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Oral History Project of Colton, CA – 11/15/13

Dr. Rivera: Good morning, my name is Dr. Tom Rivera. I'm the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies, Emeritus. Emeritus means that I retired a couple of years ago. Today is November 15th 2013, and we're in the Pfau Library at Cal State San Bernardino (California State University, San Bernardino – CSUSB). Our guests this morning are Mr. and Mrs. Luis Contreras.

Luis, welcome to Cal State San Bernardino.

Mr. Contreras: Thank you.

Dr. Rivera: Your wife's name is?

Mr. Contreras: Lucy.

Dr. Rivera: Lucy, welcome to Cal State San Bernardino and we're happy to have you here this morning. Also, thank you very much for being very understanding and sympathetic with me because I was an hour late to pick you up – so I'm sorry.

(Laughter)

Mr. Contreras: No problem.

Dr. Rivera: Luis, you were born in 1923?

Mr. Contreras: Yes.

Dr. Rivera: So you're 90 years old?

Mr. Contreras: Right, um-hmm.

Dr. Rivera: And you were born in Colton?

Mr. Contreras: Yes.

Dr. Rivera: When you were in high school you were drafted into the Army – in World War II?

Mr. Contreras: Yes.

Dr. Rivera: Tell us about that, Luis. How did it happen that you were in high school and you working part-time at the air base and you were drafted into the Army?

Mr. Contreras: I was going to night training school at Norton Air Force Base. At that time, it was called San Bernardino Air Depot. It wasn't Norton, it was San Bernardino Air Depot. I was being trained for engine mechanic work. Then when it came through for me to get drafted, I was asked to resign, quit school, which I wanted [to do] for 8 hours of training, which I got...

Dr. Rivera: So you quit school because you were drafted?

Mr. Contreras: Yes.

Dr. Rivera: Alright. In what year were you in school when you got drafted?

Mr. Contreras: It was 1943.

Dr. Rivera: You were a junior or a senior in high school?

Mr. Contreras: A junior.

Dr. Rivera: You were drafted into the Army, where did you get your training?

Mr. Contreras: In Denver, Colorado – Buckley Field.

Dr. Rivera: How long was the training? How many months was the training?

Mr. Contreras: About 4 weeks, I think.

Dr. Rivera: [Were] you trained in basic Army activities?

Mr. Contreras: Yes... marching, (inaudible), marching with 50-500 soldiers on 18 mile hikes, you-know, the good stuff.

Dr. Rivera: You were 19 years old?

Mr. Contreras: Yes.

Dr. Rivera: Where did they assign you after you did all that training?

Mr. Contreras: Well, after I finished my basic training they didn't know where to put me. They were going to send me to another engine school, but that didn't come through. They found out I was in the high school band so they put me into the Air Force marching band.

Dr. Rivera: What instrument did you play?

Mr. Contreras: Saxophone.

Dr. Rivera: Ah! So after they found out that you were a mechanic at the San Bernardino District Airport, they said: Hah! We'll put in as a mechanic, but they couldn't find a place for you...

Mr. Contreras: They were gonna give me some more training – engine training.

Dr. Rivera: [But] they said, you were a band member so we'll put you in the band. How long and what did you do in the band?

Mr. Contreras: Marched in parades, and all that stuff.
[Within] 2 weeks my name came up on the bulletin board to report to the (inaudible) officer to get my orders to go to gunnery school in Cameron, Arizona...

Dr. Rivera: So you were notified that you were gonna be transferred to gunner training?

Mr. Contreras: Yes.

Dr. Rivera: What Air Force [base] was that?

Mr. Contreras: At that time I wasn't in the Air Force, yet. I was just training for a B-17 gunner.

Dr. Rivera: Where was the training?

Mr. Contreras: Kingman, Arizona.

Dr. Rivera: How long was the training?

Mr. Contreras: About 4 or 5 weeks. They trained air gunnery, ground, and all that good stuff.

Dr. Rivera: How many crew members were in your airplane?

Mr. Contreras: 10 crew members.

Dr. Rivera: You had the pilot, the co-pilot...

Mr. Contreras: ... (Inaudible) The bombardier, navigator, pilot, co-pilot, top gunner, radio operator, right and left wing gunner, me on the bottom, and the tail gunner.

Dr. Rivera: You mentioned that your assignment was at the bottom, what does the bottom mean...?

Mr. Contreras: In the bottom of the B-17...

Dr. Rivera: What was your responsibility?

Mr. Contreras: To shoot the enemy...

Dr. Rivera: Being under the plane, that was a small...

Mr. Contreras: It was a little tight, but that's it... [and] a little lonely.
(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: After your training, Luis, you were sent to England?

Mr. Contreras: Yes. We were sent to England and our first stop was Labrador; and at that time I think it was about 30 below zero. Then we went to Greenland and that was about 40 below zero. Then we went to Iceland and that was about 40 below zero. My nails were purple, brown and black... it was cold as hell!

Dr. Rivera: Well, from Colton to that type of weather is no comparison, *verdad?*

Mr. Contreras: No comparison at all.

Dr. Rivera: And then you were stationed in England?

Mr. Contreras: Molesworth, England air base.

Dr. Rivera: How many assignments did you get when your B-17 was bombing Germany?

Mr. Contreras: We were told we were going to make 35 missions and then return home to sell war bonds... if you make 35 missions. The point was, if you left at 5 missions then you were living on borrowed time. There was no way you were going to get through 35 missions, at that time... The minute that we left the English Channel – here comes the German Air Force – [and] you had to fight all the way to Germany, and then before the bomb run – the bomb fire up in the air... 5, 10, 15 planes: everything went up. There was no way you were going to end up making [25 or 35] missions, it was just impossible.

Dr. Rivera: Mission impossible. So when the B-17 planes took off, how many took off at the same time? *Mas o menos.* More or less.

Mr. Contreras: The group that I was in was about 50 airplanes.

Dr. Rivera: How many were expected to be shot down?

Mr. Contreras: From 10 to 20... In our group and the (inaudible) we lost 60 airplanes in the first half hour. The day that we were shot down they shot down 20 airplanes.

Dr. Rivera: Tell me about the day you were shot down? You said that when you flew from England to Germany – if you didn't make the first pass... Tell me about the first pass, the second pass, and the third pass?

Mr. Contreras: You mean on the bomb run?

Dr. Rivera: Yes, the bomb run, I'm sorry.

Mr. Contreras: The first bomb run, the lead bombardier couldn't hit a target... (He positions papers to show the target and which direction the plane was coming from). Here's the target, and you're coming from over here, and from the initial point here you come over here and then you hit the bomb run, which is about 10 to 14 minutes... So the first bomb run, the bombardier couldn't see the target because with our bombing mission you had to hit a target...

Dr. Rivera: If you didn't hit the target or find the target, what happened?

Mr. Contreras: (Inaudible) You'd go back... But we never did that... Every time we went up for the first bomb run we would drop the bomb... But that particular target... the bombardier didn't see the target so he didn't release the bomb. So he came around to the IP (Initial Plan), back to the bomb [point] the second time – we couldn't release the bomb because there was a B-34 squadron beneath us, so he couldn't release the bomb then either. So [on] the third time, we had 1 engine on fire... the bombardier released the bomb, when he released the bomb they hit the other engine. So then we

peeled off and the co-pilot said: prepare to bail out, and I pulled my handles... but it wouldn't move – I was underneath. The only way I could get out of the airplane is to go up to the (inaudible) because I'm underneath. But I couldn't come up, so the pilot gave an order to the radio man to crank [me] up, if [he couldn't crank me] up, [the pilot told him to bail out] and that was an order! We were at 25,000 feet... and it is 40 below zero up there.

Dr. Rivera: ...They said if you cannot crank Luis up, leave him there and you parachute?

Mr. Contreras: There was no way [for me] to get out, but the radio man cranked me up; I was about to pass out because my oxygen was all shot up; so he connected me to an oxygen bottle and pulled me up, and [he] put my chute on my harness. As soon as he did that – I came out of the spin I was in and I bailed out. So when I bailed out, before I pulled my rip cord the airplane blew up (inaudible)...

Dr. Rivera: So you got out [just] in time? And you don't know what happened to your crew?

Mr. Contreras: I never got in touch with my crew members families because I didn't want to bring up that feeling. About 50 years later I found out they were having a reunion in St. Louis, and they got ahold of me. Talk about crying adults... they were all crying like babies.

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: So that was in St. Louis? What year was that?

Mr. Contreras: About 50 years later...

Dr. Rivera: 1990, or so?

Mr. Contreras: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: When you bailed out, you landed on the ground. What happened when you landed? This was in Germany – what part of Germany?

Mr. Contreras: Dresden, Germany.

(Inaudible) about 50 of [these German civilians] picked me up and slammed me to the [ground] and pulled my arms in the back, which is why I can't lift my arms or put my arms in the back... When they put my arms in the back and lifted my arms over my head everything cracked... They messed up my spinal cord, dislocated my shoulder, broke my ribs; and I don't know what I was hit with in the forehead but it put a hole in my forehead... My ankle was way up here (he shows the area), and they broke one wrist. They picked me up about the 3rd or 4th time and slammed me on the ground, and when they kicked me and broke my ribs – they put me in the middle of 2 haystacks [because] they were going to shoot me. They had already shot my right wing gunner and the tail gunner. [Again,] these were the [German] civilians, not their military.

Dr. Rivera: So when you landed on the ground the German civilians got you and they beat you up?

Mr. Contreras: Not just me, everybody they could put their hands on. (Inaudible)

Dr. Rivera: Afterwards, they put you against a bale of hay and they were gonna shoot you?

Mr. Contreras: They were gonna shoot me... and they heard the hollering of the German Army say, "Halt!" – and they shot some rounds over their heads so they dropped their rifles. So then, they had me walking all that day; and about midnight I started staggering and they said if you fall you will be shot. My ankle was black and blue; I put my weight on my right ankle as I was favoring my left foot... They put me in

this jail with a cement slab; they left the gate open [where there were] about 10 dogs. The guy said, if you wanna take off – take off...

Dr. Rivera: Not against those dogs...

(Laughter)

Mr. Contreras: So they left me there for about a week... and then they had this guy asking me questions, so I answered him in Spanish. I told him that I didn't want to die at 19...

Dr. Rivera: You were 19...?

Mr. Contreras: Yeah... They took me out of the jailhouse and put me in a chair and tied my hands behind my back, and in comes this big gestapo guy—a gorilla! He talked to me in Castilian Spanish – he said, I want you to know that I understand your Spanish and I want information. I told him, I don't have any information, which I didn't... That's when he hit me and it opened me up here (he points to his lower left jaw-chin area). Then, they took me out of there and they put me behind this wired fence... plus other Air Force guys were there. They took us out of there and they marched us... with 2 guards in front, 2 in the middle, and 2 in the back... We wound up in Czechoslovakia in a prison camp up there. Then they brought us back to Berlin, and then they put us in an English camp where there was nothing but English soldiers [who] had been there about 3 or 4 years. So we spent about 3-4 days there... They told us, tomorrow morning they're gonna get you guys and march you out of here. There's a little forest about 2 miles from here and when you get to the forest they're gonna shoot you. There were 9 of us... They got us out of the compound and we were walking about 2 hours... [Within] about another hour we would have been shot – but here comes this tank from the other side of the [road] – it was General Patton's armory division

Dr. Rivera: General Patton came to the rescue...

Mr. Contreras: ...They (General Patton's soldiers) shot a few rounds over their heads and they dropped their rifles. And here comes General Patton with the Jeep, and he saw the condition we were in and he picked up a rifle [and hit one of the guys in the face]. General Patton called them, you dirty S O B's... and [then he shot:] Boom-boom! He reminded me of Hopalong Cassidy – he drew his 2 guns... and Pow-pow! He didn't care about nothing [at that moment].
[Anyway,] he grabbed me and another guy and put us on top of the tank and took us back to the prison camp. And that's the way I got out of that [situation].

Dr. Rivera: How long were you a (POW) prisoner of war?

Mr. Contreras: I'd say about a year...

Dr. Rivera: You went through all that suffering for over a year?

Mr. Contreras: Yeah.

Dr. Rivera: After you were rescued by General Patton, what happened next? Were you taken to the hospital?

Mr. Contreras: General Patton commandeered a 247 and took us to Camp Lucky Strike, which was a hospital in France. That's when they found out I was allergic to Penicillin because I still had this wound that looked bad. They put on a neck brace, back brace and a brace on my ankle. I was there for about 8 months – and then they shipped me back home.

Dr. Rivera: Do you remember when you came back?

Mr. Contreras: 1945.

Mrs. Lucy Contreras: I had come back from Raleigh and moved in with my Mother on Valley. I knew his sister when he was a prisoner, we used to hang out together. When he came back, she introduced us and we went to a dance and we started dancing; and then he went his way and I went mine.

Dr. Rivera: Why, what happened?

Mrs. Lucy Contreras: After 40 years we got together.
(Laughter)

Mr. Contreras: Anyway, back then, me and this other guy, Ralph, who was a prisoner of war, we had gone to an air show at the Norton Air Force Base, and we came up to San Bernardino and we went into this bar on 5th and Mt. Vernon. We went into this place and sat down and the owner of the cocktail bar said, you have to leave... [so my friends can sit here.] So we got up, and we were walking towards the bar and his friends were these German soldiers in their German uniforms eating and drinking... and I lost it! I pulled out my 45...

Dr. Rivera: Was that the Cocky Cactus?

Mr. Contreras: Yeah, but it wasn't the Cocky Cactus at that time – it was something else. Because they had to rebuild it because the MP's (Military Police) broke the place up and took the guy (the owner) to jail. We were gonna shoot him too.
(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: Well, tell me because I'm confused. You went to a bar on 5th and Mt. Vernon in San Bernardino?

Mr. Contreras: Yes.

Dr. Rivera: They asked you to leave because they had some friends who were coming to the establishment, and when you saw who the friends were, you got a little hot under the collar...

Mr. Contreras: We lost it – I lost all—whatever!

Dr. Rivera: Because they were German?

Mr. Contreras: Yes!

Dr. Rivera: And you were gonna get even?

Mr. Contreras: That's it!

Mary (inaudible) had a pizza place across the street where we had [these German soldiers from the bar] against this big tree, Ralph and I. So the civilian police came over but they couldn't touch us because we were military. Then they brought in the MP's from Norton Air Force Base, and our Captain [who] was in charge of us (the Captain's name is inaudible) he was there. [Our Captain] had been a prisoner for 2 years; and he saw the Germans and he almost burned them... So he said, get these... out of here... [take them] to Camp Uno – (inaudible).

Dr. Rivera: Again, I'm confused, what's Camp Uno?

Mr. Contreras: Camp Uno was a camp over here in Victorville, and they had German prisoners of war there.

Dr. Rivera: Oh! They had German prisoners there...

Mr. Contreras: (Inaudible) ... The Captain said to get these German soldiers out of here because there's gonna be more POW's coming to this town, and you're gonna have a blood bath.

Dr. Rivera: So the German prisoners were given free-run, carte blanc to come to San Bernardino and do what they wanted to do?

When you came back home and you saw them – you got hot under the collar. So what happened after that? Did they take the Germans back?

Mr. Contreras: Yes, they took them back and that was it.

When I got home they gave me a 50 day furlough... at Camp (inaudible) up north.

Dr. Rivera: Where up north?

Mr. Contreras: In San Francisco, Camp (inaudible). [Near] the end of the 50 days, Japan hadn't surrendered yet; so they were gonna put me in... (inaudible) Air Force... from that point. But 5 days before my furlough was up, Japan surrendered; so they sent me a telegram to report to Pico Blvd. in Santa Monica; they gave me 39 days of hotel life... All I had to do was push a button, I had everything I wanted.

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: When were you discharged?

Mr. Contreras: 1946.

Dr. Rivera: And you came back to Colton?

Mr. Contreras: Well-yeah! I was born and raised in Colton.

Dr. Rivera: Where did you live in Colton?

Mr. Contreras: On 'L' Street.

Dr. Rivera: On 'L' and what? Close to where? Close to the church?

Mr. Contreras: About a half a block away from the church.

Dr. Rivera: A half a block away from San Salvador?

Mr. Contreras: Yes.

Dr. Rivera: You said you were born and raised in Colton. Did you go to Garfield School?

Mr. Contreras: I went to Garfield, I went to Wilson, and to Lincoln; and back to Wilson, and then high school.

Dr. Rivera: As you know, Luis, we don't have Garfield anymore – that was on 7th Street in South Colton. But we do have Wilson Elementary School.

Tell me, as a 5th grader, how did you end up at Lincoln? What was that program about?

Mr. Contreras: I have no idea why, but they took some of the students from Wilson to Lincoln. They didn't like us over there; we were discriminated against... There were nothing but Chicano guys in Garfield and Wilson.

Dr. Rivera: Yeah, South Colton was mainly Mexican-American, at that time, *verdad*? That must have been an experiment of taking you 5th graders or 6th graders to Lincoln for 1 year, and then bringing you back again the next year. What did you find out when you went Lincoln? They didn't like you?

Mr. Contreras: Well, heck no! Even the students didn't want you so-n-so's coming to school with us over here. There were a lot of fights between us and them.

Dr. Rivera: Lincoln is on 8th Street, which is the City Hall and Police Station now, right-right.

So you were there for 1 year and you found out that you were not welcome?

Mr. Contreras: We were not wanted.

Dr. Rivera: The railroad tracks, Southern Pacific... That was our border...

Mr. Contreras: At night if we crossed over into North Colton, the police would say, stay on your side... We used to call it the Mason-Dixon Line.

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: You-know they used to stop traffic because that used to be the highway from Riverside. And when the train would come through, the Southern Pacific, then the poles and flags would come down... and what did you call it? The Mason-Dixon Line – North versus South... Well tell me about that situation, did you find that to be a problem in high school?

Mr. Contreras: No not really, but I felt out of place. When I joined the high school band, I was the only Chicano in the band, and they treated me like hell... and I said, I don't give a damn – I know how to read music just like you read music.

I had an uncle who taught me how to read music when I was 5 years old.

Dr. Rivera: What kind of treatment did you get?

Mr. Contreras: Cold. Like, who the hell wants you, you-know.

Dr. Rivera: Uh-hmm. And they told you that to your face?

Mr. Contreras: Oh-hell yes! When they were [having the school president elections], we had 1 guy Joe Flores... [and there were] these signs all over the walls of the high school... "Don't vote for a dirty Mexican – keep our campus clean."

Dr. Rivera: No!

Mr. Contreras: Oh-yes!

Dr. Rivera: Was that the early '40s?

Mr. Contreras: Yes! And what McIntosh did – he got another Chicano guy and paid him \$1,000 to run against Joe to divide and conquer, you-know. Because of the thousand dollar deal – he ran against his own friend and that split the whole Chicano [vote/election].

Dr. Rivera: But that was the principal.

Mr. Contreras: That was the principal. McIntosh was an S.O.B. I heard him, just like I hear you, and not just me – but in the hallway he said: I will not educate these damn Mexicans better than the white boys. The French teacher (name inaudible) got angry and he quit.

Dr. Rivera: Which teacher was this?

Mr. Contreras: Mr. (inaudible), he was a French teacher. And our Spanish teacher (name inaudible), she quit when [she] heard this.

Dr. Rivera: And this was in the '40s, early '40s?

Mr. Contreras: Yes.

Dr. Rivera: What did you and your friends do, Luis?

Mr. Contreras: What can you do? I mean, that was part of the deal when I started to work for Norton Air Force Base at night. I missed school twice because we had some work that had to be done over there, and McIntosh got on my case. He said, if you want to go into the service now you better quit [school].
I went to night school to keep going, and I got my diploma a couple of years ago.

Dr. Rivera: Just recently?

Mr. Contreras: Yes.

Dr. Rivera: Well congratulations! Better late than never.
(Laughter)

Mr. Contreras: Hell yes!

Dr. Rivera: Tell me, you grew up in Colton, and being on the south side of Colton, you-know, we had all our stores, churches, schools, and restaurants, and everything else in Colton – what did you and your friends do for entertainment?

Mr. Contreras: We had our own clubs in South Colton; we had the Sombrero Club... We had our own bars in South Colton, we had our own dances, and that's it.

Dr. Rivera: Did you have any pals? Maybe 3 or 4 guys that you always hung around with?

Mr. Contreras: Oh-yeah.

Dr. Rivera: Do you remember their names?

Mr. Contreras: Yeah, but they're all dead now: Tony Garcia, Gilbert Palomino, the mile runner for Colton, Tommy Cabrera – he lost his leg in the war.

Dr. Rivera: Tell me about Tommy Cabrera, he's an old friend of mine – he used to live on 'N' Street between 11th and 12th Street...

Mr. Contreras: But I haven't seen him in years because he doesn't come out anymore. He just turned 90.

Dr. Rivera: What were his injuries, do you know?

Mr. Contreras: He lost a leg; and so did Gilbert Palomino, he was a mile runner for Colton High.

Dr. Rivera: Was he pretty good?

Mr. Contreras: Nobody has [beaten] his high school competition, [yet] – in the whole United States, the time that he ran the mile run. 6 months ago, it came out in the Colton News [that] nobody has broken his record in high school competition, yet, I'm not talking about college, [only] high school competition mile run...

Dr. Rivera: And who was that, Tony Palomino?

Mr. Contreras: Gilbert Palomino.

Dr. Rivera: Who else was your friend?

Mr. Contreras: All of them were my buddies...

Dr. Rivera: *Como se llaman?*

Mr. Contreras: Soco Rosales...

Dr. Rivera: Soco Rosales was also your buddy?

Mr. Contreras: We used to go to school together.

Mrs. Lucy Contreras: Soco Rosales is a real close friend of his...

Dr. Rivera: What grade level?

Mr. Contreras: We started kindergarten together: Sal Ayala, Soco Rosales, (inaudible) Hernandez, (inaudible) Sanchez, Tony Garcia, you name it. We were all buddy-buddy...

Dr. Rivera: Well, Socorro's Mom and Dad were my Grandfather's neighbors on 'O' Street. Rumba was my Father.

Mr. Contreras: Rumba?

Dr. Rivera: Yes, he's my Father.

Mr. Contreras: Good God man! He used to live across the street from us. (Inaudible) (Inaudible) My uncle, Gordo Castillo, [his] wife was half German and half Chicano because her father was Matt Rap. Do you remember Matt Rap?

Dr. Rivera: Yes, yes.

Mr. Contreras: Well, they're related to me because Gordo and my Dad were half-brothers. But he was a Castillo and my Dad was a Contreras. (Inaudible)

Matt Rap: I could listen to that man for years and years because he was a wonderful man.

Dr. Rivera: He had a son and they had kids: Henry Rap. Remember Henry Rap?

Mr. Contreras: Oh sure, I remember Henry Rap. Henry, Lucille, Catita, and all those guys...

Dr. Rivera: What a small world...

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: Your Mom and Dad, where did they come from?

Mr. Contreras: My Dad came from (inaudible) Mexico and my Mom was born in Zacatecas, Mexico. I don't know how old they were when they got over here, but it was during that revolution they had over there in Mexico.

Dr. Rivera: That was in 1910?

Mr. Contreras: 1910, somewhere around there.

Dr. Rivera: Then they came here and you were born in 1923?

Mr. Contreras: Um-hmm.

Dr. Rivera: How about you Lucy, how about your parents?

Mrs. Lucy Contreras: My Mother was from El Paso, Texas and my Father was from Mexico City. My Grandfather was from France and my Grandmother was from Spain. They migrated to Mexico and that's where my Father was born.

Dr. Rivera: How did you guys meet?

Mr. Contreras: When I came from overseas my sister told me: Don't go drinking tonight because... we're gonna go to a dance. So that's the way I met her, through my sister.

Mrs. Lucy Contreras: His sister and I were hanging out when he was prisoner – we didn't know where he was. We worked at the same company.

Dr. Rivera: What company was that Lucy?

Mrs. Lucy Contreras: Arrowhead Pipe Factory. She was in the section where they made sandwiches for workers.

One morning we saw her fly out of the shop and I asked [another co-worker], where did she go? The co-worker said, her brother just got back.

Dr. Rivera: Did you marry right after that?

Mrs. Lucy Contreras: We ended up meeting.

Dr. Rivera: You met, but did you get married?

Mr. Contreras: Not to her, no. She married somebody else and so did I.

Dr. Rivera: Why?

Mr. Contreras: Well, the love bug...

(Laughter)

Mr. Contreras: I was living in Stockton at that time; and then my wife passed away... My daughter was visiting me and they lived in Ontario. So [when] I came back from bringing my daughter back to Ontario – I ran into her 40 years later.

Dr. Rivera: 40 years later.

Mr. Contreras: We've been together 25 years.

Dr. Rivera: Congratulations!

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: After 40 years...

Mrs. Lucy Contreras: My Dad passed away and my Mother remarried and she came back to Colton. I stayed with my sister-in-law for a while, and I was only 16 and she was worried about my working at night. So she said, you better go back to your Mom because I'm afraid something will happen to you and I'd feel bad... So when I came back to Colton that's when I met his sister and started meeting people I hadn't known before.

Dr. Rivera: You were apart for 40 years; and then you finally got together after 40 years... You [both became widows].
How many children did you have?

Mrs. Lucy Contreras: I was married 39 years. I had 2 children, I have 1 left – my son passed away... but I had a boy and a girl.

Dr. Rivera: And you had 4 children? (The question is directed at Luis).

Mr. Contreras: Yeah, but now we have 3 – my son passed away.

Mrs. Lucy Contreras: You-know, my son was very proud of him.

Dr. Rivera: Everybody should be... and I understand that...

Mrs. Lucy Contreras: Luis went through a lot...
My son was an alcoholic, he died of Cirrhosis of the Liver.

Dr. Rivera: But his hero was Luis?

Mrs. Lucy Contreras: Oh-yes, they got along real good.

Dr. Rivera: I understand you were the Marshall of the Veteran's Parade in Colton on Sunday, a couple of days ago.

Mr. Contreras: Monday, yeah.

Dr. Rivera: Monday, yes. You were the Grand Marshall – congratulations!

Mrs. Lucy Contreras: My first husband was an Air Force man, too. He was in the Jolly Rogers of the Pacific, he was in Europe over in the Pacific.

Dr. Rivera: What was the name of your ship? (The question is directed at Luis)

Mr. Contreras: Shoo-Shoo Baby.

Dr. Rivera: Shoo-Shoo Baby was the name of your aircraft?

Mr. Contreras: Actually, I brought my book with all the... (Inaudible) [The picture of the aircraft is on page 51].

Dr. Rivera: Oh-ok.

How many grandkids do you have?

Mr. Contreras: Grandkids, I have 6, and 8 or 9 great-grandkids, and 3 great-great-grandkids.

Dr. Rivera: Wow! You have a large family. Do they all live in Colton?

Mr. Contreras: No, they live in Riverside...

Mrs. Lucy Contreras: A lot of them lived in Ontario for a while but they moved to Riverside.

Dr. Rivera: After you came back from your services, where did you work?

Mr. Contreras: When I came back from the service I worked for Norton Aircraft, then I worked for Lockheed Aircraft in Ontario. [But my back began to hurt] me real bad, and nobody wanted any part of me.

Mrs. Lucy Contreras: His back [problems] messed him up for a lot of good jobs, or he would have had a good retirement... his back was too bad.

Mr. Contreras: At an early age they put me on Medical...

Dr. Rivera: So you retired early on disability?

Mr. Contreras: They put me out to pasture at a young life...

Dr. Rivera: Well, you were badly injured.

Mrs. Lucy Contreras: They really messed him up good.

Mr. Contreras: And [on top of that,] all the help that I got at the hospital – part of the hospital burned and there's not even a record of me being in the hospital.

Mrs. Lucy Contreras: They had a hard time connecting his injuries to the service.

Mr. Contreras: They finally found one piece of information that connected my injuries to the service in 2002, but they hadn't connected it from 1945 to 2002. But they have me at 100% disability from the Air Force.

Dr. Rivera: Getting back from the service and getting back with your friends, was there a change of attitude? Because you left Colton at 19 years old, and you left a community that was separated from the other community... There were two towns, one in the north-end and one on the south-end. Our south-end town was self-contained, so when you came back, was there a change of attitude? ...You had paid your dues...

Mr. Contreras: When I came back everything had changed because we were more together... I remember as a young kid when we would go to the theatre, the ushers had Mexican kids on one side and white people on the other side. If you wanted to use the bathroom you had to go outside.

Dr. Rivera: Was this at the New Colton or the Hub Theatre?

Mr. Contreras: The New Colton was part of the Hub Theatre; after the war everything changed.

Dr. Rivera: Prior to the war, how old were you when you went to the theatre and experienced the separation [or segregation]?

Mr. Contreras: Up to 1941 before the war, up to that point. After the war started everything changed.

Dr. Rivera: What else changed, Luis, [besides the theatre]? Could we move freely to North Colton and go back and forth [to South Colton]?

Mr. Contreras: Oh-yeah. Everybody is together, which is a good thing... Everybody is human. I said to one guy, we're here in the same room, you're breathing the same air I'm breathing – what the hell!

Dr. Rivera: So there was definitely a change of attitude?

Mr. Contreras: Oh-yes, definitely...

Dr. Rivera: Did you take advantage of your G.I. benefits? Like schooling or buying a house?

Mr. Contreras: Right now I'm buying this house... (inaudible).

Dr. Rivera: Under the G.I. Bill?

Mr. Contreras: Yeah.

(He repeats the story about when Japan surrendered and him getting orders to report to a hotel on Pico Blvd. in Santa Monica – see page 14.)

After 39 days at the hotel in Santa Monica, they gave me orders to report to March Air Force Base in Dusty Acres.

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: March Air Force Base is in Riverside.
How about Diego Rosales? Did you know Diego, the boxer?

Mr. Contreras: Of course, I knew everybody –
After supper between 5 o'clock and 10 o'clock at night we'd be at the corner, the whole bunch of [us:] Diego, Soco, Bob, and everybody.

Dr. Rivera: What corner was this?

Mr. Contreras: 7th and 'L'.

Dr. Rivera: 7th and 'L'? Everybody would be there? That was the hangout?

Mr. Contreras: Yeah, yeah... Severo, Bernie...

Mrs. Lucy Contreras: All those guys were raised right in that area...

Mr. Contreras: We had one (inaudible) from Lincoln Schools, Bennie Freeman, he was one hell-of-a-guy, my buddy, Bennie Freeman, he was a good friend.
So we would all hang out together.

Dr. Rivera: Luis, let me change the subject a little bit. Did we have any Mexican-Americans in the City Council, mayor or City Council in Colton?

Mr. Contreras: At that time we only had one, Pete Luque. Now, we have a Chicano mayor, we have council-people, Susan Oliva, Frank Gonzales... (inaudible).

Dr. Rivera: But back in the old days we only had one.
Do you remember Johnny Martinez? He was a councilman in 1941...

Mr. Contreras: Jeramias, he was a boxer – Johnny Martinez.

Dr. Rivera: Yes. Is that Jeramias?

Mr. Contreras: Yes. Jeramias was a good and famous boxer. They called him Jeramias but he was Johnny Martinez. He did a lot for the Chicano Movement. Him and Pete Luque... (Inaudible) started to get the neighborhood together, which they did. But everything changed because when you're at war -- (inaudible). Like they always said: 'There's no atheists in the foxholes.'

(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: Well, we've had a wonderful conversation this morning. Is there anything that I've missed? Is there anything that we should talk about?

Mr. Contreras: Well, the way my buddies got killed... (inaudible). Any combat men who had buddies... you never get through that – it stays with you.

Dr. Rivera: And growing up in Colton, how was that, Luis?

Mr. Contreras: It was okay, fine. I found it most gratifying after the war because you could be considered an adult (inaudible).

Dr. Rivera: So you were given the respect that you merited? Yeah.

Mr. Contreras: Oh, on my 15th mission we lost 2 engines, and we were staggering, struggling; and the other planes are not going to stay behind you... you're on your own. So the pilot said, keep your eyes open cause we're on our own and I'm about to head for that mountain... There were [about] 20 [enemy] planes against [our] 1 airplane... [with those odds] you're a goner, you-know... All of a sudden here come these Red-tails P-51's... (inaudible) ... they shot them [the enemy planes] out of the

air; and we didn't know who the hell they were. They shot down about [enemy] 30 airplanes...

When we got to the base, with only 2 engines, the pilot said, let's go up to the front office to find out who the heck those guys were that saved our buns! So we went up there and they said, those were Tuskegee Airmen Red-tail P-51s.

They're Black fighters – hell yes! Those guys were better than the white guys up there. I mean, they were fearless fighters.

Dr. Rivera: [It was] Tuskegee Airmen who saved your lives...

Mr. Contreras: We said, how can we shake these men's hands... (inaudible)... Baca... (inaudible)

Dr. Rivera: So Congressman Joe Baca had the Tuskegee Airmen where?

Mr. Contreras: At the Orange Show. I told her, hey, I'm going over there right now... There were about 17 men... I said, 1 of you guys or all of you guys who were up there – if it wasn't for you guys I wouldn't be here. I mean, they were fearless fighters, beautiful fighters!!

I have the tape of the Red-tails, I recorded it. Anybody who wants to see good fighters - I still have the tape of the Tuskegee Airmen.

Mrs. Lucy Contreras: It was a very nice thing for him to be able to walk up to them and thank them – it was a real nice occasion.

Dr. Rivera: What a wonderful story and experience!

Mr. Contreras: Heck-yeah! For me it was.

Dr. Rivera: Again, Luis, you did 21 missions over Germany?

Mr. Contreras: 21 missions over Germany.

Dr. Rivera: You were supposed to do 25 but they brought you back to the states to sell war bonds and represent the military.

Mr. Contreras: We were supposed to make 25 missions, but it was impossible with the odds. Any flyer who flew more than 5 missions were living on borrowed time.
(Laughter)

Dr. Rivera: Well, congratulations!
Lucy, did I miss anything?

Mrs. Lucy Contreras: You pretty well covered it.

Dr. Rivera: Well thank you so much for being with us this morning. We will make this recording available to you.
We're working on our project: Oral History of Mexican-Americans in South Colton, and we just started on the project last week...

Transcribed by Pat Ricé-Daniels, Library Services Specialist, Special Collections.