

The National museum of the Pacific War

Nimitz Education and Research Center

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

Harmon Harris

141st Construction Battalion

March 6, 2016

This is Mike Zambrano and today is March 6, 2016. I am at the home of Harmon Harris in Austin, Texas to talk with him concerning his experiences during World War II. This interview is in support of the Education and Research Center, archives of The National Museum of the Pacific War, Fredericksburg, Texas, Texas Historical Commission, for the preservation of historical information related to World War II.

Good morning, Mr. Harris. Could you please tell me when and where you were born?

Harmon Harris: I was born on May 16, 1927 in Frankston, Texas which is in Northeast Texas. It is a small town, not far from Jacksonville.

Mike: What were your parents name?

Harmon: My parent's names were Carman Mallard Harris. My mother's name was Mary Pearl Braswell Harris.

Mike: What did your father do for a living?

Harmon: He was a electrician and carpenter building and repairing houses. My mother was a homemaker.

Mike: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

Harmon: I have a brother, which was by dad's first marriage and a sister from his second marriage. I was the youngest of the three.

Mike: Since you were born in 1927, you lived through the Great Depression, can you tell me how that affected your family?

Harmon: It was tough. I remember my dad would go to town and see if could find and job to do so we could buy groceries. I remember mother would tell us to go downtown and see if the grocery stores could use any help so we

could buy some groceries. Then World War II came about and they started building Army Bases and a lot of work was going and as my dad was a carpenter, we did ok.

Mike: Did you ever help you father at work?

Harmon: No, I don't recall doing so, but I helped at home by milking the cows and working in the garden. We always had a garden. He would tell me what needed to be done in the garden and if I didn't do it, he would work me over when he got home.

Mike: Did your mother do a lot of canning?

Harmon: Yes, she sure did. That's what got us through the winter. The canned goods. We lived in the country and that was a big deal. People canned. They would have a big meeting and the ladies would can the vegetable and pass them our among the people.

Mike: So, they would share?

Harmon: Yes.

Mike: Ans, your father would trade work for food or supplies in town?

Harmon: Yes, he would. He would go downtown and if someone had things to move or clean up or whatever, he would do that.

Mike: Do you remember where you were when you heard the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor?

Harmon: I know I remember that, but I don't know where I was.

Mike: You were about fourteen when that occurred?

Harmon: Yes.

Mike: You obviously too young to go into the military, do you see friends or older boys from town, go off and enlist?

Harmon: I sure did. Later on, I went in.

Mike: I read a short article about you in a local paper. It said, that you enlisted into the Navy when you were seventeen years old. Is that correct?

Harmon: That is correct.

Mike: Why did you choose the Navy.

Harmon: I had an uncle that was in the Navy and he influenced me.

Mike: Did you enlist before you graduated from high school?

Harmon: I graduated on the tenth of May and on the twentieth of May, I was already in San Diego in Boot Camp.

Mike: How did you get to San Diego?

Harmon: By train. We took the train from Houston to Los Angeles and then we transferred to a bus which took us to San Diego.

Mike: Do you remember much about boot camp?

Harmon: We did a lot of marching and then we would go to class. I don't remember much about it, as it was a long time ago.

Mike: Did you do any training with a rifle?

Harmon: Yes. I remember that we would have to check our weapon in at the end of the day as they didn't want us running around with a rifle.

Mike: The classes you mentioned, were those classes designed to teach you Navy rules and traditions?

Harmon: Some, but it was mainly survival.

Mike: When you left boot camp, do you recall where you went?

Harmon: From San Diego, we went to another base. After a few months there they shipped us to the Marshall Islands. We first went to Hawaii where we waited for a week or two for a ship to take us to the Marshall Islands.

Mike: Was it Camp Parks that you went to after you completed Boot Training?

Harmon: Yes.

Mike: Can you tell me a little bit about what you did at Camp Parks?

Harmon: They took us on training missions out into the mountain area and we had to do this and to do that.

Mike: You son was telling me that you trained to be a Sea Bee.

Harmon: Yes.

Mike: What was that like?

Harmon: it was a Construction Battalion. When they were going in on an invasion, they had to have certain things built for them to get there and stay there and that's what we did. We built houses and defensive structures to protect them.

Mike: Did they train you in a particular skill?

Harmon: No. They would just assign me to various jobs.

Mike: After Camp Parks, you went to the Marshall Islands. Do you recall where in the Marshall Islands?

Harmon: Bikini. That was the name of the island I was on. We built an airstrip there to be used in the bombing of Japan.

Mike: Where you ever at Kwajalein?

Harmon: Yes.

Mike: Was that the first island you went to in the Marshalls?

Harmon: I think so.

Mike: Do you recall what you would do during your spare time? When you weren't working, how would you spend the time?

Harmon: Played cards and shot pool. We could play baseball and so forth. The main thing we did was go to a movie. They always had a movie.

Mike: Do you remember what you were doing when you heard the war was over?

Harmon: No, I don't.

Mike: Did you make any good friends while you were in the service?

Harmon: Yes, but, I don't remember their names.

Mike: I understand that you worked on an air strip for B-29s that were ultimately used in the dropping of an Atomic Bomb on Bikini. Did you know at the time why you were building the air strip?

Harmon: No. I don't believe so.

Mike: Did you ever have to drive some of those big machines used to flatten out an airstrip?

Harmon: No.

Mike: Did you ever lay down Marsden Matting?

Harmon: No. I never did that.

Mike: Do you recall any of the duties you did have?

Harmon: The first duties were that people would tell me what to do and I would do it. Later on they would give me list of people who could do certain things and I would assign them the various jobs that had to be done. I remember ever now and then I would have the job of getting a line up of

men to work on an airfield or whatever. Maybe the next time, I would be one of the men doing it.

Mike: It sounds like on occasion you were working as a team and you were the head of that team.

Harmon: Every now and then. I was just a seaman first class.

Mike: Do you remember what unit you were with?

Harmon: I think it was the 141st CB unit.

Mike: Is there anything in particular that you remember about your overseas duty with the CBs?

Harmon: No. We just went where they said.

Mike: You were in the service for about fifteen months. Do you recall when you got sent home?

Harmon: They sent us home from the Marshall Islands on a ship, but I don't recall any of the details.

Mike: I understand you came back to Camp Wallace, Texas and this is where you got discharged there. What did you do after you got discharged?

Harmon: I went to Port Arthur and when school started at the University of Houston, I enrolled there.

Mike: Did you graduate from the University of Houston?

Harmon: I did. I got a degree in Mechanical Engineering.

Mike: Did you work as a Mechanical Engineer for many years?

Harmon: Yes, I did. I worked for a lot of school districts that had big plants. One of them was Spring Branch Independent School District. They had Cameron

Iron and a couple of others. Deer Park had big refineries and Shell Oil and other companies. Baytown refineries.

Mike: What year did you retire?

Harmon: I sold my part of the business to one of the employees who was a friend of mine.

Mike: What was the name of your business?

Harmon: Evaluation Engineering Company. We use to appraise industrial plants for tax purposes in certain school Districts and Counties.

Mike: How did you end up in Austin?

Harmon: My two children live here.

Mike: Were you recalled for the Korean War?

Harmon: No.

Mike: Did you use the GI Bill to help you go to college?

Harmon: I sure did. That helped me all the way.

Mike: Thank you for you time and thank you for your service.

Transcribed by:
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