

C. Elizabeth Callahan Oral History Interview

JAMES LINDLEY: This is Dr. James Lindley and we're here this morning, February the 11th, for the oral history from Ms. Elizabeth Callahan. The purpose of the National Museum of the Pacific War Oral History Project is to collect, preserve, and interpret the stories of World War II veterans, home front experiences, the life of fleet admiral Chester Nimitz, and the old Nimitz Hotel by means of recorded oral and video interviews. The audio and video recordings of such interviews become part of the Center for Pacific War Studies, the archives of the National Museum of the Pacific War, the Texas Historical Commission. These recordings will be made available for historical and academic research by scholars and members of the family of the interviewee. Ms. Callahan, we want to express our thanks to you for coming this morning to tell us about your experiences as a Japanese American in Japan during the period of time of the war. So, Ms. Callahan, with that, let's get started in letting you tell us in your words, who you are and where you were born, and I will sit back and listen. And, should I think there is something I can ask that will help to amplify the story, I will. Thank you so much.

ELIZABETH CALLAHAN: Well, I was born to [Tokuji] and [Tsunei] [Ishi] in San Francisco at the children's hospital. I was named [Choko] because that meant "(inaudible) child." I was the first child. And "Elizabeth" was given to me because of my doctor, the obstetrician. Her name was Elizabeth [Keys]. So, I was born Cho Elizabeth Ishi and, on my birth certificate, they wrote C-H-O-W. And I hated that, so I have never used my name. I just use the initial "C." Anyway, I went to grade school there in San Francisco. And, then, I was going --

JL: When were you born? What was the --

EC: 1922. August the 2nd, 1922. I'm 87 years old right now. Anyway, I went to the seventh grade at the girls high school in San Francisco and that was during the Depression time. In 1935, because of the Depression, my parents couldn't afford to sustain us at a reasonable family life, so my grandmother who had been here for years sacrificed her life and agreed to be a chaperone, so my dad and my mom could send us to Japan. And my sister, who is two years younger, there are two of us. So, in August of 1935, we set sail for Japan. And once we got there, my mom went with us to settle us down and we found a house, and my grandmother and I and my sister lived there. My parents sent \$30 a month which was 100 yen in those days, so we

could afford a live-in maid even. And, I went to a private girls high school there. My sister was enrolled in elementary school. It was a pretty good life. My parents kept up the sending everything to us and my grandmother was very active and she was everything to us. But after I graduated at girls high school, I went to typing school where I learned how to type in English, of course, and then the Japanese typing. But, the teacher who ran the school liked me and thought I was great. So he put me in charge of the Japanese typing, (laughter) and I helped him cut stencils in the English typing classes and stuff like that. Then I got a job with Mitsubishi called [Sanki Kogyo], and it was an electrical company.

JL: What did they make?

EC: I don't know for sure. Just electrical things I guess. But anyway, I worked there as a typist. And then I got promoted and I became a private secretary to one of the branch managers. Anyway, in 1940 my grandmother had a stroke, and she was paralyzed on the right side, and she couldn't do anything. Then, my dad came over because he thought it was critical that he come back to see his mom. Then, in '41, December, the war broke out. It was devastating to us because here we were with a paralyzed

grandma, my sister was still in school, and I was only 19 at that time.

JL: Did you have any inkling that this was about to happen?

EC: No, we didn't. I couldn't even imagine it happening because, of course we lived in our own world, so we wouldn't know. But, anyhow, when the war broke out that was about the last straw for my grandmother. And then I can remember in 1942, April, when the first Doolittle flight came over Tokyo. That was the day that my grandmother had been cremated. I had brought my grandmother's ashes home and it was something else, to lose her and to have the plane fly over.

JL: Did you see the plane or did you just --

EC: Yes, uh-huh. I did. Just a little tiny thing way up. And they were flying so high that nothing could reach them. It was just a flyover at that time. That was April the 18th. I remember that day. And then after that, I kept on working. Well, for one thing though, before that, my grandmother always had the little thing around her waist that she said it was a thing to ward off the evil and all that. Well, come to find out after she passed away, she had a thousand dollars in there. And so, I cashed that in and my sister and I took a trip. (laughter) Spent the whole thing.

JL: Where did you go?

EC: We went down to Hiroshima and Kyushu and all that. Just traveling. And it was OK at that time because the war hadn't affected us at all. But then after we came back I had to find means of living, and then, a friend of ours who had returned from the United States and established himself in Japan, he offered to let us live in one of his rental homes. So, my sister and I moved there which was in [Azabu] where all the embassies and everything was at that time. We lived there and I kept on working. My sister went on to school. I had a pretty good life there, I wasn't in need of anything. Except that there was no communications from my parents or anything. And then --

JL: Were you permitted to have a radio?

EC: Oh, yes. We had the regular radio.

JL: In [HK], you could hear the Japanese radio in HK?

JL: Uh-huh, but before we moved there, there were two college kids, men rather. My dad had made friends with them in the neighborhood and they kept on becoming friends with us. And, actually, I fell in love with one of them so we were real close. But the neighbors told us that when they were visiting us they would see people outside the house trying to listen or whatever, because they all knew we were all from the United States. Those boys were, one was from San

Jose. The other was from down in San Pedro somewhere. And they were going to college in Japan. And the guy that I fell in love with, his mom and dad lived in Hiroshima and his brother, too. But anyway, after we had moved to Azabu and we were living pretty comfortably. And then, of course, we had those raids and the 500-pound bombs dropping in the factory areas, the railroad tracks, and all that. But we weren't affected by it. And one time, I had to get off the streetcar and go into a foxhole because a P-38 came striping down the street. And that was one of those times I was really scared. But it didn't happen very often. In between time, there was food shortage. And rice was only rationed. So we only had a little bit of rice. To make a goal, we had to put sweet potatoes in it, whatever we could do to make like a stew or gruel so that it could last. My sister and I, we would take our kimonos or jewelry or whatever I could trade for food, and we would get on the train and go out to the country, and it was jam-packed. We had backpacks and everything, and we would go to the farmers and trade the kimonos and the jewelry for whatever they could give us. But, eventually those farmers were tired of the kimonos and so it was hard to get food after that. Eating all that made us kind of bloated looking, because it wasn't healthy. But, we managed.

JL: Was there any meat at all to eat?

EC: No, we had very little. I don't think we had meat. We had rice and vegetables most of the time. We struggled through that and, of course, when the atomic bomb... that was the end it seemed like. And then on May the 25th, 1945, they started dropping incendiary bombs all over the city and that one night when the siren rang, we put our fireproof stuff on loaded ourselves with the family history, whatever we could take. My sister and I were ready. And I was standing outside, and one of the bombs fell right almost close to me. But, it was an incendiary bomb but it was a dud or something. It never did burst. So I picked it up with my mitts and put it into a rain barrel that was across the street. And then, we were still there, and then all of the sudden the whole neighborhood started to burn. I don't know why, we had a little foxhole dug, and I threw in all the pots and pans in there. And as a customary thing, we always washed the rice at night time for the next morning. So I put that pot in there and covered it, and my sister and I ran. It was burning. And we had to run through the fire in order to get on the other side. So we went through it, and the next morning our face was kind of red from the heat. And walking back trying to find our house, we saw dogs who were just burnt to a crisp standing on all fours.

I didn't see any human being but we did see that dog. And then we walked back down to the house where it used to be, and I found my foxhole and I thought maybe I could salvage something. Went in, and that rice was cooked. (laughter) And my sister and I were able to eat that. And then a fellow worker from the place I was working with came looking for us knowing that we had been burnt out and he took us to his home, and his mom and dad and everybody sheltered us there for a while. Then, we moved to [Tachikawa], which is almost out in the suburbs of Tokyo, and there was a Japanese Army officer -- he was like a warrant officer -- and his wife had a big house there, and they took us in and we lived upstairs there for a while. After we moved into that house, the war was getting towards the end and the emperor came on. We all cried. We never heard the emperor speak. Ordinary people don't get to. He came on the air and said to the Japanese people, "Please, surrender peacefully. Do not arm yourself with anything. Just surrender peacefully." And, because of that, the Japanese did not have an uprising or anything, and so when the occupation forces moved in it was all calm. Nobody fought anybody. And if it hadn't been for him, I don't think it would've happened. And even though I was an American, I was very touched with that. I couldn't help

but cry at hearing his voice over the radio. Anyway, after that, this man opened up a souvenir shop in Tachikawa right across from the 376 Station hospital. So, my sister and I, had no place to go so we moved there. He had living quarters upstairs and the kitchen was third floor. We had to make fire and everything to cook. But anyway, the souvenir shop was nice and all the GIs started coming and then, eventually, I got a job at the 376 Station hospital as a secretary to the sergeant major. And the (inaudible) so it was really nice then. They gave us a dorm on the post where all the girls were. And we couldn't eat with the GIs because they kept us from mingling too much, but we were able to eat in the mess hall and everything.

JL: So you had plenty of food?

EC: Oh yes, it was nice. And then while we were running the souvenir shop, the GIs kept bringing us chocolates and butter, and we had some guys from the kitchen just bringing us all kinds of stuff and it was nice. They were the nicest guys ever. And they didn't ask for anything but just friendship. And my sister and I really thrived on that. After working at the 376, my then to-be-husband was in the next office. He was in the message center, and we got to know each other and we married in August of '46 in the chapel. It was hard. We had to go to Yokohama to the

embassy and everything. They asked all kinds of questions, and for me to marry an American, that was bad in those days. They didn't go for that inter-marriage thing. But anyway, this Captain Jacob [Webber?] as my dad and gave me away at my wedding. After that, we had to take steps for me to return to the United States. I had dual citizenship at that time. And so it took a long time for it to come through, but eventually -- let's see, I can't even remember the month -- June or July finally the papers came through, and my husband and I were on the same ship coming to the United States. But then, once I returned to the United States, they took me to the immigration office and I had to stay there over the weekend until they could clear me.

(laughter)

JL: Verify you?

EC: Yes. During that time, of course my dad and my mom were in the internment camp in Tulelake which is near the Oregon border. And, of course my dad and mom didn't have too much to lose because they were struggling anyway. Other people had to give up their homes, their furniture, everything for nothing. Almost like dying or something, they just took advantage and people had to give up everything. But my mom and dad fared pretty good. And then my dad was a block master or whatever they call it, so he ran that whole block

there. And I hate to say this but, my dad, he was a gambler. And he would rig up poker games and all that, and so he did well there. (laughter) (phone rings)

[unrelated material not transcribed]

JL: I'm sorry. Go ahead.

EC: Anyway, so they had to go to Tulelake because they signed up to go back to Japan because were in Japan, so they wanted to be with us. (phone rings) Oh, dear.

JL: Sure. Go right ahead.

[unrelated material not transcribed]

EC: That was my daughter.

JL: Checking up on you.

EC: Yeah, she said that she was worried that I was driving in the bad weather. She told me not to drive in bad weather but I didn't consider this bad weather, you know?

JL: Just a little damp, that's all. So you're talking about your parents...

EC: Uh-huh. So they were up there. They never talked much about it so I don't know what else went on, except that my mom was really upset that the barbed wires were facing them, not the other way around. They said that the barbed wire is put there to keep the outsiders from coming in but

actually, it was for them. And she thought that was wrong. Anyhow, they went back to San Francisco and established their --

JL: So you were finally able to meet up with them.

EC: Yes, and then my sister came the following year. She was able to come back. Then I had my daughter with my first husband, and then that was it.

JL: Let me ask you to think back during those war years. What was your reaction as an American citizen, but as a Japanese-American citizen living in Japan? And the newspapers and all the stories that were being published?

EC: Oh, it was hard. You're torn between the two. You love America but then, you're living right there and when they're dropping the bombs you just can't say, "Oh I love them, I'm glad they're doing it." I think I was torn between both of it. If they came over and then one was shot down or something, we would rejoice for that because they were dropping it on us. I don't know, it's hard to say because my parents were over here and I was born an American. So, I was torn between the two.

JL: Did the Japanese authorities ever try to intimidate you or to --

EC: No, not that I know of. Except that my neighbors said that they were eavesdropping whenever we were together and all

that. And so I guess they kept an eye on us, but there was nothing that I was doing that would raise any questions about us. And my sister was only a school kid so...

JL: From where you lived there in Tokyo, could you see military things that were going on? The military ships or--

EC: No I couldn't. I was right in the middle of Tokyo. Unless you lived in, say, like Yokohama or something closest to (inaudible) we couldn't see anything like that. And, of course, we never ventured out that far because of the transportation and the economy and everything, you can't afford to go traveling around anymore. We didn't have any military bases near us. I guess Tachikawa must have been one because they had all the hospitals and the landing places, but until I went to work there I never knew that existed. It's hard.

JL: When you returned to America and you finally found your parents, did you live there in San Francisco?

EC: Oh, yes. I did. I lived with my parents because I had the baby, too. She was born September '47 and my husband had gone back to Minnesota to meet with his parents and, since I was with child, I didn't go with him. After she was born, he said he was coming back but he said he didn't want to anymore. So, I just divorced him. I didn't want him around. So I divorced him in '48. And I went back at the

Letterman General Hospital at the Presidio. And that's where I met my second husband. (laughter) And that's who I was married to for 43 years.

JL: Wonderful.

EC: Yes. So I've been in the military life, from my marriage and everything, because he was an enlisted man, too. So I'm thankful to him because, if it hadn't been for him, I wouldn't be able to live like I am right now. I could never get along with the Japanese guys. I don't know why. My mom cried about it. She said, "Why can't you marry in your own race?" But I never could. (laughter)

JL: (laughter) You're an American.

EC: Yes. (laughter) It's not how you look, it's the way you feel. But anyways, like I told you, I don't have too many interesting stories to tell you about that war except that I did live through it. And I saw the bombing, I saw the striping, and I've been through it all. And I think it made me a better person for going through all the hardships.

JL: It's easier to appreciate things when you've had hardships.

EC: Yes. It sure is.

JL: You lived in San Antonio for quite a while, so your husband stayed in the military or...

EC: Yes. Let's see, we were at Letterman. He was at Letterman, too. And then he got orders to go to Germany. So we went to Germany, and I went over there for one year, but he didn't like it over there. So I wanted him to extend his enlistment there, but he wouldn't, so we came back and the assignment we got was Fort Sam. After we were at Fort Sam, he got orders to go back to Germany again and, since my kids were all in school, I stayed behind this time. And then, after he came back, he had to go to Vietnam. So, I kept on working at Fort Sam. I worked for the Academy of Health Sciences there, the (inaudible) course and, I don't know if you know about it, but the majors have to take that Command and General Staff College thing to get promoted. And all my students were all the majors, and they were nice. So, all my life I've been with the military.

JL: That's wonderful. Well we certainly want to thank you for all of that. That service to our country is wonderful, and certainly the civilians who serve our military do a wonderful job.

EC: Oh, my goodness. When he was in Vietnam, that was a trying time, too.

JL: Yes, it really was.

EC: Yes, but I can't say anything more because I wasn't in Hiroshima or anything. But this boyfriend of mine, his folks were there. But they were never affected by it. I don't know what part of Hiroshima they lived in, but they were all fine.

JL: Well, that's good.

EC: Yes.

JL: Well, I certainly thank you for your time, and coming and telling us this story. Are there any humorous things that can think of during those times that you might want to share?

EC: Oh, you mean with --

JL: Anything that happened during the time that you were over there that may have been humorous that you, in retrospect, and laugh about?

EC: Oh, well, you know with that souvenir shop and the GIs walking in. We would speak in English, and that look on their face and everything -- it was just wonderful. And then they would get stuff out of the mess hall and we would go on picnics. A bunch of us would get into those vans or jeeps and just go off. It was just a great time. And then, of course, there were times when they would look at us and they don't know whether we were for them or for the other. And the other thing is that the second batch of the

GIs that came over to replace the ones that were in the active war, those young guys never knew what hardship was. They were arrogant. And they thought they owned the place. And they acted that way and, boy, that changed our...

JL: Attitudes?

EC: Uh-huh. The first ones, they went through everything, so they knew what we went through. So they were sympathetic. They knew what it was like. They were good to us. But the second batch was not good. I remember that.

JL: During the war itself -- during the period of time when things were really hard -- were there any episodes that you can recall that might have been either stressful or things that upset you or things that were humorous?

EC: I'm trying to think. There wasn't much humor in those days, I'll tell you. But I can't remember anything.

JL: Were you ever able, on your radio, to hear stations from America?

EC: Oh, no. Uh-uh. I didn't have that kind of radio and everything was blacked out anyway. And they only let us hear what the Japanese government wanted us to hear. So, we didn't know how bad the war was at times. None of those things that happened like that we didn't know about it. Iwo Jima or...

JL: Any of that.

EC: No, and the Philippines. We didn't know about that either. And then, before the war, those atrocities that happened in China and stuff like that. The majority of the people didn't know what was going on. Or maybe I was too naïve, I didn't know.

JL: Well, I think it was difficult for information to be disseminated for one thing, and the government was able to control it.

EC: Oh, yes. They did. They controlled everything. So I don't know. I'm trying to think of what would be a humorous story but I can't think.

JL: Was the rice that you had to eat -- it was not polished, of course -- but it was --

EC: The regular kind.

JL: -- regular rice, so it was somewhat hard to cook, I guess?

EC: No, actually it wasn't hard to cook, but it was such a meager supply that we had to stretch it. And I can't even remember how we got groceries, except for going to the farmers. Because the stores were all [high], naturally, and scarce.

JL: So you were able to travel by train out into the countryside?

EC: Yes. Oh, you should see it. Just like sardines. Everybody was doing the same thing. And then, once you got

out to the countryside, you had to walk. From farm to farm, you had to walk to try to find something.

JL: So how far out of Tokyo would you have to go, do you think?

EC: Gee, maybe, over 30 miles.

JL: So quite a ways.

EC: Yes, because in those days, hardly anyone had any cars to travel in or things like that. And gasoline wasn't available. So we all had to take those trains. Of course, the transportation in Tokyo was great. They had the loop train, the subways, all that was in place back there. And the trains running out of the city, too -- the countryside -- they were running good, too.

JL: Anything else that you would like to share with us, Ms. Callahan?

EC: I don't know, I'm just glad to be here. (laughter)

JL: (laughter) Well we're glad you're here, too. Alright, well let me say thank you again for what you have done for us by coming and telling us your story. You've had a marvelous life.

EC: Yes, I have. God's been good to me.

JL: He has been wonderful. He blessed you a lot.

EC: Yes, he has.

END OF AUDIO FILE.