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Ms. Mary Roach Oral History

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Oral History Interview

Student Interviewer's Name: Ryan Glantz
Interviewee Name: Mary Roach

Time and Location of Interview:

This interview was conducted in one session on the 24th of October and lasted approximately 31 minutes. It was conducted over the phone, and only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

About Mary Roach:

Mary Roach was born in Portland, Oregon in 1940 and his lived most of her life between Orlando and Harrison, TN. Her husband, the late Robert Roach, was drafted and served in the United States Air Force from 1960-1964. Robert was a lab technician who was stationed out of Langley Air Force Base in Virginia. This interview covered topics ranging from The Vietnam War to the Cuban Missile Crisis. The interview was conducted on October 24, 2015 over the phone from her home in Orlando, FL.

Interviewer: Ryan Glantz (RG)

Interviewee: Marry Roach (MR)

RG: Growing up during the aftermath of a World War, what do you remember about your life in the years following the war's end?

MR: I just remember vaguely the bits and pieces of how it affected us here on the homeland. You know, I know we had to ration out. That was how the government was able to aid, see we were still moving out from the effects of the Great Depression, and so having the War go on, uh, that just really boosted things over here. My mom and dad had to rations you know for gasoline and butter and sugar. You know, once you use up those tickets, or stamps or whatever they gave us, you were out of luck you know? Our family was growing bigger, and during World War two, it was hard to feed a family. So because we still had five other kids in our home, it was just hard during that time. But of course it was very patriotic. Women went to work in airplane factories and helping to manufacture things. Whereas before they were in the home.

RG: What was the hardest part of growing up during that time?

MR: I think just the, uh, just the fact that I was born during a massive thing like that war, I had to grow up in the shadow of it. Since our family was so big, it was a bit of a hard thing for my mother and father to manage sometimes.

RG: And did your mother ever work outside of the home during the war?

MR: No. She stayed at home.

RG: So was your father sent overseas?

MR: No. He didn't because, I guess, if you had so many children, then you didn't have go over there, see. I don't remember, uh, what the law was, but he kept ahead of whatever was going on. So he was able to stay here with us and the family. We needed him though. Things may not have ended up working all that well for us if he had been shipped off somewhere, you know, instead of staying to help with the family. I know my mother had a tough enough time keeping up with us kids, and not having my father there would have definitely done much more bad than good in the long run.

RG: And what did he do for work during that time?

MR: Well. . . He was a dairy farmer for a while, he used to milk cows and things like that. I think at one time he worked at a fire department, fighting fires and all that kind of stuff. Trying to think of what else he did do. He had different jobs like that in the different areas we moved to in Oregon. When we grew up, we moved to Idaho and I started the first grade there. He started working for the Union Pacific Railroad. So he worked on freight trains for a long time, then he became a conductor working on a passenger train. Then he went back to working on the freight trains.

RG: Moving on to the next part of your life, uh, could you tell me about your husband?

MR: Well, I met Bob in Pasadena while I was starting to work my way to becomin' a nurse. We went on a double date, well, maybe just more of hanging out, and he went off with my friend, and I went off with one of his friends and had a miserable time. Then Bob went back and asked his friend if he had liked me, and he said that I wasn't as interesting as I thought. Then Bob asked me on a date and, uh, things just started to grow from there. We got married a year and a half later, and then that is about when he was getting ready to get his number called to serve.

RG: Where was he stationed at this time?

MR: At Langley. We had just moved there after moving from Texas. He had been enlisted to serve in the Army, and he knew his number was going to get called. And, uh, I remember telling him that I wouldn't let him join the Army. I wasn't about to let him get sent over to the jungles in Vietnam. It was just awful what happened over there. So many innocent people getting killed, it was just awful! We would hear things on the news, and it just broke my heart to listen and see everything that was going on over there.

RG: So, how did he opt to serve?

MR: He had decided that he was going to join the Air Force. He didn't want to serve in the infantry, you know. He didn't want to be put in that kind of position.

RG: So what did he do while he served his time in the Air Force?

MR: He was a lab technician. Drawin' blood for all the guys over there. He even did the blood work and lab work on Gus Grissom, and Alan Shepherd, and all those guys from the Mercury missions. He would work with all those astronauts, making sure that they were all ready to go into space.

RG: Can you tell me your experience during the Cuban Missile Crisis?

MR: Well, that was one of the worst moments that I had to go through in my married life. Being separated from Bob even for such a short time without knowing why was horrifying, you know? We didn't hear from each other for about, maybe one or two weeks (pauses) yes, probably closer to two weeks, uh, because he was on total lockdown. He couldn't call me and tell me if he was okay, or if he had been sent anywhere else. And that was just one of the worst things that I had to go through you know?

RG: How did you first find out about the lockdown?

MR: I was working in the hospital nearby there, working as a nurse while he was on base at Langley, and I had just finished handing in some paperwork to the desk when I overheard something being said about the beginning of "World War III." And I didn't want to listen, but for some reason, I couldn't walk away, you know. When you hear something like that, you have to find out more. You can't just hear that and walk away from it and go on with your day as if nothing is the same. Of course in those days that was all we heard about, how Russia was going to start a war. Anyways, so I stayed and listened to the radio and a few more people started to come around too and, uh, try to understand what was going on. Apparently the Russians were playing chicken with some of our ships down off of Cuba.

RG: Did you know about the Bay of Pigs invasion that happened prior to this?

MR: No, I don't remember ever hearing about that until after the lockdown. I guess I didn't want to start worrying myself with knowing too much about what was going on over there. I just didn't want Bob to get shipped off, so I tried to stay away from exposing myself to, uh, all that news.

RG: Thinking back, do you wish you had spent more time paying attention to what was going on?

MR: Yes and no, I think. Yes it would have been good to know a little more before, that way, you know, when that stuff starting happenin' and the lockdown happened, I could have been a little more calm about what all was going on. On the other side, uh, I don't think knowing would have really made me feel any better. I would have been just as worried if I had known then all that was going on.

RG: So you are at the hospital, did you try and contact your husband then? Like, after hearing the radio?

MR: Not then, you see, because all of the phones were all busy at the hospital once the word started to spread about what was going on down in Cuba. We didn't have any cell phones, you know. No way to find out quick enough, you know, and I kept thinking about what would happen if we did go to war. I didn't want to think about that at all, you know? We had already been through so much, and I didn't want to go through any more. It was such a scary thing, you know? And I knew my husband might get shipped off if we did end up going to war, and I did not want that to happen.

RG: When did you realize that you had no way of contacting him?

MR: Well (pauses) I was leaving the hospital to go home, where we had a phone, and I figured I would try to call someone from there to find out what in the world was going on. See I didn't know what number to call to talk to Bob, because I would normally wait for him to call me. And I remember driving home and seeing a crowd gathered at the television store nearby. You know, 'cause they had all these televisions near the windows so people could see. I don't know, but they must have had the channels on some news station at least that is what I can guess. Let's see. . . When I finally got home, I rushed inside and called my mother and asked if she knew anything. She didn't answer, so I called my brother, and he picked up. He told me that there was some stand still out in the ocean. A game of chicken, like I said before. Then he told me that all the military bases had, uh, been locked down as ordered by the different branches of the military, I suppose.

RG: How long were you without a way of contacting your husband?

MR: Too long (chuckles slightly). Oh let's see, it must have only been a week or two, but it felt like forever. I had to keep working, and every day I went home to phone my brother and see if he had any more information as to what was actually going on. Sometimes he had some new stuff to tell me, but uh. . . most of the time he knew about as much as I did. That is how it was though, you know? It all happened so suddenly, and everyone wanted to know, but it was just hard to find anything out. All I knew was that my husband could have been shipped off to Cuba or Vietnam or something and I wouldn't have found out until God knows when. That frightened me the most. You know? Not knowing if he had been shipped off, or if he was still in the States.

RG: When the crisis was over, and the lockdown was lifted, did your husband, uh, ever say anything about what he found out while being under that lockdown?

MR: I don't remember a whole lot of what he said, I am sorry. I guess that was something that I must not have wanted to remember or think about. I do remember he mentioned how frantic things were. Just how, uh, the soldiers and officers were continually rushing everywhere, you know? He told me how the normal schedules everyone was on changed. He was just as scared though, you know? He didn't want to go and get shipped off anywhere. Most of them didn't know much anyways, But see, was ordered not to speak

about what happened over there, even if he says he didn't know much, so I never did hear much about what he saw on the base. I know that he was as scared as I was.

RG: Since you had a personal investment within the military, and considering how President John-, excuse me, I mean, President Kennedy handled the situation, how do you feel about his actions involving communism and this event?

MR: Well, I think Kennedy was a great president, and he could have done a lot more than he got a chance to do. That whole thing with the Russians was scary. I don't know exactly how close things got, but I know they must have been pretty close to going south. He handled things well and who knows what would have happened if it was Johnson instead of him.

RG: Do you think Kennedy did a better job of handling, uh, things like foreign affairs as opposed to Johnson?

MR: Oh definitely. You know, Johnson was from Texas, and he spoke out of two sides of his mouth. He was always more mean than Kennedy. See, Kennedy was much more articulate and, uh, much more clear with what he wanted to do. He was trying to bring down that Iron Curtain, and get things working with the Russians. See, Johnson was good at manipulating people, he was real good at getting his way and he was always kickin' ass whenever he could you know? (Chuckles slightly). We never did appreciate him as much as we did President Kennedy. I mean, uh, Kennedy was the educated one, graduating from Harvard. That is a very prestigious. He had a good head on his shoulders. It is just so said that he didn't get to finish out his term.

RG: Yeah, definitely. (Pauses) Okay, what about in the US, do you think Kennedy did more for this country on our own soil than Johnson did?

MR: Of course. Like I was sayin', Johnson just didn't know how to really, uh, just treat people. I think he was an embarrassment to America at times. See, even though Kennedy didn't serve as President as long as Johnson, he still knew what he was doing and was dedicated to this country.

RG: Looking a little further, um, to the Vietnam War, was your husband eventually sent over there to finish his service time?

MR: No. And thank God for that. See, he stayed in the Air Force until, uh '64, and that is when he was presented with an opportunity to extend his service time. See, at this point, we had two kids of our own, so he knew that going anywhere was going to be something he would regret. So that year, he was given an honorable discharge.

RG: So, did he ever look back and wish that he had gone over there?

MR: I think so. He would never have told me because he knew that I wouldn't have reacted so well to that. See, he was so patriotic, and he loved this country so much. He would have

gone if I hadn't had our first two kids, see? You know, I am glad he didn't go, but if he had really, really pushed, I am not sure if I could have really said no. I wouldn't have wanted to, uh, you know, hold him back. But he made the choice to stay and be a father, and live to see his children grow up. And that is something that still stays with me.

RG: I think he made a great decision there.

MR: Absolutely.

RG: Did you agree with the fact that troops were sent over there?

MR: I don't think I will ever be able to agree with that. Now, that doesn't mean that I don't have respect for all those men who did go over there, you know? We were both patriotic so even though, uh, at least from what most of what America thought, even though those veterans weren't treated with the respect that other men were from other wars, we still had respect. Even though we didn't agree with the conflict.

RG: That is good. Well, I want to thank you for your time, and your willingness to share a little of your memories. It is always good to get a little perspective on history.

MR: Thank you for taking the time to listen to it all (laughs softly).