

ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

LINDA ROE

An interview conducted on

July 18, 2020

Interviewer: Laurie Dickmeyer

Angelo State University

West Texas Collection

“George Ricks Memorial WWII Oral History Archive”

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Interviewer: Laurie Dickmeyer

Transcriber: Lydia Dillen

Editor: Laurie Dickmeyer

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DICKMEYER: Today is July 18th, 2020 and this is Laurie Dickmeyer in San Angelo, Texas interviewing Linda Roe in Christoval, Texas over the telephone. And Linda, could you start off by telling us your father's name since we are going to talk about his WWII service today?

ROE: Jerry Thomas Spencer.

DICKMEYER: And can you tell us when and where he was born and where he grew up?

ROE: He was born in Harris County, and that's the county where that Houston is in. He grew up on a dairy farm about 45 miles away from Houston.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm. And do you know about when and where he decided to enter the armed services?

ROE: Well, like every other able-bodied man at that time, once Pearl Harbor occurred, he went right down and enlisted even though he had an exemption being a dairy farmer. They wanted them to stay home and work on the dairy farms but he went ahead and enlisted. He left for basic training in February of 1942.

DICKMEYER: And do you know how old he was at this time?

ROE: He was born in 1918 in December. So that would make him 24.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm. Okay.

ROE: 23? 23.

DICKMEYER: Okay, okay. [laughs] Uh, and do you know which branch he served in or what his unit was or anything like that?

ROE: He was the Army Air Corps.

DICKMEYER: Okay. Army Air Corps, great. Uh, and do you know his rank that he had while he was in the Army Air Corps?

ROE: His what?

DICKMEYER: His rank, sorry.

ROE: Oh, rank. Yes, uh, staff sergeant through most of the years and as the war ended he became a tech sergeant.

DICKMEYER: Okay. And so you contacted us because you have stories that you grew up hearing about - or you've heard stories, that is, about your father's service. Um, could you tell us about some of those?

ROE: Yes, um, one of the main stories he told us was the Blonde Bomber, which was his B-25 plane, the 408th squadron. It flew 54 missions with my dad. He was a turret gunner and he was chosen to be a turret gunner because he was so small in stature. He was only 5'9", he was very thin, and he fit up in that little tiny compartment. And it just seemed so strange 'cause my dad was so peace-loving and, you know, to be the guy up there with the machine gun, it's kind of hard to reconcile that. But he, he was - that was his job. They flew 54 missions with him, he got grounded with malaria one day and the pictures I have of the plane are probably within a couple of days of the last flight. But the crew left him, 'cause he was grounded with malaria, went off on another mission, and the plane went down.

DICKMEYER: Wow.

ROE: And one of the stories that he tells is that - and I don't know what mission it was or what part of the 54 missions he was flying - he, the landing gear got frozen. And he couldn't swim. And he said, "I would've parachuted out if that was the only other option but I was gonna try something first." But, you know, the alert came out to ditch the plane, everybody gets their parachutes on and he said, "Let me try one thing." And he was a Mr. Fix-it anyway, he fixed everything with baling wire and duct tape.

DICKMEYER: [chuckles]

ROE: And he crawled out into the - into the landing gear compartment that was open to the air, you know, thousands of miles above, you know, the Pacific Ocean. And he said it was like he was standing on his head but he was hanging on with one hand and a wrench in the other. He loosened several bolts, let them fall out, and the landing gear went down and they were able to land. And he said he was just a hero and everybody was clapping him on the back.

DICKMEYER: [laughs]

ROE: And when they got back to the field everybody was so happy and, you know, just declaring him a hero. He got called into the commanding officer's office the next day and he got reprimanded 'cause he let the bolts fall.

DICKMEYER: Mm. Right, right.

ROE: [chuckles] It was - they were so scarce, you know. And he said, "I didn't have another hand to catch the bolts."

DICKMEYER: [chuckles]

ROE: But [laughs] he always said, "Here I kept the plane from ditching, you know, and I got reprimanded." But he did get an award for it and, you know, just did really well and 'course everybody, you know, thought he was a hero.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm. Uh, and do you know where he was going on these missions? Was he in the Pacific Theater or the European Theater of war?

ROE: The Pacific. He was mainly stationed in New Guinea and the Philippines...

DICKMEYER: Mhmm.

ROE: ...but he was at Midway, he was at several little islands.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm.

ROE: And he told me, he said he used to just be praying, you know, in those midnight bombing raids to be looking for that tiny speck to land on. That he'd just be praying that they could find it. Because, you know, they'd run out of fuel. And it was always such a - a stress thing that they've got to find their way back home. And, you know, he used to tell me about, you know, the comradery that he had with all of his buddies and, you know, he said, "Even though I have friends now, it's just nothing compared to what you felt with these people that you never knew." You know, and then you're all together and you're buddies and, you know, it's just intense comradery.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm.

ROE: And he made this example to me early on, he said, "I was born in 1918, I was eight years old before we ever got any other transportation other than a mule-drawn wagon..." They lived on a farm, on a dairy farm. "...I had never been more than 45 miles away from my home when Pearl Harbor hit." And here just 15 years in between that and he's flying in these machines and operating this machinery that he didn't even know enough to dream about.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm.

ROE: He didn't even, you know, he never dreamed he'd be flying in these huge, you know, planes and - and doing these things. And just 15 years from, you know, in a mule-drawn wagon. And then, you know, here he is all over the world. And he said that, you know, the tribes in New Guinea, all they wanted to do, they just wanted to ask about America. Everything - they just wanted to absorb anything about America. And he - in San Francisco, he bought a Indian motorcycle and he bribed its way across the ocean to get to, you know, get back to New Guinea. And he said, you know, that - that motorcycle cost him a lot of money but it was really worth it 'cause he had, you know, transportation.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm.

ROE: And from San Francisco to Harris County is quite a - quite a few miles. And he had a week's leave and he rode it straight through, going and coming just to have 24 hours at home.

DICKMEYER: Wow.

ROE: You know.

DICKMEYER: Wow.

ROE: And he said, "All these exotic places I went and saw all these wonderful places, nothing was like home."

DICKMEYER: Yeah, do you know anything about, uh, how he kept in touch or tried to keep in touch with his family back home? I assume his parents or I don't know if he had a family at that point.

ROE: Yes, he did. His mother and dad and he wrote letters to them and they were given to someone in the family and they're gone. I - you know, I can't get a hold of them anymore.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm.

ROE: But I know that he wrote home and just like the greeting card to his aunt Anna, I have that one. But, you know, he did write regularly and he was very much a homebody and just wanted to come home and buy some cows and start a family.

DICKMEYER: [laughs]

ROE: That's all he wanted to do.

DICKMEYER: Yeah. Uh, so did - how long did he serve in the war? Was he there for the duration so pretty much right after...

ROE: Yes.

DICKMEYER: ...Pearl Harbor to the end?

ROE: Yes, basic February '42 and August of '45 is when he got home.

DICKMEYER: Mm. Do you know if, uh, he ever experienced any kind of combat while he was running these various missions? If they ever encountered the enemy or if he was ever wounded?

ROE: He was never wounded but they did encounter, you know, enemy airplanes and, you know, he said, you know, being the turret gunner, you know, that was kind of the - the last resort, you know, to start using that. But he did see combat in the - in the air.

DICKMEYER: And did he tell you anything specifically about that? How he felt or any specific incidences that stands out for him?

ROE: He just said that, you know, he was a very peace-loving man...

DICKMEYER: Mhmm.

ROE: ...and he was a big hunter when he was a little boy and up to the time that he went off to war and just loved to hunt and shoot and when he came back he never picked up another gun, he never hunted, he would not even talk about a gun. He said, "I've killed too many people. I'm not doing it anymore."

DICKMEYER: Wow. Wow, it had a huge impact on him then.

ROE: Yes.

DICKMEYER: Yeah. Do you remember any other stories he told about his time in the service? Anything else you can remember?

ROE: He would talk about how the days would just - just be so boring and just stretch into nothing and they'd have all kinds of busy work to do on the plane and they'd be waiting and waiting and waiting and then it'd just be these heart-stopping, terror moments when they took off on the bombing runs. And, you know, they were always at night and, you know, he said it was just - it was just so heart-stopping. You know, it just - just was so terrorizing. But then, you know, you get back and you have this, you know, intense boredom again and just, you know, wanting the war to be over and it was just, you know, so boring.

DICKMEYER: Mm. Uh, did he talk about ways they might try to pass the time during those lull points so they had, kind of, some busy work to - to do?

ROE: He gambled a lot.

DICKMEYER: [laughs]

ROE: [laughs]

DICKMEYER: Okay.

ROE: And he sent home his - all of his gambling money to his mom and she kept it and when he came back from war he bought a white Deuce Coupe on the black market. You know, cars were not...

DICKMEYER: He bought a what? Sorry?

ROE: A white Deuce Coupe, it was a Ford, it was a type of car...

DICKMEYER: Oh. Okay, okay, okay.

ROE: ...that was like the Corvette of that time. And it had a little rumble seat in the back.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm.

ROE: And my mom and dad, once they were married and had other couple friends and everything, they'd all go out and the other couple would sit in the back. It was like a little sports car. But it was white and everything else, all the - most of the cars were black or dark green and so it was just like the shining car. And he paid \$1,500 for it on the black market. I don't know how he got it but he said it took - took some doing to get that car. And my mother was the new school teacher in this very small town called Cypress, Texas...

DICKMEYER: Mhmm.

ROE: ...and he'd heard about a new school teacher. And back then you couldn't live by yourself as a single woman, she was renting a room with a family. And he came knocking at the door and asked her to go for a Coke. And my mom said, you know, he was a nice looking guy, he seemed okay and everything. And she was, you know, kind of wondering whether she should accept and she looked around him and saw the car and said, "Okay." [laughs]

DICKMEYER: [laughs]

ROE: And my dad said the - you know, the guys with the great cars always get the girls.

DICKMEYER: Mm. [chuckles] That's interesting that that's how that worked out. [laughs]

ROE: [laughs]

DICKMEYER: Uh, so let me go back to something you mentioned earlier which is that your father said he made some really incredible bonds with the other men he served with. Do you know if he - he kept in touch with those men after the war? Um, did you ever hear anything about them?

ROE: He did.

DICKMEYER: Yeah.

ROE: Yeah, I mean even into the '80s I remember my mom saying that, you know, so-and-so called. I can't remember the names now but she would tell me that so-and-so called and - to chit chat with my dad and - and I was named after the wife of a man that he was very good friends with and got killed in the war.

DICKMEYER: Wow.

ROE: And, you know, he just thought so much of him and thought so much of her and - and that's how I got named. But they - they did keep together and 'course the VFW hall back then was a big deal. And we - all the kids would run around while screaming and playing out there in the grass and the parents would be in there dancing on Saturday night. And I can remember that so vividly.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm. Wow, mhmm.

ROE: And, you know, my sister and I were talking - just this last weekend she was visiting and she's four years older. And we remember, you know, the veterans - back then there was no prosthetics and they all had the - the empty sleeve pinned up on the shoulder.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm.

ROE: Or, you know, they were in a wheelchair with their pants, you know, pinned up. You know, we just remember it.

DICKMEYER: Yeah. Hm. How interesting. Um, do you...

ROE: But the VFW dances were very big in our neighborhood and...

DICKMEYER: Yeah.

ROE: ...and then the parades - we'd have the community parades and the veterans would march in them - my dad would march in 'em. And it w- you know, just very patriotic still, even into the '60s.

DICKMEYER: And then those types of events stopped after the '60s, you would say?

ROE: Well, I can't really remember...

DICKMEYER: [chuckles]

ROE: ...anything after that, you know, Vietnam...

DICKMEYER: Yeah. Mm.

ROE: ...started going on and then it was so negative about that.

DICKMEYER: Of course.

ROE: But up 'till I was about, mm, 13 or so I can still remember the parades, and I was born in '53.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm. Okay, do you have any, uh, anything else you can remember about your father's service you want to share?

ROE: Mm, I can't really remember too much more about the service.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm.

ROE: Um he basically - you know, in the war so many people died but he cheated death even after, you know, he got out of the war.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm.

ROE: He had an angel on his shoulder. In a horrible wreck in 1957 that was on the front page of the Houston Post and - and my horse. He was riding his hor- my horse one day and helping a friend in an old oil field pasteur and it was - had great big holes in the pasteur and there was like a four-foot deep one covered with brambles and he's, you know, loping across to catch the cows.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm.

ROE: The horse does a somersault into the hole while he's on top of her...

DICKMEYER: Oh.

ROE: ...and crushed his pelvis. And I can remember helping him do his rehab. He had to learn how to walk again. And I was about 11 at that time.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm.

ROE: And, you know, we'd walk up and down the living room, up and down the living room. And that - and things that he would do, he was just a wild man.

DICKMEYER: [laughs]

ROE: And we were driving down Loop 610, which is this huge, eight-lane highway elevated around Houston. And we're going to the Houston Live set show, I have an early horse class, five o'clock in the morning. And, you know, he thought he'd hitched the trailer just right but evidentially hadn't and I just look out my dad's passenger window and I see my horse and the trailer going past us. And he revs up, you know, the - the truck and everything, gets in front of the trailer and lets it bump against the back. And he slows it down and we're still right there [chuckles] in the middle of this elevated huge, you know, highway...

DICKMEYER: Mhmm.

ROE: ...and cars are passing by us, just zipping by us and everything. And he gets out and he hitches the trailer up real fast and gets in and just says, "Don't tell your mom." [laughs]

DICKMEYER: [laughs]

ROE: You know, just things like that. He was always, you know, just doin' wild things.

DICKMEYER: [laughs] Okay.

ROE: And he was a mail carrier and...

DICKMEYER: Ah, okay.

ROE: ...a real mail ca- and people hit him up all the time for money.

DICKMEYER: Mm.

ROE: And - 'cause it was a good job and - but it wasn't that good of a job but people asked him all the time for money. And this one guy ask- this is 1962 - asked him for \$200 and my dad gave it to him. And he said he couldn't say no because he had like six kids and none of them had shoes, they were, you know, just in rags living in an old rent house and everything. He said, "I just had to give it to him." And he always said, "If you loan money, don't ever expect to get it back..."

DICKMEYER: Mhmm.

ROE: "...just be happy if you do." And this guy kept saying, "I'm gonna pay you back, I'm gonna pay you back." It kept going on like that. About a year later he said, "I'm never gonna be able to pay you back but I wanna give you the only thing I have of value." And my dad, you know, goes, "I think it's gonna be some little knick knack or a painting..." or some, you know, something that's sentimental to this man's family.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm.

ROE: And it was a beautiful, antique pump organ from 1855. And it's sitting here in my house right now, you know, it's been handed down to me. But, you know, it's worth a fortune. And my dad said, "No, no, no I can't take that." And the guy said, "You were the only one to help me. The only person." And he said, you know, "This organ is yours." And you know, we've just always, you know, cherished the organ because of that.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm. Wow, that's a great story. Huh. So you mentioned he - after he came back from the war he was still working in - on the dairy farm it sounds like but also as a mail carrier. Was that at the same time or...?

ROE: Right, he just did both.

DICKMEYER: Oh okay, he did both of them, I see.

ROE: 'Cause I don't know if you've ever been around dairy farmers but they just, you know, eke out a living. It's very, very, very poor money.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm.

ROE: And - but, you know, it's a good life and he would get up and run the mail route. Well, first he'd go milk and then he'd run the mail route. Then he'd come back and then he'd go out and milk the cows and that was the day, so...

DICKMEYER: Mhmm.

ROE: And he also farmed his own feed for the cows. And - and then once he retired he had a beef cattle operation near Bastrop. And they had a beautiful place up there and he had coastal fields all - everything really nice because he never had the time to get the fields, you know, planted with coastal and everything and it was just a beautiful place.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm, mhmm. Okay so it sounds like he had a pretty interesting and full life after he returned from the war.

ROE: Yes, he did.

DICKMEYER: Yeah, and it's - when did he marry your mother?

ROE: 1947.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm. So a couple of years after the war. And then you mentioned you had an older sister earlier and...

ROE: Yes and she was - she was b- like, he met her, they started dating, they got married over Christmas break 'cause she was a teacher.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm.

ROE: And then she finished up the school year 'cause she was pregnant and my sister was born December the next year.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm. And yeah and then you said you were born in 1953. Do you have any other siblings or is it just the two of you?

ROE: No, it's just us.

DICKMEYER: Yeah.

ROE: Mhmm.

DICKMEYER: Okay. Is there anything else you want to share about your father or his life that might be interesting for us to know about?

ROE: Uh, I think that's about it. Um, what I'm doing - I make porcelain dolls and I compete at - compete at the international level and there's a competition coming up where there's a theme of songs and memories of my childhood.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm.

ROE: And I found a mold that resembled my dad. I kind of altered it and painted it the way he looked like. Got his, you know, picture right in front of me and did the best I could and I'm

going to put some of the stories of WWII right there by the bust. You know, I'm making a bust of him.

DICKMEYER: Mhmm. Well, that's a great way to remember him.

ROE: So, I'm gonna compete that. Yeah.

DICKMEYER: Yeah.

ROE: Mhmm.

DICKMEYER: Yeah. Well, thank you for sharing your stories with us and...