

Helen Marcil Brennan
Narrator

Wayne Clark
New York State Military Museum
Interviewer

Interviewed on 21 September 2012 at the Troy Senior Center, Troy NY

INT: Ma'am, for the record, please state your name and where you were born.

HB: My full name is Helen Marcil Brennan. I was born in Cohoes, NY.

INT: Did you attend school in Cohoes?

HB: I went to Saint Bernard's Grammar School. For high school I went to Catholic High in Troy.

INT: Do you recall where you were when you heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor? December 1941.

HB: Yes, very vividly I remember. It was on a Sunday, December 7, and we were getting ready for dinner and we heard it on the radio. My mother started to cry very softly and I thought, "Why is she crying?" But she was thinking that she had two sons and she figured they'll be going into the service. Then years later I visited the *Arizona* in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii and what a feeling to know that all those bodies were down there. It was a wonderful experience to go there.

INT: After you heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor, did life change much for you?

HB: At that point, I was in the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation). My brother and my boyfriend immediately went down the next day and volunteered to enter the service. My boyfriend, who later became my husband, joined the Navy, and my brother joined the Coast Guard.

INT: When you were with the FBI during that period, did business pick up with them because of the war being on?

HB: Yes, it did. In fact, I had a hard time getting a release to go into the service because they said I was doing my duty there. I said I really wanted to go and I still have a letter from J. Edgar Hoover giving me permission to resign and saying he hoped I'd have a good time in the service.

INT: Can you tell about the type of work you were doing?

HB: In the FBI? I can just say that I was in correspondence. I ran the switchboard and I did teletype and all sorts of communications, but we couldn't talk about it.

INT: I see. So you decided to go into the Coast Guard, the SPARS. (The Women's Reserve of the Coast Guard)

HB: Because my brother was in the Coast Guard, that's how I decided. One day I was on my lunch hour from the FBI and there was a recruiting trailer on North Pearl Street and I went over and it was for the SPARS and so I got all the information. When I went home I was all enthused about going into the service.

INT: How did your parents feel about it?

HB: Well, my mother and father at first, my father was very old-fashioned and he had an idea that all servicewomen were "fast" as he used to say. He didn't want me to go in but he didn't stop me. After I was in, he was very proud of me and my sister and my two brothers.

INT: Was your father a veteran?

HB: Yes, he was in World War One. He was in the Army.

INT: You mentioned your sister went in?

HB: My sister went in a year after I did. She had to wait to be old enough to go in. I was way ahead of her in Yeoman School. I was sworn in in Albany in August of 1942. I had to meet a group of people in New York City and I had two suitcases and I thought, "I'll never make it." I went all by myself to NYC and I was just about dying, holding my two suitcases.

INT: Did you go down by train?

HB: Yes. I missed the people at Grand Central Station and we had to wait and we had a military train and it took us forever to get to Palm Beach. It was two days for us to get down there and when we got there to the SPAR station, they billeted us in the Biltmore Hotel, a very swanky hotel that had been taken over by the government. We got in line to get in there and we were starving and we went right to the mess hall and when we got to go into the mess hall, the girls that were dishing out the tomatoes and stuff, they all started to say, [in singsong] "You'll be sorry." [laughs]

INT: Were you homesick at all? Was that your first time away?

HB: Yes. It was my first time away from home and when I went to NYC, it was my first time going there alone. I was very sheltered so to speak.

INT: What was basic training like?

HB: It was wonderful, really. The Biltmore Hotel in Palm Beach, we went to classes from nine o'clock in the morning until ten o'clock at night but it wasn't all classes. During that time we would have drills, we would march, we would have swim and surf, so it was broken up with the classroom studies. It was really wonderful training and I did graduate first in my class from Yeoman School.

INT: Was Yeoman School basic training?

HB: No. Basic training was I forget how long, but then we graduated, had a big picture taken of the whole group. Then we were interviewed to see what school we wanted to go to.

INT: When they found out you were with the FBI, you probably had your choice of wherever you wanted to go, didn't you?

HB: I could have gone to New Orleans or St. Louis, the headquarters. I picked St. Louis and from St. Louis, because I was a recruiter and I was a good speaker, I used to speak at all of the Rotary Clubs at the towns I went to. I had two speeches. One, I'd look at the crowd and if it looked low key and I thought it should be higher, I would talk more about the casualties of war, but not always. I had a problem that bothered me for years after I got out of service. When I was up in North Dakota, I was recruiting 18-year old boys and a young man came in and I interviewed him. He was so thrilled to go into the service. He did the exam and all that and then he went down to Omaha to be sworn in. It was all through me that he came in. He asked me to come to Sunday dinner with his family and, always eating in restaurants and hotels, I was thrilled. So on Sunday afternoon, I met his mother and his father and they told me how thrilled he was that he was going into the service, that he was on cloud nine. About six months later, he was shipped out and he was on a ship that was torpedoed and he was killed. I felt responsible for that, I really did. I thought that if I hadn't recruited him, maybe he wouldn't have gone in the Coast Guard. It troubled me a lot. So the next time that I had to go up there to recruit in North Dakota, I thought, "I can't visit his parents, they'd probably kick me right off their porch." But I thought, "I have to do it," so I called them up and told them I was in town to recruit again and they invited me to dinner. I went over and I told them how sorry I was. They gave me a big picture of him. I said "I can't get him out of my mind, I feel responsible that he's dead." They said, "Don't feel like that. It was the most wonderful thing that happened to him. He was so happy." So instead of them saying to me, "You recruited our son and he's dead," they were open arms for me. I had such a feeling of gratitude that they did that. That's the only bad memory I have from the service.

INT: Do you recall how long Yeoman School was?

HB: It was from September to February.

INT: That included clerical plus recruiting?

HB: Yes. Plus public speaking.

INT: You were basically a natural at public speaking.

HB: Yes, I guess I was. Right.

INT: You mentioned your sister. Was she part of the recruiting?

HB: She was. It was good advertisement for the SPARS that two sisters were there. They took advantage of that and let us both be at the same station, to be stationed together, but I was in travel status and I went all over and did the speeches and all that. My sister was in yeoman work, she did clerical work in the office, she didn't do the travelling I did.

INT: Did you travel by yourself or was there an officer?

HB: A lot of times, I had to go by myself, when it was very small towns in North and South Dakota, I would go by myself and on the train. I remember one small town that I went to and I wondered why they had sent me there. When I got off the train, I had my suitcase and all sorts of pamphlets and posters and I asked where I could get a taxi. The man said to me, "We don't have any taxis, where are you going?" I told him the hotel and he told me it was about three blocks down, he told me how to get there. So I walked there and it was like something out of Norman Rockwell. There were four men sitting around a pot-belly stove and when I came in the door, they all turned around and looked at me. One man stood up and said, "You must be the recruiter that's coming" because they had sent my reservations in. They didn't have to because I was the only one in the hotel. [laughs] He brought me up to the second floor, there was no elevator, and I asked him for my key. He said they didn't normally use keys. I said I had to have a key and he gave me a skeleton key, that's the type of place [it was]. I spent a whole week there by myself. I recruited out of the post office but then when I'd get out of there and go look for a place, there were no restaurants. I went to a bakery and bought food there, and went and bought milk. I called up my recruiting office in Omaha and asked if I had to stay a whole week. I wasn't interviewing anyone and I didn't have any speeches because there was no Rotary or anything like that.

INT: You just had the guys around the pot-belly stove, right?

HB: Right. [laughs]

Another thing, out of St. Louis they had all the men that were in all the bands, Glen Miller and all that, they had a group that went all around the country, like they do now. When they came into Omaha, they came into our office and said they were going to be in the area and going to North and South Dakota and they wanted to take a recruiter with them. They figured the band was there, they'd put on this wonderful concert in the town and the recruiter would be there, maybe getting some people into the service. So they picked me and said that I would go, so I went. I rode in the bus with all of the musicians and I remember, I was never so cold in my life. We were in Fargo, ND and it was so cold, unbelievably cold. We put on a concert and as we were coming out of the stage door, there were a lot of grammar school kids there with their autograph books and one little girl came over to me and said, "Are you anybody?" [laughs] I told her, "No, I'm really not." I enjoyed that. I travelled with them through Iowa and North and South Dakota while they did their concerts and I sat on the stage. I do not have any musical talent but the man that was in charge of them said they had one number and they were going to use maracas. He said, "Helen, when I do this [motions with hand], I want you to [shake] the maracas." I said, "Really, I don't have any rhythm, I'm not going to be able to do it." "You'll do it." So I said okay. When it came time and he went like that [makes hand motion] and I threw the whole band off. I did it all wrong and I was so embarrassed. I said to him, "I told you I couldn't do it" and he never asked me to do it again. He said, "Stick to your speeches" and I said, "I told you I'm not musically inclined." When we closed our recruiting station in Omaha, we had our choice of three places to go: Alaska, Hawaii, or Washington. I picked Washington because in the meantime, my husband had come home and we were married in Omaha.

INT: What was he in?

HB: He was a radioman in the Navy. He was on a sub chaser, the same sub chaser for four years. He was in the South Pacific the whole war but he was going to be discharged from Guam. I wanted to go to Hawaii but I thought I'd better go to Washington, he'll come home in the meantime. He was out on Guam when I was discharged so I really could have gone to Hawaii but I wouldn't do that, thinking maybe I'd miss him.

Oh, one other very nice thing happened to my sister and me. I was in Omaha at the recruiting office and a military policeman came in. He said, "Where are the Marcil sisters?" We both looked up and said, "Here we are." He said, "Your brother, Jack, is on a troop train here in Omaha and we have a delay. He said that his sisters were here and we want to bring you down to see your brother." Wasn't that nice?

INT: Oh, wow.

HB: So they brought us down and there was this troop train, all military, and they walked us down and they let my brother get off the train but we had to stay right there. But we hadn't seen my brother in almost three years so when he said how that happened, he had been in Germany and he was just ready to come home and they needed an electrician first

class and they sent him out to the west coast so that he would go to the South Pacific. He was telling them [breaks off]

INT: So he was in the Navy?

HB: He was in the Coast Guard. He was on an LST (Landing Ship, Tank). He mentioned that his sisters were in stationed in Omaha so the officer in charge told him that they were going to be in Omaha for a couple of hours and that he would go and get his sisters. I thought that was so nice that they brought us down and that we got to see Jack. We hadn't seen him in three years. We had to stay right there down by the tracks.

INT: Very nice. I take it he made it home alright?

HB: Yes, he did, thank God. My sister's dead and my brother that was in the Navy, the youngest one, he was a pharmacist mate attached to the Marine Corps, he's dead. My brother, Jack, the one that I'm talking about, he and I are the only two that are still living.

INT: Whereabouts does he live?

HB: He lives in Albany, in Westmere.

INT: Do you think he might want to be interviewed?

HB: I was just thinking that.

INT: Alright, I'll give you one of those brochures and all he has to do is fill it out and mail it to me.

HB: Alright. He had a lot of service. They would land the troops and all. I'll give that to Jack.

INT: You mentioned being discharged. Did you have any choice? Did you want to stay in the service or they just decided?

HB: No. How I happened to get out – I said how my husband was on Guam waiting to be discharged, I was in Washington when recruiting closed, had a good job there and enjoyed Washington. One morning I was called, it was the middle of night, they said, "Your husband's calling from Seattle, WA." I spoke to him and I cried through most of the phone call and he said, "Helen please, let me talk to you. Stop crying." [laughs] He came to Washington. He was discharged from Seattle, WA and if your husband was discharged, you automatically could be discharged. All I had to do was produce his discharge and I was discharged, too.

INT: Was your sister married?

HB: She was single and she was in for another seven months. She finally had gone to Washington, too.

INT: Do you remember where you were when you heard about the death of President Roosevelt?

HB: Yes. I was in Omaha and I was going up the stairs into the USO (United Service Organizations) and two women who were Army recruiters—you knew most of the recruiters of the other services because we would attend different meetings together—were coming down and they told me. That's where I was, in the middle of the flight of stairs on the way to the USO, when I heard he was dead.

Another thing that was very emotional for me: Remember General [Jonathan M.] Wainwright and how he was in that death march [the Bataan Death March]? He came to Washington and they had a special parade in his honor. He was in an open car and we had to line the streets, all of the different military, and as his car passed where you were standing, you would salute him. He looked like he was coming back from the grave, he was so thin, but I always remember that. That was a highlight in my life, too, that I was there when he was in Washington.

INT: When the war finally ended with the dropping of the atomic bombs and the surrender of Japan, was there a lot of celebration that you can recall?

HB: Not really. I guess there was in New York City and all that but there wasn't in Washington, where we were. We just knew the war was over but nothing dramatic that I remember about that.

And then, when I was in boot camp [laughs], when you first went in, and we were there for six weeks in boot camp, and we all got different jobs. Some got a job in the mess hall and I got a job painting silver the trays, those great big racks they would bring in. I made the mistake of saying to the quartermaster in charge, when he said "You do this painting" and I said "I don't know how to paint" and he said, "You'll learn." So that's what I did in boot camp, I painted all those racks. I never regretted my service. I was very patriotic, my whole family was patriotic. My mother and father were so proud of the four stars in the window. The people next door to us had three children in the service and they had three stars. When my youngest brother, Ned, the one that was in the Navy, went in and we got the fourth star, my father and mother were thrilled.

There were days of loneliness. You asked if I ever got homesick. When I was in Florida in Yeoman School, I was studying, sitting there studying and then all of a sudden I started to cry and cry and I couldn't stop crying. I just had that one session of unbelievable homesickness but then it left. I treasure the years that I was in the service.

INT: When you were discharged, did you make use of the GI Bill?

HB: Not for education but for buying a home. My husband and I, we did that.

INT: When you got back, did you have the option of going back to the FBI?

HB: Yes, but by that time, I was pregnant and I never went back.

INT: Did you stay in contact with anyone you were in the service with?

HB: I did for several years with the girls who were in recruiting with me, but then suddenly we lost contact with each other, I don't know why. I met that Antoinette but she went in much later than me so she didn't have the option of deciding what she wanted to be and she worked in the galley, I think. Another one, Monica, was with her and she graduated from school with me. One time I came home on leave and she came to see me and tried on my uniform and then she joined the SPARS. But that was almost at the end of recruiting and they didn't have an option to go to any kind of a training school, they just had to go to Boston, she went to Boston, too.

INT: Did you make use of what they called the 52-20 club?

HB: I was entitled to it and I never did it. My father said, "You don't have to apply for that, you don't have to do that," and my husband got a job right away, earning after the war, he was getting 16 dollars a week. I wasn't getting anything because I became pregnant almost right away and we never filed for that. Years later, people told me I was stupid for not filing for that for a whole year I was entitled to it, but never filed for it.

INT: How do you think your time in the service changed or affected your life? Obviously it was a positive experience for you.

HB: How it changed my life? It broadened me, meeting so many different types of people from different parts of the country. I never had any negative other than when that young man was killed. It just enriched my life, going into the service. If I hadn't gone into the service, I would have been living in Troy, working at the FBI in Albany, and that would have been it. But I got to go all over the Middle West, and I enjoyed all the people I met. I really had a wonderful time in the service.

INT: Did you join any veterans' organizations like the American Legion?

HB: No, I never did.

INT: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

HB: No, other than I have no regrets about going in the service even though I was making more money in the FBI. I was doing what I wanted to do and I was very happy.

INT: Thank you so much for your interview.

HB: You're very welcome. Thank you.