larry Rabalais: And I...I appreciate the little...little tiny facets and details that you have shared with us...with...we at the Museum try to get a variety of...of points of view...not just from combatants themselves, but also from the opponents like I just interviewed Mr. Huroto San (sp?) and also from the...the youngsters living...during that period of time...their point of view...things especially about rationing; food shortages; and this sort of thing. We don't appreciate what we have today, I guess, as much as...

Miss Cook: Oh, we really don't!

Larry Rabalais: ...until we miss it. So from that point of view, again the Museum thanks you for your cooperation and...

Miss Cook: Well thank you!

Larry Rabalais: ...and we appreciate your time.

Miss Cook: Okay, thank you.

(end of interview)

FINAL copy

CD – #OH02026 – Miss Norma Cook

Transcribed by: K. Matras

Houston, TX

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