

Bernice Isabel Pratt Oral History Interview

MIKE ZAMBRANO: This is Mike Zambrano. Today is January 26, 2015. I'm interviewing Mrs. Bernice Isabel Pratt at her home at Highland Estates in Cedar Park, Texas. This interview is in support of the Nimitz Education and Research Center, Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission for the preservation of historical information related to this site. Hello.

BERNICE ISABEL PRATT: Yeah, all right.

MZ: Can you tell me when and where you were born?

BIP: Where was I born? In Donna, Texas, way down in the valley.

MZ: And when were you born?

BIP: 1922.

MZ: What month?

BIP: September 8.

MZ: What were your parents' names?

BIP: Knute Watsby and Anna Watsby.

MZ: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

BIP: I had three brothers, no sisters.

MZ: What were their names?

BIP: Well, they're crazy. Agil, A-G-I-L. He's dead now. And Gordon, he's also dead. Clarence. That's my three brothers. No sisters.

MZ: Were they all older than you?

BIP: Huh?

MZ: Were they all older than you?

BIP: I was the second one. Agil, and then me, and then Gordon, and then Clarence.

MZ: What did your father do for a living?

BIP: Well, mainly farmed. He raised vegetables and things, and that's the way he made living.

MZ: And your mother was a home keeper?

BIP: Yeah.

MZ: Since you were born in 1922, you lived through the depression. Can you tell me how that was for your family?

BIP: Well, we just lived on what we made. We made out pretty good. We had cows, so we had milk, and mainly we raised everything we ate mostly.

MZ: So do you think you fared pretty well during that time?

BIP: Yeah, I think so, considering.

MZ: True. Did you go to school -- did you live your whole life before age 18 in Donna, Texas?

BIP: Yeah, that's right. I went to Donna High School, schools all the way through from first through graduation. I graduated from high school there.

MZ: What did you do when you graduated?

BIP: After I graduated, I joined the NYA School, and they sent me to Corpus Christi. And I worked and learned to do sheet metal work.

MZ: Wow.

BIP: (laughs) And I made all kinds of little things. And then, when I finished that school, I went to work at the naval base repairing airplanes and the PBYS. I was a Rosie the Riveter (laughs).

MZ: And this was at Corpus Christi?

BIP: Corpus Christi.

MZ: I interviewed a Navy WAVE the other day that worked at Corpus Christi, working on PBYS.

BIP: I wasn't in the WAVES (laughs).

MZ: Oh, yeah. I know.

BIP: But I worked for the Navy.

MZ: You said the NYA School? What was --

BIP: National Youth Association. I don't think they have such a thing anymore.

MZ: No, I don't think so. So you went to the NYA while you were in Donna, or you went to Corpus Christi?

BIP: No, I went to Corpus Christi. I joined them, and they sent me to Corpus Christi. That's how I got to Corpus Christi.

MZ: Do you recall where you were or what you might have been doing when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

BIP: No, I can't remember any of that. I remember hearing it, but I don't remember where I was.

MZ: Do you maybe remember how people felt when they heard about it? Were they angry? Where they anxious?

BIP: Probably anxious. I don't think angry.

MZ: I forgot to ask, why did you go sheet -- why did you take this job [in Corpus Christi]?

BIP: I thought it would be interesting.

MZ: Yeah?

BIP: It was. I really enjoyed it. I made all kinds of little things. I made a cookie sheet. I gave it to my daughter, and I think she still has it.

MZ: Oh, really (laughs)?

BIP: And I made all kinds of little boxes out of metal. Any kind of metal we could get a hold of we used. Cans from all kinds of things. Mainly light metal, sheet metal.

MZ: And by working with the sheet metal, how does that apply to your work on the PBYS?

BIP: Because the airplanes, when they'd land on water, they'd [bust?] the bottom out, and we had to cut them out and fit it and then rivet it on.

MZ: So you're working in Corpus Christi; you've got this job working in sheet metal. At what point do you decide that you want to go into the service?

BIP: A friend of mine, we were working together, and all of a sudden we decided, "Why don't we do something else?" So we decided to go join the service. Of course, I got in, and she didn't.

MZ: Why didn't she get in?

BIP: Because she couldn't pass the test, or didn't. Anyway...

MZ: Was it a physical?

BIP: A physical or something. Anyway, I got in.

MZ: Why did you choose the Army?

BIP: Huh?

MZ: Why did you choose the Army?

BIP: I really don't know. That's the first thing that came along, I guess. It's what we heard of mostly.

MZ: What year was that?

BIP: Huh?

MZ: What year was that?

BIP: Must have been -- I think '42. I don't know, '42, '43. Somewhere along in there; '43, maybe.

MZ: So you joined the Army. Is that in Corpus Christi?

BIP: I joined from there, and they sent me to -- well, to take my training from Corpus Christi to -- where (inaudible)?

All of a sudden, I lost it.

MZ: Was it here in Texas where you took your basic?

BIP: No, it was in Florida. I think it was Georgia or Florida.

I knew it just as well as I did, but I can't remember.

MZ: I'll ask you later. Maybe you'll remember.

BIP: (inaudible).

MZ: Did you take a train to get there?

BIP: Yeah, I took my training there, my basic training.

MZ: I mean did you take a train, a rail car, to get there?

BIP: Oh, we went by train over there from here.

MZ: And so at this point it's just you. Your friend's not with you anymore.

BIP: That's right. I was by myself. My parents weren't even there. My parents were down in the valley, and I was in Corpus Christi. They didn't even know about it till --

MZ: Oh, really?

BIP: No.

MZ: What did they say when they found out that you had enlisted?

BIP: I don't know (laughs). I wasn't there. I just told them I'd enlisted, and I guess they took it pretty good.

MZ: That's pretty brave. Be on your own and --

BIP: Yeah. I was pretty young.

MZ: So you take your train. You go to basic training.

BIP: Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia.

MZ: Fort Oglethorpe?

BIP: Mm-hmm. In Georgia.

MZ: Can you tell me a little bit of what it's like for --
what's basic training like for a WAC?

BIP: Well, we did most of the things a man did.

MZ: Like what?

BIP: Like what? We went on all the --

MZ: The obstacle courses?

BIP: Obstacle courses. We did that.

MZ: Did you deal with any --

BIP: We did a lot of walking, and we did a lot of marching.

MZ: Was there a lot of physical fitness?

BIP: Fitness, all that kind of stuff. About the same as the
guys, most of it. But then of course I was with the group
of women [that?] a bunch of us joined together, I mean
finally got together.

MZ: Did you get any kind of -- did they show you a rifle and a
handgun? Was there any kind of weapons for you?

BIP: No, nothing with weapons. That part we didn't, wasn't --
didn't do anything with those.

MZ: It sounds like it's kind of a getting you ready and maybe a little bit of an introduction into what military life is like?

BIP: Well, it's pretty -- well, you'd go to work the same as you did anyplace else. You had your job, and you had to do it.

MZ: What were your living conditions like in basic training?

BIP: We lived in a big dorm with a bunch of -- there must have been 50 or 100 in the dorm together. And everybody shared the bathrooms and stuff. It wasn't bad.

MZ: What did you think about the Army food?

BIP: I enjoyed it. I worked, and then after work we had some free time.

MZ: What would you do with your free time?

BIP: Well, I finally met -- we went to the movies, a whole bunch of us together, and finally met some guys. And they went with us, movies and ballgames and stuff. And they had some girls' softball teams, and so I joined in one of those and I played softball.

MZ: What position did you play?

BIP: I played pitcher.

MZ: Ah, okay. All right.

BIP: Yeah. I have a picture of that, but I don't know where it is.

MZ: I'm a big softball fan.

BIP: Huh?

MZ: I love softball.

BIP: [Do I?] like softball?

MZ: Oh, I like it a lot. I haven't played in a few years, but I like it a lot.

BIP: I haven't either. (laughter)

MZ: When you're done with your basic training, do you get any type of advance training after that?

BIP: No. They sent me to Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio.

MZ: Really? So they sent you right back to Texas.

BIP: That's Texas. San Antonio, Texas.

MZ: Okay, so they send you back here. And what do you do?

BIP: When I first got in, I just drove a jeep, and I drove officers around. Anybody that needed a ride, any officer that needed to go someplace, I'd take them.

MZ: What kind of uniform would you wear while you were doing this?

BIP: Huh?

MZ: What kind of uniform would you wear while you're a driver?

BIP: Army uniform, just a dress uniform.

MZ: Okay, the dress uniform.

BIP: Mm-hmm.

MZ: And it was a jeep?

BIP: The jeep, the army jeep.

MZ: And so you got -- who did you get assigned to drive?

BIP: When?

MZ: Who were you assigned to drive?

BIP: Not any special people. Anybody that needed to go somewhere. I had kind of stayed in the office, and when somebody needed to go somewhere, I'd take them.

MZ: Ah, all right. You don't remem-- do you remember the name of the unit that you were with at this time?

BIP: No, I sure don't. It's been too long ago.

MZ: So you were just basically assigned to drive different people around the base.

BIP: Mm-hmm.

MZ: And how long did you do that?

BIP: And in between I worked in the office.

MZ: And what would you do in the office?

BIP: Mainly filing and running errands and stuff.

MZ: What did you think of that?

BIP: Well, I kind of enjoyed it.

MZ: Did you enjoy it more than your sheet metal job?

BIP: Yeah, I missed that. I couldn't do anything with my hands much except drive. Yeah, I liked working with my hands. You can tell. I made all this ceramic stuff.

MZ: Oh, you did? Everything up here?

BIP: Mm-hmm.

MZ: Wow.

BIP: Yeah.

MZ: You're pretty creative.

BIP: I like to work with my hands.

MZ: How long were you at Kelly Air Force Base?

BIP: About -- I don't know if it's -- about two or three years.

I don't remember. And then they sent me to Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama after that.

MZ: And the war's still going on.

BIP: Huh?

MZ: Is the war still going on when they transfer you to Maxwell?

BIP: Maxwell, yes. I was there during World War II.

MZ: What did you do at Maxwell?

BIP: Mainly work in the office, anything they wanted me to do. Office work.

MZ: Enlisting in the Army generally was like a man thing to do.

So when you enlist, did -- how did men treat you?

BIP: Like anybody else.

MZ: Yeah? They didn't give you --

BIP: They treated me real good.

MZ: So nobody gave you any trouble?

BIP: No. I got along with everybody. It was good.

MZ: Let's say when you're at Kelly Air Force Base, what were your living conditions there?

BIP: We lived on a -- we had a building. All the women had a building way out by itself. And there was a bunch of women living together. We all got along real good.

MZ: Did you make some good friends while you were in the service?

BIP: Yeah.

MZ: What are the names of some of them?

BIP: Huh?

MZ: What are the names of some of your friends that you made?

BIP: And there I can't remember any of them. I can't remember nothing anymore.

MZ: That's okay. What else?

BIP: I had some close friends, but I can't remember their names anymore.

MZ: I recall that you got out of the service as a sergeant. Is that right?

BIP: Yeah.

MZ: How did you get to become a sergeant after a while?

BIP: I got to be a sergeant after I got to Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama. Just working in the office, I guess. I don't know. I didn't do anything special that I know of.

MZ: Were you ever in charge of anybody else as a sergeant?

BIP: No. Just how that office -- (laughs). That's all.

MZ: Do you happen to remember any of your bosses in the military?

BIP: Huh?

MZ: Do you remember the names of any of your bosses in the military?

BIP: Not a single one. I don't know. Had a lot of them, but I can't remember the names of any of them anymore.

MZ: Let's see. What do you remember most about serving in the Army?

BIP: Why do I what?

MZ: What do you remember most about serving in the Army?

BIP: Well, meeting all the different people for one thing and helping others. It was interesting.

MZ: Did you miss your family while you were in?

BIP: My family was down in the valley. I was a long ways from them.

MZ: Did you write home a lot?

BIP: No, not very much. Once in a while. I guess they were happy for me.

MZ: Did any of your brothers go into the service?

BIP: None.

MZ: So you were the only one.

BIP: Yeah, that I know of. I haven't seen any more since.

MZ: Was there anything that you missed most of all while you were in the service?

BIP: I haven't any idea. I don't know what I missed. Well, being with my family for one thing. I wasn't with my family very much.

MZ: Do you have any memories that really stand out about your time in the service? Anything really funny happen, or just anything that really stands out that you [always?] remember.

BIP: Nothing. I can't think of anything that really stands out.

MZ: Did you ever see any USO shows?

BIP: Huh?

MZ: Did you ever see any USO shows?

BIP: Yeah. We went to shows like that, and we went to the movies quite a bit and enjoyed all of that.

MZ: Let's see.

BIP: I liked playing softball. That's the main thing. I did that more than anything. I like being outside because when I was growing up, I worked out in the farm and I worked out in the field all the time, and I got used to working with my hands.

MZ: That's pretty different from working in an office, though.

BIP: Yeah, it's quite a bit of difference, but I had to work with papers.

MZ: Other than filing, what would you do in the office?

BIP: Just move boxes and file papers [in them?] mainly. And I think I might have worked in the post office, giving out mail to the officers when they came in. I did that for a little bit. More or less odd jobs.

MZ: After Maxwell Air Force Base, do you go anywhere else?

BIP: No. I met my husband while we were in Maxwell Air Force Base. He was in the Army, too, and so we were together quite a bit. And then we decided to get married, and we were married on the base.

MZ: Oh. How did you meet him?

BIP: Because he went to the ballgames and stuff, and we went and finally got together.

MZ: Was he on the other team?

BIP: No, he never did play. He just watched.

MZ: What was his name?

BIP: Robert Pratt.

MZ: What was he doing at Maxwell Air Force Base?

BIP: What was he doing?

MZ: Mm-hmm.

BIP: Gee whiz. He had just come back from overseas, I think, shortly. And I don't know what he was doing after that. He never did tell me.

MZ: You got married while you were still in the service?

BIP: Yeah.

MZ: And you stayed in the service after that, or did you have to get out?

BIP: Yeah, for a while. And then I got pregnant and had a kid. And then they made me get out. When you have babies, you can't stay in any longer, so I got out.

MZ: This is before the war ends?

BIP: No, this is after.

MZ: Oh, okay.

BIP: The war ended before I got out. I got out in '49.

MZ: Oh, so you stayed in for a few more years.

BIP: Yes.

MZ: Did you like the service?

BIP: Yes.

MZ: Did you think of maybe making it a career or anything like that?

BIP: Huh?

MZ: Did you think of making it a career?

BIP: No. I didn't even think so.

MZ: Was your husband in the service, too, at the same time, in 1949?

BIP: Mm-hmm. We were both there together, until after we had the baby. Then about -- shortly after that, he got out of the service, too, because I had. He said, "If you're out of the service, I'm going to go, too." So then we went back to the valley. We went to Weslaco, Texas.

MZ: Weslaco.

BIP: That was in -- probably '50, 1950.

MZ: How does it work? You're pregnant. I guess you must have had to report it to your -- like your supervisor, and then from that point on they start processing you out?

BIP: Well, I was in about four months, I guess, before I got out. I worked while I was pregnant.

MZ: Really?

BIP: About four months.

MZ: And then about four months or so, you got out of the service?

BIP: Mm-hmm.

MZ: Well, that must have been different.

BIP: That was different.

MZ: Yeah, being pregnant and in the service back then. Today women get pregnant and they're -- you know.

BIP: You can stay in and take care of the baby, but back there you couldn't. They'd kick you out right away.

MZ: Yeah, it was a different time.

BIP: So we went down in the valley and of course had some more kids after that. I had four all together, three girls and one boy, and they all went to school in Weslaco, Texas. And they all graduated from Weslaco, attended all the schools there. And when they got out of high school, they decided to go to college, so they went -- they picked Southwest Texas University. That's in San Marcos, Texas. You know where that --

MZ: Yeah.

BIP: It's Texas State now, I think, or something. Anyway, they were all up here. And when they graduated, some of them got married and (inaudible), and they were all up here. And my husband got sick in '90. He got sick in late '80s, I guess, 1980-something, and he died in '93. And then I was down there all my myself, and my kids are all up here. So the kids decided they'd bring me up this way. Of course, they were all stationed around Austin. So I lived in Austin at the RBJ Retirement Center for 23 years. And then my daughter, she's a school teacher now, and said it's too hard to drive in Austin, so she found this place for me, and I moved in here.

And I have a daughter in Fort Worth. She's a teacher also, and she has a daughter that's a teacher.

MZ: That's a lot of teachers.

BIP: And my daughter here has a daughter that's a teacher, so there's four teachers in the family.

MZ: Oh, boy (laughs).

BIP: My daughter here, she kind of looks after me now.

MZ: That's good. A little bit back to the war. Do you remember when President Roosevelt died?

BIP: What?

MZ: Do you remember when President Roosevelt died?

BIP: I remember I heard about it, I remember hearing about it, but I couldn't tell you just when it was.

MZ: Oh, no, that's fine. When you heard it, do you recall what you might have felt?

BIP: I liked him, so I -- nothing I could do about it. Didn't care for it very much but it happened.

MZ: Do you remember hearing about the atomic bombs when they dropped them?

BIP: Yeah. I've heard about them. I said, "More power to them if they work in the right places."

MZ: Do you remember where you were when you heard that the war was over?

BIP: When the war was over, I was still at Maxwell Air Force Base, and everybody was real happy about it. There was a lot of celebrating going on.

MZ: Yeah, it was a long war. I can imagine there being a lot of celebrating.

BIP: Yeah. A lot of things going on.

MZ: When you get out of the service, did you try to utilize G.I. Bill at all?

BIP: No, I didn't. I wished I had. My husband was in --

MZ: He used it?

BIP: He stayed in the Reserves till he died.

MZ: Did he end up going to Korea, your husband?

BIP: Yeah. He got out in '50, I guess, 1950. A little bit later than I did. And then we went down back to the valley, of course. And then he joined the Reserves when we were down there. He was in the Reserves all those years.

MZ: What do you think about your time in the service?

BIP: Retirement?

MZ: Oh, what do you think, about your time in the Army?

BIP: Oh, my time? Well, I guess I enjoyed it. I had a good time while I was there.

MZ: Did you feel that you were contributing?

BIP: Yeah, I feel like I did.

MZ: What do you think about women in the military today?

BIP: Huh?

MZ: What do you think about women in the military today?

BIP: I don't know. It's different, I think.

MZ: Yeah? What do you think about some women wanting to go into combat?

BIP: I don't know. I've never given it thought. I've been busy otherwise.

MZ: All right. Well, I think that pretty much covers just about everything. Is there anything you'd like to add that maybe I didn't ask or a story you want to tell or anything?

BIP: I don't know. Nothing really happened that was exciting. We just played -- I played a lot of softball there and worked in the office. Just took care of the guys when they needed something.

MZ: Your work hours, was it just Monday through Friday?

BIP: Yeah.

MZ: Just regular office hours?

BIP: Uh-huh, just like anyplace else. And you had a lot of free time. You would play a lot of softball, and we had a team. We would go play other teams in other towns. And we'd go on the airplane, and they'd take us to different places.

MZ: Oh, so you had gotten on an airplane.

BIP: Yeah. They flew us to different stations where they had softball players, and we had teams and we'd play.

MZ: The softball team that you were --

BIP: And we did pretty good.

MZ: The team that you were on, was it just for your section, or did it represent the entire base?

BIP: It represented the entire base, but it was all women. All women on the team.

MZ: So they would fly you around to different bases to go play diff-- oh, all right.

BIP: Yeah.

MZ: Was it just -- well, did you play softball at Kelly Air Force base and Maxwell?

BIP: Not at Kelly, just Maxwell.

MZ: So then they would fly you around, what, around the state to play?

BIP: Around Alabama and Georgia. We went into Florida.

MZ: And your team was pretty good?

BIP: Yeah.

MZ: Did it have a name?

BIP: They took us -- oh, when I was in basic, we went up on top of the mountain. What is it? Can't remember the mountain.

MZ: Basic.

BIP: Anyway, we could see four different states at one place up there when I was in basic. Can't remember what the mountain was. Anyway, it was fun.

MZ: Did your team have a name?

BIP: Huh?

MZ: Did your team have a name?

BIP: I guess it was -- (laughs) I can't remember it having a name. It came from Maxwell. I guess we called it Maxwell Air Force Base team. That's the only thing I knew.

MZ: And you said you were the pitcher, or you were a pitcher.

BIP: I was the pitcher.

MZ: And you were pretty good?

BIP: I was. We won a lot of games (laughter).

MZ: Okay, so is there anything else that you recall that you want to share?

BIP: Can't remember. If I can remember -- my memory's shot -- it would have been better. But it was an interesting life, something to think back on.

MZ: True.

BIP: Mm-hmm.

MZ: Well, I think that pretty much wraps it up for my interview.

END OF AUDIO FILE