

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: Rita Palafox

LSS 1104 (27:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 9/26/2017

Today, you have women climbing telephone poles, repairing lines, jumping out of aircraft if they want to go airborne, and infantry. So, the doors are wide open now, because we're integrated. But back when I first joined, jobs were limited, and to get promoted, you had to compete with the men.

Rita Palafox joined the Women's Army Corps at a time when there were very few opportunities for women, whether it was in the Army, or on Maui, where she grew up. She left her plantation community to provide for herself, and became witness to one of the most transformative eras in modern American history. Rita Palafox, next, on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawai'i's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha mai kākou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Rita Margarita Palafox served in the Women's Army Corps, or WAC, for twenty years, retiring at the rank of Master Sergeant in 1976. Her military career spanned a time of profound change in America, from her encounter with segregation in the 1950s to working as an Army recruiter at the height of protests against the Vietnam War. Growing up in a small plantation community on the north side of Maui in the 40s and 50s did not prepare her for the culture shock she would later experience, but it did teach her important survival skills.

I was born in Spreckelsville on Maui, 1937. Community living was wonderful. I had so many aunties and uncles, as everybody kinda was like one family. We shared problems, went to school together, some from grade school to high school. The thing that I did not appreciate as a youngster was the outside toilet facilities. Hated that. But we learned to cope and live with it. Everybody, I would consider, whether you were Japanese, Portuguese, Filipino, the living was hard. The women, some worked in the cane field to help to provide food for family. My father was fortunate to work in the plantation store, but he had a hard job. He had to go to each camp, and there was ten of 'em, to take orders from the families, and then take it back to the store, and fill those orders, and deliver it again the next day. I was about four or five years old when I used to go with him. He was my babysitter, being the youngest in the family. So, I watched him do this and said: Whoa, what a hard job. But then, Mama-san and Papa-san, and my aunties and all my uncles used to see me in the car and bring things for

me, so I kinda benefited from this wonderful trip. But I learned how hard living was. If people didn't, you know, unite together to survive, it was hard living.

He was the plantation store manager, which I don't think a lot of Filipino guys did in plantation days; right?

M-hm. He also loved music. He could go to the store and buy a Glenn Miller, let's say, one of his favorite songs, and he could write notes for every instrument. And I told him: How did you learn all this? He said: It was a gift. And he started putting together a band. 'Til this day, he never told us how he managed to get them all dressed in Navy uniform. They rented it, but I don't think it was ever returned.

They used to call it the Old Filipino Glenn Miller Band. It bothered my mom, because she needed his help sometimes, but she knew he loved his music.

Your mother was a Vares.

Yes.

Portuguese stock.

Yes.

And then, your dad, a Palafox; Filipino.

Yes.

And tell me about how those ethnic groups affected your upbringing.

Well, to be honest with you, you know, our camps, we had Filipino Camps, Japanese Camps.

Portuguese Camps.

Portuguese Camp, Korean, Chinese, Hawaiian. And the camp we lived in, we always get picked by the other kids, because it's supposed to be the worst; outside bathrooms, the facilities weren't as good as the ones in the other camp. They had indoor toilet facilities, little things like that.

So, people teased you for having the junkiest facilities.

Yeah; and you know, like with the low class and stuff like that.

Because which camp were you in?

I was in Camp 1; they used to call that the ...

Filipino Camp?

Filipino Camp. But you know, later on, as they ran out of home facilities for the other race, like the Japanese, they kind of brought them into our camp, which was good. You know, so we had a mixed plate after a while. But anyway, it was hard. Being Filipino, I'm going to be very honest with you, they used to call us book-books.

It's usually the newer immigrant group that gets picked on; right? And Filipinos were newer.

Yes. I went to Maui High School, and I always used to tell my brother: We're only going to school to eat lunch. We were that motivated in the sense that, you know, I love history and I love science. So, those are the two subjects I made sure I paid strict—I was not what you would consider a college-bound student at that time.

Just weren't interested?

Just weren't interested, and knowing my parents could not afford it, anyway. You know. But they did save a lot for the two oldest. They did very well in school. In fact, all three of them went to Catholic school. They pulled them out of the public school, because they were complaining that the teachers were not fair. You know, they favored certain groups.

Ethnic groups?

Yes.

Which ethnic groups?

Japanese.

In public schools.

In public schools. My brother would say: I raise my hand, I had the answer, they called the next person, you know, the other person. So, my mom and dad talked, and says: About time we sacrifice, and pull our kids out of public school and send them to Holy Rosary Catholic.

But not you.

I lucked out, because, I said I didn't want to go to a Portuguese school. No; it was a joke in the family.

Because Catholic schools are—

Most of the Portuguese—

Many Catholics are Portuguese.

Right. And I said: I went to school with all my friends from the camp, and I want to stay with them. My father said: No, you're going. I said: No, I'm not. So, I won. I said: Dad, save your money; I'm barely making it through grade school, I can save you a lot of money, Dad.

So interesting that you weren't a motivated student.

You know, my friends used say, I'm gonna be a beautician, I'm gonna be this, I'm gonna work in the bank, I'm gonna be a nurse. The only thing that really got my interest was the military, because my father was in the National Guard. He spent twenty-six years there. He was a wonderful sharpshooter.

Expert rifleman?

Yeah; expert. And he had his own rifle team, and they used to compete with all the other island National Guardsmen and Reserve. And they did pretty good. When I became a sophomore, I start thinking: Hey, you know, you better start thinking what you're gonna do, 'cause time is going fast. So, I thought about the military.

And what was there for women at that time?

Very little; the jobs were scarce. But you know, what motivated me is that they had some technical fields that I had been interested in. And definitely, they had the GI Bill, which is a college degree. So, if I could progress myself and find myself, hopefully in the military as a starter, maybe there's a possibility I can, you know, find myself.

After graduating from Maui High School, Rita Palafox went right into the service, volunteering for the Women's Army Corps. She was sent to Alabama for basic training, and on the journey there, had her first encounter with segregation.

We knew there were some racial problems, but we didn't know how severe it was until we went by train, and our first stop was Texas. And we had stopover there, and that's the first time we were exposed by the word Whites Only Bathroom, Colored or Black

Bathroom Only. So, you know, we figured with our group, we had eight of us. We had some Filipino gals, a Hawaiian gal, and looking at me, mixed plate, dark, my tan. Well, we were confused and scared. For me, I have to use the word culture shock. It took a while for me to look at that and say: My god, we just raised our right hand and swear under oath that we will support and defend this wonderful country of ours, and this is the best they can do for us?

What year was that?

This was 1955.

And you had to choose what bathroom to go to?

Yeah.

White, or non-White?

Right in Texas. And so, we decided to flip a coin.

And we ended up going into the Black side of the house. And they were just as shocked as we were, because, whoa, here's a group of—some of 'em thought we were White trash trying to make trouble. So, we told them we were from Hawai'i. The minute we said that, boy, the whole world stopped. This one gal held the door open and says: I'll hold the door. Because you had to pay a dime to use the bathroom. It was not free. So, we apologized; it was sad. And later on, we just told them, I wonder why they don't have one for beige.

Everybody had a laugh about that. What about riding the bus? Anything happen on that score?

Yes. Our first pass, which we worked so hard for to go downtown and shop, and hopefully go to a Chinese restaurant and have some hopefully good Chinese food. Well, I was the last to board the bus. And I know there was a little bit confusion, 'cause I could sit on ... our group that went on the bus. I mean, like ...

Where were they sitting? The ones who already got on the bus; where were they sitting?

Well, I don't know what the bus driver really told them until I thought I heard: Back of the bus. So, my five senses went twenty-four/seven like, bing-bing, the vision got sharper, the hearing. I said to myself: Oh, my god, not on the bus. So, by the time I got to my turn to pay, I looked at the bus driver and I said: Did you say the back of the bus? He said, Well, yeah. Kinda he was just as stunned seeing all this. So, I said: You know, sir, in Hawai'i, we fight for the back seat.

And that's so true.

And over here, we can go and, we can go to—

Now it's reserved for you.

And he said: Hawai'i? He served with some folks from Hawai'i, and he apologized in the sense he said: You tell them sit anywhere they want. But they were already sitting down by the time I got there. So, I went to the back, and asked this nice gal in the back; I said: Do you mind if I sit with you? She says: Oh, no. So, I sat down. She said: What happened? And I told her. She just touched my hand and said: Thank you.

She was a Black woman?

Yes. So, I asked permission to sit back there. And I think I did tell her: I wish they had one for beige. And I said this was our first pass, and what a way to go. So, there was a lot of bumps in the road.

What a disconnect, after swearing patriotically.

Yes; that's what hurt the most. Right. And how proud my father was when he arrived here. You know. And to be greeted like this, I'm saying: My god, this can't be America, the land of the free.

So, you volunteered for the Women's Army Corps.

Correct.

Which many people now don't really maybe recall that there was a separate division for women, and it was separate, and not equal, because pay, power, very different in the Women's Army Corps.

And you had to compete. When promotions come in, you then have to compete with the guys.

Tell me; were there jobs that were earmarked for women, and others for men, or were you competing for the same slots?

Well, when I joined, I would say we were lucky as women if we had thirty jobs available.

For women?

For women. The rest was open for the men. I lucked out, because I got on-the-job training. I guess my typing skills was so good they said: Don't spend money on her, just send her on to her next assignment as a clerk typist. I knew pretty much what I was getting into. We had a wonderful recruiter. I mean, she let us pretty much know what was going on. Not too much with the problems with segregation and all that good stuff. She touched off a little bit, but not enough. We only took the minimum two-year service to find ourself, for me. And if I could not, you know, in two years realize, you know, what I should do, then I was in trouble. I mean, it was an opportunity, you know.

So, in two years, did you find yourself?

I sure did. We had a bulletin go out in every WAC detachment, and I used to check that bulletin board like a hawk eye. And when I was stationed in Oakland, my first assignment army terminal, I saw on the board, Okinawa. I said: Oh, wow. But I knew I didn't have enough service time. You needed a year, unless you waiver your time. So, I only came in for two; I had to have three years. So, I went right to the first sergeant and asked what paperwork I needed to waiver and take that extra year. And she said: Oh, I don't know, you still, you know, should stay a little longer, Rita. You know. And I said: No, I want to go. So, I lucked out and got Okinawa. So, when I got there, my first sergeant was Charles Los Banos. And that name is for me, legendary. So, I said: Wow. He was very strict with me. He said: Don't you make trouble or bring shame to us, you know. He just wanted me to make sure, you know, watch what I do. And he was very protective. I told him: Jesus Christ, I left Hawai'i to get away from my father, and look at you.

So, was he talking about dating?

Dating, and be careful because uh, you know, we were young. He used to take me home, and met the family, and pretty much felt very adopted by this wonderful family. What a wonderful soldier, professional. So, I consider him a mentor. So, through his wonderful guidance, he kinda instilled me. I think I pretty much found myself, and I thank him, because I believe in mentors. I think this is why I can honestly sit here and tell you if it wasn't for all these wonderful people who cared, I wouldn't be sitting in front of you today.

Did you have a significant other?

No. No; at the time when I joined the Women's Army Corps, once you got married, you had to get out. So, you know, we are—

You were marrying the Army.

We were married to the Army until the law changed. And it didn't change until we integrated.

Which was when?

I would say between '75, '76; maybe after that.

After her two-year assignment in Okinawa ended, Rita Palafox reenlisted in the Women's Army Corps. She was next stationed at Fort Ord, California before heading to Fort Lawton, Washington, where she was one of twelve women picked to be a senior missile tracker. Her second three-year term of service was almost over, when yet a new opportunity opened up.

Doris Caldwell; she was a young captain at that time. She knew I was thinking about getting out of the service, you know, when I was there in Seattle. So, she kinda sneaky through or politely knew the director of the Women's Army Corps was coming, and she said: Rita, if you had one job that you'd like, which job would you take in the Army? I said: Recruiting. Knowing the chances of me getting army recruiting in Hawaii was ... forget it.

Why would you want to recruit? 'Cause this was during the Vietnam era.

Yes.

And you know, it was a hard sell in Hawai'i, in many cases.

Reason; you know, like I said, as you progress through your journeys, you grow up a little bit, you start finding yourself, and you said: Wow, I wonder what I'd be like if, you know, I could share my journey with the people that I really have high respect for, you know, or local kids. I mean, for me, I mean, there's quality here. I mean, the family, the tradition of the Nisei or the Japanese, the 442nd. I mean, history is here. And I'll be darned if I didn't get recruiting.

The Vietnam War, of course, became a very unpopular war. Was it unpopular at the time you were recruiting?

Pretty much. In fact, Patsy Mink and Abercrombie was doing their thing with the University of Hawai'i. I'm not against demonstrating; I think it's honorable, I think that's what we fight for, and to have our freedom of speech and stuff. But when they go cross the line, yeah, we have problems in Hawai'i, but not as bad as California. Burning of the flags, draft cards, walking around with packages over their head. The part that hurt me the most, our recruiting station was on Halekauwila Street next to the unemployment office. And President Johnson came to visit with Inouye to give a

speech at 'Iolani Palace. I went with my commanding officer. And they were so loud and so ... oh, I was so embarrassed that these folks, as the President was trying to talk, they were yelling and screaming, and doing whatever with packages over their head. I went up one of 'em and I said: If you believe so strong against the Vietnam War, take the package off your head. I know they weren't from Hawai'i. Then, you had these kids that, not to be drafted, come in and say: I want to volunteer. There's the balance. I said: My god, here's this one guy putting a package over his head, demonstrating against the war, probably will never serve, and here's the kids still coming in the door saying: I want to go in the Army and volunteer.

How did you feel about the Vietnam War at that time?

Pretty much, I'm not one for wars. I did a lot of visits to cemeteries. I still have a hard time.

But you still volunteered, asked for the recruiting job.

Yes.

With unsettled feelings about war.

Wars. There's a lot of us feel the same way, even the ones that went there. You know, and some went back for second tour, because in their heart, especially if they lose a comrade at arms, their friend, they felt: Gee, I lived, and he didn't, I want to go back. And they knew at that time, it was not a fair situation. They did not know a lot of things that was going on, and it was troubling for them, but they went back because they lived, and their friend didn't. One of the things when I was picked as the recruiter here in Hawai'i, I knew I was already in trouble. Because the recruiting station know for you to get in recruiting, you had to be a recruiter. Well, I was brand new, fresh. There were warning signs that if I don't produce, you know, the door I came in would be open to go out, kinda thing. I saw this recruiter by the name of Joseph Hao, top recruiter in the nation. And I said to myself: Who best can train me than him? He said: You know what; lot of those schools have ROTC. The Cabral brothers was with Kamehameha School, so he knew them. He said: I'm gonna call them, and see what they can do for you. I said: I want to go to Kamehameha School. He said: Forget it; I don't think the principal gonna let you in. I said: Well, we can try. But the Cabral brothers got me in. And I was greeted by the president; I think her name was Clark. She said: You can talk to them, but they're all college-bound. I said: Okay, at least I have the opportunity; thank you very much. So, I wore my dress blues, I went up there. I gave my presentation. And I was shocked; after I was done, about five of 'em came up to me, says: Can we talk to you privately? I said: I'd love to have you guys. So, they came down. The principal wasn't too choked up. But they came down, and they went in the service. Just to make a long story short; these kids, I know they were good. If you live in a dorm, they

had white glove inspection. You know, basic training would be a breeze for them. They went in there, and we got a letter from the director of the Women's Army Corps. She got a letter from the commandant of the Women's Army Corps in Alabama, and she said she was so proud that there was a group of young women that came in and broke every record at the training center. American Spirit Award was the top, outstanding training; every category our good old Kamehameha School did it.

And that didn't keep the young women from going to college, either. In fact, they would have their college paid for if they stayed in.

In fact, I had feedback from one of 'em; she thanked me. She said: You know, I saved my parents a lot of money; I got something they could not afford. She was a good student, and thanks to the Army, she got her degree.

Did the headmaster let you back in?

No problem.

After nine years of recruiting in Hawai'i, Rita Palafox was proud to be asked to establish a recruiting center on Guam. Three years later, the Guam Legislature acknowledged her for meritorious work. Rita Palafox left recruiting to become a drill sergeant back in Alabama, at the same basic training camp where she started her Army career fifteen years earlier. She had received many commendations by the time she retired in 1976. Moving home to Hawai'i, she spent the next twenty-one years working for the Department of Veterans Affairs. Mahalo to Maui girl Rita Palafox, retired and living in Windward O'ahu at the time of this conversation in 2017, for your service to our county in active duty and civilian roles over a career that saw tremendous change in America. And thank you, for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, a hui hou.

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Don Ho was my best friend. 'Cause every group that graduated, or day before they finished their basic training, the last song they play before bedtime was the Taps, and I used to do my walk and give them my farewell speech. And I said: I would like for you to meet my best friend. And I turn on my tape recorder, and Don Ho would come on and say: I'd like to dedicate this song to my family, or to the audience, and then he sings I Will Remember You. And as soon as he got through singing, I would say to them: Bring some aloha wherever you go, whatever you do. Show respect, love one another, and spread some aloha throughout this world; we need it.

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