

Homefront: SPEARS, James
Service Branch: HOMEFRONT
Interviewer: Brosh, Kate
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Transcriptionist: Terry Moore
Highlights of Service: World War II; Worked in ammunition plant

Interviewer: Today is April 5, 2001, and we're interviewing James Spears. Are you aware that our conversation will be recorded and that the tape and transcription will be placed in the Lee College library, and do I have your permission to do that?

Homefront: Yes.

Interviewer: What year was it and how far into the war was it when you began working at the factory?

Homefront: December 7, 1941, I heard on the radio in the car that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. So when my wife and I got back to the house we decided we needed to check up on this, because we might have to change our lives a little bit. I knew that they were constructing national defense plants all over the country by the end of '39. However, Red River Arsenal was under construction between Texarkana and New Boston. I think the people around there referred to it as the New Boston plant, because it was the biggest thing that had ever happened in that part of the country. My wife, Min, was working in the Treasury Department office in Dallas and had a good job, and we didn't think she ought to quit that job, so I came back over to Texarkana, my hometown, and went to work at the arsenal. They did not have a machine shop or a welding shop or anything like that constructed at that time, and they'd hire anybody that came along who had a craft. I had had some training before the war in the Army and in the Air Force at Barksdale Field before then. I had been discharged out of the service before that started. They put me on the fire department, and that's how I got started into it. My daddy and my big brother were employees in a machine shop in Texarkana. I got to telling them about some things that were under construction out there, and my daddy had been working for that company for about 33 years. That might not

be correct, but it's close. My big brother had been there since 1929 when he got out of high school, so they'd been there a long, long time. I told them about the machine shops being constructed and all this modern stuff, and they got interested in that. After a short period of time, they left where they had been for many years and went to work in the ammunition plant—the “bullet mill.” The machine shop was almost finished, and my daddy and my big brother went to work there. Then the guard department and fire department had hired all the people they could find that had a trade and put them in these departments. They started the ceilings in the shops, and by the time they were ready to go to work there they had almost manned all of the craft departments, like pipefitters, electricians, machinists, blacksmiths, welders, the whole gamut of craftsman. I think there were ten or eleven different groups eventually when they started production there. They already had the people hired in various vocations, and they started gathering them in. My daddy and my big brother beat me into the shop. I came in after they had already been hired, and stayed there until the war ended in '45, I think it was. That was from the spring of '42 until the end of the war, and we all worked there together. During that period of time, my big brother became the shop foreman. He went up real fast. I say that with a lot of pride, because he was one of the most intelligent machinery and manufacturing-minded persons that I've ever met in my life, and I've worked for lots of big companies. They never had anybody in their employment that could hold a light to my big brother, and I say that with lots of pride. My daddy was a strange fellow in that he was a natural-born mathematician. I don't know what that has to do with the story I'm telling, except he had an uncanny sense of measuring anything. He could look at an object that needed to be rebuilt or redesigned and made a mental picture of the thing, and then he could go into the tool room where he worked and duplicate that with no drawings. He just made a mental picture of whatever the object was. Our military forces when the war started were down to nothing. I was discharged out of the Army Air Force at Barksdale Field in October 1939, total of the people in the military—Army, Navy, Air Force, National Guard, Coast Guard—was less than 200,000 people. Our military forces for the United States was less than 200,000 people when the war started, and as a result—so Gen. Hershey said when he turned his commission back to the Congress when the war ended—that he had

had to draft 18 people to get 6 good ones, so if they drafted 18 million, they got 6 million fighting people. We worked there in the beginning of the war in the Pacific, and things looked bad for our people. Materials started coming back to the Red River Arsenal to be rebuilt and redesigned as fast as it could be done. By the end of '42 and the beginning of '43, the war was really getting hot, and one of my younger brothers was drafted. He had two little boys at home, but he got drafted. He went into a tank destroyer organization and went through all that training and went to Europe. Their job was to infiltrate German forces in Europe and attach high explosives to anything that had wheels on it and blow it up, and that's what he was doing, and he lived through it. He died in the mid-60s from a heart attack, but he stayed in contact with three guys he served in Germany with. There was a spirit of camaraderie because they had been through so much— indescribable stuff—they couldn't forget each other. The Lone Star Ordnance Plant was an ammunition production place. They produced ammunition there from start to finish. There was no machinery in existence to manufacture ammunition with when the war started. Nobody in America had dreamed we were going to be in a war until Hitler jumped over the border and gobbled up the Austrians. Occasionally military people would come through the shop. It was a big place that had a railroad track through the middle. Railcars would come in there and load this stuff with a crane and get them ready to go wherever. Our first project was to build machinery to manufacture all kinds of 30 caliber rifle ammunition, 50 caliber machine gun ammunition, one pounder-60mm big stuff, to little 90mm mortars, and big stuff for eight inch guns. We had to manufacture machinery to make that ammunition, because there wasn't anything yet, and we had to start from scratch because there wasn't no pattern. We had no idea; there was no picture; there were no guidelines, and the young engineers were just frantically running from idea to idea. Anybody that had an idea, they would explore it. As a result, by the time the Red River Arsenal storage facility had enough stuff in storage to run the war another four or five years. It was American ingenuity—just started from scratch to build all this stuff. I was a young squirt then—yes, I was.

Interviewer: How old were you?

Homefront: A little over 30 years old. In those beginning years when everything had to be done from scratch, my daddy started off in the tool making department. He'd been doing that all his life, and had started out as a boy and became a master machinist. In fact, he worked in the civil service machine shop until he was 75 years old, and they forced him to retire. He didn't want to retire, because he loved making things with no pictures or drawings. He was born that way, I guess. One of the incidents that happened to my daddy, and my big brother, and I all at the same time was our supervisor came into the shop one day and said, "I need three volunteers, so you Spears boys come and go with me." We went into a production area that had a still in that plant. We had to put on non-conductive soled shoes and wrap them up with tape, and they searched us to make sure we didn't have matches or cigarettes or a lighter on us, because this was an explosive area. They said somebody was going to go to the Sakaya(?) area and get Brillion tubes. I hadn't heard that expression before. We didn't know what that was, but it was chisels and hammers to break up concrete with. They told us we were going to break this stuff up on the floor, and it was TNT, and it had spilled out and was spread out all over the floor about an inch deep. It had to be broken up in chunks and put in a container and hauled off to be melted again. So, there we were running around in that building covered with TNT all over the floor, and here we were breaking it up with a hammer and chisel. That was some experience. But it was just one event like that after another. In '43, my little brother was in combat in Europe by then, and we were working two eight-hour shifts a day, seven days a week—sixteen hours a day, seven days a week. If something went wrong anywhere in that manufacturing plant, machinists, boilermakers, and electricians had to go over and figure out how to do something. We didn't have anything to go by. You had to go do it and just do something. Along towards the end of the war, maybe two or three months before the atom bomb fell in Japan, an Army officer came to visit the shop one day, and he called everybody up into the middle of the shop and made a speech. He said, "Indications are that this thing that we've been in for four years is about to come to a head. If any of your tools need straightening out, if your hammer handles need replacing, or your mushroom chisel heads need redressing [the company

didn't furnish our tools, and it was that way everywhere back then]..." So for the next two or three days, everybody was busy getting their own personal tools back up to snuff. After the atom bomb was dropped, everybody asked what we were going to do now, and we just said, "Go home!" The pressure was off, and everybody was happy and crazy. By that time, my big brother was the shop foreman. Every twenty-four hours there was a trainload of ammunition going out on a Cotton Belt and a BP—bombs and ammunition of all kinds. Two of us went to the hand grenade line, and they searched us and went through this safety check where they made sure we had on safety shoes, no matches, no lighters, no nothing. We had a conveyer belt that was 1800 yards long from the start to the finish. When we got over there, they said, "We had a blow in the bay where they were setting the pull pins, and your first job is going to be to clean up the mess." We had to do that ourselves. This conveyor belt went through a notch in the wall that was just big enough for it to go through, and there were earth barricades about eighteen feet thick. Well, these people were just splattered all over the inside of that building. One of them's job was to set the pull-pin on a hand grenade. Now, I know you don't know what that is if you've never had a hand grenade in your hand, but that's the part that makes it completed. The people that investigated assumed that she picked it up and realized something was wrong and she froze. She couldn't react, and it went off close to her face. We had to clean that up and then correct any kind of damage that was done. It knocked the belt off on the floor, and we got that to running. Then they went back into production, and they wanted us to stand over in the background and watch what the people were doing. Watch every movement that their hands made and that they made. We weren't to pay any attention to their conversation, but just watch what they were doing, and we were to come up with something better than they were doing. They were using two people in each bay, and there were two or three thousand people working from one end to the other in this assembly line. They only had two people in a bay so they wouldn't kill everybody—just two at a time. They used their left hand to pick this thing up, or else hold it in their hand, and then they'd pick up a tool and do whatever they had to do to this thing. All up and down the line there were people doing something. They can't stop it, and they'd just go faster. At noontime, I had an idea. I made a tool to hold in your hand—I

dreamed it up myself—and that person could put their hand behind it and snap that pull-pin and move on. When it was over with, that one line where we worked was producing 18,000 hand grenades every twenty-four hours, and that wasn't enough. They needed more. That gadget that I made relieved probably 300 people in that line to go somewhere else and do something else. One person could work in that bay now rather than two. We worked sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, and there was no end.

Interviewer: Was this the same factory that you were working in before the war?

Homefront: No, we worked in a machine shop in Texarkana that, by the way, is still in business and still making money.

Interviewer: What is it called?

Homefront: Sico Machine Shop in Texarkana, Texas, on Broad Street. My daddy went to work there during World War I. That machinery company works on cotton gins and cotton oil mills and oil field drilling rigs. It was a pretty good sized place and still is. That's where I started out when I finished high school in '36. My daddy showed me what had to be done. The guy that owned the plant came and said he'd bring me something to eat when he came in at midnight. I made a whole twenty-five cents an hour for working all night, and thought I was the richest kid in town. I worked all night long running a machine. The war years were impressive, though. One year in that period of time in that same shop, we had a piece of machinery called the Bullard Vertigo, and that was a production machine that manufactured big, heavy stuff. Some company somewhere was manufacturing wheels to go on tanks. You've seen these tanks going down the road, and it has these little wheels running around inside the track, well they had rubber on them, and they had to be vulcanized on there. Some company had an explosion and had lost a machine, so they contracted with that government shop at Lone Star to manufacture a mold that would form the rubber on those buggy wheels. My brother came to me and two other men, and this Mr. Hughes was running one of the Bullard's, and I was running the other one. We started this on the 3rd of July in 1943, and we stayed there the rest of that day and night. They asked us if we needed to sleep, but we said we didn't. On the night of the 4th

inspectors were coming to see what we were doing, and they said everything was exactly right up to then and to keep on going as long as we could. Well, by the end of the 5th, late in the afternoon, the inspectors came and called us in the office and said, “You guys have earned a break.” Back then you had to have ration stamps to get gas, and you only got enough to barely get back and forth to work. They gave us some ration books, and told us to go home and get our wives and kids in the car and get out of town—just go somewhere. My son was three years old at that time, and when I got home that evening I had a fist full of gas rations and some other stuff they gave us. They asked me if my car needed tires, and I said I needed two tires real bad, and so they sent me down to the truck stop, and said they would call ahead and arrange to have some tires put on my car. Told me not to ask any questions or tell anybody. So I went home and told my wife to pack up stuff—that we were going to get out of town for awhile, so we went to a town in Missouri where there was a beautiful river and stayed there for three or four days. A lot of people that I knew had a lot of pressure on them and just crashed. They never did get drafted, because they wound up alcoholics or something. They just couldn’t stand that 85 hours a week pressure. Somehow or another me and my daddy made it through it. He retired when he was 67, and I retired when I was 67 over here at Lee High School.

Interviewer: When you worked at the factory, did you stop working there after the war ended?

Homefront: Yes, I didn’t even look for a job until sometime in the fall of the year. I didn’t want a job. My wife had finished her education and become a teacher, but I just went fishing and hunting. I had two or three buddies that all did the same thing after working in the plant.

Interviewer: What was the name of the factory you were working in that made the grenades?

Homefront: Lone Star Ordnance Plant, and it’s still in business today. They’re not making ammunition, but they’re salvaging ammunition by the thousands of rounds all the time. They take explosives out and ship the parts off somewhere else. Red River Arsenal is right across the fence from there, and that’s one of the biggest ordnance depots in the United States. That’s where my big brother wound up his working life. He was an inspector of all the government’s storage facilities in

North America. And that happened a lot after the war. These people that had working the factories all through the war, they took care of these people. I wanted to disconnect, though. I had learned a lot of stuff that I wouldn't have but for being in that circumstance of the war manufacturing ammunition, and no limit at all that couldn't be met.

Interviewer: Before Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, we had cut off supplies of scrap iron and oil.
{End of Side A—Side B begins }

Homefront: We didn't ship any more stuff after '39. Every little community on the railroad all over our country had a mountain of scrap iron next to the railroad tracks. Before the war started, I had gone to Washington and gotten a job working in the Navy Department in the Bureau of Ships—and this kind of story was never in the newspaper—but our government knew that the Japanese were building big battleships—monsters—bigger than anything we could dream about. So, off of the record—the story goes—draftsmen that were drawing plans for naval vessel from the Bureau of Ships drew a lot of mistakes into these plans. They were hard to find, and they left these plans for the Japanese. Then, all of a sudden one of these big juggernauts turned over on its side and sunk. {Laughter} That was a pretty good story—it happened before the war, but that story floated around.

Interviewer: After the war, were you recognized for your work at the factory?

Homefront: Yes, I received commendations for developing that hand grenade pull-pin tool and for helping design a tool that eliminated tubing fittings off of the top of this steam chest.

Interviewer: That's pretty much it. I think you've answered all my questions. I want to thank you for all your time.

{TAPE STOPPED—END OF INTERVIEW }