RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT B. IMMORDINO

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Patrick Lazarus: This begins an interview on April 22, 2004, with Mr. Robert Immordino in Lawrence Township, New Jersey, with Sandra Stewart Holyoak and Patrick Lazarus.

Sandra Stewart Holyoak: Thank you, Mr. Immordino, for taking time to talk with us today. To begin the interview, could you tell us a little bit about your father and mother, how they met?

Robert Immordino: Well, my father came here when he was around eighteen years old, I think, in the early 1900s. He worked in New York for a while. He had a job on--he was, "put on the train," he says--and he traveled a day and a night. Wherever it ended up, there must've been some train wreck or some train disaster of some kind, but all he knew was that they were virtual slaves. They had to shift for themselves. They didn't eat too well.

The way he escaped from his [predicament] (he and his brother) is that when the overseer, [who] was Italian, he told them that they could go home for Christmas. When they did go home for Christmas, they decided to go where they were supposed to have been hired. There was an Italian who used to exploit the immigrants. When they went to get paid, they were paid a lot less than they were told they were going to get paid. When they started to complain, they were told to keep quiet or they'd have trouble. That was the end of that experience.

For a while, he said, he worked in New York. When he came here, the time was the Depression and all his work was firing up the stoves for some Jewish families on Saturdays. He used to get every bit of fifty cents for that, he said, but he was living with his sister in New York. Then, he later went to work in the coal mines in Pennsylvania, which he didn't like. After a few years, he decided to go back to Italy.

[Editor's Note: Mr. Immordino's father may have worked through several economic downturns--the 1899-1900 recession, the 1902-04 recession, the Panic of 1907, the Panic of 1910-1911, and/or the Recession of 1913-1914--prior to the Great Depression period from 1929 to the eve of World War II.]

He got married and came back again, a few years later. Then, in the meantime, my sister was born, after they were married. He sent for my mother sometime later. She came over around, I don't know, it was 1912, '13, and then, I was born. I was the first one born here. My sister had been born in Italy and I was born in 1914. So, that's pretty much what happened there.

SH: What part of Italy were they from?

RI: They were from Sicily, central Sicily. It's a place called Villalba. It's in the province of Caltanissetta, which, by coincidence, is where we invaded during World War II. I mean, they went through this town. You know our success (the American success in World War II in Sicily) was because we had made a deal with the Mafia. That's why we were able to make the progress we did in Sicily.

I don't know how much you know about what happened in Sicily. The English were supposed to take up the east coast and Patton came in through and went all the way around to Palermo. They were supposed close off and seal off the Germans, but the English had trouble and they managed

to get there too late. Patton got there in time, but the Germans got across and escaped from there. By coincidence, I found (I investigated) that, on the fiftieth anniversary of the invasion of Sicily, the first American to land in Sicily was a man from Trenton, New Jersey, a Navy man from Trenton. [Editor's Note: The Invasion of Sicily, codenamed Operation HUSKY, commenced on 9-10 July 1943.]

SH: Really? For the tape, we should say in advance that Mr. Immordino is quite a historian in his own right. [laughter] Tell us about your family in Italy. Were there stories that you were told as a young man growing up?

RI: Well, not too much, because we never knew our grandparents, my parents' parents. They came here and they never saw their parents, our grandparents, again after they came and settled here. So, I went to Sicily after World War II with Jerre Mangione.

We went to the hometown and we saw some of our cousins that were still living. Most of my uncles and aunts were all gone or they had moved out, because, after the war, the Italians had to go in northern Italy or up in France or Switzerland to find work. Some of them ended up in northern Italy and, I understand, did pretty well. They were in the resort industry up in northern Italy. I never got to know them, just the ones that I met in Sicily, in the town called Villalba.

SH: Was one of your father's sisters already in the States?

RI: Yes. She had come here and it was an arranged marriage. She'd married somebody in New York City. That's where my father came to live when he first came here, with another brother, but, then, he also had a brother who wasn't admitted to the United States. He ended up going to South America, into Argentina.

The story we heard was that he was killed, because his wife had a man on the side, I guess. Somewhere, they ended up killing him down in Argentina, [laughter] but my father then sent for two of his brothers, one of whom started a bakery business and [was] very successful at it. He actually had a delicatessen, and then, a bakery store in Trenton.

SH: Did any of your mother's family come to the United States?

RI: Just the cousins, which we met. They were up in Lodi, a cousin, and then, she had another cousin up in Niagara Falls, but none of her sisters or brothers came. They're the ones we met when we went to Sicily. It would be the children of one of her sisters.

SH: Did they ever talk about how your parents met?

RI: No, I don't seem to remember how they met. I don't know. My sister just (she was in her nineties) died about a year ago and, somehow, never [said], as far as I know. I know I taped them. Maybe it's on the tape; I don't recall. I don't recall about how they met.

SH: Where were you living for most of your younger life?

RI: Well, I lived in what we called North Trenton, around where the Helene Fuld Hospital is. I don't know if you're familiar with the Helene Fuld Hospital in Trenton. We moved several times, I remember, in a small period of time. I remember, finally, my mother put her foot down. I think they moved three or four times within a matter of three or four years and my mother finally put her foot down. Then, my father finally found a house, where we lived for a good many years after that, until I got married, until the '40s.

SH: What was he doing then?

RI: Well, he had a number of jobs. He didn't have [many] skills. My father didn't have any education. He couldn't read or write. My mother was able to read and write. He had a series of jobs. I remember one--he was driving a wagon for some brickyard company. Another time, he was just working pretty much as a laborer, and that was the job he had during the Depression.

We were lucky because he worked all during the Depression, twelve hours a day, seven days a week. He worked in a place called Trumbull Electric Company. They made bathroom accessory-ware and electrical things, insulators and things like that, that electricians used at that time. That's pretty much the kind of work he did and, of course, my mother was a housewife.

SH: Were you and your sister the only children?

RI: I had a brother and two sisters, and one sister had died also. She was pretty young. So, my brother was a little younger than me. I was, of course, the second one. Then, I had a sister (who later died of diabetes) who came after me, then, my brother, and then, another sister. That last one is the only one that's still living besides me. She's living in Florida.

PL: Where did you attend high school?

RI: Well, I went to junior high school until ninth grade, and then, the Depression started. So, my father pulled me out to work, which is the thing that they did, and I went to work. I remember, I was not quite fifteen.

I worked in a place called (Jay's Bombers?), which was a Newark company that came to Trenton. They sold bathroom accessories, the toilet holders and the grab rail and the soap holders, that kind of stuff. It was very interesting that they used to have on their billing, "Nobody under sixteen years of age was employed here," [laughter] but that didn't apply to me. That was the first job I had, I think--yes, that was. Then, I got a job during the Depression, picking apples for a dollar-and-a-half a day, that kind of stuff.

SH: Did your family talk about politics at all?

RI: No, my family wasn't political at all. We had no politics. I didn't become politically-conscious until much later, after I went to night school. I went to ninth grade. Then, several years later, I got tired of hanging out in the smoke room, poolroom, and I went to night school to finish up, got my high school education going to night school.

SH: Congratulations.

RI: And I repeated the ninth grade over again, which made it easy. So, I just put in four years. Several of those years, you just walked back and forth from what we called North Trenton to Trenton High School, which you wouldn't dare do these days. [laughter]

SH: What made you realize how important education was?

RI: Well, I guess, first, I got sick and tired of eating smoke, hanging around in the poolroom. So, I decided, as an escape, to go to night school. Then, when I went to night school, we had the best teachers there was in Trenton High. I don't know how much you know about the Trenton school system, but we had excellent teachers.

One night, one of the teachers, who had a habit of going off and talking about things, began to talk about a book called *100,000,000 Guinea Pigs.* Right away, (I remember saying the population was a hundred-and-some million in the United States at that time) I said, "That's me." So, I investigated that and I found out that the authors of that book were fellows by the name of Schlink and Kallet, that they ran a place called Consumers' Research up in Washington, New Jersey. I became a member of that and I was then going to save the world for the consumer.

[Editor's Note: *100,000,000 Guinea Pigs: Dangers in Everyday Foods, Drugs, and Cosmetics* by Arthur Kallet and F. J. Schlink first appeared in 1933.]

Then, they had a strike. That's when Consumers' Union was formed. That was a strike from that. Kallet went with the employees and they started Consumers' [Union]. I was one of the first thousand members of Consumers' Union. [Journalist] Heywood Broun and a lot of those others supported all the employees of that strike. Eventually, Consumers' Research went out of business, but, now, Consumers' Union continues. That's how I got involved with that.

[Editor's Note: Schlink co-founded (with Stuart Chase) Consumers' Research in 1929. Kallet joined its board in 1930. In September 1935, Consumers' Research workers attempted to organize a union and went out on strike. Kallent and Colston Warne led the pro-labor faction in leaving Consumers' Research to found Consumers Union. Consumers Union began publishing *Consumers Union Reports* in May 1936 (both later became known as *Consumer Reports*).]

Then, I was going to night school. One night, while I was going to save the world for the consumer, some teacher grabbed me and says, "I want to talk to you after school." He told me that I was going to lose all my friends if I didn't stop talking about consumers. He led me to a cooperative club, which the teachers, at that time, in Trenton had formed for self-protection. They had organized a buying club. By the way, they organized the first Federal Credit Union in the State of New Jersey. I got involved with that cooperative club.

I remember, this was when I first began to get politically-conscious. This one teacher told me to go see this person, who was another teacher, and he was the one [who] sort of was running the cooperative or buying club. I remember him looking at me and saying, "Oh, Immordino." He

says, "Are you a Fascist?" and I didn't know what a Fascist was, but I knew, by the way he asked the question, it wasn't good. I says, "No, not me." [laughter]

So, that's when I began to become politically-conscious and got involved with groups that were anti-Fascist. I mean, of course, that sort of developed a split between me and my father. My father was somewhat of a nationalist. He was for [Benito] Mussolini and I was all *gung ho* against Mussolini and his gang. So, that's when I'm beginning to [develop my views].

From that, I got involved in the labor unions, with the teachers' union. They organized the teachers' union, too. At that time, it was not fashionable for the teachers belonging to the teachers' association to even think about joining a union. That was "unprofessional." Of course, today, the teachers' unions are as militant as the other unions. [laughter]

SH: Tell us a little bit about the discussions with your father. Did you stay in contact with your family in Italy?

RI: Well, actually, my father worked most of the time. I mean, as I say, he worked twelve hours a day for a long time, seven days a week. So, we didn't see him too much. When he came home, I guess he had a lot of chores to attend to around the house. So, we never had a chance much to discuss [things]. We had no discussions, unlike my wife's [family]; my wife's family was very political. They were all Socialists back in Italy, [laughter] but my father's family was not political at all. So, we never discussed much of that at all.

I later got involved in politics during the Depression. I got involved with a group called the Young Republicans. You had to have a lot of guts to become a Republican in the days of Roosevelt, [laughter] but I didn't know any different. So, I got involved with Young Republicans.

SH: Were there discussions about Roosevelt and, if so, what were they like?

RI: Well, then, of course, when Roosevelt came in, my father began [to support him], because, by this time, he had had it at work. Roosevelt was the savior at that point. Of course, we knew things. I had gotten involved with unions, too, by this time. We even organized the plant where my father worked. We lost the election, but I got involved with the early CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] days. We had a sit-down strike to convince the employer that we meant business. So, that was an experience.

I was the president of the union and another fellow was the vice-president. We were stupid enough--we didn't know how to protect the officers--with the result that, in 1938, there was a recession. So, the boss laid us off and he made sure he wouldn't rehire me. Then, the other fellow, who was the vice-president, ended up getting a job at General Motors. They had just started a new plant in Trenton. He did well. He ended up being a general foreman at General Motors, but I left that place.

Again, I was active with the Republicans, so, I was able to get a job with the Highway Department for a while. My father, in the meantime, when we lost the election, he ended up

being out of work there at his place, too, even though he had worked there many years. So, that's how I got involved with the unions.

SH: Was he supportive of you at that point?

RI: Well, of the union, yes, at that point, because Roosevelt created the climate for the union, because he said, "If I were a worker, I would join a union." [laughter] So, that became very fashionable. Of course, we had a lot of legislation protecting unions in those early days.

SH: Did you or any of your family ever take advantage of any of the New Deal programs?

RI: Well, no, we never did, because my father worked until this [downturn]. It must've been 1938 or '39, around there, when my father finally lost his job there. So, up to that point, where other people or their families [were] being dispossessed, we had food on the table. My father worked hard for that. He was a hard worker. He was a good provider. There's no question about that.

SH: Was your brother also pulled out of school to work?

RI: No, my brother went to high school. He went through high school. He graduated from high school, but he was never able to go to college. He had the abilities, but my father didn't have the money. He even went to my uncle, who had a bakery shop, which my father had brought over here, but my uncle wouldn't listen to my brother. [laughter] Well, that was the [times].

SH: What about the girls in your family? Were they educated?

RI: Well, my older sister, again, was pulled out of school early. She had to go to what they called continuation school and work at the same time. So, although she was pretty smart, she had native intelligence, she didn't get any formal education. I had another sister who, I think, only went to eighth grade.

Well, none of my sisters graduated from high school, as I remember. Well, it just wasn't--my father, he didn't know. He didn't have any education, so, it was one of those things that nobody sort of looked after us. As I said, the only reason I went to night school was because I got tired of eating smoke in the poolroom. [laughter]

SH: You were so young to be involved in the union and have such leadership positions, were you not? Was everyone else involved also very young?

RI: Well, I guess I was socially-conscious, you'd say. I got involved with creating playgrounds in the neighborhood, with kids and for kids, and so forth. I guess I was a little bit of a leader of some kind. We organized clubs in the neighborhood to keep the kids away from getting into crime and that kind of stuff. So, that's what happened to me.

SH: Working at such a young age, were you involved in sports at all?

RI: No, I was never, just what we played on the street. We played wicket on the street. We'd hit a stick or a pussy. You'd hit the thing and play on the field; maybe baseball, but not too much. I was not too much involved with sports of any kind, organized sports.

SH: Where your family settled, were there other Italian-speaking people?

RI: Oh, yes, it was a neighborhood. It was that the first one (Italian family) would move in, then another. Then, the Germans and the Irish would move out, that kind of thing. [laughter] That's the way it developed and became a very, very "small Italy." It was not this big part in Trenton. The big Italian community was Chambersburg, was around the Roebling plant.

In North Trenton, where I lived--again, you have to define North Trenton, because it could be anywhere from the Battle Monument to the Brunswick Circle--we lived around Paul Avenue, which is where the church was, that Catholic church. So, that was the neighborhood that I came from. It was almost every one of the houses of the Seventh, Eighth, Ninth, Tenth Streets in and around Helene Fuld Hospital. They were all Italian, yes. It's the way that became.

It was a pretty well-knit community. Again, we had fellows that ended up in crime because there were no playgrounds in our neighborhood. Nobody was looking after the kids. Some of them ended up in jail and one of them ended up being electrocuted, because they got involved and they killed somebody. So, that was part of the neighborhood, but we managed. Most of the kids in the neighborhood managed to keep out of crime.

PL: Was a large part of the community based around the Catholic church?

RI: Yes. There was a Protestant church, but that was a small one. That was sort of a Pentecostal church. They were people who were Catholics before. They left the Church and became their own group, but it was a small group. It was not that big. Most of them were Catholics; at least they attended the Catholic church.

Then, there was a Catholic school there, too. I went to the Catholic school for one year, and then, part of a second year. Then, I didn't like the way they treated me. So, I just walked out, and then, went down and signed up at the public school. [laughter]

SH: Did your family often go to church?

RI: Well, my father very seldom went to church, because he worked. [laughter] If he ever was home on a Sunday, he had other things to do. My aunt, who was married to my uncle who had the bakery shop, I remember, we used to hate to go visit them on Sunday, because, if we didn't go to church, the first thing she would say is, "You go to church?" Then, we'd have to admit we didn't. So, we just kept away from her, [laughter] but, outside of that, it was nothing real strict [in regards to] church attendance.

SH: Were you ever subjected to any sort of bias because you were Italian?

RI: Oh, sure. As a matter of fact, as recently as when I worked here in Lawrence Township, at different times, different places, it would express itself in different ways, sure. Well, just when you think it's over, it's not over, because, just a couple days ago, I met a fellow who was a veteran of World War II. I just found out he was at Okinawa when I was there. He tells me that some woman walked up to him recently and says, "You're Italian--are you a member of the Mafia?" As I say, it's still [there].

Incidentally, some lady just wrote an excellent article, best one I've seen, on why there should be Italian-American studies and why they're [important], to refute the stereotyping of Italians. It's the best one I've seen. She's a PhD and she's connected with the Order of Sons of Italy [in America]. I had met her once before. I wrote an article on the St. Joseph's Table. That was a custom that the people (the Sicilians) had. She had belonged to another group in Washington and she was responsible for publishing that article that I had.

SH: Tell us about the St. Joseph's Table.

RI: Yes, well, the St. Joseph's Table, it's a custom where a family faced with a crisis, in the course of a year, would pray to St. Joseph, because St. Joseph was the Sicilian patron saint. If their prayers were answered, meaning that they successfully went through, whether it was a sickness or whatever problems in the family, then, they would agree to have a St. Joseph's Table, which was then made up of several different places, could be anywhere from four, six, eight, ten placements.

They'd have large breads shaped into the "Joseph's Beard" or the Baby Jesus. The bread, with Sicilian bread, they were able to do that because of the way it was made. Then, they'd have all fruits and vegetables all over the table. They would invite poor people to come and they would feast them there. At the end of the day, each one would take off their portion of the bread and that would be brought to their family. That's what happened.

My mother had a table, I remember, one time. I think she had got sick. Then, my father had a table at the end of World War II. His name was Joseph, so, he prayed to St. Joseph that my brother and I [would] come back alive from World War II. After that, he had a table and that picture, we've had around [here]. Then, we've written about that.

Then, what has happened, as the custom began to fade off, as people died, then, they began to have a community table at the church, a rather large table. I've got pictures of some of that stuff. So, that was the custom of a St. Joseph's Table. Then, they used to have a St. Joseph's Feast, the parade and bands and stands and foods and that kind of stuff, but that's what that St. Joseph's Table was about.

SH: Were there other family customs that came from Italy?

RI: Oh, yes. There's one there--that's for St. Lucy's. I think that's December 13th. They'd cook up wheat berries. They'd just cook them up and just sweeten them with either honey or sugar. That would be one thing and that was supposed to be something [where] they would pray to St. Lucy. I think there was supposed to have been a bad year for their crop and the towns were

almost starving. Then, suddenly, a ship shows up with a bunch of wheat. From that, that's the way I understand the custom goes. So, that was one custom.

Another one had to do with the dead, around sometime in October, around somewhere near maybe Halloween Day, had something to do with the dead. It's sort of vague to me, but I remember this--they used to have little superstitious things, that they'd knock things around the table to drive out the spirits and all that kind of stuff. So, that continued for until most of the older people died off. Then, the younger ones, some carried it [on], but most of them are slowly petering out, unfortunately, but there were a lot of nice customs that they had.

Others, they would make [special foods]. Easter, you would have special kinds of breads and pastries and stuff like that, cannolis and other delicacies that they would make, plus, the regular food. That's when we'd have chicken maybe once a year or something like that. [laughter] Otherwise, you would be eating beans and lentils and that kind of stuff, some vegetables. Well, even in Italy, I understand, they don't get that much meat. Meat is a small portion of the meal. At least that's what I understood.

When we went--as I say, I went to Sicily in, oh, I think the late '70s--well, I went twice. So, my brother-in-law, my wife's brother, ran a tourist business. He used to call it a "cultural safari." [laughter] He did a good job. Then, I went with this Jerre Mangione. I don't know if you're familiar with him. He was a writer. He was a well-known writer. He died not too long ago. You may have heard [of jazz musician] Chuck Mangione; well, that's his uncle. [laughter]

[Editor's Note: Gerlando "Jerre" Mangione (1909-1998), a journalist and professor of literature at University of Pennsylvania, produced works focused on the Sicilian-American experience.]

SH: You organized your father's business in 1939, but he lost his job. At that point, the war had already begun in Europe. How aware of those circumstances were you here in America?

RI: Of the war, you mean? Well, of course, by this time, I was involved with this, what was called the American Committee Against War and Fascism. So, I was really *gung ho* against Mussolini and his gang. Of course, Hitler, we knew what was going on. Of course, my father, again, he was a nationalist. He was sort of supporting his country, until the war broke out.

[Editor's Note: The American League against War and Fascism, founded in September 1933, initially included a range of liberal and pacifist organizations, including the NAACP, the League for Industrial Democracy and the American Communist Party. Conflict between the Communists and Socialists drove out many non-Communist groups. The organization rechristened itself as the American League for Peace and Democracy in 1937, but disbanded after the German-Russian Nonaggression Pact was signed in 1939.]

Of course, then, they had to, I guess, try to hide their [past affinity], but there were Fascist groups organized. I remember, there was a Fascist club that was organized down in our neighborhood. They had a club and a big sign up there [that read], "United States Fascists" and that kind of crap.

SH: Really? It was that open.

RI: Oh, well, one of the biggest Fascist rallies was held up here in North Jersey, at the Filippini Sisters, Walsh (it's called Villa Walsh), up in Morristown, somewhere up in town. That was one of the biggest Fascist gatherings in New Jersey, yes, sure. [Editor's Note: Over ten thousand people attended this rally on August 16, 1936.]

There were other Fascist-minded groups around, too. Well, even in Princeton, here in Princeton, I'm involved in something up in Princeton called Dorothea's House, which was something that was built expressly for the Italians of Princeton. That's quite a long story--it's an interesting story--but they had a Fascist group organized there. They would all dress up in black shirts, but I think most of them were just nationalists, more so than ideological Fascists, because, after all, most of them were working people and Mussolini didn't treat working people too well. [laughter]

SH: Would it be fair to say that Franklin Roosevelt was not supported in his push to enter the country into war before Pearl Harbor?

RI: Well, I don't know. I don't think there was--well, I lived through it. So, you didn't feel you were [obligated], although you felt for what was happening in Europe. You knew Hitler was no good. When Mussolini went in and stabbed the French in the back, we knew you were moving in that direction, but you hoped that you weren't going to get involved in the war.

I remember, my thinking [was], World War I happened in Europe, so, I said, "If a World War II breaks out, I'm going to go to Australia." Well, I went almost to Australia, but not as a tourist. [laughter]

SH: There were a lot of isolationists as well.

RI: Oh, yes, but the people around Roosevelt and the supporters of the America Firsters, I don't think were as powerful as they would like to believe they were. They had some support, but I don't think that they were--certainly were not a majority, I don't think. At least that's not my feeling.

SH: Lindbergh did not have any influence at all.

RI: I don't think too much. He had some, but [not] much. Obviously, he didn't. He didn't prevail, because Roosevelt and his supporters, they were pretty strongly supported. Again, even the left-wing parties, they were in there. They had their influence over [events]. Whether it was the Socialists, the Communists or the Trotskyites, they all had their influence in things.

[Editor's Note: The America First Committee, founded by R. Douglas Stuart, Jr., then a Yale Law student, in September 1940 became the most prominent of the isolationist organizations in the pre-Pearl Harbor period, due to the stature of its spokesperson, famed aviator Charles A. Lindbergh, an outspoken isolationist.]

So, they were certainly all against that gang, although they hated each other. Each was the worst enemy of the other one, but they somehow worked together. That, plus, I think, most middle-of-the-road people, sort of kept them (kept the America Firsters) at bay, I think.

SH: Was there any discussion of the Spanish Civil War?

RI: Well, I remember--not being involved--but being interested in supporting the Spanish Civil War, because we knew that that was only the opening gun of [a larger war]. Here, Mussolini and Hitler were in there supporting [the Fascists] and here was a democratic government that even our government wasn't even supporting.

So, that's when it went down the drain, but, again, that was part of the politics of the day. I remember, I still had some buttons (and I got rid of them not too long ago) of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and all that kind of stuff. I used to support them in whatever they [needed].

[Editor's Note: The Abraham Lincoln Brigade was a group of American volunteers that fought against Francisco Franco's Nationalists during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).]

SH: You had it.

RI: Yes. Well, as I said, because I had belonged to this--it was called the American League Against War and Fascism. Some people say it was Communist-oriented, but I never saw it. To me, it was democratic with a small "d," and that's all I was concerned about.

SH: Tell us where you were and what you remember about Pearl Harbor.

RI: Well, I remember very well where I was when Pearl Harbor was hit, because I was here. Actually, I was not living here--I was living in Trenton. Well, when we got married, my wife and I, we got married on March 16, 1941. Now, Pearl Harbor didn't take place until nine months later. So, when I got married (the draft had been started), it was with the understanding that I was going to be drafted. That's what we [assumed].

[Editor's Note: The Selective Service Act of 1940 required all twenty-one to thirty-five-year-old males to register for the draft. Japanese forces attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, thrusting the United States into the Second World War.]

We were visiting some friends just a couple miles down the road here, down by the circle. We were sitting there and we got word, while we were sitting in the room there, socializing, that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. That's when I first got word; we got word. Of course, we knew that something bad was going on.

It's interesting what happened about that time, too, because I had been involved with the union since 1936, '37, '38, these CIO unions and the Electrical Workers Union. That's where we organized this union. Now, when the war breaks out, General Electric had a plant in Philadelphia [that] made switch gear for ships. There was a plant in Trenton that made springs

for the automobile industry called Allied Young. They were organized under the UAW [United Auto Workers]. Of course, when the war started, all that stuff stopped.

Now, General Electric was taking this plant over, but they did not want to get involved [in a labor dispute]. They had already had a contract with the Electrical [Workers] Union of the CIO. They did not want to get involved in any potential jurisdictional battle with the UAW, even though they were out of the plant. So, what they did, believe it or not, they went to the national headquarters of the Electrical Workers Union and said to them, "Find somebody in Trenton that will come in here and make sure we organize this union under our contract." I'm the guy that was picked. [laughter]

So, our job was--I had a job, not making too much, but I got a job working with GE. We cleaned out the plant. I was working with the maintenance department. Then, it was my job to make sure that everybody came in and joined the union under the United Electrical Workers (CIO) union contract. That's what we did.

So, that's where we got involved there, but an interesting thing developed out of that, too, was that I found, after a while, that I was the only Italian in the place. Part of the contract provided that the company would provide the union with a list of all the employees that are hired. Then, I worked in the maintenance, so, it was not much--I got around. So, I kept wondering why there were no other Italians in there.

I knew General Electric. Of course, General Electric was a progressive company (at least at that time it was, had a reputation) and I said, "Couldn't be the company policy." So, my sister and a lot of her friends kept applying for jobs and nobody [was] being hired. So, I found out when they went and applied. These new people would come in; I'd say, "When did you apply?" They would apply weeks afterward.

At that time, there was a committee formed in Trenton to keep the heat off the Italians because of the war, at least the loyal Italians (Italian-Americans). We were part of the Philadelphia local union. The president of the union, I knew him pretty well. In that case, I would call him up. One day, I called him to tell him what was going on and that I was going to go to this committee and blow the thing wide open. Again, I said I knew that the company, their policy, [was not to blame].

So, the next thing I know, the next day, I'm called in by the manager of the Trenton plant and the superintendent. They say to me, "We hear…" because this president of the union down there was close to the manager, who later became president of GE. He passed the word down here. When they called me in, I played dumb. I said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

They said, "Well, we know [about the issue]. You give us their names and we'll hire them right away," and I said, "No, you've got people who have applied, your personnel file--go to the personnel file and go." Well, it's just like pulling the cork out of a bottle. They started to come in. That's how they started.

What they found out afterwards is that General Electric had taken over the personnel manager of the Allied Young Company, which didn't hire Italians. He was carrying on the same policy. Of course, GE, quietly, they arranged for that man to be transferred someplace else. That's how that happened. My sister and others got jobs.

Then, I was too militant and they finally got rid of me. Even though I knew that the war was there and I'd have to do something other than what I was doing (I was working in the maintenance department), I started to go to a welding school. I used to work up until three-thirty, catch a train, go to Philadelphia to the welding school, come back. I then became a welder and I became a production welder.

SH: Where were you working then?

RI: I was working at General Electric.

SH: Back to them again.

RI: I was still working there, all the time. From the time they hired me, I was there. I always worked for them, but I worked in the maintenance department. Then, I became a welder and I got on production. I figured, "Well, that'll be good enough to keep [me out of the draft]."

Well, in the meantime, I had found out that, once you get married, your status could change. I was 1-A (ready to go to the draft), and then, when you got married, you became another status. The war hadn't even started yet. Then, when I got to work for GE, I got deferred, but I was too militant. After a while, they got rid of me, because they used to defer people who'd just drive jitneys. Here, I was, a welder--took a little bit more skill than driving a lift truck [laughter]--but that's what they did.

It's interesting. When the time came for me to be drafted, I was working with a guy. Then, one day, I saw him all dressed up in the Navy uniform. I said, "How come you're going in the Navy?" and he said, "I got it all figured out." I said, "What do you mean?"

He says, "In the Army, they shoot at you. In the Navy, they shoot at your ship and they might miss you." [laughter] "That's pretty good reasoning." So, I made it my business to try to get into the Navy, and that's a long story. So, I ended up getting into the Navy. That's how I got in there.

SH: Tell us the story.

RI: Well, what happened is, when you're inducted, then, they took you out to Camden to be inducted and trained and examined. When I went in with them, you were always escorted by either a Navy chief petty officer or an Army sergeant. So, I saw this Navy petty officer. I fell in alongside of him and I sort of moseyed up to him. I says, "How do you get into the Navy?"

He says, "Why? You want to get into the Navy?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Are you limping?" I said, "Not me." He says, "Oh, I figured you're just amusing me. [When] you get all done with

all the examinations, you get in different lines." So, I made sure I got in the line of the guy that I'd just got done talking to. He's down there answering the questions.

The story was that they would ask you, "You want the Army or the Navy?" If you said, "The Army," they'd put you in the Navy; [if] you said, "The Navy," they would put you in the Army. [laughter] So, I got into this guy's line and he's there, "You want the Army or the Navy?" I said, "Navy." He looked up and all he said [was], "Oh, it's you." The next thing I know, I was in the Navy. [laughter] So, that's how I got into the Navy.

SH: You had married before that. How did you meet your wife?

RI: Well, I met my wife at night school. She was attending night [school]. Her mother had died and she only had six months to go to finish high school. Her sister was going to be training as a nurse and didn't want to stay home. So, she had to leave school to take care of the rest of the kids in the family. So, she started to go to night school, because the classes that she had for the next six months could not be completed in six months. You had to take the whole year

So, I'd met her at night school. I had known her brother, but here she was, this nice girl, real quiet girl, by the room down in class there. She seemed like a nice gal. I eventually asked her out, and then, eventually, got married. That's how I met her. Of course, her brother being a nice guy, I liked, too.

SH: You passed muster with the family then.

RI: Yes, oh, yes, although her father liked--she had a fellow. Well, she only saw him a couple times. He was not Italian. Somehow, her father seemed to be partial to the other guy than to me, but I won out. [laughter]

SH: When did you enlist in the Navy?

RI: Well, I didn't enlist, I was drafted. By the way, I've got all the draft cards, everything. [Editor's Note: Mr. Immordino refers to a scrapbook here and throughout the interview.] It was in October of 1943. When I went into the service, the reason I've got all this stuff is, I was consciously saving a personal scrapbook. As a result, everything that I got my hands on, I saved.

There was only one thing I discarded and I regretted it. When we were out in the Pacific, some sailor wrote some satirical poem about [US Army General Douglas] "Dugout Doug" MacArthur, because, according to this sailor, "He had the ability to walk on the water and he never needed the Navy to get anywhere." [laughter] So, somebody told me it was divisive. Like a fool, I tossed it away, but everything else, I've saved and I could show you stuff. [laughter]

SH: Where did you go to boot camp?

RI: Bainbridge. It was a new boot camp in Bainbridge, Maryland.

SH: You were drafted.

RI: You're drafted, then, you go to boot camp. I was lucky. When I went to boot camp, I was able to type. You're only supposed to stay in boot camp two weeks, and then, they ship you out. There was an opening in the office of the barracks that I was in. The guy, just by coincidence, happened to be from Trenton and I got a job as a yeoman, they call them. That's what they called the typists and clerks, a yeoman. I got a job with him.

As a result, I was there in the barracks, as in the outgoing unit, they called it, at boot camp for about three or four months. So, I was able to stay there. Then, when it came time for me [to leave] (that I knew I was going to be going out), then, I was able to pick a school. I went to a radar school.

SH: Why did you pick that?

RI: Well, that was the best school that I qualified [for] that would keep me out of battles for a period of time. I couldn't get into the electronic technicians--I didn't have the qualifications--where it would be six months or a year, but this one's giving us six weeks. So, that's the best thing I could do.

SH: Where was the radar school?

RI: We went to Virginia Beach. While we're down in Virginia Beach, then, suddenly, they picked a bunch of us and sent us to Washington, down to a place called the Naval Research Laboratory. We were in something called the SPS, Special Projects School. All I know is, you'd see all the other sailors around…

---------------------------------------END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE-----------------------------------

PL: Side two, tape one; please continue.

RI: Yes, well, where was I?

PL: SPS.

RI: Yes, we went to the SPS School, that's right. They told us we were being investigated by the FBI and we're wondering, "What the hell are we in for?" We don't know. All I know is, the next day, we were in this big room. There was hundreds of GIs and I don't know how many officers in the background, and in walks some officer from Washington, half asleep in the morning.

"Good morning, men." "Good morning, sir." The next thing he says, "Any of you have any objections to flying?" With this background, "What the hell is this about?" I swear, if one guy raised his hand, everybody would've raised his hand. So, nobody raises his hand. He says, "Good," and the next thing he says, "Some of you will get posthumous awards." [Sarcastically] "That's nice."

Well, what it was is that we were in something they were newly developing called radar countermeasures. There was a lot of training. We ended up where, a number of weeks, we were there at Washington. We went for a period of time to Ocracoke, North Carolina, where we learned how to deceive the enemy by various ruses we had.

We'd go out on the ocean with small boats, with different things hanging from a balloon, like chicken wire. Of course, the whole idea being, when the radar would hit it, it would create an impression that, instead of being one little boat out there, there's many out there. Then, they used to also have recordings of actual unloading of merchant ships, all the noises going on. The whole thing was that they would create this impression, under the cover of darkness, to deceive the enemy that there's a big fleet out there.

They claimed that they actually worked it against the Germans in Southern France at one point. [Actor] Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., was involved in this stuff, too. So, we had that kind of training. Then, they told us how we would deceive the Germans and they would deceive us, and so forth. There were various ways that we did it. So, that's what I got out of it.

Then, when we're all finished training, we were in Washington for, I don't know, a couple of months, it seems to me. Then, they put us on a train with sleepers, on Pullman trains, and took us to the West Coast, and then, we got on the ship, took us to Pearl Harbor. Then, from Pearl Harbor, they flew us from Pearl Harbor down to New Guinea, where I caught the first ship.

It was something new they had just developed--a communications ship for amphibious warfare. The communications ship had all of the latest communication things--the printing presses and radar, radio--everything that they needed to conduct an invasion. All the communications in the invasion that they would have, amphibious invasion, would originate off of a ship like this. There were several ships that they had. Twice, the ship I was on was in charge of the whole invasion.

SH: Did it have a name?

RI: Yes. It was called (they all were named after mountain ranges) *Mount Olympus* [(AGC-8)], was the one I was on at the first one, when we went to the invasion of the Philippines--the second invasion, not Leyte, but Lingayen Gulf, which is up in the northern part. That's when we first got our first experiences of Japanese suicide planes.

[Editor's Note: On January 6, 1945, an Allied naval force commanded by Admiral Jesse B. Oldendorf began a three-day bombardment of Japanese positions along the coast of the Lingayen Gulf. On January 9th, the US Sixth Army landed between Lingayen and San Fabian to begin the liberation of Luzon.]

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: Go ahead, please.

RI: All right. Where was I here?

SH: Maybe this is a good time to go back and talk about the special radar school in Washington, DC. When you finished there, a Navy lieutenant commander came in and spoke to you.

RI: The one who first came in was a lieutenant commander that told us, "Did we want to fly?" or, "Did we have any objection to flying?" The reason (what he had reference to), some of the guys did get plane duty. Most of us got ship duty. Now, the guys [who] got flight duty, they were supposed to fly in over enemy territory with these what they called a radar receiver, a special piece of equipment that would give you all the necessary information, that a radar operated on this frequency (they called it pulse width), and so forth.

You would go in and record this stuff, so that, then, at the time of the invasion, somebody would determine whether they wanted to jam the enemy radar in advance, you see. That was our function, is to collect this information. Then, somebody would make a decision whether or not to jam the radar. So, of course, you may be jamming some of your own equipment, too. So, that was our main function, what they called the radar countermeasures.

SH: The school was in Virginia Beach.

RI: No, the radar school was in Virginia Beach. The countermeasures school was in, they called it the Naval Research Laboratory in Washington, DC.

SH: Literally in DC.

RI: Yes. That was right in the Navy Yard, or whatever it was; I don't remember. I think it was the Navy Yard. It was a Navy establishment, anyway.

SH: Did you get leave often?

RI: Well, when I was in boot camp, I got a lot of leave. I used to be able to come home and I was in a position where I could get home pretty frequently. Bainbridge was not far from [New Jersey]. I think it was one of the first stops out of Philadelphia on the way to Washington, into Maryland. So, I was able to get leave there. From Washington, there might've been, but I don't think it was too frequently there, while you were in school. Of course, once we got to California, then, there was no leave after that. [laughter]

SH: You talked about the investigation of you and the other men by the FBI.

RI: That's what they told us.

SH: Did your wife tell you if people were here?

RI: No, she never said anything. If they did, she was not aware of it. No, she didn't.

SH: Did you notice any different security measures when you were at the Navy Yard, around the school, as opposed to someplace else?

RI: No. It was no different than when I was going to the radar school in Washington. It's just that these were just rumors we used to hear. It was nothing that [was confirmed]. If the FBI investigated us, we didn't know anything differently about it then.

SH: What did you get to see or do on your trip across the country? What do you remember?

RI: Well, we were on a Pullman train. So, I remember, we got to Chicago, then, from that time, I remember we're sleeping through going over the Rockies. It got cold at night, but we were warmed up there, all of us. It was good duty. Most of the other guys, they would go out there in just coaches, but we had Pullmans. We had special treatment.

We soon found out we were special, and especially when we got to Pearl Harbor. When we got to Pearl Harbor, then, they put us in a small group, put us on a plane and flew us from Pearl Harbor all [the way] down the Pacific and across the Equator. By the way, I crossed the Equator four times and once by ship. [laughter]

SH: Tell me about Pearl Harbor. Were you able to see any of the destruction that had been caused by the Japanese attack?

RI: Well, there was no evidence of it by now; got there [in] '44, because I went in in October of '43. So, it was '44 (and I think late in '44) when we got out there, because the invasion of the Philippines, the second one, was on January 9th, so that it was late '44. I've got all of those dates down. I've got them all marked down. I used to mark it down then, but that's how we got to Pearl Harbor.

When I was in Pearl Harbor, I met for the first time the first guy from Trenton. I met him all over the place out there. Then, we went to the Philippines, the invasion of the Philippines. Then, we came back to Pearl Harbor. While I was in Pearl Harbor, then, you wait for your next assignment. They give you all kinds of dirty deals.

I remember being on leave one weekend. Coming back to the barracks, I heard two chief petty officers mentioning a fellow by the name of Joe Fishberg. I said, "Joe Fishberg?" and I said, "Was he an attorney?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Where will I find him?" So, I went to find Joe Fishberg [a Trenton-based lawyer and, later, federal bankruptcy judge]. He was a lawyer and he was working in censoring. So, he says to me, "Do you want to stay for a week as a censor?" "Well, that's better than pushing wheelbarrows around."

So, for a week, I was a censor and I learned the tricks of the [trade]. Some of these censors--you've got guidelines and you can be liberal about interpreting things--some of the guys, they would tear up these guys' letters. It's like putting the thing in the player [pianos]. I don't know if you remember the player pianos. Some of them might say, "You do that guy a favor--throw it in the wastebasket." [laughter] I learned. I was able to [censor letters]. So, most of the letters that I sent to my wife [were intact].

Incidentally, most of the letters I sent to my wife, I have. I organized them in chronological order. They're in the other room. So, I was able to get away [with a lot], but, when you were in Pearl Harbor, you couldn't say you were. You could say you were in the Hawaiian Islands, but you couldn't say you were on Hawaii, for some reason or other. [laughter] I don't know why, but I got the duty that place from him. I met him.

SH: This type of communications ship was a new idea. What were your duties?

RI: Well, we had special duty. We were attached to what they called a flag. The flag was not part of the regular ship and you would move from one ship to another. We never had the dirty duties that the sailors had, the cleaning ships and paint them. We only came into play when there's going to be an invasion. So, the rest of the time, we had time to ourselves.

It was just four of us enlisted men and an officer. That's what the team [was] composed of. It was two radar operators, a radioman, an electronic technician and the officer. That was the team and we had good duty.

SH: Where were the men from?

RI: Well, one guy was from North Carolina, one guy was from Pittsburgh, and the electronic technician was from Minnesota. The officer was, I think, from--I don't know if it was Maryland or somewhere. He was a good man. He was.

I went to a reunion a couple of years ago and I met the guy that was the electronic technician, who was from Minnesota. He used to be a good friend of [US Senator from Minnesota and Vice President] Hubert Humphrey. [laughter] I'm hoping to go. I haven't been [to a reunion] for four, five years, six years now. There's going to be one in September. I hope to go to this one this year in Branson.

SH: Are the reunions under the names of the ships?

RI: Yes, under the name of the ship. Well, it was funny. When the war was over, we all chipped in--a bunch of guys got together, want a reunion--we all chipped in five bucks. I never heard anything, of course. So, I moved after that, if they tried to reach me after that.

Then, I heard, by accident--oh, yes, what had happened, how I found out about the reunion was, one day, I was subscribing to an Italian newspaper out of Newark and Congressman [Frank] Guarini, from up North Jersey, it said had been on the same ship I was on. So, I wrote to him and told him, "I was on the same ship." I sent him some stuff, because I had written stuff about the experiences on the ship at Okinawa. He let me know about the reunion.

[Editor's Note: Democrat Frank J. Guarini represented the 14th District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1979 to 1993.]

That's how I started to go to [reunions]. I went to two reunions. One was held in South Jersey and one was held in Chicago. They've held them in different places, but this one this year's going to be in Branson, Missouri. So, I plan to go this time.

The ship that I was on (the one in the Philippines) was the *Mount Olympus*. Then, later, we came back to Pearl Harbor. Again, they flew us back down to New Guinea and I caught the ship, the *Mount McKinley* [(AGC-7)]. There's another thing. While I was on the *Mount McKinley*, then, they decided they're going to send me and another guy and put us on a yard minesweeper.

Boy, I died a million deaths. A yard minesweeper, you go in first. You've only got a three-inch gun. Ah, you don't have a chance, but, anyway, it seems that some storm developed and the invasion was delayed. They transferred us back to the "mother ship." [laughter] I was on the *Mount McKinley* and that was good duty. A lot of interesting things happened out of that one when we went to--I don't know if you want me to get into the Okinawa one now or not?

[Editor's Note: The amphibious invasion of Okinawa began on April 1, 1945. The island was declared secure on June 22, 1945.]

SH: Talk about what you did on the *Olympus* first.

RI: Oh, the *Mount Olympus* was very interesting. The Philippines has got all these islands. The invasion, we had to go through Leyte and into all of the series of islands, and then, out into the China Sea. Then, we had to go all the way up. Lingayen Gulf's at the top of Luzon and that's where the Japanese invaded initially. That's what we did.

We sort of feinted that we were going to go towards Formosa. Then, the ships came down and landed into this Lingayen Gulf. Now, the equipment, this whole phase was rather new, so, the equipment that we had, we had no room on there [onboard]. They just put us inside just behind the Captain's quarters. He had a place and there was a hallway behind him. That's where our equipment was, just set up there, just set in there, no room.

I had a lot of room to roam around. Up there on the main deck, there was a big map showing all of the [positions], what was happening on the beaches. On the ship, there was a Filipino guerilla they had brought aboard and I made it my business to talk to him. He let us know that while we were going through all the islands, the Japanese thought we were going to hit Manila. So, they withdrew from northern Luzon down into there, with the result that when our guys invaded and began to hit the beaches, nothing came from the beaches on the first wave, the second wave, the third wave and the fourth wave.

The famous picture of MacArthur walking in, standing up--that's a fake. Nobody was shooting from the beaches. So, they stood over and got that picture, all of them walking in with the water. That's when we first saw that picture for the first time, MacArthur walking in there, standing up. Nobody was shooting at him from the first wave, let alone the fourth wave. [laughter]

It's interesting--the Captain of the ship, he got tired because the people were all walking around his deck. He issued a memo (and I've got a copy of it), "This is the Captain's ship. Nobody's got

any business walking around here." So, he was complaining there was too many visitors. On the main deck, just outside of his office or his room, was this big map, which showed all the progress on the beaches.

So, that's where we were for that one. Then, we were stood there about a week. Again, our job was listen to radar. We had, they called it a radar receiver, and we'd be listening. We had duties, four hours on and four hours off, during the invasion. Otherwise, we were free. They were there about a week, and then, they relieved us.

We went back to Pearl Harbor. Yes, I mean, we were there a couple weeks, and then, they flew us back out again. We ended up in New Guinea. That's when I caught this ship that eventually went to Okinawa. Now, that's a story by itself. [laughter]

SH: When you were finished on the *Olympus*, where did you go to be sent back to Pearl Harbor? Did you go back by ship?

RI: It's all the same ship, no, the same ship. We would come back by the same ship, the *Mount Olympus.*

SH: I thought it was just your group.

RI: Oh, no, the ship came back to Pearl Harbor, see, because, then, they would get another assignment.

SH: You talked about flying there.

RI: Well, when they'd pick up the ship the first time, see. Now, later, after the war was over, the *Mount Olympus*, I saw (somewhere, I've got a clip from the paper) that Admiral Byrd was sent to the South Pole on the *Mount Olympus,* because there was talk about the Russians rushing to the South Pole. It was on the *Mount Olympus,* was this command ship that he went down there.

[Editor's Note: Rear Admiral Richard E. Byrd, Jr., planned Operation HIGHJUMP, commanded from the USS *Mount Olympus*, which took place from August 1946 to February 1947 and established the Little America IV research site in Antarctic.]

Then, when we flew out, everybody in my group was flown out and I was left behind. They were all concerned about me. I got the first experience I got flying when I had to catch up to them. There's an island just outside of (I don't know, a few hundred miles from) Pearl Harbor called Johnston Island, which is the first stop out.

They flew us on a PBY. That's the boat that's got the [pontoons]. Boy, every time that thing would land, you'd think the bottom was being ripped out. They had some trouble with that thing. We managed to survive it, and then, pick up another plane. It took us all the way down to the Pacific, to New Guinea.

SH: Please tell us what you mean when you say you, "had a little trouble with that."

RI: Well, they had engine trouble and they were concerned. They had to stop and repair it, and so forth. I don't know why I was the only one of the group that was left behind, for some reason. Maybe somebody got mixed up in their orders, I don't know, but the rest of my crew went. They were concerned about me. They wondered [what happened].

Of course, I finally show up somewhere around Thanksgiving and I meet them down in New Guinea on this--now, it's the *Mount McKinley* that I came on, which is the ship that eventually went to Okinawa, actually.

SH: Was this the same group of men?

RI: Yes, the same group of fellows that we had. This was four of us and the officer. When we went to New Guinea, we picked up that ship. I told you they took us off for a while. They put me on a yard minesweeper, and then, there was a storm and the invasion was delayed. They brought me back aboard the *Mount McKinley*.

SH: On the sweeper, what would your duties have been?

RI: I guess the same thing as I was on this other [ship], except you would go in first. You see, you go in first and you're supposed to be picking up on enemy radar. You see, that's the [duty]. They'd try to get the [data].

They had something called the frequency and the pulse width and other factors that meant something to somebody who was going to jam. You've got to make sure you're going to jam at the right frequency, [so that] you don't jam your own equipment. So, that's where we were. I mean, again, it was going to be just a small [ship].

SH: Were you training at all during this time?

RI: No. Whatever training we got is what we got at the school, and it wasn't that much. At least for us, it was not that critical. All you do is, you had earphones and you'd listen to, like, a radio, except the information that came out of it was more than just a voice. It would be not only the frequency, but, then, they had what they called the pulse width and other factors.

Radar was relatively new then. It was a rather brand-new thing then, was nothing [well-known]. I saved all kinds of cartoons. I remember, I got one, [there] was a little kid, the wife was complaining to the husband, who worked in the radar, "Explain radar to the kid. Otherwise, he's going to pick it up off the street, off the other kids." [laughter]

SH: Please continue the story.

RI: Well, then, when it came time for the invasion, we started out, I think it was on the 22nd of March. Now, everybody knows that April 1st is the invasion of Okinawa. We were in the area a week before Okinawa, one whole week. This group of islands they seized just off Okinawa there [the Kerama Islands], it's only about fifteen miles from Okinawa. The group of islands, I found

out later that the admiral that was in charge there argued that they should seize these islands before they hit Okinawa. They wanted to establish a seaplane and a logistics base.

So, our [group], we went in on March 26th. That's a week before Okinawa. We were setting in there for [a week] and we now began to get suicide attack planes. Even though Okinawa was over here, Japan is only three hundred miles away. We were just a small group of islands off Okinawa. I got a map and I couldn't find it; I would've showed them to you.

They had picket ships all the way around, 360 degrees. So, the ships would be way out here. If the enemy planes come in, they would pick them up first. Then, they would tell us, and then, we would be alerted. We used to hear on the radios that these planes were coming up. This picket ship would be hit by one Japanese plane or two and would survive; another one would get one and would sink. So, we'd get all that kind of stuff was going on.

I recorded every day how many [times they called] what we called general quarters. They then didn't always come in, but they're close enough. We used to get big air raids on a Thursday. I remember, we used to get five air raids. I've got them all recorded (and it's since been confirmed in another book), but I've got them date-by-date from March 26th down to, I think, May 22nd, we were there.

So, I've got it recorded--all the days, how many air raids, one, two. The only time we didn't have air raids was when it was bad weather, inclement weather. I just counted them the other day. There's only six or seven days [without a *kamikaze* attack] out of that almost two months that we were sitting there.

SH: The picket ships were your only protection.

RI: No, the picket ships are our advanced protection. A lot of times, all we did, especially if they came in at night, they had little boats that generated smoke to create a cloud. That's all that would be [put out], is a cloud of smoke over top of us.

I've since read that our ship nearly got hit more than once. All I knew was that, now, on this ship, they did build a little room for us, but it was nothing. It was like, maybe, an eighth of an inch [of] metal. If they ever came in on that side of the ship and hit us, they'd [have] picked us up with a blotter.

When the guns would go off on the starboard (the starboard is the right side of the ship), well, I figured they had to come through the ship to hit us, but, when the guns used to go off on our side of the ship, "Well…" [laughter] So, we used to wonder what was going on, but I've since read about it, that those two or three times, our ship was very close, near to being hit.

At one time, there was an aerial plane [that] came over during the day. They figured it was photographing, looking for our ship, because they knew it was the command ship. Our ship was in charge of the whole invasion. So, after the plane left, they moved our anchorage from one here way away someplace else, so that if they were looking at their film, they weren't going to be finding us.

While we were there, in the beginning, they found almost three hundred Japanese suicide boats [*Shinyo* motorcraft]. They were the little boats. They were, like, fifteen, eighteen feet long. They carried four-cylinder motors, looked like a Ford motor, and they carried two 250-pound depth charges. They were to come in and get as close to our ships [as possible]. They had the depth charges [set] to go off at five feet, which would blow them up, too. Fortunately, they never got to use them.

SH: Where did they find them?

RI: Most of them were hidden in caves and some were camouflaged on the ground. Now, it may be that they knew--our intelligence found them there--I don't know. All I know is that our Admiral argued, when they argued the invasion [plan], to hit this group of islands, but they found these boats.

Aboard our ship, initially, was the unit of the Army and their PR guy was a guy from Bound Brook, this Italian-American guy. I got friendly with him. With his unit was *Nisei*, Japanese-Americans. I used to be able to walk in and out of their office. One day, I walked into their office and there, in the wastebasket, there was a wastebasket full of stuff and a clump of paper about that thick and about that [large].

Remember now, I'm saving everything I could get my hands on. I said, "What you going to do with that?" and they said, "You want it? Take it." So, I took it, among other things. I didn't think anything about it. I just shoved it into my locker and, I don't know, a week, ten days later, the Navy intelligence officer makes an announcement. He says, "If you've got anything you want to send home, bring it in, get it cleared." So, I grabbed this clump of paper and I brought it into the Navy officer, the intelligence [officer].

Now, he's sitting on this side of the table and I'm sitting over here. He opens this thing up and this thing opens up just bigger than the size of this table. What the Japanese had done, they'd glued together a couple of sounding maps of one of their harbors and on the other side was plain. They painted on there (it was drawn to 1/50,000ths scale) this suicide boat attack plan. They were to attack in groups. They were to organize [in] groups of nine, they'll attack in groups of three. They showed the silhouettes of the [Allied ships].

I don't know--I'm looking on the other side, just see a sounding map. He says, "Where did you get this?" and so, I told him, "I got it in a wastebasket." The next thing he says is, "Admiral [Richmond Kelly] Turner," who was in charge of the whole invasion, "he's been looking for this map." As if I had any choice, I said, "If it gets us home any sooner, he can have it." [laughter]

So, I think that's it. Well, he called me up a couple weeks later and he says, "We found another copy of the map. So, if you want the map, you can have it." So, he gave it to me. I brought it home. I had it home for twenty years in a closet.

Now, Lawrence Township is named after Captain [James] Lawrence [Captain of the USS *Chesapeake* during the War of 1812]. So, I got involved in the Lawrence Township history and I

got curious about Captain Lawrence. So, I had occasion to go to Washington and talk to the Navy historian about Captain Lawrence.

In the process, I happened to casually mention that I have this map home. He says, "Why don't you give it to us?" So, I did. I said, "Just make a photograph of it, so [that] I have it as a [copy]." "Oh, sure, no problem." So, six months later, they sent me this map, and I've got it in the other room. I didn't think anything more of it until twenty more years goes by.

In the meantime, we had an artist who painted a painting of Captain Lawrence, an oil painting. It hangs in the municipal building. The Navy people saw it and they wondered if this man could paint another one. He did and we gave it to the Navy. When this man died (well, this is maybe forty years later), I thought that they ought to know something about the artist whose painting they got. So, I got some background and I send it to them.

In the letter, I says, "Whatever happened to my map?" and they now knew. In the meantime, the Navy historian had died. He was a rear admiral. This man was a civilian and he wrote back and he says, "Come on down. We've got it down here in the Navy museum, on the wall in the Okinawa section of World War II." So, my wife and my two children, we went down.

Sure enough, there's the map over on the wall, but their caption was factually in error--and I think it was deliberately [so]. The map was found by the Army in a cave. They threw it in the wastebasket. I got it. I gave it to the Navy. The Navy says, in their caption, that the Navy found it and that's why it's here. Well, the map, when they sent me the photograph, they acknowledged on the back that I donated it, because the other admiral was still living.

I mentioned to the historian, said, "But, that's factually incorrect." He says, "Well, we'll correct it," and he says, "What do you think?" I said, "Just the facts--it's found by the Army, and then, I gave it to you. That's all." "Oh, no, no problem." So, anyway, to make a long story short, it's never been changed. I'm going back down again in about a week or ten days to see whether they still got it. I've got letters after letters [claiming] that they would correct it and I'm going to pursue it. [laughter]

SH: Good for you.

RI: And there's the map down there. That's my prize memento. I've got all kinds of other [items], interrogation sheets of Japanese that they fished out of the waters and all kinds of stuff. I've got all kinds of money.

By the way, one of the things that I have, in the Philippines (I'll show it to you, if you want to see it later), the Japanese, when they occupied the Philippines, they issued their own money there. Then, I found (and I bought) the guerillas would have their own money, which they used to make out of mimeograph paper on the back of affidavit sheets, which I got them. Then, when we invaded; then, we had our own money. So, I've got some Japanese money, this guerilla money and the American money. [laughter]

I was going to give it to the Philippine Government. Somebody said, "No, give it to the Smithsonian." I don't know what I'll do with it.

SH: Going back to the invasion on March 26th, what could you see?

RI: Well, remember now, during the invasion, we're glued to our work, except for when you go to sleep. You're like, I don't know, four hours on and four hours off. Well, occasionally, I would go outside. One time when I went outside--you're not supposed to, especially when bullets are flying around--but, one time, I went out when it got a little calm. There was (not too far from us) an LST, landing craft, that it was an ammunition ship. It had been hit by a Japanese plane and just began to explode. It was just the Fourth of July all night. All I know is, the next morning, when I looked out there, there was nothing there. The ship had sunk.

Most of the time, when there were air raids, well, everybody was at your own assignment. When there's an air raid, everybody's got a [battle station]--some guys at the guns, wherever it is--but our job was [to get] into that room, that little room. Like I said, the only thing between us and the outside was that maybe, *maybe*, an eighth of an inch steel with some insulation. That was all. That's where I was. So, we couldn't see anything much.

I've read about it since then. Other guys have written about it. Then, when nothing was happening, we'd go out and we could just see water. Well, they would bring in ships there that were hit, too, into the anchorage where we were. A lot of ships that were sunk, that were damaged, were just towed in there and fixed as best they could. Then, they could ship them back to wherever they had to be repaired.

I remember, it was a strange thing, seeing this one ship sitting there and this airplane flying in, a real small airplane with, like, a wheel on the top. It would fly, and then, all of a sudden, it seemed like it was just threading the needle and the plane just stopped, right in the air, just suspended, right. It flew alongside of, like, a merchant ship and just this thing on the top caught it, just like in a needle. I saw a plane like that not too far from here, for years after the war. I'm sorry I never took a picture of it afterward, but that was one of the things I remembered.

Other times, I remember we were watching a movie one Sunday night and we got general quarters, which announces that there's something going on. By the time we climbed out of where we were and got upside, between us and the open sea was another ship. I think it was a hospital ship. This plane had come in low over the water to evade our radar and just flew right into that ship. The only thing between us and them was that ship and it started to go ablaze.

The interesting thing is that when we left Okinawa, our ship came back to Pearl Harbor. They claimed that our captain and another captain tossed a coin. Our ship was going to be refitted for the coming invasion of Japan. So, when we came back to San Francisco, half of the ship got leave and the other half waited until the first half got back. We were in the first half.

I came home and, while I was home, we were in New York City, my wife and I. We were standing on the corner of Seventh Avenue and 34th Street, Macy's. We were waiting for Macy's

to open. We were looking at the Empire State Building when the Empire State Building was hit by a plane. I don't know if you knew about that. This is a bomber.

Well, we were looking at the Empire State Building. We were fascinated, because you could see the top of the Empire State Building. Gradually, the clouds were descending and the top of the building disappearing. I heard an airplane motor. "Crash," a circle of flame go around the building, debris falling off the side--no more airplane motor. So, I deducted that a plane had hit.

Some guy comes running up (and the guy knows everything), "Oh, that was an oil burner." So, I told him what I had observed. "Oh, couldn't be." Well, standing there was a fire alarm box. My wife was petrified. She couldn't move either way. [laughter] Now, the war had been over in Europe, but here we were, wondering. It wasn't long afterwards.

We got our composure and we were walking down the street. Then, a car came by. It had its cover down and it was playing the radio. All of a sudden, it's interrupted by the radio announcer, that an airplane had hit the Empire State Building. That's what had happened.

[Editor's Note: On July 28, 1945, a US Army Air Forces B-25 bomber struck the Empire State Building amid heavy fog, killing the three crewmen onboard and eleven civilians in building.]

SH: Did you pull the fire alarm?

RI: No, we never did. So, we finally went into Macy's, and then, we went to a show. We went back and we looked. We saw the building was all roped off. I remember coming home and [radio news personality] Walter Winchell was announcing that this airplane had hit the Empire State Building. Where they hit was the Catholic Welfare and a lot of people got killed. He said something to the effect, "Why didn't it hit two stories above--where there was a group of right wingers up there--to wipe them out instead of the Catholics?" [laughter]

SH: He was quite a character.

RI: Yes. That's what happened, but, then, it shows you how irrational you can get. While I was home, the first [atomic] bomb dropped. After that experience, when I saw that plane--the plane hit from the other side, we just saw the flames circle around--how irrational you can get, when it came time for me to go back, I didn't want to fly out of New York. So, I took a train to Washington, took a plane from there. [laughter]

Then, the second bomb dropped while we were at San Francisco. Again, I saved [a memento]. The commander of the navy yard there, when the word [came] of possible Japanese surrender, one of the warnings was, "Let's be careful, because the Japs may be pulling a fast one on us." So, when the second bomb went off, then, of course, I was at Pearl Harbor, yes, when the war was over--not Pearl Harbor, San Francisco.

[Editor's Note: Hiroshima was the target of the first atomic raid on August 6, 1945. Nagasaki was attacked on August 9, 1945. V-J Day was declared on August 14, 1945, in the United States and August 15, 1945, in the Pacific.]

They put us on another communications ship and they shipped us to China. The ship (the *Mount McKinley*) that I was on goes to Japan and the first surrender, formal surrender, took place aboard the *Mount McKinley,* before the *Missouri*. I've just wrote to the editor of the reunion newspaper. I found a brief history of our ship from the time.

By the way, that ship was built mainly by women in North Carolina, in Wilmington, North Carolina. That ship was involved in a lot of things. I'd say that was one of the most distinguished ships. It was the ship that, besides Okinawa--I just forgot what they did in Europe, before they came here. Then, it was the ship that was used in Korea. MacArthur used it. It was used in the bomb testing places that it was used at and a number of other places of significance. It's an unusual ship, I just think. It's been scrapped since.

[Editor's Note: The USS *Mount McKinley* served as the flagship for Operation CROSSROADS, the 1946 atomic bomb tests at Bikini Atoll, and General Douglas MacArthur's Inchon landings during the Korean War in September 1950.]

SH: What ship did you get put on to go to China then?

RI: Another ship, an older communications ship. What they had done to make these, these ships were originally built as merchant ships. Then, when the Navy took them over, they converted them and adapted them for their purposes, to be used for communications ships (and, of course, sleeping quarters and all that stuff).

After my first experience in the Navy--when you get bunks in the Navy, they have, like, tiers. My first time I got on a ship, I went [on the bottom] and it was okay. The guy above me was on duty. So, when he came in, he sank in there. I tried to turn over and I couldn't turn over. [laughter] So, from then on, when I got on the ship, the first thing I went for was the top bunk.

SH: Did you ever regret it?

RI: No. I was always in the top bunk after that, because, then, there were times when guys would get sick and the guys down below would get the debris. So, as long as I stayed at the top, nobody was above me there. [laughter]

SH: What was the ship's purpose for going to China?

RI: Well, because of the Chinese Communists, and so forth. We went into Tsingtao, which was a German community before World War I. By coincidence, I started to write (I never got too far) my autobiography, but I wanted to find out what was going on when I was born. There in Tsingtao, which was this [colony], the English had seized some German ships in that port. It's in north China.

[Editor's Note: Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the Chinese Nationalist Party or Kuomintang, served as head of state of the Chinese Nationalist government from 1928 to 1949. In the late 1920s, he began a campaign to eliminate the Chinese Communist Party under Mao Zedong. After Japan

invaded China, the Kuomintang and the Communists joined together to fight against the Japanese from 1937 to 1945. From 1946 to 1949, the Kuomintang and the Communists engaged in a civil war that ended with a Communist victory and the creation of the People's Republic of China under Mao. Chiang's forces fled to the island of Taiwan (Formosa).]

We went in there. We were the second American ship in there after the war. I ended up collecting a lot of mementos. Most of the sailors would go looking for bars or places. I used to want to find out [about the area]. I figured I'd never come back here again. So, I got a lot of mementos--maps, I mean, paintings, vases, kimonos and everything else that you could think of. [laughter] Some of them are in the other room, but I collected a lot of things when I went in.

Then, from Tsingtao, we went up a little further north, and then, into Tientsin. Of course, the ship had to stay out on the ocean. Then, we went up ever-winding rivers, which then began to give me my concept of what China was--like, backward. In the front, at the ports and the harbors, there were a lot of commercial operations. Of course, when we got to Tientsin, that was a very modern city--paved streets, trolley cars, hotel rooms. The story was that the hotel rooms, if you took a hotel room, you got a girl. I wasn't interested in that. I was married and I just stayed at the barracks. [laughter]

That one, I had some interesting experiences in Tientsin. I ended up, to go get something to eat, there was some kind of a restaurant. It was run by (I think, I don't know) White Russians or Red Russians [opposing sides in the Russian Revolution and Civil War (1917-23)]. I don't remember which. I remember going in. There were a lot of sailors and Marines in there. Then, I opened up the back door and there were some kids trying to fly a kite. They had a string about this big, trying to fly a kite.

So, I get out there to give them a hand. Their teacher reminded me a lot of Mrs. Roosevelt [First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt], her facial expression. So, I get with the kids and I played with them for a while. After a while, I remember, I started to act like a reporter and started to ask this one little girl a lot of little questions. Then, after a point, she takes the pad--she's going to be the reporter. She asked me how old I was and her parents were about my age. I've still got a picture of her. I remember, her name was Natasha. She was a Red Russian.

I met an agent of theirs. He was an accountant and he was very much interested [in world affairs]. I remember, he kept asking me questions [about] what I thought was going to happen after the war. I told him what I thought would happen, but he collected stamps. For a while after the war, we communicated. Then, suddenly, I guess when the Cold War got in, the thing was broken off. I never heard from him anymore, but he was helpful to me.

I remember going shopping for some of these things that I mentioned. They told us (one of the instructions) that the Japanese businessmen expect you to bargain. They have a price, but they expect you to bargain. So, I figured, "Let me find this guy. I'll pay him if he wants and he'll help me shop." So, I remember, we went into one place that I had been the night before. So, what happened was, we bargained on certain prices.

Then, he did something which (I found out later) you're not supposed to do. After he got the total, then, he's trying to bargain on the total. There was a big argument going back and forth between them. Later, he told me what he did. He wasn't supposed to do that, [laughter] but I got some pretty good things. I got some what is called razor money [knife money], which is over two thousand years old--although some kids broke part of it--but, then, some other coins.

I remember, after the war, I went and had it appraised, but, no, they didn't want to pay me any more than I'd paid for it over there. I don't know whether it's worth more now, but I got a lot of other Chinese coins. When we left Tientsin, a ship came down from Japan that had sea bags full of coins. So, what the Japanese had done is taken up all the Chinese coins. They had them stocked in a warehouse. On this ship, the sailors got it and they get sea bags full of these coins. So, when I get on the ship, "Hey, fellow, just take whatever you want." So, I grabbed a bunch of them. I've still got them. [laughter]

SH: What were your duties at this point?

RI: Well, again, we didn't have too much (I don't remember anything specific), because we were supposed to be doing radar work there. I remember, though, this ship, when we went out (and I got a picture of it, I showed you), it's fully loaded, all the decks, all the top, with fruits and vegetables and boxes. All I know is, the sailors had loaded up a bunch of liquor for the officers. Every night out, they used to have a big party. They appropriated some for themselves. [laughter]

That ship, oh, then, we ended up almost not making it. We got caught in a typhoon and, boy, that was [rough]. We had a convoy of twelve ships and, after a while, everybody's on your own. Our ship was--this was the course. Because the waves were too hard, they would go against the waves that way.

I met an artist whose job was to do paintings. He painted a number of things. I've got the document on crossing, authorized, that shows that you crossed the [International] Date Line. He drew pictures of mermaids--why, you've never seen mermaids like that before. [laughter]

SH: What was the name of this ship?

RI: That was the *Blue Ridge*. I think it was the *Blue Ridge*, it was called. It was an older ship. See, the *McKinley* was the GC-7, the *Mount Olympus* was GC-8; this was GC-2.

--END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO-----------------------------------

PL: This is tape two of an interview with Mr. Robert Immordino on April 22, 2004, with Sandra Stewart Holyoak and Patrick James Lazarus.

SH: Please continue with the story of the *Blue Ridge*.

RI: Well, let's see. As I said, we went from Tsingtao, which is northern, was a German town. Catholic evidence is there, Catholic churches, and so forth. I remember, going around, the kids

marveled at our coats, because we had coats, compared with some of the dresses they had. Then, I remember buying those small--what I called a violin, [but] it's not a violin. It was a piece of bamboo, which they claimed it was covered on the top [with] snake skin, but they played music on it. I've still got it. The strings are broken, but I still have it. I bought a couple other things there.

After we left there--and we were there several days, as I said, we were the second American ship in there--then, we went up further north going into Tsingtao [Tientsin], into the city, which was a very modern city. We had a lot of interesting experiences. I mentioned earlier about with the Russian kids. As I say, I've still got the pictures and some of the stuff, the questions that they asked me or I asked them, and maybe some of the stamps that I got from that stamp collector and, maybe, the letters yet. I'm not sure if I've got them up there.

SH: Were these communities commercial communities?

RI: Yes. They were Russian, Red Russians. There were White Russians in the town, too, from before, but the Red Russians were there with their relationship with the Chiang Kai-shek government, because, at that time, Chiang Kai-shek was still in charge. Then, while we were there, now, the war's over and they were beginning to discharge GIs on points. A ship came down, get a newer communications ship called the USS *Wasatch* [(AGC-9)]. It came down.

It picked us up, like a whole bunch of us, a whole group, because we're going to be discharged, because we were ready. We had enough points to be discharged. Then, we ended up in San Diego. We came all the way from north China all the way across the Pacific.

SH: Was this when you were in the typhoon?

RI: No, no. The typhoon was when I was on the *Blue Ridge*. It was right after the war, right after the war and before we got to China. That was the typhoon.

Again, you wondered [if you would make it]. It got so tough, they couldn't cook, because the ship would be tossed, the things would be tossed. So, they had C rations that they would cook, heat up. I remember telling my brother and another soldier how rough it was, for three days, that we had to eat rations. They looked at one another and they said, "He had it tough! He ate rations three days," the Army, yes. [laughter] Again, this was when the typhoon [happened].

Now, it's time to be discharged. They picked us up and brought us all the way to San Diego, and then, from San Diego, they put us on a train--not a Pullman, now. This is just a coach. We went from San Diego (I have traced it all up on a map) and we ended up in Lido Beach, New York. That's where we were discharged from, sometime not too far from Christmas. I remember, we were discharged. That's when I was discharged.

Yes, I came home and that experience was over, but, then, I wrote about some of these things later on. I got involved--there was a local newspaper, the Trenton paper. After the war, the printers went on strike and the union organized its own paper. It was a labor-oriented paper. I've been involved in unions.

Oh, by the way, while I was in the service, I was carrying on the campaign "to save the world for the working man." I used to keep up with all the politics. I used to be able to call the votes in Congress. [laughter]

I remember, we had a pretty reactionary Senator from New Jersey by the name of Hawkes. I remember, after the war was over in Europe, they wanted the GIs to go against the Russians. They'd say, "Let's finish it up." [laughter] Of course, the GIs resisted that then, but he was a pretty reactionary guy. I remember, they were complaining about some of the rations. I remember being sarcastic and writing to him, telling him that we'd be willing to give up our rations if it's so tough back home. [laughter]

[Editor's Note: Albert W. Hawkes (1878-1971), a Republican, served as US Senator from New Jersey from 1943 to 1949.]

So, talking of ration books, I've still got my ration books. Then, I even have a ballot of the 1944 Roosevelt election. I've still got it, because I got an extra ballot. I voted my own ballot, but, somehow, I got ahold of another one and I saved it. So, I've still got the 1944 ballot for the Roosevelt election.

SH: What was the reaction when Roosevelt died?

RI: Well, it was pretty sad. We were at Okinawa. That was on the 12th of April. By the way, in that group of islands there where we were, where we first landed, is where Ernie Pyle got killed, too. He was shot. Some sniper shot him. It was pretty calm, but I have a cartoon (in other words, this cartoon shows about that one, mentioned it). Then, there was another cartoon.

[Editor's Note: War correspondent Ernie Pyle was killed by Japanese fire while covering Marines in battle on Ie Shima on April 8, 1945.]

While we were at Okinawa, the war in Europe was over. I remember, I have a cartoon that shows a GI at Okinawa, "Pass the ammunition," just that kind of stuff. Then, I have a cartoon (was at the end of the war) that I could show you. It shows there a GI with a gun and he says, "No encores." Then, somewhere, I've got a colored sketch that some GI made showing when the Japanese were finished--shows a Japanese general with a broken Japanese flag. [laughter]

SH: What kind of confidence did the sailors have in Truman?

RI: Well, those of us [overseas], to us, that was a godsend, because, in particular, in our case, our ship was being refitted to go to Japan. The talk was about a million casualties and that could be one of us. So, they can argue all they want. Truman did the right thing, because, well, it took them to drop two bombs, and I don't think we had any more bombs. They only had the two bombs, I think, but it took that much to convince them. They [the Japanese] would've fought to the end, on the beaches and everyplace else.

By the way, at Okinawa (somewhere, I've got it), they found out that this general that was in charge of the Japanese--they fought right to the end on the island--they had this, "One plane for one ship, one man," for something else, and then, another thing. They just said why they should commit suicide, what they expect as a result of their suicide.

PL: How did these *kamikazes* and suicide boats affect your thoughts about the Japanese?

RI: Well, they were "Japs" for us now, at that point; you know that. Although, aboard the ship, as I said, these were Japanese-Americans. That's where I got that map from. They were *Niseis*, they lived in California. As a matter of fact, I've got a picture of them. I often wonder whatever happened to these guys I remember, as far as the Japanese-Americans, but the Japanese were our enemy.

PL: Did you feel they had lost the ability to respect life?

RI: Oh, yes, well, sure. All we knew is, as I say, on a Thursday, we used to get a big raid, five raids. We used to get five of them. The guy who slept beneath me was the yeoman in the intelligence office. So, one day, I asked him, I said, "What the hell's going on?" He said, "Well," the information they got was that, "each Friday, they would graduate new pilots and they would just give them enough gasoline to go one way."

By the way, according to Hanson Baldwin, who was a military analyst and was writing for *The New York Times*, says that there were close to six or seven thousand Japanese planes destroyed in the battle for Okinawa, either that were shot down or dove into the ships or were otherwise destroyed. That was the biggest sea battle in the history of the world.

That was where their biggest battleship [the *Yamato*]--again, had only enough oil to go one way--they came down. Then, of course, we sunk it [on April 7, 1945]. Their battleship was bigger than ours, but they had been looking for it. Of course, we broke the Japanese code early in the war. That's why we were able to [achieve] some of the early successes we had, because we broke the Japanese code.

As a matter of fact, one day, we found that in the South Pacific, in the early part of it, one of their generals, or one of their top officers, was flying from one island to another. They found out about it, and then, they knocked the plane down and killed him--again, because we were able to break their code.

[Editor's Note: On April 14, 1943, the Mitsubishi G4M bomber carrying Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto on an inspection tour from Rabaul to Balalae Airfield in the Solomon Islands was intercepted and shot down by a squadron USAAF Lockheed P-38 Lightnings. The admiral's location was derived from the ongoing interception and decryption of Japanese secret messages by US intelligence forces codenamed MAGIC.]

SH: Why were the *Nisei* onboard your ship?

RI: Well, they were part of the Army. They were in the Army. Of course, in the early part of the war, they were sent to Europe, but these guys were [onboard]. Well, this unit was the 77th Infantry Division, they called it. They called it the Statue of Liberty [Division]. Now, I think they were in Europe before. As a matter of fact, a lot of the guys I saw on the ship, the *Mount McKinley*, had come from Europe. They participated in something (I don't know) in the Mediterranean before [they] ended up in the South Pacific, is where we picked it up.

So, this Army unit, I think, had been fighting in Europe. Then, after the war in Europe was over, they transferred them over to the Pacific. So, these *Niseis* were part of the Army Intelligence, that's what they were. They worked in the Army Intelligence. There were two of them. I don't know if there's any more, but that's all I saw.

[Editor's Note: Neither the USS *Mount McKinley* nor the 77th Infantry Division served in Europe during World War II, but it is possible that Mr. Immordino met individuals who had served in that theater earlier.]

SH: They were on the ship.

RI: Oh, yes. Then, of course, after the Army unit is established on the beach, they left. They all left our ship and operated off the beaches. I don't know what ever happened. I'm sorry that I didn't try to contact this PR guy that I got to know, got to know him. He lived in Bound Brook.

See, years later, I called up one day and I heard somebody over the phone saying, "This guy's asking about Uncle So-and-So." I found out he had died in the meantime. I'm sorry I didn't get to him earlier, because he was a very interesting guy. He'd worked for one of the newspapers in Bound Brook. I used to look out [for these men]--I'd find these guys. I made it my business.

One thing I did do (my wife often wondered), when we were sailing the South Pacific, I was able to (you're not supposed to), I found a cot. At nighttime, I wouldn't sleep down below. I would go up on deck and sleep on the deck somewhere. Just under the gun emplacements would have a thing that would stick out--I put my cot there. Then, in the morning, I'd get up early and I'd hide the cot. [laughter] I got away with it for a long time.

SH: What about boredom on the ship? Were there any activities?

RI: Well, again, because we were free, we had a lot of freedom. As I said, the only time we came into play [was] when there's going to be an invasion. Outside of that, we were almost just tourists, for all practical purposes.

SH: What did you do to entertain yourselves?

RI: Well, read, write letters, sometimes go to a movie. We used to even have ice cream aboard. We had a pretty good deal, our ice cream. Of course, they had, I guess they call it evaporators. They were able to take the seawater and evaporate it in the units into drinking water.

So, we had most of the comforts of life on the ship. So, whatever, you'd go around and chew the rag with the guys that were free to talk and get around. I did a lot of reading when I was there. They had a little library.

SH: Did you have a newspaper or anything?

RI: Well, yes, they would put [one] out every morning. It would be, like, a mimeographed [paper]. I saved some of them, too, the news, what was happening in the world, that they'd have it recorded there.

SH: When the war ended in Europe, did you notice any difference in the way you were supplied, any different attitudes or anything?

RI: No, because we were at Okinawa when the war was over. So, we always had to protect ourselves against the enemy. By the way, we wrote a poem (some of us wrote a poem) about the Japanese. We used to call this, "To the Tune of *Stormy Weather*." [laughter] I've still got it.

The gist of it was that, "Stormy weather, we've got to keep our bones together and old Tojo'll come out to get us. And we'll always keep praying for stormy weather," because that's when Tojo didn't come out after us. I got copies of it yet in there. I think I had it. Didn't I send you this map, this big piece? It's in there. [Editor's Note: Hideki Tojo was a Japanese Army general and Prime Minister from 1941 to 1944.]

SH: Oh, *Stormy Weather* is in there.

RI: Yes, there's two of them. One was *Stormy Weather*; the other one was about getting rates. It's about in the middle of the page there, isn't it?

SH: Oh, I see, right, there it is.

RI: Yes, "To the Tune of *Stormy Weather*." Now, [looking at photographs] these are the *Niseis.* Take notice of, there, how on Okinawa their graves were like the midsection of a woman. The way it was explained to us is that when the people died there, they would bury them into the ground until the flesh was gone off them. Then, they would take the bones down to the ocean and wash them off.

There's an opening (right behind this guy). The thing is, they would go back to where they came from there. This part here is shaped like this, the center section of a woman. Now, there are the *Niseis* there. Oh, here are these islands. See, this is Okinawa right here; I mean, the Kerama Retto Islands and this is Okinawa over here. So, you see how far. We weren't too far away from Okinawa itself.

Again, whenever they came in (we got air raids at night), they had these boats, as I say. The word would go out, "Make smoke." These boats would go out there and generate smoke from oil. They would just create a cloud so that they couldn't see what was underneath there. Of course, well, when we had general quarters, they would call it, it means that somebody's coming

down. They weren't always necessarily coming down on us. They may be coming down here, but they knew that we were there.

SH: Did your ship have any casualties onboard?

RI: No, we didn't. Since (when I went to the reunion), I met a guy who was a corpsman aboard our ship. He used to have to go out into other ships, he told me, and he wrote about his experiences, too. He lives up around New Brunswick somewhere, but we didn't have any. We never got hit. So, there were no casualties there or anybody getting seriously hurt at all.

SH: Did you ever have to pick anybody up?

RI: No, I didn't--he did--because our job was to stay on the ship. We're not supposed to get off the ship, but his job was to go to these other ships. He used to have records to compile on dead people, and so forth. He had to record all that stuff. He had a tough duty. I didn't, since our duty was to stay aboard a ship.

SH: You talked about coming back after the war by train. What was the reception like, coming back almost four months after the war was over?

RI: Yes, I guess, right. Well, I didn't see anything too much. I was too anxious to get back to work, like a fool. Instead, I could have taken it easy. My wife had been working for General Motors. Of course, everybody is [laid] off and, right away, they're on unemployment. We were entitled to 52/20. Like a fool, I was going to go back and "save the world," actually, get back active with the union.

[Editor's Note: The GI Bill included a "52/20" clause, which provided twenty dollars a week for fifty-two weeks to discharged servicemen while they looked for work.]

After a few weeks, I went back to work. Then, things began to catch up with you, I guess, depression, everything else. All I know, it seems to begin to get real. Suddenly, you're slowed down. As I said, we used to have a lot of freedom, but, suddenly, you're slowed down. Everything is [real] and it began to accumulate on you, I guess, also--whatever happens to your system after all those experiences and adjustments, and so forth.

I remember, I got into pretty bad shape after, for a while there. As I said, instead of taking it easy--my wife and I could have, on the two unemployment checks, we could have had it easy for a long time, instead of riding it out--I didn't do that.

I was not able to fit in because other people had taken over the union, where before I was the top guy. When I left, when I went to the service, I was the president and I had built the union, but, now, I'm just another guy. It's hard to adjust to that. Somebody else is the president and a lot of new faces are in there, new things. Of course, in the meantime, the plant is also now converting from war to peace. General Electric started to develop. It went into a new business of manufacturing automatic washers, you see.

I was getting involved in unions. Then, you soon begin to find people using the union for not [the] purposes that it was supposed to be used for. They're using it for special privileges and that kind of stuff. I got involved with that kind of stuff later. Some corruption began to set in and some of that stuff, when they began to expose some of the corruption in unions. That comes a little later. So, all that stuff begins to climb up on you.

SH: You talked about your father having the St. Joseph's Table and praying that you and your brother would get home safely.

RI: It was in '46, yes.

SH: What about your brother? Where was he?

RI: Well, he was attached to--it was part of Patton's Army. He said he was the equivalent of a yeoman. He did clerical work. He was close to the officers, but he had a pretty rough time, too, from what he told me, some of the experiences they had. He didn't talk too much about it, but, from what I picked up, he was in where the fighting was pretty bad.

[TAPE PAUSED]

PL: This continues tape two of an interview with Mr. Robert Immordino.

SH: We were talking about your brother and what he had gone through with Patton's Third Army. Had your sisters married during this time?

RI: Yes. My younger sister (it's a strange thing), she was communicating with two different soldiers and she got the letters crossed. The one that she should've married got the wrong letters and crossed her off--even though, now, both the husband and the wife, respectively, are dead. Just recently, they got together. She lives in Florida. Well, the one lives in Florida, one lives, I think, in Las Vegas, but they've sort of become friends again. They both [have] grown kids.

Then, my other sister, an older sister (the one who came after me), she got married. She had diabetes and she died of diabetes. So, those two got married. They did get married, and then, my brother got married, too. [Bob's oldest sister was married before he went to war]

SH: Did your mother and father and the family talk about how they coped with rationing?

RI: No. I never heard them complain about anything. Of course, I had been married and I had moved out. Of course, my mother died right before we got married, actually. My mother had died. We got married in March 1941; she had died the prior September 1940.

As I said, we got married because we both figured that I was going to be drafted. I was in 1-A. Well, the thing is, on the draft board, I had a political enemy. He was *gung ho* [about] getting rid of me as fast as possible. Of course, he protected his son and a lot of other people. I found out that, if they had the proper financial considerations, he could arrange to see to it that their sons and friends didn't get drafted, but he and I were political enemies.

He did his best, but, then, there was another person on the board who didn't like him either. He sort of passed words around of what was going on. So, I was able to stay out as long as [possible], but he was very disappointed when he thought he had me ready [to be] drafted. My wife was working, and then, she quit her job. That helped get me deferred the first time. This would be before I got the job at General Electric, right after that, but that was another consideration that I had that I had to put up with.

SH: Did your wife stay with her family and work during the war?

RI: Well, she stayed with her sister and they worked. They worked hard. They took a night shift, so that it wouldn't be too hard on them. They lived in her uncle's. They lived in her uncle's house, which was not very good, good heating. So, they had a tough time, she and her sister. She worked at General Motors and she had a lot of good friends.

One of their friends used to write poems to her to keep her spirits up. She had this girl (had a husband who was in the Marines, too), but I think my wife has still got some of those poems that they used to write to keep her spirit up. She was lucky in that regard.

SH: Did you ever consider staying in the military after the war?

RI: No, no, oh, no, that was not for me. [laughter] By the way, another reason I got into the Navy, I didn't like to wear a necktie. So, in the Navy, you don't. Those are restricted. [laughter]

SH: Did you apply for OCS or something like that?

RI: No. As a matter of fact, I didn't even take advantage of any of the GI Bill. The only thing we took (and we really didn't need it) was, when we bought our house, bought this house, we used the GI [Bill]. They would pay for [it], but my wife had saved money. When we bought this house, we paid six thousand dollars for this house. My wife had saved half of the money. So, when you go in to get a mortgage, who puts up half of the money on a mortgage? [laughter] So, it really didn't amount to anything.

[Editor's Note: The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, known as the GI Bill of Rights, offered funding for college or vocational education, as well as one year of unemployment and loans to buy homes, to returning World War II veterans.]

I kept some of the GI insurance for a little while, but that was the extent. I took no benefits from it, even the little bit of unemployment compensation, you see. That was foolish. Of course, a lot of guys went to school and took advantage of that. I just didn't, and foolishly.

PL: When did you first become your town's assessor?

RI: Well, let's see now, I worked for General Electric from when I came back after the war ('46, yes, early '46) and I worked there until 1961 or '60. I had gotten hurt while I was there. I nearly

got electrocuted in one of the jobs that I was working there. I was working as a welder and I nearly [died]. I dropped a welding stick and I was up on a crane.

The welding stick, it's all metal and I was sweating. I reached for a ladder on there and, boy, I was being electrocuted. The guy I was working with noticed it. He kicked the stick and that broke the contact. So, then, they moved me out of that job on the maintenance and into another job. It wasn't too bad.

Anyway, a relative of mine convinced me to leave GE to go to work for him, because he had just started a business. I went to work for him, and then, after four or five months, or three months, he laid me off. Here I am, out of work; I was out of work several months. Then, a job opened up as an assessing clerk at the town hall. By this time, I had been active with the unions and back with the Democratic Party here, only because the leader seemed like a real "democrat with a small 'd,'" and I liked that.

So, I'd been involved politically, with the unions, and I got a job at town hall. I think I was getting five or six thousand dollars a year or something. We had two kids. That's when I got the job there. From assessing clerk, then, I became assistant assessor. Then, we had a re-evaluation and there was some monkey-business going on in the re-evaluation. People complained and raised holy hell. The assessor finally resigned.

We had a council-manager form of government here. The manager appointed me the assessor, but even when we changed the form of government--well, that's right, before I became the assessor, they had changed the form of government. For the first six weeks of the new form of government, I was the acting manager to launch the new form of government, because the manager that they hired was unable to take his job, because he lived in Pequannock, somewhere up near New Brunswick. He couldn't leave his job because of the budget.

It fell on me to open up here in this town and prepare a budget and everything else. So, I had that experience here, too. So, I was assistant assessor. Then, when the assessor left, I became the assessor. That was an interesting experience, because that's a good, interesting job. You never get bored. You might go nuts, but you know everybody. You're everybody's friend, the assessor. One old assessor had it pretty well figured out. He says, "All taxpayers are honest, but some are more candid." [laughter]

SH: Well said.

PL: Did you always have a mind for history?

RI: Yes, apparently, because I remember, as a kid, going to school, I used to always go looking [for news]. In those days, the way you got news was the drugstore window or someplace. There'd be a little bit of news and I'd always go looking for the news. Apparently, I didn't know it, that I had the taste for history.

Then, I started to get involved with unions, and then, I got involved with labor history. Then, from labor history, when I went to work for the Township, then, I got involved with Lawrence

Township history. Nobody paid any attention to Lawrence and Lawrence is a very old community. As a matter of fact, we still [have] our old, original minute book, which goes back to the early 1700s.

Nobody paid any attention to Lawrence Township history and we got involved with the NJ Tercentenary Commission. [NJ Tercentenary was celebrated to recognize the 300 years of the founding of NJ. The Historymobile was created to travel throughout the state. The first tour was in Lawrence Township with Mr. Immordino's help.

[Daughter's Note: (From *The NJ Tercentenary 1664-1964* -- archived copy in the NJ State Library -- available online) Taken from label under photo on page 48 – my father is in the photo" *The Historymobile's first tour of the state is launched at Lawrence Township Junior High School in 1961. Left to right: Former mayors Lloyd A. Carver and John T. Cunningham, Assemblyman Charles E. Farrington, Miss Helen Titus, teacher, Mayor Owen R. Healey, Township Committeeman Charles E. Connell, Jr., Superintendent of Schools Fred Combs, Robert B. Immordino, Chairman of the local Tercentenary Committee.]*

We got involved [in it] and we all learned a lot. Then, I was exposed to a man [whom] I mentioned earlier, who, for decades, would write columns about Trenton history. He was a very interesting guy and I learned a lot from him. That's how I got involved in the history. Then, from Lawrence Township history, I got involved with Italian-American history.

We learned some things about some of the history that happened around here during the Revolution. In the Second Battle of Trenton, the first battle prior to the second battle took place right here in Lawrence. George Washington had had the First Battle of Trenton, when he beat the Hessians. Then, he took his Army across the river. Then, when the British found out what had happened in Trenton, they decided, "We're going to come down and teach this guy a lesson."

So, Washington came back here. He sent a unit up here near Lawrence, [but] not too far up here, because the British were coming down from North Jersey to head him off. That's [when] an incident happened here in Lawrence. We celebrate it. Now [going in] its forty-second year, I think, we've been celebrating that event. So, the fellow who's doing it now is doing a good job, but I carried it on for twenty years or so.

SH: Out of all the things you have been involved in, what are you most proud of?

RI: I think I'm most proud of one, actually, two things--three, maybe. I was on the school board and [one] is the fact that I was able to get things going in Lawrence Township on its history. It's interesting, because, then, some politics got involved.

The woman who succeeded me (died not long ago), she built on what we collected. We started to collect historical items, and so forth. The library, through money from the Historical Commission and her own dint, she was able to put all this historical stuff on computers and put it in acid-free envelopes and containers. Tomorrow, they're going to name the room after her.

I think doing that [was significant]. Also, we have a library in Lawrence and I had a lot to do with that. We had a county library system and we used to be serviced by a bookmobile when I moved here. I was able to organize a group of women to force the freeholders to give us a branch in Lawrence Township. I worked behind the scenes with them. I was President of the County Board Library Commission at that time.

Then, later, after that went on, some of the communities in the county's library system were going to quit, which means that the library system would collapse. Lawrence was paying more than its share because library systems in the county are funded by the participating communities, through a tax, on your taxes.

We were able to convince the town fathers after they'd made a study through Rutgers. Some librarian group came down and made a study and told us that we should get more for our money [and] not to pull out. The result was, they moved the headquarters from Ewing Township to Lawrence. So, we got the biggest headquarters right here in Lawrence now.

I think that, plus, I think, my work on the school board, I think they're the best things, I think the big [ones]. Of course, having two great kids and a wife, that goes without saying. My two daughters both teach. One teaches in Connecticut, the other one's in California, in Palo Alto. I guess I was always educationally-oriented, for a long time anyway.

SH: How much do you think you were influenced by World War II?

RI: Oh, I think a lot. As I said to you earlier, I woke up when I was going to night school. I owe the teacher for doing that. I always had a lot of respect for teachers. I think I read a lot when I was in the [Navy]. I read a lot. I was able to do a lot of clear thinking while I was in there. That was just as clear as a whistle.

I think that that's what [it did for me]. I developed, I think, my mind and a lot of that [was] from the service, the experiences, moving around and seeing different things. As I said, when I would go to a place where I knew I was never coming back, I was interested in finding out what was going on. When I went into north China, I went to the back streets and [would] go around seeing how people lived and talked. I'd do the best I could day tripping, and the same thing when I went into Tientsin.

Then, I was carrying on my campaign. Well, it was interesting--while I was in the service, I was carrying on a campaign through my letters. One day, I get in my mailbox a copy of *The Nation* Magazine. You familiar with *The Nation* Magazine? At that time, I used to subscribe to something called *In Fact*, which was put out by a fellow who was an old newspaper man. So, I supplied him [the officer who left the magazine] with a copy of *In Fact*.

All I knew--I never knew, never found out who that intelligence officer was--but I used to get a big smile from one of them. I guess the intelligence officer was reading my mail and he figured that I was on a progressive track. So, he gave me *The Nation* Magazine and I gave him this other stuff. [laughter]

So, that's how, but it just raised you up, mentally, anyway, I think. I learned good, health habits. Again, especially when I used to sleep outside, I'd get up early in the morning. I would be in that exercise, the exercise on the ship, and walk around. Because I had this [duty], it was a terrific opportunity to do what I had to do, as I said. As sort of a free spirit, I could "come and go." It was a great duty as far as I was concerned.

SH: What about the hierarchy in the Navy? Was there any interaction between the officers and the enlisted men on your ship?

RI: Well, our only contact we had was with our officer and he was a regular guy. He had been an enlisted man and he was just a regular guy, a good guy. We never had too much contact with the others. So, we'd salute if we had to (I don't remember having too much), but there was no animosity to it. I knew that there was the strata.

I remember, saving cartoons, there's a little story about, whenever they would take an island, the first thing the enlisted men would do, they would have to build the quarters for the officers. They'd put up a sign and it'd say, "Officers Only. Enlisted Men, Keep Out." Then, the chief petty officers would have the same thing for them. Then, finally, the GIs would build their own place, "This Is God's Country--Everybody Welcome." [laughter]

SH: Did you have any occasion to meet any of the admirals or see any of them in action?

RI: Not in action; I said only that one. The closest one was that first one at the Philippines, when the Captain was right [there]. I mean, this was his office and they had a hallway and we had our equipment here. We're just working out there. We used to walk off the main deck there. We saw him, but, then, when he wrote that memo, then, we looked at him, says, "This is a blowhard, this guy." [laughter] "This is my deck. This is the Captain's quarters. Everybody keep off."

SH: Did the McCarthy era affect your involvement in the unions?

RI: Oh, sure. That was a very black period, I remember. Well, as a matter of fact, I met [him]. Early after the war, I got involved with veteran organizations. Housing was tough for veterans. I remember, I belonged to what was called the American Veterans Committee, which was a group of veterans that [was] entirely different. Are you familiar with the American Veterans Committee?

SH: Please explain.

RI: Well, the American Veterans Committee was a group that said--their motto was, "Citizens first, veterans second," where all the other veterans' groups, it was veterans first. That was a group that was mostly made up of liberal-minded, progressive-minded veterans. We were involved with them. We were working for passage of legislation to provide housing for veterans.

I remember going to Washington and this one Senator comes up. Of course, it's Senator Joe McCarthy, because he hadn't yet gone on the campaign. It was just still new. I understand that

the Catholic priests are the ones that got him to go off on this business of finding Communists in every corner.

I saw him, but, then, when the McCarthy period came up, this thing got really ugly. I remember cleaning out a lot of stuff that I had, because I wasn't going to be [accused], because it really got bad. As a matter of fact, George Welch, that guy, I remember he told McCarthy off, "Don't you have any conscience?" When he went after the Army, now, he's going to [claim] the Army was full of Communists?

[Editor's Note: Senator Joseph McCarthy's accusations of communist infiltration in the U.S. government led to a nationwide witch-hunt to unearth alleged communists, particularly in academia, an era of persecution lasting from 1950 to 1957 known as McCarthyism. The Army-McCarthy Hearings, which ran from March to June of 1954, were televised nationally. During the proceedings, Joseph N. Welch, counsel for the US Army, famously asked, "Have you no sense of decency, sir?" as part of his counterattack against McCarthy, which was cited later as the beginning of the Senator's downfall.]

It's a funny thing. I was driving down the street, had a funny feeling coming over me. I can't explain that. The radio blares and they announced that McCarthy was dead. I said, "Somehow, it's strange--it may be a coincidence--but there must be something there to it." Of course, you found out that he was a big faker anyway, but he suddenly felt that he was going to make a killing, him and Nixon and the rest of them--of course, his right-hand man, that Roy Cohn, too.

SH: How organized and effective was the American Veterans Committee?

RI: Well, the American Veterans Committee was pretty good for a while, but, then, as the guys began to [age], they got into government and [started having] families and got older and they're dying off--the thing started to peter-out. It lasted a few years, but we had a local chapter [that] I was involved with. Then, it just gradually [came to an end]. Well, some of that Red Scare business also crept into there, too, into that organization, anyplace that they figured Communists were infiltrating. I was called a "real commie."

You could write to the FBI and find out what's on your [record]. So, I finally did that. They had me down there, "He is a Communist," or, "He isn't a Communist," "He is a Communist," all this kind of stuff--of course, all blacked out. I had my whole record and I finally ended up burning the whole thing. My kids were wondering, wanted to know why I didn't show it to them. They used to have different guys that they would black everything out. You couldn't tell who was telling who, but they would have this [record]. It took awhile.

I remember (suspected) that my phone was tapped. I used to go to--there was a guy who was a Communist. He ran a drugstore, but he used to give you a break on stuff. So, I used to [shop there]; I have to go to the cheapest place. I knew him. I remember, one time, being followed by a car and it must've been an FBI guy.

Then, I remember our phone acting real strange. I remember talking into it and I says, "Well, if you're doing this, here's my war record here, too--take this, too. This is what the Captain says

and what we did in World War II," but that's what went on during the McCarthy era. It was a real dark period.

Well, I remember this--you remember this fellow I told you [about] who wrote *In Fact*? His name was George Seldes. He then published a book of quotations, which had not only the normal ones you would read in Bartlett, but all the right-wing and Fascists and whatever remarks that they had. That book was published.

It was his book, but there was a publisher who raised the money. People like Steve Allen put up money and the guys that wrote *South Pacific.* All them people like that, they put up the money to finance this book. Somewhere, I've got a copy of it. It's called *The Great Quotations* [(1961)]. It's got quotations in there that you don't read anyplace else.

I'm a quotation collector. I've got a lot of quotations, political or otherwise. I've got a whole section on politics, section on Italians, on ethnics, and this one, *The Great Quotations*. Yes, that Seldes, he was an old newspaperman. He lived almost to be a hundred years old. He lived up in, I think, Vermont or someplace, but he did a lot of good work.

Then, during this dark period, there was a publisher who made a pile of money out of that thing. He started to break in. Stuart, Lyle Stuart, his name was. He's the one that put out this book, but it was funded by, as I said, [famous] people. He'd list all the names down there, guys that really cared what was happening to this country. Steve Allen was a very progressive guy. Oscar Hammerstein, that's right, he was one of them in there. There was a whole group of them there, but that was a very ugly period. We must not live through that [again].

--------------------------------------END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE----------------------------------

PL: This is side two, tape two; please continue.

RI: Where were we?

SH: We were talking about what a dark period it was.

RI: Yes, well, it was dark, and in the unions, too. That began to affect the unions. Then, of course, the Cold War started to get hot. Then, that began to affect the labor movement. The CIO was really the progressive wing of the labor movement. They really went out and organized people, and then, got involved politically.

Today, you see political action committees? The first political action committee was started by the unions (in self-defense), but they were investigated inside and out. Then, it was "a plot by Russia," and all that kind of stuff. All they do is practice elementary democracy. Today, you've got hundreds of political action committees, but the first one was started by the unions. That's when you learned elementary politics, elementary civic duties.

I remember, I had a book that, in the early days, I gave it to the Labor Museum up in--there's a labor museum up in Botto House [the American Labor Museum at the Botto House National

Landmark in Haledon, New Jersey]. It was called *The First Round*, just elementary politics, [how to] organize and get people to vote, why people should vote. It was just plain, common, ordinary things that you learned in what we used to call civics in school. That's what they did and that's how the unions got involved.

[Editor's Note: The CIO organized its Political Action Committee in November 1943. PAC staff member Joseph Gaer's *The First Round: The Story of the CIO Political Action Committee* debuted in 1944.]

That's why Roosevelt got elected in 1944. I remember, there was a saying there, "Clear it with Sidney." The right-wing was saying that Roosevelt said that they had to "clear it with Sidney," meaning Sidney Hillman from the [Amalgamated] Clothing Workers Union. He was the head of the first CIO-PAC. As a matter of fact, I've got a couple of buttons when Stevenson ran, Stevenson and Kefauver [on the Democratic ticket in the 1956 Presidential Campaign]. I was offered a hundred dollars for a political button. I had five or six of them; I've got one left.

SH: What about the strikes that happened during World War II?

RI: Well, most of them were pretty well controlled, because the unions took a no-strike pledge during the war. It wasn't until after the war. So, during the war, there were very few strikes. There were not many. I think, there for a while, some of the miners--remember, of course, John L. Lewis [President of the United Mine Workers of America, 1920-60] then started to go sour, because [of] whether it was ego or whatever.

Well, I think he wanted to be Secretary of Labor and Roosevelt wouldn't appoint him. So, he broke with Roosevelt and he thought he was going to take the unions with him. Of course, he didn't, but I think, during the war, there was not much labor trouble, as far as I can remember.

It was afterwards that, then, it broke--and you couldn't blame the unions. They were held in tow during the war, although the union I belonged to (the first one I belonged to), during the war, they were the first ones to get union health benefits. They couldn't get raises, but they got health benefits, which was equivalent to a raise. They were at least one of the first unions in the area that got health benefits under their contract. As I say, they couldn't get raises, but they got that.

Then, unfortunately, some of the members started to take advantage of it. Then, the company, it was a small company--yes, that's what happened. I remember, I was active with [the] union when you had to fight for elementary justice. Then, I saw the period when guys were using the unions for special privileges. I worked for General Electric. They got some guys in there, if they wanted to go to the racetrack, they would just call a strike.

It took awhile. Then, finally, the company was getting ready to move out. Then, finally, I ran again for the presidency. Then, I defeated this guy, and I found out later that the company was grateful for it. [laughter]

SH: Were you ever in danger?

RI: Oh, yes, sure, a couple times. My eye, for a long time, I still have a scar here--somebody gave it to me. As a matter of fact, it got so bad, at one point, I went to a couple of newspapermen that I knew to tell them that, if anything happened, that "this and so-and-so," because, even in the CIO, corruption began to set in. In the beginning, it was a certain amount of idealism, but, later, you began to get different opportunists walking in.

A lot of corruption began to set in there, too. It's like any institution--after a while, it becomes corrupt. It becomes staid, becomes super conservative. People have special interests, but I think the unions, by and large, are still one of the best defenses of democracy that there is. To me, teachers, librarians and unions are the basis for building a democracy, I think, if you don't have them--good teachers, I'm talking about.

SH: What about integration?

RI: Well, we, or the CIO, were the first ones that integrated unions, right from the beginning, and not only that, fighting for women's rights. I remember, I worked for General Electric and the women, working alongside of the men, doing the same damn work, were getting less money than the men. We used to have to fight for that. We broke a lot of that down.

The CIO gets the credit for all of that. They broke integration. It was broken down real fast, certainly in the CIO unions, and some of the AF of L unions, some of the old ones. Then, it began to influence the other unions, too, but the CIO unions were the progressive ones.

SH: What about administrations within New Jersey? I am assuming you had to work with the State Legislature and the Governor's Office.

RI: Yes, they did. By the way, early CIO, Frank Hague tried to stop the unions there. I was involved with a thing up there. The early days of the CIO, they were going to test Frank Hague, because Frank Hague, it was everything for industry up there. Of course, he was the boss. He ran the unions and he ran everything else. So, the CIO was going in there and they were going to test, have a test case.

[Editor's Note: Democratic politician Frank Hague served as the Mayor of Jersey City, New Jersey, from 1917 to 1947 and as Vice-Chairman of the Democratic National Committee from 1924 to 1949. His political machine dominated Hudson County and played a major role in shaping the state and national political scene in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s.]

The CIO took me and another guy (this other fellow I told you was vice president, became a general foreman at General Motors), we were sent up there to escort a Congressman into Pershing Field, it was called. We had certain instructions, that we would meet on a certain corner. This was the Congressman--you said from Wyoming, he was from Montana--Jerry O'Connell, his name was. We were to escort him into the field.

[Editor's Note: Democrat Jerry J. O'Connell represented Montana's 1st District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1937 to 1939.]

Sure enough, pretty soon, we looked down the street and there comes a bunch of women. On the back, I could see him, because he was a baldheaded guy. We fell in beside him. We started to walk through the field, past the cops. Newspapers are taking pictures. The next day, the newspapers have a picture in the front page that says, "Policemen escorting Congressman O'Connell into the field." It wasn't the policemen--it was me and this other friend--and it wasn't escorting him in. They couldn't take O'Connell, because when the policemen finally got up with him, they really manhandled that guy.

I remember, when they started to manhandle him, I said to one of the police, "Take it easy." Unknown to me, there was this big cop in back of me. He said, "Take your goddamn hands off of him." I looked around [Mr. Immordino makes a bad noise]. Pretty soon, the organizer who took us up there, after they took this Congressman and really manhandled him, we got out of there. We left Jersey City and went back to Newark. Pretty soon, he shows up, after they released him. He recognized us as his accompaniment, [laughter] but that was in the early days of the CIO.

The Legislature, yes, you'd begin to lobby and they would take delegations down. You'd talk to Congressmen and you'd begin to get candidates to run for public office that were supportive to the unions. Of course, at that time, the sheriff was always the enemy. So, you always made sure you'd try to get a sheriff--you'd neutralize him or get somebody that's your friend. [laughter]

SH: Was there any particular administration in New Jersey's history that was more acceptable or receptive to the unions?

RI: Oh, sure, there were. Let's see, of course, Hoffman, when Hoffman was Governor (that was during the period of this Hague thing), he was not a friend of the unions. Then, let's see, after Hoffman, who came after Hoffman? Then, of course, you remember, he got in trouble.

[Editor's Note: Harold G. Hoffman (1896-1954), a Republican, served as Governor of New Jersey from 1935 to 1938. Shortly before his death, while serving as Director of the state Unemployment Compensation Commission, he was found to have embezzled funds, which he confessed to on his deathbed.]

The Democrats, generally, were more friendly, I mean, after Roosevelt and the others broke the back of Hague, because Hague was the control. He used to control the whole state. He used to control both parties. He used to pick the Republican candidates to run against his men.

Yes, there was a time there were even some groups that would try to organize a farmer labor party. Of course, there were other elements in the union, more conservative, they didn't want to do that; maybe there were some left-wing influences at work there. There was always those that were Socialist-oriented, those that had some Communist influences. They could never see [eye-to-eye], because they're worst enemies. The Socialists and Communists are the worst enemies of each other. You don't have to worry about the capitalists--they kill each other off. [laughter]

PL: Where did you get the foresight to save all the valuable memorabilia you have?

RI: Well, all I know is, when I went into the service, I guess somewhere I knew that you could save things and I consciously decided that I was going to save a personal scrapbook. As a result, every place, everything I got, I could get my hands on, I saved. I just saved it. Then, of course, because of the duty that I had--if we were in the Army, you could never be able to do [it] or maybe some other duty they had in the Navy--but I just happened to have a combination of breaks. I used to save this stuff, and then, I would send it home, okay.

One of the last batches of stuff, what I remember, some of the radar equipment used to come in (I've still got the trunk), it was like a little trunk. It had hatches on it and a lock. I was able to appropriate one of those after we got the equipment out. I'd fill that up and I'd lock it. I had things you could stencil your thing on it and I'd send it home. The whole pile of stuff, I would send home. I just was, I guess, consciously looking for this stuff. Again, I've got a lot of cultural stuff that I came out of China with.

It was a funny thing, though. This Russian I was telling you about, he told me, when I got some of that stuff, says, "You think you got some great things?" I says, "Oh, it's just terrific." He says, "You know these are nothing more than duplicates. These businessmen have contact with people in the hinterland and castles. They bring the originals in. They make a model and bring the original back. They keep repeating the castings [laughter] and they sold it off to you, people like you, that you think you're getting the original."

So, some of that stuff is [suspect], but you learn those things. I still have paintings upstairs and I had kimonos [that] I gave to my granddaughters. In the other room, I've still got some (you'll see it on your way out there), there's still some vases and other things that I got, that I just got my hands on, that's all. Pictures, every time I could get a photograph of something, I grabbed the photograph. Again, because it was a communications ship, we had the latest photographic equipment. I used to make it my business to find a photographer and get pictures and save them.

PL: Did you support the United States' involvement in Korea or Vietnam?

RI: In Korea and Vietnam, I guess I might have had mixed feelings. I wasn't too sure what was going on there. All I know is, I used to read about [North Vietnamese leader] Ho Chi Minh, that Ho Chi Minh wanted to base his country on the United States. We just weren't smart enough to see it, because what you remember now, when the Cold War was in, that thing affected a lot of people's thinking. If (in any way) they thought you were neutral towards the Russians, then, you were an enemy. So, I think that's what happened in Vietnam.

We made a big mistake in Vietnam because Ho Chi Minh, as far as I know, he wasn't a Communist and, if he was, he wasn't [vehement?]. After all, there are all kinds of Communists--take [Yugoslavian leader Marshall] Tito, when he broke with the Russians. Even the Italian Communist Party was more independent of the Russians. Of course, in the beginning, the Russians really dominated things, but a lot of these guys--they were nationalists--they began to toe their own line. They protected their own country.

I think Ho Chi Minh, from everything I've read (and I could be wrong), when they fought the French, they thought that they were going to get their own country. Then, suddenly, we had this

philosophy, "Well, things could fall there, the whole rest of the [region would fall, too]," just like I think we're screwed up in Iraq right now. I think we made a big mistake there [in Iraq] and, as far as I'm concerned, [President George W.] Bush has got to go.

I don't know what your politics are, but he's got to go, because you're not going to get Scalia [as] the Chief Supreme Court Justice, oh, God. As far as I'm concerned, Scalia--and he's a Sicilian, half Sicilian. His father, I remember his father--you know he's from Trenton originally, Scalia. As far as I'm concerned, he's the most reactionary judge we've had. This business with him going down [duck hunting?] with [Vice President Dick] Cheney, I don't know what you think, but I think he went down there to make sure that he played the right cards, because Bush is going to make him the Chief Justice when what's-his-name steps down.

SH: Rehnquist.

[Editor's Note: Antonin G. Scalia (1936-2016) served as an Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court from 1986 until 2016. William Rehnquist, appointed to the US Supreme Court in 1971, became Chief Justice in 1986 and remained in the post until he died in 2005. Chief Justice John G. Roberts, Jr., succeeded him.]

RI: Yes, and, if that happens, boy, God help this country, unless we get enough other judges to outvote him. Scalia is bad news and he's contemptible as hell. He's arrogant.

SH: I thank you very much for taking time to be with us. Is there anything else you want to leave on tape?

RI: No, I think that's pretty much everything. Thank you for coming; I just appreciated the opportunity and good luck here. That's all I could say. It's too bad my brother-in-law's not around. He had real stories he could tell you, boy.

SH: Thank you so much.

---END OF INTERVIEW---

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Reviewed by SriPrudhvi Chirra 12/5/2020
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 1/25/2021
Reviewed by Carolyn MacLeod 3/8/2021