

Nell Stevenson-Bright

Interviewer: Well, it's an honor to have with us today Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright. And we appreciate you coming up to our KUED studio and we honor you for your service to our country. Can you tell us just what you were doing on December 7th, 1941; and what your thoughts were?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: I was living in Amarillo, Texas, and on December 7th, I graduated from college and I was working in the advertising department at the *Amarillo Times*, one of the newspapers in Amarillo. I was just sitting around listening to the radio, like everybody else, and all of a sudden, it came over the radio that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. So everybody was very shocked. I had already started flying at that time, and of course, nobody knew what was going to happen from then. So it was quite a shock to everybody.

Interviewer: So you had your pilot's license?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: I didn't have my pilot's license at that time, but I had started flying.

Interviewer: Then did you sign up to serve right after that, or was it--

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: No, it was after that, that Jacqueline Cochran had talked to President Roosevelt before December 7th saying that if we did get into the war, we did not have enough pilots and that women could be used -- could be trained as pilots to fly just like the men. Nobody believed it at that time because that had never happened before. The women had never flown military planes before. When she took -- Jackie Cochran, who was a very famous aviator at that time -- took 25 women over to England and they were flying over there and after December 7th, President Roosevelt called her back and she had also talked to General Arnold, who was head of the Army Air Corps at that time, and asked her if she could put together

women's training -- training women to fly. So that's where it started, because we did not have, the United States did not have enough pilots at that time. So the women, I saw the advertising in a flying magazine, and at that time, we had to have our private license and 75 hours flight time to qualify to even apply for the training program. I applied and was accepted and, actually, there during the time of our service, there were 25,000 women who applied. There were 1,800 accepted, and out of the 1,800, there was a 1,074 of us that graduated. It was a tough program. We went through the same flight training as the men -- primary, basic, and advanced. We had our training at Sweetwater, Texas. It was an all women air field, the only time there was ever an all woman air field to this day. We got our hours in six months where it took the men nine months to do the same thing. We received our wings from the Army Air Corps and we had officer status. When we were sent to our assignments, we all lived in officer's barracks, in the O-Qs. We ate in the officer's mess, so we had officer status but we were technically civil service. When we were deactivated in 1944, we had no veteran status, and we had no veteran's benefits because we were supposed to get military status, but at the last minute, it had to go through Congress, and it was voted down by three votes in Congress. Therefore, we fought for about 30 years to get our veteran status, which we finally got our honorable discharge in 1978. Now, we do have veteran's benefits, but all of that 30 years, we didn't.

Interviewer: Okay, let's go back just a little bit here, I want to ask you -- Jackie Cochran took 25 women over to England?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: England.

Interviewer: England. These were women pilots?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: That had already been flying a long time, had over 500 hours.

Interviewer: And they flew for the British Air Force then?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Yes, the Royal Air Force.

Interviewer: Against the Germans in the--

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: No, they just ferried planes to the fields.

Interviewer: Oh, I see.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: But they actually, you know, they didn't fly in combat.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: But they did take planes.

Interviewer: There were 25 American women helping out in the British Air Force--

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Right.

Interviewer: --in England and so forth.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Before Jackie organized the training division, Nancy Love took 25 or 26 woman. She got women here in the United States that had and talked them into letting them be in the ferry service in the United States, ferrying airplanes from the factories to the bases here in the United States.

Interviewer: Hmm.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: And then our groups were put together later on.

Interviewer: And so you saw an ad in the paper. That was an ad, or was it just an article?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: An article in the paper in the flying magazine, and said, if you were interested, would you write. So I wrote a letter and Jackie Cochran interviewed me in Fort Worth, Texas.

Interviewer: And you had 25,000 women apply, and what did you do, just take a test then?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: No, you had to already have your private license and 75 hours. Later, they lowered it to 35 hours, and you had to be 21 years of age.

Interviewer: So the number of flight hours eliminated a lot of those 25,000, I guess.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Well, and a lot of them were just not qualified. They either weren't old enough or they weren't -- when they were interviewed, it was a tough interview. You were asked an awful lot of questions because she wanted people that, she wanted women she knew could do it. Jackie was a self-made woman herself, and one of the most famous pilots. She broke, you know, broke records even up unto her 70s.

Interviewer: Okay, and when you got accepted, did you have any basic training and tell us a little bit about that.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Yes, we went to Sweetwater, Texas, and we had training in PT-19s, and we had primary training and we had to have so many hours there. We had flight, we flew in the mornings, went to ground school in the afternoons, then the next week, we would go to ground school in the morning, fly in the afternoons. We had to have so many hours in primary after that. Then we had basic training, and this was the same type of thing that that men had, exactly the same training to fly, even though we already had our pilot's license, we had to learn how to fly the Army way. We had to have ground school and we had link trainers. We were

busy 24/7 almost, we felt like. We almost flew seven days a week to get our hours. Sometimes we got weekends off, but very seldom.

Interviewer: Were your instructors women or

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: No, the instructors were men.

Interviewer: The instructors were men.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: The check pilots were Army check, Air Force check pilots.

Interviewer: And were you -- this base you were on, where there also men training all at the same time?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: No, it was an all women air base -- just women.

Interviewer: All right, and you're lodging and everything was pretty much like the men had?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: It was all barracks, we had what we call bays and there would be six women in a bay, there was a bath room in between and six women over here, so you had 12 women using one bath room and one shower. That always got pretty interesting.

Interviewer: Yeah, all right, now tell us what happened after your basic training and give us as many details as you can about that.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Well, after -- as I say, we had the primary training, then basic training, and then advanced training. In the basic, we flew the BT-13s. In the advanced training, we flew the AT-6's and the C-78s. Now, this was in my class. Because I was in class number 7, so I was in one of the early classes. They changed it around some in the later classes, but this is what happened when I was in my class. After graduation, there were 20 of us chosen out of my

class -- and there were 85 that started our class, and there was 57 graduated, I believe the other, because if you didn't make the grade, you got washed out. There were 20 of us chosen to go to B-25 school to go transition in B-25s at Mather Field at Sacramento, California. The girls had not flown B-25s before, and Jackie wanted to prove that the girls could fly the bigger planes, too. So we got our orders. My first orders were to go to (inaudible) and Jackie was working on this, and I'm sure some of us had already left Sweetwater to go home on leave, she got the orders, and she had picked the girl that she wanted. Some of us, they had to send the Highway Patrol out to bring us back to Sweetwater, to tell us our orders had been changed. Then we didn't get any leave, we went straight to B-25 school. We were at B-25 school in Mather, California, and instantly there were 20 Tuskegee Airmen there too, so the commanding officer did not particularly want the women pilots or the black boys, either. We were not too welcome, but they didn't have much choice. So we got our training in B-25s as first pilots. We got almost 200 hours in B-25s at Mather Field. We were there November through February. Then there were 10 of us sent to March Field in Riverside, California, and 10 of us were sent to Biggs Field at El Paso to tow target squadron. The tow target squadron, that's where we were training the anti-aircraft boys, this was ground-to-air where we towed the targets behind the planes and they shot real bullets at the targets. Hopefully, they hit the targets and didn't get too close to the planes.

Interviewer: Well, what -- tell us about these targets. What did they consist of?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: The target was just a big sleeve out of material, a big sleeve and it would be rolled out of the plane about 2,500 feet behind the plane and we would fly a pattern back and forth and they would try to hit the target. Then the anti-aircraft boys from Fort Bliss would shoot colored bullets and their officers could tell whether they hit the targets or not. At Biggs Field, we flew B-25s towing targets, and B-26s. We also flew simulated bombing

missions, we flew gas missions, and we flew strafing missions. For some of those missions, we flew P-47s -- that was a pursuit plane -- and the two Navy SPDs, the A-24 Helldiver and the Curtiss Helldiver. Those planes were Navy planes that the Navy didn't want anymore, so they sent their worn-out planes to the tow target squadrons and they would kind of be wired together and we would fly them.

Interviewer: Now, when you say strafing missions, besides towing targets, what did a strafing mission consist of?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Well, the troops from Fort Bliss would go out into the desert around El Paso. This was *their* training. They would be out in the desert for, I don't know, maybe a week at a time surviving. Every morning, early in the morning, we would take off before sunrise, and then come down out of the sun and right over the top of their heads and they were supposed to -- if they were eating breakfast, or whatever they were doing -- they were supposed to hit the dirt.

Interviewer: It was a training exercise?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: A training exercise *for them*--

Interviewer: On the ground.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: --as to what they could expect if they were in combat.

Interviewer: I see. So, you were simulating if you were going to strafe them, I see.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: One morning, another girl and where were strafing in P-47s, and we saw a lone Jeep coming up, kind of trailing the end of the convoy, so we decided that he should be strafed. So we went down and strafed him and he didn't pay any attention to us at all. So the

other girl, Katie Landrieu, another one of my buddies, got on the mic and said, "Let's go get him again." So we went right down pretty close to over his head and he jumped right out of the Jeep, left the Jeep going out into the desert and hit the dirt. We came back to see how he was getting along, and he had taken off his white t-shirt and was waving it at us, "No more."

Interviewer: How high above the ground were you?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Probably 50 feet, or 100.

Interviewer: That's interesting. Now, besides those two, what was the other that you mentioned, another mission?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Then, the ground troops would have to learn how to put on gas masks because during World War II, they were using, I don't know, mustard gas, some kind of gas. Anyway, they would attach gas tanks under our wings with the real stuff, and then we would go out and the boys from Fort Bliss would be over out there in the desert, and we would come crossing. As we went across, we let out the gas, and that was training them to get their gas masks on in time. Of course, they didn't give us gas masks.

Interviewer: You released some of the gas?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Oh, yes.

Interviewer: It was actual gas?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Yes, but they didn't give us gas masks in the cockpits, but we were just lucky it didn't come back on us, I guess.

Interviewer: Did you have any other missions besides those?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Yes, what they called “window missions.” We didn't know what we were doing at that time, but that was just when radar was coming in, and we flew the twin engine Beech aircraft, and we had a pattern that we would fly back and forth. The boys at Fort Bliss were learning to use radar. As you know, the aluminum strips would get the radar all off. So we would fly back and forth and our crew chief would drop out boxes of aluminum strips, and this was to train the boys to try to get the radar to work even with the aluminum strips. We didn't even know about the radar at that time, but that's what they were doing. Then at night, we flew search light missions, training the boys using search lights. We had an instrument rating to do that, because once they get you in the search lights, you can't see, you can't tell where you are. So you have to fly by instruments, it's like being in a cloud.

Interviewer: And how high were you when you were doing those search light missions?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Oh, we were about, 10 to 12,000 feet on search lights.

Interviewer: And, what were you were stationed, right at Fort Bliss then?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Biggs field.

Interviewer: Biggs field.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: That was the Air Force base. The other, we were done at the other end of the base, the tow target squadron was. Then they were training the boys on B-17s and B-24s up at the other end.

Interviewer: And you were still pretty segregated from the main body of troops?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: No, no. We were, we had our own matched our officer quarters, which was own separate building where we lived.

Interviewer: But you were right on the base with all these enlisted guys?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Right.

Interviewer: Can you think of any -- in those days, women being equal with men and doing the same job was not as accepted as it is today. Do you have any incidences where you had a derogatory remark made?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Well, a lot of the girls had quite a hard time when they would get on the base. We were very lucky that at Biggs Field, the enlisted men treated us like officers. We had no problem. Our group didn't have any problem getting along with them. At some bases, they did. Some bases, the commanding officer was not happy to have women pilots. But when we first arrived at Biggs Field, we reported to the commanding officer of the main base, he was over all the base. Now, we had our own commanding officer for the tow target squadron. This man was not expecting us. There were already seven WASPS there that had been transferred from another base, but they were, they were living at the nurse's quarters. Well, he was not expecting us, I don't think. There were 10 of us that showed up, he was not too happy about it. He didn't have any place to put us. One of the girls, our spokesperson, said we were supposed to live on the base. He was supposed to have a place to put us. So he said, "Well, we have to go down with the enlisted WACs." Of course, we had just come from Mather Field at Sacramento, where we had our own master officer quarters, and we had our own officer privileges, which was the understanding from General Arnold that we were supposed to have. So our spokesperson got on the phone to Jackie Cochran and told her what our situation was, and that we were being put down to the -- she said, "Well, you go ahead and spend the night at the enlisted WACs quarters, and I'll be there tomorrow." Early in the morning, Jackie's plane came into Biggs Field and by

noon, we had our own bachelor officer quarters on base, because they just didn't mess with Jackie because she had the authority to do it because she was working directly under General Arnold. Other than that, our particular group had a very, very good experience. We had lots of airplanes to fly and landing officer of our tow target squadron was very supportive of us. If we had so many hours, flew so many hours during the week, we could take a twin engine Beech, or a B-25, and go someplace for the weekend. That was pretty nice, so he was very, very, good. But as I say, I think we were lucky from talking to some of the other girls later on. We had a really good deal there.

Interviewer: And for the sake of viewers that may not know what these abbreviations mean, explain what WACs, and WAFFS, and WASP.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: WASP is "Women Air Force Service Pilot," and then, Nancy Loves group was the WAFFS, I'm not sure what that stands for. They were just doing ferrying, Women's Air Force Ferry Service. Then there were combined and they were WASPs also. The WACs were just the Women's Army Corps, and they did, of course, they were not Air Force.

Interviewer: And they had WAV's, women that were in the Navy?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Yes, that was in the Navy, and SPARS that were in the Marines.

Interviewer: So, there were whole groups of women.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: But I think, as far as I know, the nurses were the only ones that went overseas.

Interviewer: Yeah, right.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Well, no, some of the WACs did too on administrative things, like secretaries are doing paper work. I believe there were some of the WACs that were allowed to go overseas.

Interviewer: Well, tell us about some of your experiences off duty. Would you go into the town and, uh, you were, you were wearing uniforms, obviously.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Mm hmm. We had people thinking we were stewardesses and
(laughter)

Interviewer: Were there any fraternization with the enlisted men or officers.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: No fraternization with the enlisted men, but with the officers, yes. There were some pretty cute ones there, too.

Interviewer: Cute officers?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Of course.

Interviewer: (Laughter)

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: We had time for social life, too. We would go, of course, they always had everything going on at the officer's club. We would go in to El Paso for and dinners or to Juarez. We would go over to Juarez and get a little gas for our cars. As you know, it was all gas rationing then. We could put a little bit of 100-octane in the tank and then go over to Juarez and fill it with whatever they had, probably kerosene, I don't know what.

Interviewer: (Laughter). You get it by the can and bring it back?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: No, they had it in a can, but they would fill it up for us over there. You just, you had to go across the border.

Interviewer: So, you'd drive over.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Drive over, uh huh.

Interviewer: Well then, on some of your R&Rs, you could take a B-25 and fill it up with some friends, and take off somewhere?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Yeah, like New Orleans or Los Angeles or someplace.

Interviewer: (Laughter) Well, that sounds like a pretty good duty.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Yeah, that wasn't too bad, wasn't too bad a duty at all.

Interviewer: And so, you're in this Fort Bliss situation the entire time of the war?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Yes, uh huh.

Interviewer: Through the whole war, then?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: After we got out, finished our training, then some of the girls in my class were sent to the ferry command and did ferry planes. But our group that went to B-25 school ended up in the tow target squadron, which we liked because we got to fly lots of different kinds of airplanes and different kind of missions and we flew a lot. We worked hard. It was not an easy job.

Interviewer: When they were shooting at those targets, did you ever have any real close calls of a bullet coming near your plane?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Well, one night, we were towing targets at night. They were supposed to, the boys at Fort Bliss were supposed to get the target into the search light and then shoot at the target. Well, they got the plane into the search lights, and we started having flack burst right in front of the plane, and we had to do a little evasive action on that. We called the ground control at Fort Bliss and told them that we were leaving out of the pattern and going back to base, and if their boys couldn't shoot any better than that, we weren't going to fly any more for them that night, anyway.

Interviewer: How big were the crews on those B-25s when you were towing targets?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: It was just two of us -- pilot and copilot -- and a crew chief that would be manning targets.

Interviewer: There would be three of you there. You'd let the target go, you would go up with the target on the plane.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: No, no. Yes on the target, and then it would be rolled out on a line about 2,500 feet. If the target was not shot down or they didn't break the big line that it was on, then when we finished the mission, it would be rolled back into the plane.

Interviewer: All right, let's talk about the ferrying assignment. I imagine that's delivering planes from where they were manufactured out to the bases?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Yes, the girls would deliver, they would go to the Republic Aviation, pick up P-47s and take them. Sometimes they would be taken on ships overseas to England. So they would take them to the different bases, mostly for them to be transported overseas. They would take them up to as far as Alaska, up in there for Army transfer, and out to

the Pacific. Some of the girls flew P-69s up to Alaska, and the Russia women came over from Russia and picked them up and flew them back, flew them over there.

Interviewer: Flew them to Russia, huh? Today we have, all the skies are all controlled by air traffic controllers. Tell us about what kind of control they had in those days.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Well, we had air traffic controllers then, but it worked a little bit different. Now, you talked to everybody, but then, it was on a system of beams. The A beam and the N beam, and you had to listen and you did it by, so you knew when you got over the control, like if it was Phoenix control, or Reno radio or Elko, Nevada, wherever you were. Then you got right over the top of it, then it was a straight beam. But otherwise, it was -- the A was the Morse code A, and the N was the Morse code N, and you know which way they were supposed to go. If you were flying instruments, you had to stay on the beam so you would know where you were.

Interviewer: So you didn't have a controller there telling you what elevation to fly?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Yes, they told you that, but they would tell you, but you still would have to -- they would tell you what elevation to fly -- but you still would have to be on the beam to be where they could tell you.

Interviewer: I see. Well, so, where were you when they heard that Germany had surrendered?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Well, we got out in December of '44, we were deactivated. I had moved to Phoenix then and I was working at a radio station, KTAR in Phoenix, and that was when I heard that.

Interviewer: So, they deactivated the whole group in December of '44?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: --'44, before the war was over.

Interviewer: That was because that was when they were supposed to vote for us to be militarized in December, and that was when Congress voted against us. Jackie said, "Okay, if you're not going to keep your promise on that, then, then I am deactivating the girls."

Interviewer: And she deactivated the group because they wouldn't give them military status?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Basically right.

Interviewer: And then, it took how many years

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Till 1977.

Interviewer: And in 1977, tell us what happened.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Barry Goldwater put a bill through Congress and a lot of the girls worked on getting all this done, too, because we have an organization that has been meeting every two years ever since we got out. There had to be a bill put through congress to give us veteran's status, so Barry Goldwater and Bruce Arnold, General Arnold's son, got the bill together and got it through, trying to put it through Congress. It had to go into committee, and representative Wright, who was from Texas, I believe, told Barry Goldwater that we didn't do anything more than any Red Cross people, and he wasn't about to ever take that bill out of committee. So, Barry Goldwater had been working for a long time, our records and everything, because we'd proved what we did. So Barry told him, "Okay, then I'm going to attach that bill to every bill that goes through Congress until it goes through." So the next one, this was when Jimmy Carter was President. The next bill that came through was to increase the benefits for the

Vietnam veterans, and Barry attached our bill on to it. Of course, that went through, and that's how we finally got our veteran's status, but we had a pretty long fight about doing it.

Interviewer: Tell us about, there were some of your group that lost their lives. How many were?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: There were 38 women that lost their lives.

Interviewer: During various exercises?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: We had some accidents in training, some of the girls were ferrying planes on accidents. We had one accident at Biggs Field. One of the girls that came there late had just gotten out of training and she was sent directly to Biggs Field. She really didn't have enough training to fly the bigger planes, she hadn't had the training that we had, but she wanted to check out on one of the Navy A-24s. The way that plane is set up, it had dive flaps because it was a Navy dive bomber, and the throttle was on this side, and you flew it with stick. Then, on this side, you had a lever for dive flaps and for landing gear. The dive flaps were supposed to be wired where you couldn't move them. And whether they weren't wired on her plane, I don't know, but when she tried to take off trying to check-out on that plane, and she took off and reached for the gear, she hit the dive flaps instead and went in. So that was one accident, one of our girls was lost on a ferry off of Long Beach. She was flying a P-51s, one girl in my class, as a matter of fact. They never have found that plane. There were just several different accidents, but usually one of us would go home, would take the body home and a big part of the expenses were met by Jackie Cochran herself because the government did not pay any expenses of the girls that got killed at all. The parents could not put a gold star in their window. Usually we would take up a collection, too, for the family.

Interviewer: That's interesting. You know, these are little known facts to even people that study the war. They don't understand this.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: That's true.

Interviewer: Elizabeth, have you got any questions?

Elizabeth: Kicking down a whole bunch of ones that I had. I wanted to know, you know, they are in Amarillo, Texas. What possessed you to say, "Gee, I'd like to fly?"

Interviewer: Well, I had been interested in flying, uh, for a long time. When I was 10 years old, during that time, this was before everybody's time here, the World War II pilots, the old barnstormers, would come through, especially in Texas towns where the fields were flat, and they could land there. Then they would buzz the town first and everyone would go out and see them and they would take people for rides, that's how they made their living. So my dad took me out to see the plane when I was 10 years old, and so I wanted to go for a ride in the airplane. I think it cost \$2.00, or something like that, so he let me go for a ride in the airplane. So that really was, I guess I must have gotten the bug then. Then when I was a senior in college, they had the civilian pilot training program. The government started that in, I believe it was '40, maybe '39 or '40, at the different universities and colleges all over the country, because to start training pilots, we had the CPT program in our college, but they would only take one girl. They would take 10 boys and one girl. Or 10 people and one girl, so the instructor there at West Texas University, where I was going, had a daughter, so she got the girl's spot. So I didn't get to take CPT training. After I graduated, then when I was working in Amarillo and I got together with several people and we bought a Taylorcraft. There were 10 of us that put in \$150 a piece and

bought a Taylorcraft so we could all take lessons out of English Field in Amarillo. So, that was how I got interested in flying to begin with.

Interviewer: That's interesting. You had no fear getting into that plane when you were 10 years old?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: No, heavens no.

Interviewer: Not at all, huh.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Probably should have.

Interviewer: (Laughter). That's pretty interesting. Any other questions? Natalie or Sally?

Elizabeth: I have one more and then Sally has one. Did you want, did any of the women want to go overseas and fight?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Oh, we would have, I'm sure if they had wanted us to. As far as we -- we were happy with what we were doing there. And we felt like we were releasing the men to go to combat, so we didn't, and we would have followed orders, I'm quite sure it would have been fine.

Interviewer: Was the pay that you received the same as an enlisted WAC, or was it more in line with the officers?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: I have no idea what the WACs got. When we were in training, we got \$150 a month. After we graduated, we got \$250 a month, but we had to pay for part of our BOQ and food. We didn't get in any in-flight pay, and of course the officers, the Air Force

officers who were doing the same thing we were doing, got flight pay and I don't know how much they got. But it wasn't a lot more than what we got.

Interviewer: Okay, any.

Crew: I have two questions, actually.

Interviewer: And look at me when you answer.

Crew: I will ask and then you can just look at Rick as though he asked you. When Cochran was asking you those tough initial questions to get in, do you remember what those questions were? Did you have to be, obviously you probably had to be not married, no children, work ethic. Do remember the things she asked you?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: No, there were some girls that were married and had small children that were accepted. One thing that she was interested in was the fact that I already had my education, that I already had my college degree because I got my degree when I was 19 and had been out of college for a couple years. She was impressed, I think, with the fact that I wanted to fly and I made some sacrifices on my own to fly because that's what she had done in her life. If you haven't read her life, you should get her book and read it. She was also very interested in our work ethics and of course you had to be physically -- we had to have a physical, and the physical was, you had to be in *perfect* health. She was interested in why we wanted to do this, and I think I imagine our answer, whatever we answered made a great deal of difference. If somebody told Jackie that, "Oh, they thought it would be so glamorous," she probably wouldn't have accepted them because we did not look particularly glamorous in our size-44 "zoot suits" at Sweetwater with our hair tied up and everything. And it was hard work. It wasn't a glamour job. If you didn't know what you were doing, you were putting your life on the line.

Interviewer: Mm hmm.

Unknown Person: So what were those sacrifices you made to do this?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: After we bought our airplane, I went to the bank and borrowed \$150.00, and I was not making very much many at the time. I was making, I think, \$15.00 a week at that time. I had a roommate and we were renting a room for \$8, and that included our dinner. We could get breakfast at Walgreens for 10 cents and then we would go to one of these places in Amarillo that served family style and we could get lunch for 50 cents. So, we had it all figured out that we could save many out of that \$15.00 a week. Many times, I would have to skip lunch many times to save up enough many to pay for my flying lessons, and to pay back the bank for borrowing \$150.00. I'm sure I never would have gotten that from the bank if it hadn't been for my Dad, who was a very good friend of the bank president, and he probably told him that it was okay. So, there were many of us that skipped meals to pay for flying lessons.

Interviewer: And \$150.00 in 1941 or '42 was--

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: A lot of money.

Interviewer: --like, yeah, \$15,000 today or something.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: That's right.

Interviewer: That's amazing -- a group of you women got together and bought your training airplane.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Well, it was men and women, too, in Amarillo.

Interviewer: That did that.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Uh huh.

Interviewer: That's interesting.

Unknown Person: Nell, can you describe what it feels like to be flying and why you enjoyed it so much? Can you describe to people who have no idea what it's like to be in the cockpit to fly? The power of that or what.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Well, especially if you were in, in a single engine plane all by yourself, you've got the power and you're up there just above everything else and it's just beautiful. I remember my first solo night flight in training. To go up at night, you would be up there all by yourself in the atmosphere with the stars and the moon is just something that is very difficult to explain. It's really great.

Elizabeth: Is there a difference then when you got into a B-26? I mean, now you were in something--

Interviewer: B-25.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: I mean, it's the same deal except you have a copilot. You always have a copilot in the B-25 and the B-26. Still, it's just a wonderful experience. Of course, all of us that were together a lot interesting that time have stayed friends. It was quite a bonding experience for us, especially the ones of us that flew together. A lot of us flew together a lot in the twin engine planes where we had pilot and copilot.

Interviewer: So when you mustered out in 1944, December--

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Mm hmm.

Interviewer: --what was the total number of the women that were in the group then?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Well, there had been some that had resigned because since we were Civil service, if they wanted to resign, they could. Out of the whole group, out of the 1,074 that graduated, I suppose there was still at least, you know, 950 or so. There were probably still close to 1,000 deactivated.

Interviewer: And you still get together today and how many are in that today?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: There's still about 300 living.

Interviewer: 300 living today.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: In as good as health as I am, I'm very fortunate to be of good health, you know, some of them come in to our reunions in wheelchairs and things. But still, I just talked to one of my classmates last week and she had just celebrated her 90th birthday by taking all of her kids and grandkids on cruise.

Interviewer: Amazing. Well, Mother told me never to ask a woman what her age is, but I'm going to ask you. How old are you?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: I'm 86.

Interviewer: 86. Well, we appreciate your service to our country.

Crew: A couple more questions here.

Interviewer: We've got some more questions.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Okay.

Unknown Person: Well, I was just wondering what she thought about the whole war effort.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: I didn't hear that.

Interviewer: Tell us your feelings about World War II in general. If you were to talk to future generations about the war, what is your feeling about it?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: About World War II, you're talking about?

Interviewer: Right.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Well, I feel that in World War II, we were fighting for -- really fighting for freedom because I don't think how people realized how unprepared we were. I think the Air Force had, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, I think there was about less than a thousand pilots in the Air Force and about that many airplanes. Our country came together and really produced and went 24/7 for a long time and everybody sacrificed. There was gas rationing, there was sugar rationing, there was tire rationing, but everybody just stepped up to the plate and did it. I don't think a lot of people realize that there were German submarines on our east coast and Japanese submarines on our west coast, and some of them landed. We were absolutely not prepared for any of this, but everybody came together and did a good job and some people -- it was a horrible experience. I mean, people, a lot of the guys went through an awful lot of hell on both sides of the world. It was pretty bad. That's what some of us say, you know, when we talk it young people, that because -- another girl that is in Sedona with me, we talked several times to the ROTC at NAU, Northern Arizona University, that they just, you know, didn't realize what was going on at that time. We feel like even though we did a lot of pioneer work for the girls that are flying in the military today, that we still didn't do anything compared to what the men did overseas in the South Pacific and D-Day and all of those. It was

really a bad scene, but it had to be done. I had the privilege in March of attending the international conference of women in aviation in San Diego. About 3,300 registrants there, mostly women, all tied into aviation in some way or another -- Marines, Navy, Air Force, civilian, airline pilots. It was really great to meet all of the younger people there and I had the privilege of having dinner with Major Nicole Malachowski, who was the first woman that flew with the Thunderbirds. She just put in her two years with the Thunderbirds. Absolutely gorgeous gal. You would think she was a model, and just to visit with all the younger gals that are flying today, it's really -- and they say that we paved the way for them.

Interviewer: The Thunderbirds is a group similar to the Blue Angels.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Yeah.

Interviewer: They do exhibitions.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: The Blue Angels are the Navy, I believe, and the Thunderbirds are the Air Force.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Mm hmm.

Interviewer: Do you fly, did you ever fly after you--

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: I flew for a little while, ferrying surplus airplanes, but not for very long. I am a member of the Ninety-Nines, which is the International Women of Aviation, and I fly with other people, but I haven't been current with my license for a long time. I had flown an awful lot and was ready to do something else.

Interviewer: That's interesting, yes, any other

Unknown Person: Where there a few WASPS that flew professionally after the war?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: The airlines -- nobody would even talk to us about flying. The airlines said, "No." They wouldn't even talk to us about flying. There were some, there were a few girls that flew on their own and instructed, and there were very few that were corporate pilots. We have one girl in our group, Margaret Ringenberg, who is still flying. She has over 40,000 hours in the air. She was in Tom Brokaw's book, "The Greatest Generation." He went out to Fort Wayne to interview her and she took him up for a ride and I think gave him a thrill or two, purposefully.

Interviewer: (Laughter).

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Anyway, she has continued flying and has instructed. She was an instructor and she has kids and grandkids and some of them are flying.

Interviewer: I imagine, a lot of our young women who are today, who are flying are probably grandchildren of some of that group?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: That's true, I know of several instances of their daughters are airline pilots. Mm hmm.

Crew: Wasn't there a WASP you flew with that did a record?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Yes, I flew with Carol Bayley Bosca, who was lost last September. Carol kept flying after the war with air shows and her dad bought her a Pitts Special. I don't know if you know what the Pitts Special is, but it's a very special airplane that Curtis Pitts built for acrobatics. Carol had the second plane that Curtis Pitts built, and she flew in air shows and

she was acrobatic champion in 1951. She and I were stationed together the whole time. I flew with her a lot at Biggs Field. She was with me at Biggs Field, and we did a lot of flying together in the B-25. Carol also made an altitude record in a Piper Cub of 30,000 feet that stood for many, many years. I think somebody just broke it about two or three years ago.

Interviewer: Hmm.

Crew: I wonder what it was like, you mentioned, knowing that you were paving the way and being pioneers and also having all of this resistance, you know, not being seen as, you know, not getting the same pay and all of that. I just wonder if you kind of take us back and what that was like.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: We didn't really think anything about it, to tell you the truth. We knew what we were getting paid and we were happy about it and we were just happy to be flying those airplanes. We different even know, it was no big deal. We didn't even know what the boys were getting paid. We knew they were getting flight pay, but we weren't. So, we just thought we had a good opportunity to fly the planes because we were the first women to fly military airplanes in the United States. But, but we had no, we were not thinking at that time we were being pioneers or anything else. We were just having a good time flying.

Interviewer: In those days, they were really stepping out of the box of what was normal to do what they did.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: That's true.

Interviewer: And I'm sure they thought it was a real privilege to--

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Absolutely.

Interviewer: --to be where you were, right.

Unknown Person: It sounds like it wouldn't happen without this Cochran woman, is that right?

Was it all because of her?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: I didn't quite understand the question.

Interviewer: She said if it was not for this Cochran lady, that none of this would have happened.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: That's right, if it hadn't been for Jackie Cochran. She, of course, was one of the most famous aviators that we've had. She was in Amelia Earhart's time. She was actually a better pilot than Amelia Earhart, I think. Anyway, they were friends, and probably kind of competitors, as a matter of fact. Jackie kept flying all the time, and she flew, clear up she flew jets when they were -- she was a good friend of Chuck Yeager's, and when they were breaking the sound barrier out at Edward's Air Force Base, Jackie was right in the doing that, too. She was the first woman to break the sound barrier.

Interviewer: She was a test pilot then along with Yeager?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: She was not necessarily a test pilot. She was just -- she retired as a full colonel in the Air Force. She just wanted to, she got permission to do it. Jackie got permission to do pretty much whatever she wanted to.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: But if it hadn't been for her, we wouldn't have had the training at all.

Elizabeth: Did you get to know these Tuskegee Airmen at all?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Uh, yes, we did. As a matter of fact, when we went to Mather Field, the commanding officer -- you talk about us having any problems -- the commanding officer at Mather field would not allow the Tuskegee airman -- now, they were already Air Corps officers -- he would not allow them to eat in the officer's mess and he would not allow them in the officer's club. So the commanding officer that we had for us, the head of our training at Mather Field, we talked to him, we told him we thought that was pretty bad because they were treating us pretty good, even though they weren't too happy to have us, we still had our own BOQ on base. So Captain Wimberly went and talked to the CO about it, so he finally agreed that they could eat in the officer's mess but they had to just stay down at one end of the, they had to eat at one end of the officer's mess. So all the women pilots went down and ate with the Tuskegees. That didn't endear us to any of the boys from Alabama that were there, I'll tell you.

Interviewer: Well that's an interesting story right there.

Elizabeth: It is, isn't it? I want to know more.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: A lot of them had their wives with them. The Tuskegees weren't -- none of them were from the South in the first place. Most of them already had their college degrees, which was unusual at that time before they were sent to the South to be trained at Tuskegee, Alabama. They were just great, great guys. So about five years ago, when I was at Oshkosh, because a couple of us, Carol Bailey that I mentioned a minute ago, and some of the others for years have been going to Oshkosh to the big air show there every year. There were two African American men who came into our tent, we always had a tent, had our exhibit in the Air Force building. And they said, "Are there any girls here who were at Mather Field during the war?" There were *three* of us there, so we got together with them and had, they were both

retired. One of them retired as a full colonel from the Air Force, another was retired as a bank president out of Chicago. So we all tried to climb up in a B-25 again, which was no easy task at that time. Then Charles McGee, he is Tuskegee, he is pretty well known all over and he is there all the time, too. We have been very good friends with him.

Interviewer: Do we want to maybe go over that incident, have her tell it again?

Elizabeth: Which incident?

Interviewer: About the Tuskegee air guys sitting down there by themselves and so these women pilots.

Elizabeth: What did they think about sitting down at the other end?

Interviewer: You went and joined them, is that the way it was?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Yes.

Interviewer: It's kind of interesting because, you know, they're stepping out of the box in society by just flying airplanes, and then they make that effort over there, I think that.

Elizabeth: Yeah, have her tell it again.

Interviewer: Try to just, uh, I want interject anything, but tell that story again the best you can.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Well, when we were sent to Mather Field for our B-25 training, there were 20 women sent for transition training in the B-25 and 20 of the Tuskegee Airmen. All of us just graduating and getting our wings. The commanding officer at Mather Field was not too happy to have either one of us. But at least the WASPS, we had our own bachelor officer quarters, our BOQ, with each private rooms right there on the base. I'm not sure where he put

the, where the Tuskegees were living. Some of them were living on-base, some of them were living off-base because their wives were with them. But the commanding officer would not allow them to eat in the officer's mess, and would not allow them in the officer's club. We didn't think that was quite fair. So we spoke to our commanding officer that was in charge of the WASP training there, and expressed our feelings about it. So he did talk to the commanding officer of the base and he finally said he would allow them to eat in the officer's mess, but they would have to and also come in the officer's club, but at the officer's mess, they would have to sit at one end by themselves. So, that's what they did. So when we saw that they did that, then we all went down and joined them and sat there with them. The boys from Alabama, they didn't they didn't care for that too much. They thought we were -- well, that was just a little much for them to handle, I think.

Interviewer: And that was, what year was that?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: That was 1943.

Interviewer: Interesting story.

Unknown Person: Just if we have another minute, you said you had time to be social and that you would hang out with the officers?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Mm hmm?

Unknown Person: Was there courting going on?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Now you're getting personal.

Interviewer: (Laughter) When she said some of those guys were cute--

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Yes, we dated.

Unknown Person: So, ask her the question and talk to her a little more about it. Open her up a little bit.

Interviewer: So, are there any stories you'd like to tell us about social life with the officers at the base?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Well, some of the girls dated, some of them didn't, and most of our dating would be, the affairs at the officer's club or going in to El Paso for dinner and then we flew with a lot of the guys there, too. I don't know of any -- let me see, is there anybody that nobody got married to anybody that we were dating at that time.

Elizabeth: Can she describe her "zoot suit?" It's not glamorous, I want to know exactly how unglamorous it was.

Interviewer: Uh, she referred to it as a "zoot suit," but, uh a zoot suit was something different.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: That was something different.

Interviewer: from what you called your outfit.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: We called it that--

Crew: I have to room to the rest room, excuse me. I will shut this door, it is noisy.

Interviewer: Okay, go ahead.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: It was coveralls. It was just big coveralls like the guys, they were men's coveralls, and they were mostly size 44 for all of us. They had just the old Army

coveralls, green Army overalls that they wore. They had belts sewed into them, so we would take the belts and hike them up to the waist and tie them in front and of course they were roll up the sleeves and roll up the pants and that's what we flew in all the time at Sweetwater.

Interviewer: And you called them “zoot suits?”

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Uh huh. Later on, after we did, the later classes got their own. Cochran saw to it they got their own flight suits. But, in the early classes, we didn't have our own flight suits.

Elizabeth: Did you go to a high enough altitude that you got cold?

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Well, yes, but we had the big leather jackets, and if we were going in the B-25s, when we were going up over 20,000 feet where we needed oxygen and everything, we had the fleece-lined jackets and the boots, but that was after we got out. I was training. I went down there in May at Sweetwater, so I was there mostly in the summer.

Interviewer: Well, uh, that's all interesting information. Again, thank you so much for coming.

Mrs. Nell Stevenson-Bright: Well, boy, it's been a pleasure.

Interviewer: Really appreciate you, uh, giving us an insight in to World War II that a lot of us haven't heard of.

End of recording.