Interview with Muriel Helsel

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DePue: Good morning. My name is Mark DePue. I am the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I am here today with Muriel Helsel. Today is Monday, November 5, 2007. I am here with Muriel to talk about her memories of the Pearl Harbor attack because she had the opportunity—I guess is one way to say it, Muriel—to be in Honolulu the day of the Pearl Harbor attack. What we'd like to start with here, Muriel, is, if you could tell us just a little bit about yourself. Let's start with when and where you were born.

Helsel: I was born in Bisbee, Arizona on April 24, 1919.

DePue: Where did you grow up?

Helsel: When I was two, my family moved to California. I grew up in Los Angeles.

DePue: Okay. What was your father doing?

Helsel: My father was a man of many, many trades. He had a butcher shop for a short while, but he actually was quite allergic to all the flowers in California although they didn't know they were allergies at that time. That problem hadn't come up. He was gassed in the mine—mining copper in Phoenix. He was in the carpenter trade. Also, a butcher part of the time.

DePue: When did the family move to California?

Helsel: In 1921.

DePue: Okay. So, you were old enough when the depression happened to remember that?

Helsel: Oh, yes, I grew up through the depression. But it was a wonderful time. Looking back, we were—everybody was having problems. But we had a very happy childhood. We played games. My mother went to work. She was very, very… Can

we have time?

DePue: Yeah.

Helsel: She was a wonderful person. I don't know how she took care of her elderly mother, her husband, who eventually was practically bedridden, and two teenage girls. We never felt for want. She always made certain that we had everything that we needed, dresses and whatever clothes we needed. She wouldn't let us work during the depression. So, I never had any feeling of being without food, or anything.

DePue: Were you able to finish high school then?

Helsel: Oh, yes. I finished high school and went to one year at UCLA. And then mother said, "I can't do it anymore." My sister was ready to get married. Then I went to a secretarial school for summer and discovered that I really enjoyed it. That saw me through all the war.

DePue: When did you graduate from high school?

Helsel: Nineteen thirty-seven. Class of 1937.

DePue: A year at college and by 1939 you were working? You were out in the work force?

Helsel: Oh, yes. In fact, I went to work after I finished the secretarial school in 1937. I worked from then until I was married. I worked for a gentleman who was very good about seeing that I was… I can't do this.

DePue: You're doing fine.

Helsel: I didn't know you were going to go back this far. I was...

DePue: We can move on if you'd like?

Helsel: Probably. I mean, it all led into the fact that I was able to stay and work at Pearl during the war.

DePue: Let's talk about how you met your husband then.

Helsel: Met him at church. When they moved to California, we lived right across from the Methodist Church. I was in Cradle roll. They built another church. They were connected with USC. All my childhood I went to the University Methodist Church. His father was a professor at the University. He was just down for the summer. He went to college in Washington. We met at church and were married there by his father.

DePue: You were married in April 1940?

Helsel: April 2nd, 1940. Just before I was twenty-one.

DePue: I don't think we got your maiden name yet. What was...?

Helsel: Vanderwalker. All one word.

DePue: Vanderwalker.

Helsel: Vanderwalker.

DePue: Dutch?

Helsel: Yes.

DePue: Okay. What were your father's and your mother's names?

Helsel: He was George William Vanderwalker. She was Catherine Leona Simons. Her father was born in England, and I don't know. I guess there was a lot of people came over, probably involved in the gold rush. We don't know too much about him.

DePue: Your husband's name was Rolland?

Helsel: Rolland. Two l's. R-o-l-l-a-n-d.

DePue: Okay. And he was at USC when you met?

Helsel: No, he was down for the summer. He went back and took some graduate work after we were married. He went to Seattle Pacific College up in Seattle.

DePue: What was his major in college?

Helsel: Political science.

DePue: Okay. What happened, then, in 1940?

Helsel: Well, after we were married—just shortly after—he asked if I would mind if he joined the Naval Reserves. During his college years, he worked for Captain Anderson, who ran the ferries between Seattle and the islands. There was no bridge in Seattle at that time over through the islands. He ran a ferry line. Also, in the summertime, he ran a sightseeing boat through the locks around Seattle from Lake Washington. That was fune. After the first few months that we were married, that June,, we went back to Los Angeles and he went to graduate school.

DePue: I know he ended up in graduate school at Harvard, did he not?

Helsel: He had a chance to go to this course at Harvard. He asked for deferment until the end of the semester which he did. At the end of that fall semester, we went back up to Seattle. They greeted us with the fact that the Navy was looking for him. That's when he was ordered to Boston. Well, we repacked everything and met then, his family in Kansas where they had a farm. Then we continued onto Boston.

When we were looking for an apartment, the places were terrible where we looked. We couldn't see anything that we would like to live in. They were dirty. There was food in the refrigerators. I said, "Maybe the school knows something?" He went into the office at school to report, and he came out with this look on his face. He said, "I have to live at the school." So, we found me a Harvard House—they call it—where the graduate students from Harvard were allowed to have apartments. I stayed there and he stayed at the school. That's where he was appointed an ensign in the Navy.

DePue: He joined the Naval Reserve in 1940, then?

Helsel: Yes.

DePue: There's a lot going on in the world in 1940. I'm sure you had an opinion about that?

Helsel: Well, we were not that cognizant of what was going on in the war. We were young married people. And I don't… I'm sure he did. He was more into it than I was.

DePue: Do you recall why he wanted to join the Navy Reserves?

Helsel: Because the captain who ran these ships had tried to talk him into it for a long time.

DePue: Oh, okay.

Helsel: He had been injured in the Second World War, I mean, the First World War. He was quite badly crippled. He had fallen down into a hold. But he was strictly a Navy man and very loyal. He just thought it would be a good idea for him to join the Navy. I guess they figured there was going to be a war, and Navy would be a good place to be.

DePue: But he joined the reserves initially, so he still had aspirations for his own career?

Helsel: Yes, he did.

DePue: What was he looking to do?

Helsel: Looking for history. Also, to coach basketball. He and his brother were basketball referees for USC at all the practice games when they were together and in Los Angeles, and in a league run by companies. You know, they used to have a lot of those company sponsored games.

DePue: What was it that he was doing specifically at Harvard, then, when he was there?

Helsel: That was strictly put on by the naval department. Supply department. And he was a Naval Supply Officer.

DePue: He was getting his advanced training. He's already been commissioned by that

time?

Helsel: No. He was commissioned after he finished Harvard.

DePue: That would have been about what time? Do you recall?

Helsel: Well, that was August of 1941.

DePue: Okay. And what happens, then, in 1941?

Helsel: Actually, I had worked during the time we were in Boston. I went to work for a group called American Defense Harvard Group. It was a group of college professors and people high in the political field trying to get the Americans aware of what was going on in Europe, and the terrible things that were happening. So, I finally got an inkling of what was going on in the world outside of my little one. We knew that things were going to happen. It was inevitable that we would get into the war.

So, after school was finished, he was ordered to the Pennsylvania, which was in dock in Long Beach. But his orders were to go to San Francisco. We went home and took the train up to San Francisco. Of course, they promptly sent him back down to San Pedro to catch the ship.

DePue: We should mention that this was the USS Pennsylvania that he was assigned to.

Helsel: Yes. Battleship.

DePue: Okay.

Helsel: Within a few months—well, wasn't that long because it was August I had an apartment near his parents, and mine too. He got out to Pearl and wrote me that I should come out as soon as I could, that all the wives were out there. He just thought that would be a good idea for me to come. My first reservation was for January second, I think. But I had written that I would take the first available cancellation, So, that's how I happened to go early. We took a car. A car cost more than my freight. We had a brand new car which we took out. That's how I happened to be out there just before the war.

DePue: Let me make sure I got this straight. I recall my reading of the history here. The Pacific fleet was on the West Coast of the country. Then somewhere around August or September, just a few months prior to the Pearl Harbor attack, they moved the entire fleet out to Pearl Harbor, didn't they?

Helsel: I'm sure I don't remember.

DePue: Well, that must have been when your husband went out with the USS Pennsylvania to Pearl Harbor.

Helsel: Yes, that's what… He sailed out on the Pennsylvania.

DePue: You went on the Lorelai, you said?

Helsel: The Lurline.

DePue: The Lurline. Was that November, then?

Helsel: I sailed, I think… I have the dates.

DePue: Yeah, you'd given me the date earlier. November nineteenth, I think, is when you actually got there. Does that sound right?

Helsel: Yes. It took about five days. The other thing was that, the day after I sailed, he was ordered from the Pennsylvania to Ford Island as a supply officer NAS [Naval Air Station] Ford Island. Actually, we learned years later that that group of ensigns that went out, who were ordered to different ships, were due to go out to Wake and Guam and those islands that were just being finished being built. Actually he got to stay on Ford Island. The others went on to different islands.

DePue: At the time, by late November, early December, he was no longer assigned to the Pennsylvania.

Helsel: Yes, that's correct. Before I arrived at Pearl he was reassigned.

DePue: You're brand new, young, still almost on your honeymoon, kind of.

Helsel: Yes.

DePue: You're in one of the most beautiful spots in the world. What was your reaction when you first arrived to Hawaii?

Helsel: Oh, I was overwhelmed. It is a beautiful place. And it was a wonderful place to spend the war, actually, after the Midway battle. We were very busy. We rented the apartment and we bought some furniture unpainted, planning to paint it later. I remember we bought a refrigerator and things like that. He was assigned as Supply Department duty officer for NAS Ford Island on December seventh.

DePue: Can we back up just a little bit, Muriel? I hate to interrupt you. You'd gotten an apartment in Honolulu?

Helsel: Right at Waikiki.

DePue: Right at the beach?

Helsel: Not at the beach, just off the beach.

DePue: That's still not too bad, though, is it?

Helsel: No, it was very nice.

DePue: And you were probably enjoying yourself, getting settled in. I'm sure it was a very busy time. I recall that you went to a concert *The Battle of Music* the night before, on December sixth. Do you recall that?

Helsel: Oh, yes. I still have the program from that.

DePue: I think we're looking at that now. Was that a series of military bands that were competing against each other?

Helsel: Yes. Bands often… At that time, all of the… I don't know whether they still do. The big ships and even the little ones all had bands. They had this series of concerts as you can see by the program.

DePue: What kind of music were they playing?

Helsel: Mostly marches and things like that. We went with a group from the Pennsylvania. They had had us aboard for Thanksgiving dinner. My first introduction to the Navy, really. They joined us and after the band –which I think the Pennsylvania band won –we with a group, went down and went to the Royal Hawaiian, which I had wanted to see very badly, and hadn't had a chance to do much sightseeing. We tried to get them—a couple of the boys—to stay with us overnight because it was late. But they had quarters at eight o'clock the next morning, so they decided they'd better go back to the ship. Well, the Pennsylvania, at that time, had been put in dry dock, so, it was hit; but it wasn't badly damaged and was able to be put back in service. I don't think anybody I knew was hurt on the Pennsylvania, although, I'm sure there were some—

DePue: There were some casualties.

Helsel: There were casualties, yes.

DePue: Why don't you tell us what happened on the next day? December seventh.

Helsel: The operations officer lived just a couple blocks from us. He asked Rolland to come and pick up his car and drive out to the base so his wife wouldn't have to take their two children, get them up in the morning. Otherwise, I would have been out at the base when the bombs hit. As it was, I took Rolland to the operations officer's home. He drove the car out and was on the base when the Japanese hit. The army officer that was in the other house at our little compound took me with his wife to Fort DeRussy. In the meantime, looking out, you know, we started watching from the yard. We could hear all the bombers, but I had thought nothing of it because I was used to the big guns that they had at Long Beach.

DePue: It probably is worth mentioning here, for the people who aren't really familiar with the geography of the area, that Pearl Harbor is a few miles down the beach from Honolulu, isn't it?

Helsel: Yes, it is. Not too far.

DePue: You were wakened by neighbors?

Helsel: Yes. The neighbors awoke me. They eventually took me to Fort DeRussy where we spent the night. They were holding us there and waiting for gas masks. They were going to take us up to Schofield, I think. They hadn't decided. But we ended up staying there. Staying in… They had—oh, what would you call them? I can't think of the word –dugout kind of things where we stayed. I never had so many mosquito bites in my life. I could hardly open my eyes the next morning. I've not been affected by mosquitoes since.

DePue: Muriel, what was your first thought when somebody said, "They're bombing Pearl Harbor?"

Helsel: I went to the telephone to call my husband to tell him. Of course, the operator said, "This is an emergency. This is the real McCoy." I thought, "What am I thinking of?" You just have strange reactions. It was terrifying. I had the worst headache I think I've ever had in my life. I decided I'd never be afraid of anything again. But mostly I was worried about my husband. They let us go up on the banks above the fortifications that they had at Fort DeRussy. We could see the fires on the ships. You had no idea what was happening. We didn't have communications like they do now.

DePue: As far as you knew, your husband was on Ford Island?

Helsel: Yes. I mean, he was. I knew he was. I mean, he'd had time to get out there. It was a very long day. The next morning, the army wife and I decided that we'd rather die in our beds than in this group because all the other army wives and their Japanese maids were there. It was crowded, hot and very uncomfortable. Luckily, I went back and my husband came by to pick up clothes. I knew he was all right. It was a long twenty-four hours.

From then on, of course, we had martial law immediately. We had black-out and curfew. He was only able to come home either once every six days, either in the daytime or at night. Usually he came home at night because I was working. I had gone to work for the Pacific Naval Air Base Contractors at the base. Drove out there everyday. Of course, I didn't know much about Honolulu. I hadn't been there long enough for him to teach me anything except how to get out to Pearl Harbor. Eventually I went out with a group. We had a car pool; we drove out together. That was helpful.

DePue: What was the mood of your husband and all the other military men that you were associated with?

Helsel: They were angry at what had happened. It was just great confusion. I was working at the base in the Public Works Department and our office was taken over by the men from the Oklahoma. It had overturned. A lot of boys were trapped down

below. You could hear them tapping. A few of them had gotten out. They were trying to get a roster made up of those that had survived. That was a traumatic experience. One of them had had to pull someone back out of the porthole because he was too big to get through. That was traumatic for him. They were invited back aboard one of the other ships for dinner and they couldn't stay or go below deck. They had not been out long enough. There was a little landing place that the boys that worked on Ford Island had to go to to get a little officer's launch over to the island. Of course, they had a laundry there. And I had taken all my good bridal linens and left them there. Of course, I never saw them again. I was happy that they took anything they could find for the boys that were burning.

DePue: Those were terrible injuries.

Helsel: It was terrible. It was terrible. To make a long story short, one of the officers on Ford Island was a legal officer. He He was the one who urged my husband to declare that my legal domicile since we didn't have children. His wife was a nurse. She had worked and was affected by all the casualties and didn't want to stay alone. Of course, he was at the base like my husband. They didn't have any leave. Most of it was cancelled. After about six months –I don't know whether it was that long –I I went to live with her. That was very helpful. But they kept telling me I would have to take the next ship out, so that's why we declared it my legal domicile. I was able to stay.

DePue: You didn't want to go back to the States?

Helsel: I didn't want to go back, no.

DePue: You kind of gave me an inkling here, but what was the attitude that you and a lot of the other Army and Navy wives had about what was going on?

Helsel: Well, shocked mainly because we were used to the Japanese there. We had no fear of them. There were lots of rumors about landings and that was the terrifying part. This house we had had no windows; it just had screens which was quite usual. And Venetian blinds which rattled. Since we had to have black-out, the only two rooms we had blacked out were the kitchen and the bathroom. So, I would go home and go in the kitchen until I had to go to bed. Then, I dashed to the bathroom and then I'd go to bed.

I kept hearing these plop, plop noises. All these rumors about landings. I was petrified. It was years before we learned that they were the bullfrogs. They call them bufoes [the biological designation] But my husband thought the same thing when he came home. He said, "What's that?" It took us a long time to discover what they were.

DePue: You mentioned a couple times that in Hawaii at that time there were huge numbers of Japanese.

Helsel: Oh, yes.

DePue: What were your feelings and others' about the Japanese that were there?

Helsel: I had grown up with Japanese in Los Angeles. I couldn't believe. It was after I came home before I really learned about how they were interned. I don't recall feeling badly about them, or at least the ones that were… We didn't consider them the same Japanese as the ones that bombed Pearl. I don't remember any animosity towards them.

DePue: A lot of Americans have heard about the internment of the Japanese on the West Coast, and they're not aware that really nothing happened to the Japanese who were in Hawaii.

Helsel: There were too many. I don't think the island could have operated without them.

DePue: You never felt any threat from that large Japanese population?

Helsel: No, I didn't. That doesn't mean other people didn't.

DePue: What did you think about the internment –when you did find out about it –that was going on on the West Coast?

Helsel: I didn't hear all the details until this series was on PBS.

DePue: The Ken Burns series?

Helsel: The Ken Burns series.

DePue: Oh, really?

Helsel: Yes. I didn't really. I knew about it, but didn't really know the extent of it. The fact that the men were not allowed to join the Army. That wasn't until after late. Of course, out into Europe and Italy and that area. We didn't get a lot of information. We didn't have instant news like you do now. I remember the thing that saved us was the first paperbacks. We would get *Newsweek,* and *Time,* and *Life*. Late. I mean they'd be several months late or weeks late. .

DePue: I wanted to ask you to, if you recall—and maybe you weren't able to hear President Roosevelt's speech just, I think, the day after the Pearl Harbor attack –the famous…

Helsel: I've heard it so many times; I don't remember when I first heard it.

DePue: Okay, okay. What was your husband's assignment? Did his duties change after the attack?

Helsel: No, he was at Ford Island. He was an Incoming Stores Officer most of the time until about two years after when they decided to build a bigger strip that incorporated the local airport and Hickham and made it long enough for the bigger

bombers. They established NAS, [Naval Air Station] Honolulu. He was Supply Officer there. They ordered him there.

DePue: I'm sure he kept very busy, because Pearl Harbor had to be one of the busiest places in the world after that attack happened.

Helsel: It was.

DePue: And you worked at Pearl Harbor yourself?

Helsel: Yes. I worked at Pearl Harbor. I worked the first year at the Public Works Department because I had been in Boston. We had an assistant to the admiral who was from Boston. I was put in a steno pool. The girls couldn't understand him; I could. He used to call on me to take his dictation because I knew what he meant. But that led to the fact that they were trying…

I don't know how much you know about the Seabees but the construction battalions were very important in the Pacific, building the islands. There was an admiral –I think his name was White –who was ordered out to start what they called the Director of Pacific Division, Bureau of Yards and Docks. Unfortunately, he was lost coming to Pearl. It was some time later –I don't remember the time frame –when Admiral Carl Cotter was ordered. My immediate boss, John Delaney, was his assistant.

For the first year, I was with the Public Works Department, and then, they established the DirPac docks. And so, I went with Delaney to AirPac docks on the first of January of '43. I guess that was. The Admiral and Mr. Delaney –oh, he was a captain then, I guess –would go out to the Pacific on tours and they would come and dictate to me just on the typewriter. I'd take all the information so it could go in the admiral's pouch to go back to Washington. This was when they were gearing up for the Pacific wars that went on. That was a very interesting… But before the time was over, they had a yeoman attached so that he could fly with them. I turned out to be chief clerk.

DePue: But it sounds like that duty meant that you needed to have a security clearance?

Helsel: I did. I had a security clearance: the top that they ever gave civilians.

DePue: Wow.

Helsel: I still have it.

DePue: You were getting information that was not getting into the newspaper at all?

Helsel: Yes. It was technical information on what was going on and what was needed. I was aware that if we had gone into Japan, there would have been a terrible loss of

life because of the nature of the sea surrounding Japan. How they would have had to… They were trying to work out some way to get the boys in closer to land. We're ahead of ourselves.

DePue: Yeah. TWell, that's okay. That's okay. You mentioned something earlier that really caught my attention about Midway. That before Midway, Pearl—or Hawaii—was one way, and then afterwards, it changed.

Helsel: Until Midway, we had black-out and curfew. We had that all during the war. The curfew eased up a bit after Midway. But until then, all the buildings at Pearl were manned with machine guns; they had barbed wire and pill boxes at all the strategic corners throughout Honolulu. They had barrage balloons, which I've never heard mentioned;.all over the island they had these barrage balloons so that it would interfere with planes coming low. I remember I had trouble with all the flowers out there. They didn't have antihistamines in those days. So I remember being ill and thinking, Oh, I just hope I get better. I don't mind having more problems, but not when I feel so lousy. I had to take the day off to go home. They were taking the covers off the guns on all the buildings.

DePue: So, you knew something was up.

Helsel: I knew something was up, and then later, of course, that that was Midway, where they were able to break the code and know something was going to happen. It was just strictly by chance that they were able to catch those carriers and shoot all the Japanese carriers.

DePue: Of course, Midway now is considered—at least in the Pacific— the turning point of the war.

Helsel: It was.

DePue: An incredible victory. Were they able to discuss the battle in detail when it got to the newspapers in Hawaii?

Helsel: No. I didn't know anything about it until after the war.

DePue: Oh, really?

Helsel: Oh, yes.

DePue: But you knew something good had happened?

Helsel: Yes. We knew that after that… Of course, there are always rumors, but we didn't discuss things. Oh, what was it? *Loose lips sink ships.* We all believed that because it was very easy for one little bit to be talked about and people put two and two together pretty easily. So it was pretty tight.

DePue: Those were different times than we have now.

Helsel: Oh, yes.

DePue: Was there a real sense of camaraderie among the civilians as well?

Helsel: Oh, yes. We were all busy. We worked six days a week and sometimes seven because I had high classification. We were often called in for the seventh day to be able to take dictation. Of course, my husband had other information, being with air people. We tried not to discuss too much. Our information was slow in coming. It was usually after the fact.

DePue: Were there a lot of shortages that you had to deal with?

Helsel: Yes. Although we never had rationing. That's why I said it was a good place to stay. You either did without… But we didn't have rationing. I think the only thing they rationed were tires. You couldn't always get gasoline; you couldn't always get milk;, you couldn't always get meat. But we never were long without shortages. Of course, I was lucky with my husband being in incoming stores. He always knew when the refill ships were coming, and when it was a good time to go to the commissary.

DePue: Oh, wow.

Helsel: And get food.

DePue: That amazes me that you had no rationing there. I mean, everybody in the United States was rationed.

Helsel: Yes. I know nothing of rationing.

DePue: Wow, okay. Well, then that was a good place.

Helsel: Yes.

DePue: Were you able to keep in contact with your family back in the states?

Helsel: Oh, yes. We had censorship. You couldn't write anything home, and you're not supposed to keep a diary of any sort. Unfortunately I didn't. I couldn't really hint in my folks' letters. They kept them for a long time. And you couldn't say much about what you knew was going on.

DePue: Your husband stayed in that assignment for the duration of the war?

Helsel: He was at Ford Island for two years, and then he was at the Naval Air Station in Honolulu for two years.

DePue: Anybody who studies military tactics realizes the importance of logistics. He must have been right at the heart of the naval logistics at the time. You kind of alluded a little bit about towards the end of the war. I wonder if you recall hearing the news

about dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

Helsel: I don't have any recollection of my reaction to that except knowing that the war was ending.

DePue: Now, there's been a lot of …

Helsel: Haven't thought about that.

DePue: Okay, there's been a lot of criticism in some circles after the war. And this is looking forty, fifty, sixty years back at it and saying, Boy, that was just an awful thing, that the atomic bomb was dropped.

Helsel: Knowing what I knew at the time, I thought it was terrible. I mean, knowing later how much damage was done, it was sad. But I felt it was necessary. I think we would have lost innumerable people if it hadn't have happened. We didn't start the war.

DePue: And you were witness to prove that.

Helsel: I was witness to prove that.

DePue: You remember VE day? Victory in Europe day?

Helsel: Not too much. We were more interested… We were still at war.

DePue: I can see that perspective. I suspect you do remember when the Japanese surrendered?

Helsel: Oh, yes. Yes. I don't remember a great celebration in Honolulu, but that doesn't mean there wasn't one. It's been a lot of years. And I guess I was more interested in going home, which I did pretty promptly after the war.

DePue: You and your husband both?

Helsel: He was later. I went alone and then, he came about a month later. And then, he put in for retirement or resignation or whatever. I don't think he was entitled to retirement. In the meantime, they'd lowered or raised the age at which you had to be to join. So he decided after devoting five years that he'd better stay in. That's when he went and was regular Navy after that.

DePue: Okay, so that's what he did for a career?

Helsel: That's what he did for a career. He had already started trying to find a position as history teacher and basketball coach. He was able to then change and go back into the Navy.

DePue: Of course, in 1945 and early ’46, some people wondering if the depression will come back again. The Navy was good secure employment, I'm sure.

Helsel: Yes, it was.

DePue: After the war did you stay in Hawaii or did you move around a little bit then?

Helsel: No, we left right away and went back to the states. That's where he was applying for jobs, and that's where he went back into the Navy. We had interesting assignments. He was always connected to the Air Department. He had duty with Joint Staff in Columbus, Ohio. He had duty with the Bureau of Aeronautics. After he retired, I was able to go aboard the LEM before it went to the moon.

DePue: Lunar module?

Helsel: The lunar module. Yeah, that was interesting.

DePue: Yeah, okay. Wow. And you had a daughter somewhere along the line.?

Helsel: Oh, yes. We have one daughter. That was in 1948. We were at Pennsylvania at that time with Admiral Wood. That was the name of the Supply Depot Director who went out to Pearl. He took us with him. She was about a year and a half when we went back to Hawaii in 1950. It hadn't changed that much. We had another tour where we lived right across the bay from where the Arizona sank. It was not yet a memorial, but it was going to be a memorial.

DePue: Your housing was right on Pearl Harbor itself?

Helsel: Yes, it was at the Naval Supply Depot on Kuahua Island as they call it.

DePue: How did you say that again?

Helsel: Kuahua.

DePue: Kuahua Island. I love those Hawaiian names. Is there any other story or incident from the time that you were in Hawaii during the war that you'd like to mention?

Helsel: There were a lot of interesting things. I remember during the blackout he was Incoming Stores officer. They had a Quonset hut. No, they had a meeson hut which was flat roofed, at Kuahua Island, just about where our house was later. He had a tent up there and he stayed there. I decided he needed a dog. So, for Christmas, I got him a Scottie dog. Little black dog. I had to go up to St. Louis Heights to pick it up. That was the most harrowing experience I had. We had black out, and the car only had a sliver of light. I'm sure they had them on the West Coast too. Just this little light was all you could see. And darker than… I had the puppy in a box. Well, he got out of the box. We had sold our brand new car and bought an old model A. That was an interesting experience. I went down this mountain with no light and the dog out underneath my feet. I wasn't sure that he'd be alive by the time I got down to the bottom.

One of the funny things was that –we used to have tea dances, especially right

after the war –and we all would go out. In those days you didn't have nylon stockings, you had rayon stockings; you had to keep them in a bottle or the cockroaches ate them. Instead of that, the girls would put makeup on their legs. And the boys all had white dress uniforms. It was not very compatible.

DePue: Did the makeup come off on the white uniforms?

Helsel: Right. Makeup came off on the white uniforms. I knew better; I was a wife. We had so many interesting experiences. Weddings that were done in Hawaiian style with the wedding song in beautiful gardens. Luaus. Every time an officer left they'd put on a Hawaiian luau. We still got to swim and do a few things like that after Midway. But it was always under stress. You were always under stress.

DePue: And working six days a week, I'd imagine you were probably pushing fifty, sixty hours a week that you were putting in. Or more than that?

Helsel: Yes.

DePue: Well, looking back on it all, it looks like it was quite an adventure. You have some very good memories, and obviously some bad times as well. Do you think that the sacrifice that you and your husband, and all of the Americans in Pearl Harbor made, was it worth it?

Helsel: Oh, I'm sure it was. I'm sure it was. I'm afraid we're not as involved in this Iraqi War as we should be. But there's so much going on in the world, you wonder what's going to happen.

DePue: Yeah. I would think one of the differences between then and now is that in 1941, ’42, ’43, everybody is focused on winning the war. That's certainly not the case now.

Helsel: Yes. We see so much immediately. I think it would be difficult for people to see all of the carnage at Pearl Harbor immediately. I don't know what would have happened.

DePue: Do you think it makes some sense –I don’t want to put words in your mouth –that here is so much more censorship at that time, that the public just aren’t aware of the savagery of battles like Tarawa and Guadalcanal?

Helsel: Oh, I don't …

DePue: You weren't finding out about that and some other things until, as you said, well after the war, were you?

Helsel: Well, yes. All the details. I mean, you can't imagine what went on.

DePue: In, let's say, the middle of 1942, were you certain—was everybody else you knew, certain that you were going to win in this war? This is just months after the attack.

Helsel: No, we were still afraid they were going to land on us. I mean, it was a miracle that they didn't come and take Hawaii right then. That was certainly one of the crucial, I think, errors in their war. As one of their admirals knew. Which one was it that didn't want them to attack?

DePue: Yamamoto.

Helsel: Yamamoto.

DePue: So, that must have been very tough, living with the uncertainty all of the time?

Helsel: Yes. We didn't really feel after it proceeded to the Pacific. The war wasn't over, and we knew that anything could happen at any time. We weren't sure of Europe and what would happen there.

DePue: What would you want people today to remember about World War II, about your involvement in it?

Helsel: Oh. Looking back, that they were years well spent. I'm proud of all we did. We worked hard, and we gave –even though we didn't have rationing –we gave up a lot of things. And we were sorry to see so many things that were wrong. Hawaii was so integrated. I mean, you didn't think anything of the mixed races. It was quite an eye opener to be ordered to Norfolk afterwards and see the separation down there, how badly they were treated. I didn't have any knowledge because I grew up in an area of Los Angeles where there was a lot of Chinese, and Japanese, and —

DePue: You're talking about the blacks in Norfolk area?

Helsel: Yes.

DePue Do you think that your experiences in the war changed you?

Helsel: Oh, yes.

DePue: And how?

Helsel: Well, I had to grow up in a hurry. I was pretty young—twenty-two, when the war started. I learned a lot and I changed a lot in my philosophy of life.

DePue: How did your philosophy of life change?

Helsel: I guess I was more aware of the minorities. I knew growing up –because we had blacks, oneO of the top students in my high school was a black boy –and I remember we tried to get them to come to our dances and things but they never did. They sort of stayed by themselves. Looking back, I can understand why, because of how they were treated in other parts of the country. But as high school students, we didn't have that feeling about them. The Chinese, or the Japanese. We had all three. The only thing, when I went to Hawaii, yeah, I was surprised to see more mixed

couples: haoles [mainland whites] and Japanese, or haoles and blacks. I wasn't used to that. But certainly that has changed. I don't know for the better, but I'm more tolerant.

DePue: Here's the last question, then. Just, reflect on your life. You have a chance here to pass on some advice or wisdom to your daughter, or other future generations.

Helsel: Oh, I wish I had some pearls of wisdom. I believe in getting the most out of life. Being tolerant of other people. Realizing life goes by pretty fast, and you can't put off until tomorrow what you should do today.

DePue: Okay. Any final comments for us, then?

Helsel: No, I'm sure there's much I've left out.. Well, you might be interested in knowing my most vivid memory of that December 7 is standing in the yard of our rented house with the neighbors, watching the Japanese planes in formation, peeling off , dive-bombing our fleet. That memory is as vivid today as it was when it happened.

DePue: Well, I think you've done a wonderful job. You have Muriel, you really have. I've really enjoyed talking with you.

Helsel: Thank you.

DePue: Thank you very much for the opportunity. We look forward to seeing you in the future.

That concludes today.

END OF AUDIO FILE