Interview with Maria Isabel Solis Thomas

Interview conducted by Anna Zukowski on October 8, 2003 at the University of Texas at Brownsville, for the U.S. Latino & Latina World War II Oral History Project, University of Texas at Austin. Used with permission.

Maria Isabel Solis Thomas:
When we went to work in California, my sister and I, we, oh my god . . . there were girls there, oh my god, from all over . . . They were Italians or they were Portuguese or whatever, but then there were a lot of Mexican girls, real nice girls. They, like I say, they were from Denver, Colorado, they came from Seattle, Washington, they were, well, they was far from Pennsylvania, there was some girls that came from over there ‘cause their families had moved there and I went to work in a shipyard we met all these girls from all over and we were staying in these, ah, we ourselves in these girls dormitories.

When we went over there, realize real neat, everything was so beautiful we thought oh, it looked like when you’re in school, in girls’ dormitories, you go someplace else you know all the girls and it was so beautiful, everybody friendly and conversing with one another and all of that, but I’ll assure you one thing that I would say that about at least 40% of the people that were there they were Mexicans—Mexican girls. We got up at three o’clock in the morning, got ready by five, took off at five, ‘cause we have to be at work by six but we stop on our way at a little restaurant and had breakfast, and took our lunch, and whatever, and went to work.

Interviewer: So what kinds of things were you doing at work?
Maria Isabel Solis Thomas: Oh well we had to . . . it was dangerous . . . and it was dangerous and, ah, we, ah wherever there was needed . . . see . . . it concerns us . . . was pipes . . . nothing else . . . plate was somebody else who had to weld the plates and different things. We, it was the pipes, the pipes on the railings, pipes that were the water pipes, this pipe, whatever pipe, and the most, how can I say, delicate and stuff it was a tiny, tiny little pipe that came in the front of the ship and it was a little stand like this, a platform on the top you know with the holes on it or whatever . . . it stood on a base no higher than . . . and oh my god. And then they wanted me to get under there, in the center, there was a little pipe coming out, that, well, was the radar. And it’s very delicate. And you have to know precise, exactly precise how to strike the rod and at the same time how to weld around, clear around it and seal it, see, ‘cause it had to be sealed. And not to make a hole, not to do damage to it.

And oh my goodness . . . and we were really, we were very thin, we were very small, just kids, like I say kids, but we were very thin. We were always playing . . . making exercise and what . . . I think that’s why, and we walked a lot, and so we were very thin, short and thin, but then we have to wear all this uniform—this stuff—we wore coveralls, and then we worked, on top we wore. I wish we could have been able to take pictures of ourselves over there . . . we were not allowed--not in the shipyard or any place around there—nobody could take pictures. There was a war going on, you ain’t gonna be taking pictures of no shipyards or anything but anyway . . .

Interviewer: But World War II had already started?

Maria Isabel Solis Thomas: It was under full force. There was in [19]44 there was in full force, and that’s why they needed us to go and help ‘em build these ships, to get ‘em out, ‘cause they needed the ammunition, they needed the food, and [to] transport these boys where they had to go, okay?

And so, like I say at that time, to crawl under there, and with all of this mess that you had, so I had to take just about everything, all these things off, and just a hood, in my glasses they give you, so that you won’t burn your eyes and get under there, crawl under there, and seal it. I was so proud, ‘cause man, I did it just exactly the way they wanted to, and here I come up and [they say] “Hi Shorty, you did pretty good!” [Laughs] But anyway, at the same time, it was fun for us you know, crazy kids, but at the same time we were very proud that we were doing something good, something to help, to help the boys really, we never thought about being patriotic or being . . . because we were doing it for our country
though we believed that we were helping these boys, these young men that were out there and were going out over there. 'Cause and we see 'em when they were shipped out and oh, their sad faces and everything, it was very hard. And so I don’t know, it’s . . . I can’t explain, but it’s very hard. It’s very hard. And so if we’re going over ___[?]____, I was wearing little bitty earrings that had a tiny little bitty cross, and he looked right at me so funny, and he says “Can you give me one of your earrings?” I looked at my earrings and said, “Oh boy,” and my sister looked at me and I look at--we’re standing there like fools you know—but I had the turban, and at the same time I guess it come out and you could see it I was always wearing earrings, my goodness, for my sister always used to say “She’s got no shoes on, but she’s gotta wear earrings.” So anyway, and so I felt sorry for him, and I took it off and gave it to him, and then the other boy, it was the other sailor that was there, you see they were crossing they were going into their ship, he says “How ‘bout the other one?” I said OK so I took it out and I gave it to the other boy. We never seen them again, I don’t know who they were or whatever, but anyway it was sad . . . it was sad. Anything, any little thing, it means something to them. Maybe to remember the girls who were there or whatever, but uh . . .

**Interviewer:** Did you have a lot of contact with the soldiers?

**Maria Isabel Solis Thomas:** No. No, no, no, no this is when they were boarding their ship. See, they brought in their ships when they were damaged . . . in there and we got to see ‘em. It was very sad. But then . . . but then . . . no, no, our job was to do the work, to do the work there wherever we were needed, whether at the top of the deck, whether it was to the bottom or on to the boiler room, everywhere we were needed we went. This was, it was dangerous, it was because there were some places that were very, very dangerous, even for a man, and yet we kids went and did the job without even, without a second thought. That’s what they needed, we were gonna do it. And thanks be to God everything was fine. We were both fine, and in fact and like I say on some of these . . . that’s when we had the rest, then we would go and visit or go into San Francisco, we just a few miles from there. Pick up the bus and go with a whole bunch of girls . . . Lina, Rosa, Virginia, this that girls from all over the country, I tell you it was like this . . . all women!