

Texas City / World War II Oral History Project

Audited Transcript

Interviewee: Earlis Hines

Interviewer: Luke Alvey-Henderson

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[0:01]

L: I am Luke Alvey-Henderson and we are at the Moore Memorial Public Library on August 8, 2012 and we are doing an oral history interview with Mr. Earlis Hines.

So thanks for joining me today. My first question would be, were you drafted or did you decide to volunteer?

E: Well, I initially, when I was in high school, I volunteered for the Navy Aviation Cadet Corps. They came around and gave us tests while we were in school and we were supposed to go in and score at the end of school, but about two weeks before I got out of school I got a letter stating they were going to take college graduates only, because it was quite a bit of schooling involved in it and the war was nearing an end. They were going to take college graduates, so I had several letters when we joined air crewman and I turned eighteen in July. My dad was in the process of redoing the house and I told him I'd just wait until they drafted me, and it wasn't too long. (Laughs.) And October 23, I got drafted in 1944.

L: So we've been asking this of everyone, do you remember where you were when you heard about Pearl Harbor and how that affected you?

E: Well, I was out at my dad's place out in the country, and we heard it on the radio. I remember it well. My oldest brother was already in the service. He had gone overseas with the first infantry division. He never got to come—he never got a furlough. He just was drafted in '41 and they just went from there on. It was a—I kind of halfway suspected that it was coming, but I was just a teenager and at that time I didn't have any worries too much about what was going to happen. In school we were involved in collecting the grease they make munitions with, and iron, scrap iron. I was in the wood shop class later on and we built the model airplanes for the Air Force and the Navy to identify different aircraft when they went into combat. It was pretty neat. Navy had scales that we made them by and they were replicas. I mean, down to a T.

[2:54]

L: So you were in Louisiana, what town did you live in?

E: Well I lived about halfway between Alexandria and Marksville. Out in the country, they've got a little settlement called Center Point. And that's where I was drafted from.

L: You mentioned that your brother was already involved in the service, did he have to serve overseas?

E: Oh yes. They left to go overseas before—actually, I think it was a little bit before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. They went over to England for training. From England to North Africa, the invasion of North Africa, to Sicily, then back to England for Normandy on D-Day.

L: So was it something that was present in conversations with your family or in your thoughts that your brother was in danger, or did you just try not to think about it?

E: I was young and didn't really (laughs) give it a thought. Probably didn't have enough sense to really give it too much thought, serious thought. No, I never really worried about it. Even when I started overseas I didn't worry about it. Just took it as it come. But the nearest thing I came to it: A troop ship came under general quarters alert, an unidentified aircraft was about twenty-five miles off and they got on the general alert. And that was about the nearest I got.

When I got out on Okinawa there was still some fighting going on at night and little periodic shooting during the daytime, but primarily the main campaign was over. It was not declared secured yet, but the campaign was essentially over. We were airlifted as soon as peace was signed. We followed the 11th Airborne Division in, I think it was 11th, it was one of the Airborne, I think it was the 11th. They went in one day and they spent the night at this ancillary base in Japan and then we went the next morning. Then from there we hiked, well I think it was about thirty miles down to a little town of Zama. There

was an old Japanese barracks. We went down there to check on disarmament and so on, and stayed there a few days and we moved on way up north.

[5:45]

L: So that kind of activity, did it feel very tense or did you feel secure, or what was the feeling, because it could still be dangerous?

E: Well, I felt fairly secure because of the regimentation of the Japanese people. Because a lot of them, they lined the roadside, they never had seen American troops in that particular area, they lined the roadside. The old folks were bowing and the little small ones would salute, give the hands a salute, the kids. I mean from the small ones up to grown people.

L: That had to be kind of a unique experience—

E: It was.

L: Did it feel surreal?

E: It was surreal, yes. It was a different—there was a kind of feeling of accomplishment after all the hard fighting that went on during both wars. I kept up with it. I didn't worry about it, but I kept up with it.

L: So you mentioned you were drafted and then you served Okinawa after the main fighting, where did you get your training?

E: At Fort McClellan, Alabama.

L: How was that?

E: It was tough. They talk about training in the Marine Corps, we did the same thing and maybe more. Like rappelling walls and crawling under fire at night, live ammunitions. And then we actually ran, in our last two weeks, field training before going overseas. And this was of all our training over there in that particular area. Yeah, ran live-fire exercises that would teach you how to keep your head down, you know.

L: Okay, so I've never been under live fire—

E: And to look out for people ahead of you, and on the side of you. We had real tires. At that time they used flamethrowers and we had recoilless rifles on the heavy weapons and we had flamethrowers. I was fortunate enough to run into a problem with a flamethrower. And I can tell you, that in the summertime it's not any fun. It is hot.

L: So when you're doing a live-fire exercise, what does that feel like? Do you feel just focused on the task at hand?

E: Yeah, you have to focus, because in some cases they have targets flashing up, but your main thing you have to watch out is the guy next door. Everybody's green and some of them have never had any kind of hunting experience, so you have to be really careful of live-fire problem running. Keep an eye on who's out in front of you, what's on the side of you and so on, you know.

[9:00]

L: So you mentioned that you did clean up in Okinawa, so you were there at the end of the war, so do you remember how you felt when you heard about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and that the war would be over?

E: Well, actually we really didn't get too much news of that type. We were on a ship with aircraft carrier support and they didn't really put out that kind of information to everybody like us grunts. (Unintelligible.) And actually it was several days after most of those bombings took place that they actually sued for peace.

L: So what was the name of your ship?

E: I don't even remember. I was on, the ship I went over on was a converted merchant ship and I don't remember really what the name of it was. Memory's getting so a little touchy.

L: About how large was it?

E: Well I think we had about somewhere around two thousand troops, something out of that nature. From seventeen hundred to two thousand, in that neighborhood.

L: So tight quarters. What did you do on the ship?

E: I beg your pardon?

L: So it was really tight quarters.

E: Oh yeah. And then we got in a storm about seven days out, a storm, and they had two destroyer escorts. One on each side and up ahead of us. And at times you couldn't even see them. They'd come up and they'd go down. I don't know how they stood it. (Laughs.) It was kind of a trying experience. A lot of guys were getting sick. We went through the Marshall Islands and the Gilberts. We got off in the Gilbert Islands and run some exercises, landing craft exercises and got back on and waited for our aircraft carrier escort, for the next one, to go on in. At that time things was pretty serious it was still, you know—

[11:28]

L: So did you feel that you were likely to see combat, because as you said, you had no way of knowing that the bombings were going to happen?

E: Oh yeah, I didn't have no doubt that we would be in combat, it was just by the time we got there—I did join a company that was in reserve. They had been in combat and they were in reserve. They had been relieved and were in reserve. And instead of just going right up on a frontline company, I first went to, me and one other replacement, went to the quartermaster, 27th quartermaster. And I was on guard duty that night. Next morning they sent a courier down with a regimental order transferring me back to a rifle company. That's where I stayed there. Then in December of '47—uh, 1945, that unit deactivated. It was a National Guard unit and they deactivated. Where I was at we had two battalions. A few people went to the Airborne, a majority went to First Cavalry and other units. I'm not sure where all of them went, but they scattered us out pretty good. I had a bunch of my friends in my platoon that went to First Cavalry and we were in a unit together and we weren't in the same squad, but we were in the same platoon together. So we kept contact.

Had a lot of interesting assignments over there. I guess kind of interesting. A ten-day patrol checking for weapons in shrines and temples and schools. Ten of us and we had an interpreter with us. And we went places they had never seen American troops before also. And back roads that even a jeep couldn't turn around in. It was just oxcart roads. They'd go on up a mountain and it just came to a forty-five and had a log down in front of it. When you (unintelligible) down and you looked down and it looked like there was a river down below, and it looked like it was just almost directly down about three hundred or four hundred feet down there. I got out and the jeep driver backed up against that log, trying to turn around. (Laughs.) I'm glad I got out. (Laughs.)

[14:35]

L: So with that kind of terrain and those kind of places that you were looking for weapons, did you ever think about what it would have been like if we had to have a land offensive on Japan?

E: Yes, it would have been bad. They've estimated a hundred to a hundred and twenty five thousand people killed. It would have been bad.

L: Was that in your thoughts at all, while you were doing those exercises, what could have happened?

E: I never gave it a thought, just minded my own business, pretty much. It was interesting. The only real problem we had was with the Koreans. They had a lot of

Korean population and they would pull riots and we'd have to fix bayonets and get in trucks and go and disperse them. Actually when we got there they weren't too bad. At first (unintelligible) with bayonets and rifle and they'd scatter. It didn't happen very often; occasionally.

But we moved around a lot. We'd just stay in a place a while then move on. They were just starting a garrison down when I left. It was building up places to stay, you know? Separating—my last assignment we was in a big factory and they had the whole regiment there at that time. I had the job of negotiating deals with the Japanese government for manpower and materials and overseeing it. (Laughs.) I don't know how I fell into that job, but that's what I fell into at that time. They were separating them into squad rooms and sectioned it off into headquarters and so on. But it was pretty interesting after you got—things got (unintelligible) lined out.

L: What was your initial reaction when you heard that Japan had sued for peace and that the war was over?

[17:05]

E: I was happy like everyone else. We really didn't have a big celebration where I was at, like they did in some places, lot of firing and things were going on, but where I was at we didn't really do too much of that over there where I was at in Okinawa.

After I come home we got separated. We had a choice of joining the reserve corps or either going back and reregistering at the draft board. And I joined the reserve corps and I spent a total of active reserve corps in active duty almost twenty-four years and the remainder until I was sixty or the remainder of the years in retired reserve. I had a mobilization assignment with a unit out in Las Cruces, New Mexico, if it would have got called, but I've got disabled in training and a (unintelligible) illness. I just waived my disability and so (unintelligible) time I could retire. And they moved a unit to Dallas, so that I went (unintelligible) to unit aid for a unit up there for about three years and then I decided I'd just call it quits.

L: So what brought you to Texas City originally?

E: In Texas City?

L: Mm-hm, what brought you here originally?

E: I worked for Amoco for almost thirty-three years. I retired when I was fifty-eight while I could still—I was crippled up and I had a problem. I had phlebitis in my leg. It was swelling on me at times. It swelled real bad and I went to get Ace bandages up at the medical, and the doctor called the cab and sent me to the hospital for eight days. And

he didn't want to let me go back to work and I pled: "I got to back to work, got to turn my tools in; I got to have my retirement ceremony." And he told me, "You can't climb," well that was part of my job, so I just went ahead and soon as I could retire I retired.

[19:45]

L: So how did you hear about the Amoco hiring and get that job?

E: Oh, I enjoyed it working out there. I like to work. I was born working.

L: No, I asked how did you hear about the position in the first place at Amoco. How did you get the job?

E: Oh, a friend of mine was working over there that I was in the reserve unit with and he asked me to go and put my application in. I was working as an assistant insurance adjuster, but I was assistant to the vice president. He was the adjuster and he was the vice president in charge of claims. I first started working in the print shop, because I had worked in Alexandria in a print shop before I went over there. Then he made me his assistant, so I worked in that claim department probably for a year and a half. I decided I could make more money working in a plant, so I left. I worked where I thought I could make the most, the best living.

L: So what year was it roughly that you came to Texas City?

[20:56]

E: I worked in the print shop over there in Alexandria. I first went to Houston. I wanted to be a salesman and I met a friend one weekend that I went to school with was working over at Parker Wholesale Paper in Houston. And he told me, "I think you can get a job over in Houston at Carpenter Paper Company." Well, that was for me, because we had a salesman from Carpenter that I got to be pretty well acquainted with that called on us in Alexandria, so I went over there and went to work. And about a month after I went to work the guy that was cutting paper got drafted and I was the only one that they had that knew how to cut paper, so they asked me to cut paper. And that's a hard, heavy job and I told them I'd do it for two weeks on the pay I was getting, but if I cut longer I was going to have to have more pay. And I said I'll give you two weeks. And we had a meeting every Saturday morning and when he got around to me and he said, "Hines, we couldn't find anybody to take your place."

I said, "Well raise my salary and I'll stay."

And they said, "Well we can't do that. It's a companywide policy."

And I said, "Well write my check. It's my last day." And I went back over to Alexandria and this salesman that I had met called me and told me, said that, "I think I have you a job if you want it."

I said, "Where's it at?"

He said, "Galveston, Texas."

I said, "What kind of job is it?"

He said, "Printing."

I said, "I'll go. I'll take it."

He said, "I'll call and tell them I got somebody for them."

So I went over there and it just went from there to—(waves his hand).

[23:04]

L: So what year was it that you moved to Texas City?

E: '48.

L: '48, great, so what was your first impression of the town?

E: It was different. Yeah, it was a lot different in the way people, neighbors lived, you know? Just a lot different from what I was used to. You could live next door to somebody and not even talk to you. I wasn't used to that.

Later on, lived there long enough and everything found my way around. (Laughs.)

L: So you came in 1948 and started working for Amoco.

E: I didn't start working for Amoco until 1951.

L: Oh, that's right, sorry. So did you buy a home pretty soon or did you wait a while?

E: I bought a—first, when I got married, we rented in Galveston. They had a bus that ran from Galveston to Amoco and I rode that bus. Well I met my wife when I was working at the insurance company and we got married in '51. 'Course, I needed more money then, (laughs) but anyway, we bought a little house in Texas City. She started to work over at BP too, but she was going to have our first child and she worked six months and had to quit. So I continued on. We bought a house, first in front of Carbide (unintelligible) over there and then later on I bought a lot over in the Amburn addition in Texas City and we had a house built out there.

And then when I retired we moved up to a place I bought up in Buffalo to raise cattle up there, built a house up there. The grandkids was all down here and my wife couldn't stand it any longer, and we moved back and had a house built down here and the grandkids are scattered all over now. (Laughs.) My daughter's two children still live right close by. With one with her and one close by, and we see them really regular.

[25:39]

L: So what are some of the most major ways you think Texas City has changed over the years that you've lived here?

E: Well, when I first moved over here things was still kind of tore, you know? They were building a lot of houses down in Mainland district over there. There was a lot of building going on and the businesses downtown had begun to thrive. Now the businesses are mostly closed up down there now, all the old businesses, people that I knew. It's kind of sad that they're not there anymore.

(Sound of people talking in the background.)

L: We'll just wait one second for these people to pass, so if they start talking it doesn't pick it up.

E: My son lives over in Texas City and I see him frequently. He just took me up the World War II memorial. We went up and went all over the memorial while we were up there. Took the tour they have up there. It was enjoyable.

L: If you could sum up what it was like living in Texas City when you first moved here for those years that you were working at Amoco, what was your overall impression of living here?

E: Well, I love Texas City, yeah. I told my wife if I was going to live anywhere around here around the coast, this is my favorite place to live. The mayor has built more infrastructure than anyone that's ever been in office, except maybe [Emmett F.] Lowry. Back in his days he built roads, a lot of roads and stuff. Their daddy beautified a lot of buildings. The convention center over here, and their whole family did a lot for Texas City. Of course, there's other people that had a lot of hand in it.

We were gone for about nine years, we lived up in the country for about nine years, and when we came back it was quite a change. We moved back in '97. Well, we moved to a different location in town and things were just different, you know? But Texas City is a place I enjoy living.

[28:36]

L: So if you could say one thing about Texas City, living here, that was different than other places you've lived or that stands out that made it some place you love to live, what would that be?

E: Well one thing is that people are friendlier here, in my experience, very friendly. And I value that a lot. And taxes are cheaper than anyplace around and they built the infrastructure up better than anybody around in my opinion. The drainage system has just completely changed. They put that levy in there and the floodgates and that little pumping station and everything. And they replaced a lot of drainage through the city within the last two or three, four years. And it's just very improved infrastructure and schools—wonderful schools.

L: So what was it like raising kids in Texas City? Did it feel safe? Did it feel like a good place to raise kids?

E: Well at that time I did. Yeah, I did. I felt (unintelligible) safe, my kids. I lived out in the Amburn addition out there. They started building up the (unintelligible) houses over there. I just never gave it a thought about it, but now it's different now. I don't know why people have to be breaking into people's houses, and robbing, and shooting and all that stuff. It just doesn't make sense to me. That's the change that I see now for Texas City primarily, is the crime that we didn't have.

L: A lot of people have said that during that period, during the war and right after the war that anyone who wanted to work could pretty much could get a job in the plants—

E: Probably. Probably could.

[30:55]

L: And do you feel like that's changed in Texas City that if you want to work you can find a good job?

E: Well I don't know. I'm not sure just how it is now. I've been gone for so long it'd be hard for me to guess where it would be now. I retired in September of '84, so it's been a long, long time and there's been a lot of changes made. I know that—I left before BP took over. And I know people who've worked out there and say there was quite a difference than working for Amoco. Amoco always number one priority was safety, and they had problems. We had explosions on the units and I was around some of it, unfortunately.

But nobody got killed during that time and luckily—but refineries are something that a lot of people don't understand. There's possibility for disaster everywhere you step if you're not careful. It's that explosive. You can put gas monitors around and all you want,

and all this, but if a leak occurs then that's something that will happen. They x-ray the lines and so on, but still occasionally you'll have a line rupture or a valve fail. And that's something I figure that anybody that works for any type of refinery or chemical plant has to be aware of that. You might get killed and you have to be aware of that. That's just one of the tricks of the trade I say.

L: Do you think your military service helped prepare you for that mindset?

E: I was pretty well-prepared. I was raised on a farm and we started work in school. People think times are hard now? We started work in the field before we started school. And I mean work, there was no dragging around. We worked until darkness almost and then went in. We had chores to do around the house. At night we got lessons by the kerosene lamp or the fireplace in wintertime. And later on my older sister won a scholarship to LSU [Louisiana State University]. And she worked during the summer and she bought one of these Aladdin lamps that uses air, kerosene and air, you know. We called them (unintelligible) that's what it was, Aladdin lamp is the name of it, but I thought I was in heaven when we got that. (Laughs.) I could see. When I was in high school and grammar school too we had lessons every day. When you went to school you went to school to learn or you wouldn't be there. I have a (unintelligible), because I've done pretty good on my old farm war time.

L: So that pretty much covers all the questions we have, because we talked about your war time experiences and your experience living in Texas City and how it's changed. Can you think of anything else that we didn't cover that you'd like to address?

E: No I think that pretty much takes care of it, just that there has been a change. One thing is, that I could not understand the greed of the people in Texas City since this last explosion and all this kerosene, I mean this Benzene leak thing. They had—monitors were all over. They showed negative except for an eight-hour period. I worked eleven years in the lab and we sampled the tanks and we distilled it in the lab and washed glassware with it, pour it down the sink. You know, it's just something that baffles me is how greedy the nation is. It's unreal. But anyway, I thank you.

L: Well we thank you for participating. So that's the end of our interview and thanks for coming down—

E: It's not anything that's (unintelligible).

[36:20]