

ORAL MEMOIRS
OF
BRENDA NORTON
An interview conducted on
April 5, 2022

Interviewer: Dr. Matthew Gritter

Angelo State University
West Texas Collection

“Greatest Generation Oral History Archive”

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GRITTER: Should we close the door, or?

NORTON: It's up to you I don't know that anyone's gonna be around

GRITTER: Alright so, I'm here with, um, Doctor Brenda Norton for the Greatest Generation Oral History Project my name is Doctor Matthew Gritter and we're going to ask Doctor Norton some questions, um, about her connection to the Greatest Generation, so I don't think we'll go through all of the questions on our questionnaire since they're not all applicable but we'll get as much done as we can, so, What is your name?

NORTON: It's Brenda Norton

GRITTER: When and where were you born?

NORTON: Um, Fort Sam Houston, Texas

GRITTER: Mhm-hm

NORTON: in 1959

GRITTER: Mhm, where did you grow up?

NORTON: Ah now that gets it..

[Both laughing]

NORTON: ..my father was in the Air Force for the first part of my growing up-

GRITTER: Mhm-hm

NORTON:- so we were transferred around to different military bases.

GRITTER: Mhm-hm

NORTON: Uh and then when I was junior high, he retired from the military and we moved permanently to San Antonio, Texas.

GRITTER: Mhm. Great, and what schools and colleges did you attend?

NORTON: Uh Undergraduate was Creighton University

GRITTER: Mhm

NORTON: Law school was Texas Tech University School of Law

GRITTER: Mhm

NORTON: Masters was Southern Methodist University

GRITTER: Mhm

NORTON: And Doctorate was Baylor University

GRITTER: Great, and what was your first job?

NORTON: Ehhhh

GRITTER: [chuckle]

NORTON: Besides the usual babysitting and stuff like that, the first real job was JC Penny

GRITTER: Alright, so did you have any personal connections to a service member, um, during World War 2, or who served in World War 2?

NORTON: Um, he served in World War 2, I wasn't around then

GRITTER: Mhm-hm

NORTON: Not quite that old. Um my father did serve in World War 2 and all of my Uncles served.

GRITTER: Nice, and do you- can you say anything about their service? Like

NORTON: Um, honestly most of them did not talk about it much to the kids

GRITTER: Mhm-hm

NORTON: uhm as we got older they would discuss it a little bit, uhm, I know that.. um.. after Pearl Harbor occurred, um, my father went and looked into enlisting, and he was getting ready to graduate from college that May

GRITTER: Mhm-hm

NORTON: -and he did wanna go into the Army Air Corp,

GRITTER: Mhm

NORTON: Uh and of course, y'know, to be Pilots, Navigators, all that sorta stuff, you had to have your college education, so they said go ahead and finish up your college education unless your draft number comes up. Um and he did that and then enlisted

GRITTER: Okay

NORTON: And did become a bomber navigator.

GRITTER: Mhm-hm

NORTON: I do know from things he has said that he spent some time in England...

GRITTER: Okay

NORTON: ...during World War Two Now he wasn't terribly specific about what sorta stuff he did and everything,

GRITTER: [chuckles]

NORTON: and [pause] the way you kind of learned about things that occurred during World War Two is we'd be watching documentaries about it or something,

GRITTER: Mhm

NORTON: Uh and he'd make some little comment like 'No that's not quite how it happened', or 'Yea that was a stupid, ya know this or that.', or 'Yea those bombing raids were really difficult', uh so that was - and the only time he was really specific about something was, he had one training thing [pause] I have seen this in some documentaries and movies, they were training the soldiers to communicate silently with each other while they were on the ground...

GRITTER: Mhmm

NORTON: ... If - and they were supposed to use these little clicker things

GRITTER: Oh

NORTON: And, well it turns out that of course the Germans figured it out, or just picked up one 'a the clickers after shooting one of the soldiers, uh so I know that in training that my father refused to use his clicker...

GRITTER: [laughs]

NORTON: And they were doing kind of ya know um with other of his friends that had grown up in the country, they would do bird calls or something like that to each other.

GRITTER: Okay

NORTON: Uh and they got in trouble for not using their clicker

[Both laughing]

NORTON: and they just sorta told the sergeant that the clickers are stupid, this isn't gonna work and yes it turned out very quickly that the clickers were NOT a good idea and they, fairly quickly, stopped using them.

GRITTER: mhm, mhm, uh that's interesting. Hm. So. Um, how was World War Two remembered in your community, were there commemorations, or monuments, like?

NORTON: um, yea particularly we-we were on base...

GRITTER: Mhm

NORTON: I mean there was always lots of stuff, there were commemoration things, and of course [breath] there were all kinds of different military celebrations for different things um and um, when ya know like when we were stationed at the Air Force academy, of course there was lots of stuff with it because that is [pauses] Army Air Corp, then after World War Two the Air Force itself was created to going into Korea, which is when my father um was called back up again.

GRITTER: Mhm

NORTON: So then he spent 30 years in um, the Air Force. Um so there were lots on the Air Force Academy.

GRITTER: Mhm

NORTON: And then when we were stationed in DC and dad was serving at the Pentagon. Of course there's lots of ceremonies around DC and stuff at the time-

GRITTER: Mhm

NORTON: Even though this was the time of the Vietnam war,

GRITTER: Mhm, mhm

NORTON: Uh and you can kind of feel the shift in the public that they were still official government celebrations and military celebrations.

GRITTER: Mhm. Mhm. So how did World War Two and its aftermath shape you?

NORTON: Um, shaped me in that, um, [pauses] my father um he wouldn't talk specifically about the war, but he was very open in talking- at least to me, I don't know about my brother and sister- um about the effects of war, about decisions to go to war.

GRITTER: Mhm

NORTON: um [pause] about kind of the aftermath on individual soldiers...

GRITTER: Mhm

NORTON: ...and on the people, and the psyche of the people and particularly, like when we would be traveling, 'cause he later became a History professor, was always very involved in History.

GRITTER: Oh, Okay

NORTON: and while we were stationed at the Air Force Academy, he got his PHD in History from the University of Denver.

GRITTER: Oh, interesting

NORTON: So that he could become a History professor, uh, and it was military history.

GRITTER: Mhm

NORTON: um so he would take us around to all different battle places, and all different things, so when we did do things in Europe and stuff, like we went to um the D-Day sites and stuff like...

GRITTER: Like Normandy

NORTON: that and he would sorta talk to us about ya know, sometimes ya have to, but be careful and stuff like that, and then I-I - this was more shaped by the Vietnam and can also be shaped by the World War Two in that yeah politicians decide to go to war,

GRITTER: Mhm

NORTON: but once the decision is made, leave it up to the military, and stay out of it.

GRITTER: [laughs] interesting

NORTON: uh, and so he would even talk about- cause people would talk - Oh we've never done this before 'cause Vietnam, that's the only time people protested stuff like that, and he would always point out people were protesting of World War One,

GRITTER: Mhm!

NORTON: Protesting the Civil War

GRITTER: Definitely.

NORTON: And so he'd be like kinda trying to point out to us that the same questions come up again and again.

GRITTER: Great. So I think this kinda ties in, has the way World War II's remembered changed over the years? Like

NORTON: Mhm, I think so. um [pause] Even through my father, I would see that it would be kind of pushed off of what HE did um and I still to this day don't know. All I know is he was in England and they were doing bomber stuff and he was navigatin'

GRITTER: [laughs]

NORTON: Um, so I dont know specifically where he bombed or anything like that

GRITTER: Mhm

NORTON: Um but I think that it's come to appreciate how difficult and how close the world was on the brink

GRITTER: Mhm-hm

NORTON: and I - ya know, it may be this recent stuff with Ukraine, is kind of brought it back to the younger generation were starting to forget-

GRITTER: Mhm-hm

NORTON: -that you can have megalomaniacs that want to take over the world

[Both laughing]

GRITTER: So what do you think of the idea of the Greatest Generation?

NORTON: Um, I - ya know I'm not sure they were the GREATEST, but they were certainly a GREAT generation.

GRITTER :Mhm

NORTON: um, ya know I'd have to say the Revolutionary people were also pretty Great...

GRITTER: [laughs]

NORTON:... so were the Civil War people, um, but yes, uh [pause] I-I have serious doubts and- we did kind of occasionally talk about this later on,

GRITTER: mhm

NORTON: the sacrifices and the mass effort it took world wide,

GRITTER: Mhm

NORTON: uh to get through World War Two, I-I have serious doubts and even my father expressed doubts, before he died, um, ya know back in the Eighties, Nineties, that whether or not the American people could make those kind of sacrifices again-

GRITTER: Mhm-hm

NORTON: - could come together as a community, and we've only gotten worse since that point in time

GRITTER: [Laughs]

NORTON: so ya know and I do and I'll see things happen and I'll be like I wonder how my father would react to this, and I know like the Ukrainian invasion my father would be MAD,

GRITTER: [chuckle]

NORTON: He would be like [impression] 'Sign me back up, I might be ya know 80 somethin'...

GRITTER: [laughs]

NORTON: years old but I'm goin' over there, we're not doin' this again, blah blah blah, blah blah, blah.'

[both chuckle]

GRITTER: Interesting. So do you have any items, objects, correspondence, that you wish to share with the project?

NORTON: um, all I have - I have some of his um, decorations, medals and stuff like that, and I don't know what all of them mean, they would be-

GRITTER: Okay

NORTON: - some- they would be something ya know about this navigation school, and that thing or whatever, I don't know what - ya know I don't have any specific things like that, um or his flag, and you can have the decorations but you can't have his flag..

GRITTER: [Chuckles]

NORTON: [Chuckling] ..from his coffin

GRITTER: Okay, so do you have any concluding remarks to make?

NORTON: Um. [pause] Ya know there's an old saying that people who forget history, are destined to repeat it, and I really think that's true, the older I get

GRITTER: Mhm

NORTON: Um and I really do think trying to remember what a huge effort World War Two was and how difficult and how close we really were to having a very different, that Men in the High Castle TV show kind of points it out-

GRITTER: Mhm, yeah

NORTON: it would be a very very different world and people make an assumption that that's done and gone with, it won't happen again. Honest to goodness, that's exactly what we're looking at in Ukraine.

GRITTER: Mhm. Great, well thank you very much.

[End of Transcript]