

REID CHAPMAN: This is Reid Chapman and Debi Miles. Today is March the 7th 2003 and we are interviewing June Lamb at 16 Carrier Street in Asheville, NC.

JUNE LAMB: Yes, and the full name is Martha June.

REID: Thank you. Very good.

DEBORAH MILES: Well let's talk a little bit about the day your mother drove you to sign up--

JUNE: To Atlanta. Yes this was, it must have been January because I signed up, I could only sign up after I was 20. Maybe it was February of 45. And mother drove me to Atlanta where I was able to enlist with the WAVES. And I chose the WAVES partly because, again, mother had an older brother who was in the Navy in World War I in China. And so she had an affinity for the navy. Also, I knew that navy personnel were not being sent overseas. And it was, well it was just a choice. Mostly of familiarity. So then I was sent, I went up to New York by train from Asheville to attend basic training, which was at Hunter College. I guess that's in mid Manhattan. I remember that experience quite well. Of finding my way from Grand Central Station out to Hunter College. I remember asking a gentleman on the train was I on the right train and how many more stops. And he kindly told me, but he said, "Young lady, please don't ask other strangers how to get around in New York. But anyway I succeeded without any difficulty. It was an unbelievable experience because we were housed in apartment buildings which they had taken over next to the campus of Hunter College. So we were several girls in one apartment that had been stripped down so it could have bunk beds, etc. Then we had a community dining hall where we would assemble. That was an interesting experience, and I'll just say because having grown up here in Asheville and

not being in close association with /black people I found myself walking in and I was going to be sitting there and I said well June sit down, what's the problem. So it was I thoroughly enjoyed the...

DEBI: Oh, because of Jim Crow. You were used to Asheville--

JUNE: Well, of course. So that was my first experience. And then as we were in basic training we were learning to parade, so we were there. Our parade ground was near the reservoir of whatever district that is. But I just remember an open area of asphalt. There were some ladies from Texas who ended up being our squad leaders. And some of the Northern people, particularly the New Yorkers didn't like those Southerners. So I had a nice experience all the way around. And then I chose of course to be in medical. And then I went to Bethesda Medical where they, I think it was... That's where the national health institute is. So that's where we were getting our hospital core training. I just remember the sweltering heat of Washington. Then I was assigned to...essentially that's where we had hospital core training. Then I was given a choice, not a choice, they were giving assignments and by that time of course the European conflict had ended in May of that year. We knew that the thing in the Pacific was winding down. They were send people to the base nearest their home. Well, that meant I was going to be sent to Camp Lejuene. I thought "Oh, I don't want to go to Camp Lejuene," so I told a little white lie to say that I was going to visit my sister and her husband who were then stationed out in Texas. So I got as far as Oklahoma.

DEBI: You got another trip out of it.

JUNE: I got another trip out of it. So I remember mother and dad putting me on a train. My getting as far as Memphis and that was on V-J Day—at least—no, that was not V-J Day—yeah, that's what they call it, V-J Day, when the atomic bomb first fell. August--

DEBI: August 6, I believe... 1945.

JUNE: Right. We had a 12 hour layover there and got a connection out to Norman, Oklahoma. Norman, Oklahoma was a naval air station that had been converted into a medical facility to do the proforma discharge for all the people coming back from the Islands. Prisoners of war, etc. And all the California hospitals were jam-packed. And so that is why I was going to Oklahoma. So when I go on the train and it was overnight, obviously. And I remember pulling up the shade and looking out on the terrain and I saw these lights going up and I thought, "I didn't know they had any hills in Oklahoma."

Because here in Asheville you see lights on Beaucatcher Mountain. It turns out those were lights on the oil wells. Well, anyway, it was an interesting experience. So I indicated that I had experience in x-ray work so I didn't get assigned to ward duty. So I was in the x-ray department. That's when I discovered that Dr. Leroy Santi of St. Louis University had written the first textbook about radiologic technology. So then I determined that that's where I'd finish my degree when I got out. After 18 months I was discharged and I did go to University of St. Louis, which is a Jesuit school, primarily just for boys prior to that. And at the end of the war they had decided to admit women students. And we were in a sort of old large home but there was no campus.

DEBI: Let me ask you this June when you were—you were in for almost 18 months in Oklahoma. And did you see returning POWs?

JUNE: Oh yes.

DEBI: Did you have interaction with them?

JUNE: Well, only cursory. There was one friend of mine who was from California and she was in occupational therapy and we were invited by a couple of guys to go to Oklahoma City on an outing...

DEBI: This was not a professional outing...

JUNE: Not a professional outing and this guy was from Lubbock Texas. I have forgotten his name, but he was sure that I was the one that he wanted to hook up with. And I blurted out something like "well I don't know I may become a missionary." I had never thought about it before, but I thought but that...evidently I was wanting to slow down any idea of my settling down and going to Texas.

DEBI: What an interesting time for young people.

JUNE: Terribly interesting that's when all the mixtures from the north and the south and the east and the west and everything happened after that.

DEBI: It changed American history.

JUNE: It certainly did.

DEBI: There's so much about these intervening years that must be fascinating but for the sake of talking about WWII it sounds like your time as a veteran was at the end of the war.

JUNE: Well, I'll connect it with how I got to Japan because when I graduated from St. Louis University in '48 I came back to Asheville at what was the New Norburn hospital in what is now memorial mission complex but this was when there was still buildings left over from the Asheville Normal School and it was a very pastoral campus. And so I was working there as an x-ray technician with Dr. McGray and the... I was always

thinking...and I was still living at home, living with my parents. This is the house I grew up in. Then I was always thing well I maybe I'll go to California and do one more thing that's a little more interesting. And did research. Whereupon I received a letter from someone at Duke asking if I was interested in going to Japan with the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission because the National Research Council in Washington had written to Duke for suggestions of personnel and they did not have a curriculum. So they had written to St. Louis U, which was Sister Alco Anger, and she simple said that June Lamb might be interested. That's how I was contacted, out of the blue. In the spring of '50 I think it was in September that I was being processed to go to Japan to join with the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission.

DEBI: And when were they established?

JUNE: I think they were established in '48.

DEBI: That was still three years after the bombing.

JUNE: Oh yes. It could have been a little earlier than that. It could have been '47. It took a little while for them to get organized and what they were essentially the way I saw it to verify with the population what they had already researched in laboratories to determine the effects of the radiation fallout.

DEBI: So what did you think when you got accepted.

JUNE: I was ecstatic.

DEBI: Another adventure.

JUNE: Another adventure. Of course everyone would say "the war is on, the war is on." I said well I'll be safe if they'll give me a passport and say I can go, I'll go. So that was a tremendous experience a variety. I went by Northwest airline. There were only a few

passengers. And we went via Chicago and Seattle and put down in Anchorage and got to Tokyo. It was a rainy day and I just remember all the umbrellas and all the...I fell in with a Chinese fellow who obviously spoke English, who was working with the group. He's the one who met me at the airport. Here he is driving on the wrong side of the street, as far as I was concerned, explaining to me about Japanese money and this and that and the other. And here we were zigzagging through this...that was my first introduction. Oh and we were billeted...there were other Americans there for different reasons and we were billeted in one of those places in mid Tokyo that had been I guess a company building but they had made it into dormitory-like things for American ladies traveling through. Then at the Imperial hotel. I remember being there and then I was only in Tokyo for a couple of days and then I was put on a train to go down to Hiroshima. That was an incredible experience and especially in the day coach. Everybody...the men...their belts, it looked to me like they had wrapped them around about twice, at least. They were so frail. Had lost so much weigh and whatever. They was absolutely no confrontation, everybody was gentle and kind...

DEBI: Why do you think the men were frail?

JUNE: Well it was after the war. They were hungry. And I remember seeing on the side of the railroad tracks where they had planted vegetables. So they were this was in '50 so they were still very much in reconstruction. I remember buying what they called their obinto box and having the chopsticks. It was the first time I had ever seen anyone do that. I was thinking no wonder they were so skinny having to eat with those sticks. But I saw how you can pick up a clump of rice and put it in one cheek and another in the other a little like a chipmunk and you could enjoy your food. That was how I experienced

going to Hiroshima to begin with. And I was there for several months before I went down to Nagasaki, which was a smaller unit.

DEBI: So would you say that in Hiroshima that the impact of the nuclear bomb there was still evident.

JUNE: It was evident in terms of the destruction. And then of course, obviously, the people who had received either flash burns from the explosion or fire burns because the city was so devastated from the fires that broke out. And I do remember going into a department store and one time maybe I got an elbow from one man but the total impression was that they welcomed our being there. I kept saying to myself that that would not have happened if they had taken over our country. So then I began to think, well, how is it that they're so different? How is it that they're so accepting? Number one is that their religious background is, tends to be what I call more fatalistic "whatever will be, will be." But also there's a constant phrase "shagata ganain?" "There's nothing you can do about it," which is a little different than "Well, we can make a difference." And so the acceptance, the fatalistic acceptance of this disaster, that restrained them. But the other thing was that they were more than glad to be rid of their military industrial complex. That's where I have always found a very sympathetic relationship, because I am totally against the military industrial complex that dominates our culture. And I remember coming home sometime when I was with the mission, the Presbyterian mission in the '60s and everybody said, "well what about communism in Japan?" and I said, "Don't worry about it. Worry about materialism. Because it's eating us up and it will will eat them up and I did speak the truth.

DEBI: So you went from Hiroshima to--

JUNE: Nagasaki. I spent a good deal of my time there, so I was able--

DEBI: When did you get to Nagasaki?

JUNE: I would have to look back carefully, but it must have been in '51. Yes I got there in the fall of '50 and some time in the middle of '51 I got ...

DEBI: And what were your chief responsibilities in Nagasaki?

JUNE: As a x-ray technician. And I remember going into the department. They had a big Quonset hut kind of hospital facility on top of the hill. I remember going into the x-ray department and being introduced to all of the Japanese technicians. And everybody's name ended up with san and I thought, "are they all members of the same family?" See, I had no introduction to Japanese language or culture. I was essentially one of the head technicians.

DEBI: Were people who had flash burns or fire burns or also the effects of radiation, they would come for x-rays?

JUNE: Well the program was that they were doing a geographical survey or demographic survey. In other words they had a fleet of cars, station wagons in those days, and they would have the epicenter and so many miles from the epicenter were people were living or now living so they would go out and I don't know the details of how they designated who they picked up. I know that they were simply brought in for routine examinations. The x-rays we took were for bone density and growth patterns--

DEBI: So they would just go out and look at people in the street?

JUNE: No, I'm sure they didn't just look at them in the street. I think there was some demographic way of--

DEBI: They had a database.

JUNE: They had a database. So that they chose to bring in samples from these several districts. I know this child who was mentioned in the documentary--

DEBI: Would you say a little something--

JUNE: So just...there was a documentary produced last fall of survivors of the atomic bomb in Nagasaki. I happened to appear in that as an x-ray technician, holding the hand of a then child who is now in her late 50s who was a survivor. In the documentary she speaks of her afraidness of having to go to these examinations and the uncertainties that all of them had about what was happening to them. So these were routine x-rays on yearly basis to see the rate of growth that might have been deterred or whatever. So that's where the x-ray part came in. Then they would do certain other, I'm sure, blood evaluations and so forth, like samples--

DEBI: So the U. S. government was trying to verify what they thought was the impact--

JUNE: Yes and I really seemed to me they were verifying with human beings what they already knew. And there are volumes written, I'm sure, about what the effects were. I'm too far past that to give you any official quotes, but I always simplify it by saying there was an increase in the rate of usual abnormalities. In other words, more micro-safalics, more tuberculosis and that could be attributed to health, general health. Of course, radiation cataracts and leukemias, and ...I think that I'm eager for some, may be through this project, someone can look at that documentary and see how they documented the determination of our government to suppress the information being developed or I mean being acquired, and/or certainly to suppress the obvious destruction that had taken place for six or seven years through the McCarthy era. We need exposure to how that was and of course I have been sternly strongly insistent that we get rid of nuclear weapons

DEBI: You have the eye-witness account...

JUNE: Well, I always said, they banned mustard gas after WWI. Why in the world can't we ban nuclear weapons? But it's obvious again, that again, the military industrial complex, it doesn't fit their menu.

REID: So June, when you were in Nagasaki and Hiroshima both, you were working with Japanese people as well as Americans?

JUNE: Well yes, as far as in the field, the employees. Yeah they were sort of, I don't know what the ratio was but there were several Westerners, not all from America. Some were from Australia. And there was this one lady that I became close friends with, Marie Gonzalez, who had grown up in Hong Kong. She was Chinese Portuguese. She had lived through the Japanese occupation there and for some reason had an opportunity to come as a nurse with our organization. We were predominantly from the US.

DEBI: This went on through 1952 when you returned to Asheville? No you went from there to...

JUNE: Well actually from '52, when I finished my two year contract with them I came back with the intention of, which I did go to University of NC for my first year in social work. So that was my yes I'll get mixed up on the number of years, but anyway there was one year...

DEBI: And did the commission finish their work at the end of the contract?

JUNE: Oh no they kept on going. I don't know the exact date but they finally transitioned out of doing that kind of thing and the facilities and whatever were taken over by the Japanese and they were doing more treatment then. The research part

finished and I think that was probably by the '60s, but I just can't put my mind to it to say exactly when.

DEBI: I think that gives a frame of the research, the organized phase, the research phase. I'm glad to hear there was some kind of treatment.

REID: I'm kind of interested in the social aspect when you were living in Japan during those years. It sounds like you were part of an international community, really there, and what that was like particularly after this time of being in the United States during a very patriotic period. What was it like being in the more international community, what was the feel--

JUNE: Well it was very refreshing. I loved it. and the ok the facilities for example in Nagasaki we were billeted in the home of some wealthy Japanese person that was taken over. Then we had a common dining room somewhere so it was there I was able to be friends with some Nisei, Japanese Americans, who came from the west coast and I believe some had experienced the internment camps. There were those from Australia, as I mentioned, so it was really a multicultural and good time and then in Hiroshima the time I was there, they had taken over a military officers' quarters, you know, several house in a neighborhood. That's where we were billeted. We were transported from that small community to Hiroshima, it was in a greyhound bus so we all pack up and get on the bus together and go to work together and come home together. And all along the inland sea.

DEBI: How far was your home from where you worked?

JUNE: Oh I'd say it took us about half an hour. Hiro, H-I-R-O, was the name of the little community. But then in Nagasaki we could walk to work because of our location.

DEBI: How far apart are Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

JUNE: Well they're quite far apart. I don't know the mileage, but if you think of a map of Japan with Hokkaido, the northern most and that's sort of like the equivalent up in Maine, then the thing bends a little bit so Washington is where Tokyo is or rather Tokyo is where Washington is. Then you drop on down till finally you get down to where Alabama is. And Nagasaki is more where Alabama is. Hiroshima is more, well Virginia, NC.

DEBI: That's a great description. Gives good reference points.

REID: How much did you interact with the Japanese people while you were there?

JUNE: Well the interaction was mostly with the...let's see, I'm trying to think. Like being a regular tourist...in Nagasaki they had a place where you could go for dancing so that ...we were not the only Americans there. There were occupation people there in the Sasabo, which was not far from Nagasaki. That's where we did most of our shopping in terms of going to the commissary. There was that kind of interaction, but in terms of becoming intimate friends or anything there wasn't that much opportunity. And then one or two of my friends in different places, we'd always go to some church. I would find, we'd try to find out even though we couldn't understand a word being said, but I remember going to some little house churches and even when to the ?Guragame? church which had been hit by the blast. That's a big catholic cathedral on top of a hill in Nagasaki. And so I went with my catholic friend Marie Gonzalez to worship services there. The Australians had responsibility for the occupation in the Hiroshima area, so there was a rather large contingency of Australian soldiers there and they a chaplain who was just excellent, so some of us would go to their worship services. And I just

remember the openness in other words I enjoyed the interaction with the Japanese as well as the others from different places.

REID: Kind of as a final question, I guess. What lesson would you really like to see the American people get from your experiences during this time, if you had to boil it down to one main lesson?

JUNE: I'm thinking of what I always said when I was even over there was that you cannot tell people to have a democracy. You can demonstrate a democracy. You can be a democracy and people will want to be one. Anymore than you cannot tell people to become a Christian unless they choose to be. It doesn't happen. To me that has been the weakness of the error of our various administrations when they have assumed that they can tell other people how to lead their lives. So mainly, it's first be democratic and my huge concern right now, as somebody said on television, "it's all broken," because we're acting so arrogantly, so unilaterally. I really tremble. I lived through the period of time in the '50s and '60s when we were called the ugly Americans just for this kind of thing that we know what is right. I think it all began with the Reagan administration and some how we're a city on the hill, we're special, we're somehow chosen by God. I think that we are going to lose it.

REID: Is there anything else that you would like to add to what we talked about.

JUNE: I think that the more oh yes I have often said that I was more comfortable in Japan, and I've heard other Westerners say this, that it's because everything doesn't have to be black and white, right or wrong, with me or against me. That's the most limited mentality that human beings can possess. Whereas in Japan, I found that they were able to listen. They could carry on a conversation without feeling intimidated or needing to

intimidate. And I remember that people would say, “Well, you can’t believe what the Japanese are saying.” “What’s wrong with...I mean, what’s your problem?” It’s this narrow-mindedness, black or white, right or wrong assumption that you’re perfect. That is our main problem, the degree to which I have found more enjoyment in finding people who can think in the gray areas, outside the box as they say. this is why we don’t get along with Europe a lot of times. Because we’re too simplistic.