

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ARNOLD LASNER

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES OF WORLD WAR II

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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and

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Dustin Elias: This begins an interview with Sandra Stewart Holyoak, Dustin Elias, and Arnold Lasner on Friday, April 26, 2002, in Plainfield, New Jersey.

DE: Mr. Lasner, I would like to begin by asking you about your parents. Can you tell me about your father?

Arnold Lasner: My father was born in the States, in New York. Next question.

DE: What did he do for a living?

AL: My father and his three brothers were in the trucking business in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

DE: How long did he do that for?

AL: Many, many years. He was an offshoot of his father, my grandfather who I never knew, never met. Believe it or not, his father, my grandfather was in the soda water business, horse and wagon way back when. ... It turned over to the sons and they used the old Mack trucks, Mack T-truck and they had a fleet of trucks and they were catering to the Dugan Brothers, a bakery and a large bakery in the area, they used to deliver flour to them from warehousing and also for Watkins Brothers and that was the business they were in.

DE: Did you ever help your father out, tag along with your dad?

AL: Their business was down in Port Elizabeth off of Magnolia Avenue and when I was going to Rutgers in Newark, I used to hitch a ride, take the bus from Newark to Elizabeth and walk from Broad Street down to Magnolia Avenue and get a ride home with my dad and if not, I'd take a bus straight home.

DE: How about your mother, can you tell us a little bit about her?

AL: My mother was a housewife, never went to college, raised two children. We lived in Carteret at that time. My grandparents lived above us. We lived downstairs.

Sandra Stewart Holyoak: Your mother's parents.

AL: My mother's parents, yes.

DE: Do you know where your parents met?

AL: Yup, in Elizabeth, back-to-back court in Bond Street. Their backyards practically touched, a backyard love affair.

SH: Was your mother born in this country?

AL: My mother was not born in this country. My mother was born in Russia. My grandparents came from Russia by way of England and, as I said, my dad was born in New York.

SH: Do you know when your grandparents came to this country? Did your mother come first?

AL: No, no. My grandparents, my mother's parents, came to this country, I would say 1890 or prior to.

DE: Were you born in New York?

AL: No, I was born in Carteret.

DE: Did you grow up there?

AL: I grew up, went through schooling, through high school in Carteret.

DE: What activities did you get involved in when you were a child?

AL: Okay, very good question. When I was a youngster, I had a heart murmur. I wasn't able to participate in the normal sports in school, although when I was in high school I did belong to a softball team, this was out of high school, and I played ball. I wasn't in any sports in school. ... I was very active in school, in the band, in the different clubs, et cetera.

SH: What did you play?

AL: I played the coronet. We had our own swing band, marching band. I was in the All State Band. I dropped the coronet after I got into the army.

SH: Did your father serve in World War One?

AL: Yes. My dad graduated from Newark College of Engineering [NCE] and he was a chemist. He was in the service and this was a little bit vague. I know he was in Canada, ... he helped produce poison bombs and whatnot. He was there for a three month period and then he came back to the States and was eventually discharged from the service, but how he got to Canada whether he was in service, I know, I had papers showing that he had to get a release from the Canadian Government to come back to the States. I don't know whether he was in the army, not in uniform, in Canada or what. This goes back a few days.

SH: Did your mother go to school?

AL: Yes, she graduated high school. She didn't go to college to my knowledge.

SH: Did your mom work before she got married?

AL: This I do not know. I remember her as being a housewife all her life.

SH: Did you have brothers and sisters?

AL: I have one sister who was a couple of years older than I am who graduated from high school, graduated from college, Douglass. ... Her major was music and she minored in teaching. Eventually she became a teacher when she moved down South.

SH: Was your whole family musically inclined?

AL: ... My mother had a very terrific voice, so did my sister. My sister played the piano. She also minored in music. She played in the band, glockenspiel and piccolo, I remember. That's about it.

SH: Did your parents play any instruments?

AL: No. Neither my mother nor father played.

SH: Did your grandparents play any instruments?

AL: Not to my knowledge.

DE: How did the Depression affect your family?

AL: Very well. ... Our family was not a wealthy family. My father, living in Carteret, drove back and forth to Elizabeth everyday. To answer your question in another way, I can recall my mother giving me a dime to go down and get a loaf of bread. I lost the dime on the way. I was afraid to come home. A dime was a lot of money. I can also remember the time I found a wallet with twenty-five dollars in it. That was a gold mine. It had the name and address of people who lived a block or so away from us. When I returned that wallet, I got the biggest hug you've ever had.

SH: Do you remember any hobos, or people, coming around to your home looking for hand outs or willing to work for food?

AL: Not really. Not really, we had a pretty well open home, open house. I remember an uncle of mine who lived upstairs with my grandparents, had a friend of his, ... who worked in New York as a laborer, building skyscrapers, at that time. He stayed with us for a time. I remember another friend of my uncle who stayed with them occasionally. As far as panhandlers, or hobos, no, I don't recall.

SH: Did your father use his education as an engineer?

AL: He used it in the army. After that, I guess, the soda water business turned into the trucking business and three boys, my dad and my two uncles, ran that. During the Depression time, one of the boys was a driver, another one was the head mechanic, and my father ran the business in the office. That's how that worked out.

DE: During the time of FDR's policies, were your parents politically active?

AL: To answer your question, ... I remember my dad, I don't know whether it was political or what, ... was active in the NRA and I believe it was the National Rehabilitation Association, that the government ran. What his duties were, I couldn't tell you.

SH: Were they for FDR?

AL: Both my parents were Republicans. During the time of elections they voted Republican. I don't know whether they voted for the man, and not voting Republican, but I assume they voted Republican.

SH: Were politics discussed openly in your home?

AL: Not that great a deal. I know my father was, and I don't think this was a political appointment, he was on the Board of Health in Carteret. Both my father and my uncle were members of the American Legion at that time. That was big. I remember we went to Legion picnics and Memorial Day, we'd go down to the wharf, the little wharf in Carteret, and have our memorial period of time and that's about it.

DE: Was there a higher sense of community during the Depression?

AL: I'll put it to you this way, Dustin, Carteret was a town of about 13,000 people at the time I was growing up there. It was a small town and people knew practically everyone. It wasn't that cliquish. Going through the entire school system, you mingled with, you associated, and you became friendly with every race, color, or creed. During the Depression, I was a youngster. My folks were the ones that felt it the most. My sister and I lived through it but didn't actually feel the pangs of the Depression. Yes, I feel that the town came closer together during the Depression. We were always a helping hand and so forth, but I assume that they did come closer at that period of time.

DE: Did it seem like the Depression would soon come to an end or did people just try to live day by day

AL: It was a playing it by ear type of situation, day by day as you say. It wasn't until the war clouds were overhead that things started to pick up, little by little. People were getting jobs, slowly, and fortunately, my Dad and the business kept rolling, but they felt it, also, like everyone else did.

SH: Were you and your family aware of the events occurring in Europe?

AL: Okay. I graduated high school in 1943. I took the academic course knowing, and with the hopes, that I would be able to go to college. I didn't know what I wanted to do. My dad, as I mentioned graduated from NCE in 1914, and I thought I might ... become an engineer. So I applied to NCE ... prior to graduation from high school, and was accepted, knowing that I would be drafted. If I had six months in, I had the idea that at least I tasted it and I would want to go back, or not want to go back. I started in chemical engineering and I found out very quickly, because of my eyesight, that I couldn't see depth. Well, when you are looking at plans and

you're drawing, and then in mechanical engineering, and so forth, and so on, I said, "Well." ... Then Uncle Sam said to me, "You know I want you to come and visit me for a while." So I had my six months of college experience knowing that I'd want to go back when I finished my military service. I was drafted October of 1943 and I went or was sent to Camp Chaffee, Arkansas which is no longer there. It was an armored division camp where I learned how to drive a vehicle. I had not driven before, never having a license before. The one car we had, Dad needed for work. ... I finished there after practically wrecking an armored car, learning how to drive, and ... at that time Eisenhower needed replacements overseas. My basic training was over and I found myself on a ship going to Italy, to a repple depple, (replacement depot), that was about forty-five kilometers north of Rome. It was an estate that belonged to Count Graziano who was a nephew of Mussolini, if I'm not mistaken. ... They teach you one thing in the army and that's never to volunteer. Well, they were looking for replacements, anybody who could drive a vehicle. "Well," I said to myself, "The army taught me how to drive," so I raised my hand. Woe be it to me, the next thing I knew, I was on an LCT, ... (Landing Tank Craft), going from repple depple to Naples on the LTC to southern France, ... D plus 10, the invasion of southern France, I landed in southern France. I was driven to Grenoble. At the repple depple, I met with a group of individuals, put on six-by-six and taken to the outfit that we would join. To my great surprise, the outfit that I joined as a replacement ... B troop, the troop that I went in to replace, was annihilated. The outfit was the 117th Cavalry, mechanized, originally, the 117th National Guard outfit from New Jersey, from Westfield New Jersey. I was put into B troop. I'm along with a lot of new fellows and a couple of cadre from a different unit, and from that point on, for a period of eleven months, we were ahead of the infantry. We were the eyes of the army. We would reconnoiter, go into a town, hold it until the infantry came up and pushed forward. I had eleven months of combat. The first German I saw was a dead German. I don't know if it turned my stomach or made me feel good at that time. In the interim, I saw a lot of my buddies go home. The B troop that I belonged to was one of three line troops, A troop, B troop, and C troop. We had E troop and F troop. E troop was our own artillery. F troop, believe it or not, we had our own air force, a piper cub. ... Right. The line troop consisted of a jeep, two armored cars, the first jeep had a .30 caliber machine gun on it, two armored cars, another jeep, which had a mortar attached with it, and a couple more armored cars, and so forth. The three groups in our troop would go to their respective target for the day. I was a driver of a jeep. I didn't drive an armored car. We also had half-tracks. We also had our own maintenance back at Headquarters Company. That's the way the troop operated. We used the aircraft, we went on scouting missions everyday.

DE: Can you tell us about your experience when Pearl Harbor was bombed?

AL: December 7th, a shock. It came as a shock to the nation. I was not in the service at that time. I was still in school. I was still in high school. I knew of my dad and my uncle, having been in the army during World War I that this was it. I'd eventually end up in the service. My thoughts were, the world is topsy-turvy now. I just have to play it day by day and wait my turn.

DE: Did you know where Pearl Harbor was?

AL: I knew of Pearl Harbor. I had a neighbor, who had one of their relatives was in the Navy, and we were very close to that neighbor, ... and we knew about Pearl Harbor.

DE: Did you believe that an attack on Pearl Harbor could actually have happened?

AL: I'm thinking of today and then. Today, yes, it could happen. Then it could never have happened. With what's going on in the world today, anything can happen.

DE: What is basic training like in the cavalry?

AL: All right. You say the cavalry. You have to keep the cavalry separate and I'll explain that in a moment. I was in a tank outfit attached to learning to drive a half-track and a jeep, not a tank. We went out on maneuvers. Arkansas, we had to dig slit trenches, we had to dig latrines. If you're ever in Arkansas, don't take a shovel with you because it's nothing but sheets of slate, and to dig a slit trench or a latrine with a shovel into slate, you get a few calluses and blisters. My training there was with the armored infantry, basic infantry training, but armored infantry. Now we go back to the cavalry, when you mentioned cavalry, the 117th was originally horse cavalry out of the Westfield armory the 102nd. The 117th is an offshoot of the 102nd. They were federalized early in the 1940s and became mechanized. They did away with the horses but the 117th was originally, as well as the 102nd, a horse cavalry. When I joined in, they were fully mechanized. ...

DE: Were the commanding officers well trained for a mechanized cavalry?

AL: Yes. ... The outfit went overseas in double strength to England and they trained in England. From England they went to North Africa and they fought in North Africa. Some of the fellows in the outfit were overseas in combat zones for thirty-six months or better. They rotated, was discharged because of the very longevity and their experiences that they went through, believe it or not, they had 130-150 credits or points for rotation. For the eleven months that I saw combat with the outfit, I had eighty-four points and was out of service in two and one-half years, discharged. So, yes, they were well trained. I had gone through a number of records of what they did, in our 117th alumni association journal that comes out quarterly from the outfit. The officers, I'm talking about the officers not the non-coms at this point, and to my knowledge was extremely well trained, well experienced from what they had gone through previously. The non-coms, there was a rotation because they got injured and got killed ... et cetera. I can tell you stories about a few of those also. ...

DE: Did you have any impressions about what actual combat would be like?

AL: As a replacement into an outfit, they tried to pair you up with someone that had experience. It was frightening. After your first patrol, you're a seasoned veteran, believe me, after a first patrol that you contacted the enemy. You worked together buddy-buddy and if you are fortunate, you survive buddy-buddy. ...

SH: Tell us what your first impressions were of Italy and what you saw. What kind of devastation did you see?

AL: Let me answer it this way. On the LTC leaving Naples, I turned around and I looked at the country and it looked so dismal and so black and I knew that Naples was a nest of ... sharp individuals. ... I saw this dismal black outline of Naples as we were pulling away and I said to myself, "I'll never come back to Italy." Don't forget, I was only in Naples and forty-five kilometers north of Naples, I didn't see that much of the country. Since the war, I've been back to Italy twice, and I found it to be a lovely country. It's day and night when you're talking then and now. I didn't see that much of the small towns being beaten up. I did in France and into Germany.

SH: How diversified were the men of the 117th Cavalry?

AL: At the time that I joined them? Well, our outfit, B troop, was quite diversified. Fellows from all over the country, New York, out West, and so forth. We did have a few, as I said, some of the cadres they shifted over and some of the men they shifted over from the original, the horse cavalry, and, in fact, I have a very good friend who lives here in Edison who was with the original. In meetings that I go to at the association the original fellows are all in it. They were very close, having gone through the cavalry end of it. I'm a comparatively newcomer when I go to the meetings because I was in D-Day plus ten in southern France when they were all the way through. They were with them in England. They were with them in Jacksonville where they went on with their horses and so forth, so that it's a camaraderie that had developed and still here today, within the association.

SH: Tell us what you saw at D-Day plus ten into southern France?

AL: What I saw, not very much in southern France, because when we landed ...

SH: Where did you land?

AL: In Marseilles and we went up, got into six-by-sixes and they drove us right to Grenoble. How many kilometers, I don't recall, where we met our outfit and went with the outfit. So I didn't see too much other than looking out of the back of the truck with the flaps flapping. As far as the towns being beaten up or not, I didn't see that much of it.

DE: Can you tell us what a repple depple is like and what occurs there?

AL: The first thing that went through my mind is it's like a concentration camp, but it isn't. It's a replacement depot where new individuals that were shipped over from the States or from England were billeted, fed. As far as training, the only training you got was you were playing ball, play baseball, you play football, and you couldn't wait to get out of the repo depot to be assigned somewhere. It was not like going to the train station waiting for the train and then going to work. It was nothing but a campsite, which harbored those that would eventually be reassigned to different outfits.

SH: Was there ever a chance for you to apply to like OCS or specialized training?

AL: Good question. Like a rifleman in any company, I was rifleman in a cavalry company. I was eighteen, nineteen years old. To apply for OCS, it never dawned on me that I wanted to be an officer, that I had the qualification to be an officer and then to see new second lieutenants coming into the outfit. Now I've been in the outfit for whatever period of time and a new second lieutenant came in to the outfit, I knew more than he did at that time, as far as fighting was concerned. No, I never thought of, fortunately, I was unfortunate in not being a gung ho individual that was asked to become an officer, or what have you. I became a private, a PFC and the war went on. I hope that answers your question.

DE: Did you ever wish that you were serving in a different military branch?

AL: I was a young boy. I ended up in, hey, a National Guard outfit from my own State, at Westfield, and West Orange, and then you were too busy with the war to think about something like that, "I wish I was." I never thought of it.

SH: Following Pearl Harbor, did you think about joining any of the other military branches?

AL: I wanted to get some college under my belt in order to have the taste to either want, or not to want, to go back to it. I could have enlisted. I don't know if my family would have signed for me at the time, but I wanted that experience first, knowing that I would be. I had a buddy of mine who went through grammar school, we went through middle school, we went through high school together. He was accepted in a V-12 program, if you remember what they were? He was in service before me. When Eisenhower needed replacements they cleaned out the V-12 program and sent them over. When I was waiting to go overseas, I ... got a letter from him, I still have it somewhere. He was on his way home, minus a leg, already. I think that tells you something.

SH: How often did you discuss the war and how was it discussed?

AL: In the different organizations that I was in, in high school, the band and the chemistry club and the French club and this club and that club, we constantly discussed the war. We realized that the war was on. We knew that we would be in it. There were a number of us that I can recall, who are no longer with us that were in high school, went into the service. Through different accidents and, what have you, are no longer around, but as far as discussing it, yes, we discussed it. We knew we're gonna be in it, we hoped that it would be over soon. It was just life day to day, until it caught up with you.

SH: Tell us the story then, your story from southern France, as you moved through France and the incidents that you remember, please.

AL: I remember funny things. I remember sad things. Early on, I remember seeing a trooper in our troop blown to bits. I remember.

SH: Was it a land mine?

AL: No. He was cut in half, blown to bits from a machine gun. I remember we, we were in the base of a hill, the Germans was in the base of the other hill. Cows were in the pasture in between. We were dug in, they were dug in. Food and ammunition was delivered to us at night. Any movement, they will start shelling us, any movement we would start shelling them. I'm sitting in a slit trench; my back to them, got a .30 caliber machine gun on top of the slit trench. I'm reading, *Stars and Stripes* or whatever, someone must have moved in the background, in the trees or something, they saw movement, and they started shelling. Well, in the base of the tripod, I got three hand grenades. One of those hand grenades went off. I'm sitting with my back to the gun, the hand grenade went off, and a piece of the hand grenade shrapnel came down across my head and hit the opposite side of where I was sitting. A piece of the hand-grenade was in the shape of a triangle. I kept that triangle with me for God knows how many months. I know where I lost it. An experience, a joyful experience after it was over with. A funny experience. I mentioned we had motor maintenance. Whenever we captured, liberated, absconded, from the Germans, some wine, hand guns, enemy hand guns, and so forth, we would ship it back to motor maintenance and they will hold it for us. When we got a furlough, we would be driven to Sarberg and Severne and from there to Paris or Nancy. We would call upon motor maintenance. If you didn't smoke cigarettes, send them back to them, and so forth, and you get this bundle and you went to Paris. You're able to sell the guns, you sell the cigarettes, and have a whoopee time.

SH: How often did you get a furlough?

AL: I had two good furloughs when I was overseas. [Tape Pause]

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AL: A funny incident, yes. We had members in motor maintenance who rarely got an opportunity to come up on the line. ... One night we go out on patrol, true this is, he (from motor maintenance) came up, he had an M-1 rifle, a bandolier of ammunition, suspenders, and hooked into each suspender was a hand grenade. We had to enter a town and we didn't go in with vehicles at first. We sent the squad in to see, a look-see. He decided to go with the squad. We're crossing this open field, all of a sudden, Mr. [Mr. Lasner makes gunshot sounds], Gerry opens up with a machine gun. When two fellows got through, it's his turn to go. He starts running now, he is, I would say he was five foot ten, eleven inches weighed 200 and some odd pounds, loaded down the way he was, he's running across this field and the German opens up and one of the hand grenades happens to pop out and fall. He puts his hands up, "Hold it," bends down, picks it up, puts it on, "Okay," it's time to run again. He made it. ... [Laughter] I'm laughing and crying at the same time. ... Furloughs. I had the job at one time of driving fellows from wherever we were on the line back to Sarberg and Saverne and they'd catch a train wherever they were going to Nancy or Paris. At long last, my name was called to go on furlough. Believe it or not, a fellow from motor maintenance was with me, the two of us went together. Well, I had a couple of handguns, I smoked everything, but ended up smoking a pipe, and I had a number of cartoons of cigarettes that I didn't use. I brought them along. We were going to Paris. The Americans had a hotel in Paris for the soldiers that came in on furlough. Well, he made a rule; we can't go into the hotel, or come out of the hotel, that without having a drink first. If we were going back to the hotel we had to stop at a bar and have a drink. If we're

coming out, we had to stop at the bar in the hotel and have a drink before we came out. We sold the guns that we brought. We sold the cigarettes, and so forth. We went to the Follies. We lived it up. It was our turn to come back to the outfit. We packed up, we were halfway out of Paris, believe it or not, I should have saved the story for last, the war ended. We turned right around and back into Paris. We spent the next week, ten days in Paris.

SH: This was the war in Europe that ended.

AL: Yes, that's the war in Europe. Then we had to find the outfit, go back, and find out where the outfit was. Fortunately, 117th was billeted in a town called Ober Erlenbach, which was just outside of Frankfurt-A-Main, which was Eisenhower's headquarters. ... Our duty at that time was to patrol ... the circumference of his headquarters, as security. So we found our outfit there and the sergeant and I were called into Captain Barnaby's office and put on the deck for, "How come we were so late?" We were AWOL coming back to the outfit. "Well, sir, you know, it happened like this," and we went on and on and on, he said, "Get the ... out of this office and don't ever let me see you." We got away with that one. ...

SH: How was the traffic managed with people going to Paris on furlough, and with supplies.

AL: The traffic was, we went by train back to Sarberg or Severne and then like a jeep or two would come to pick us up and take us to the outfit. ... Actually, during the war, doing that, you left the outfit there and they were here when you ended up, so you don't know where they were, you had to stop and ask.

DE: Can you tell us about your experience with the civilians of France and with Italy?

AL: I wasn't that long in Italy to have direct contact with the civilians. I can remember a funny thing that happened, though. In the repple depple, they built slit trenches and on top of those slit trenches, they built ... potties, a square box with holes in it running across the square box, in an open field. I can recall one day, I'm having a conference with the President [Laughter] and I'm reading the *Stars and Stripes* on this potty and across the open field comes the man with a plow and a little boy next to him, and I looked up and he says, "*Buongiorno*," and I said "*Buongiorno*," to him and I continued reading, and he continued his plowing. [Laughter] You know, these are the little things that make life plausible at that time. As far as France is concerned, what surprised me is, again, funny, in Paris. They called them pissoir right on the street. They have urinals, a board across ... your feet exposed, your shoulders and your head exposed, you're doing your business and, good day was walking by. This was an open pissoir in Paris at that time. As far as the people of Paris are concerned, I met during combat the FFA [Free French Army] they were very, very, very cooperative. We worked together. The civilians were happy to see us, naturally, but we didn't stay too long in any one place. We were always hop-skipping ahead. After the war, we were in Germany already. We weren't supposed to fraternize. Well, a bunch of the fellows did fraternize. That brings up another story. After the war, some of the older members of our troop were already being re-circulated back to the States. Our outfit was slimming down and we were doing double duty. I had a fellow, a buddy, Fred Ward, who was working in the kitchen and he said to me, "Why don't you come into the kitchen?" he says, "It's not bad, you eat better, et cetera." ... Okay, so I was able to get into the

kitchen and you worked one day, twenty-four hours, and you were off one day, twenty-four hours, the same way the bakers worked one day, twenty-four hours, and they were off one day. Well, a meat shipment came in. A meat shipment is thirty-six-by-thirty-six cartons. In the center of that is the filet mignon and all around that is all the different cuts. Filet mignon never left the kitchen crew. That was put aside. For favors, we give a piece here and a piece there. Did you ever take a fifty gallon drum, heat it, throw salt, throw eggshells in it, and make coffee? That's the way we used to do it. I mentioned earlier, my father was in the trucking business, Dugan Brothers and Watkins Brothers. We used to make pancakes. I said to myself, "We don't have any syrup to go with this." So I wrote to my dad and said, "See what you can do in getting me some concentrate." I get a shipment of pills from Dugan Brothers. It was, maple syrup pills. I experimented with it, got the right consistency. I had fellows coming for my pancakes from fifty miles around. You heard of Spam? ... You talked to a soldier and he didn't like it. I had men coming from twenty-five miles around for my Spam. I used to take a five gallon container of sweet and sour pickles, take the Spam, throw the sweet and sour in it, crumple it all up together. We used to buy fresh vegetables, barter with the farmers around.

SH: Now, this is after the war.

AL: Yeah.

SH: In Germany.

AL: In Germany. We get lettuce, take a glob of Spam, sweet and sour pickles, put it on, we add some mayonnaise out of the can. They used to come from ten and one-half miles for my Spam. Experiences. ...

DE: Were there any organizational problems transporting a cavalry from southern France into the Battle of the Bulge and then through Germany?

AL: Yes, there were always problems that popped up. Shortages of ammunition; couldn't get to you with it. Shortages in the food; couldn't get to you with it, because of road conditions, because of the enemy, where they were located and what they were doing, *et cetera*. You mentioned the Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes. This was December, January. This was a surprise to Eisenhower and to everyone. We thought by Christmas the war would be over. Our outfit was situated outside of the town by the name of, and I'm not swearing, Bitche. ... We were in the Ardennes, in the mountains, a road cutting across the hill going down, A troop, B troop, C troop. Our vehicles were behind us. We were dug in. We had engineers come up and string concertina and barbed wire ahead of us. They put booby traps on it. Behind our vehicles we had a strong wiring, or wires, with tin cans on it to let us know if anyone is coming up from the back. We were there close to the full month. We didn't turn our vehicle over enough. The batteries were dead. We had an escape route down on the back, taking us back to company headquarters. The three troops, A, B, and C had machine guns set up that they crossfire with each other so that if anyone came in this area, you could crossfire with the other machine guns into their full area. The battle started, A troop was down partially, partially down with flu. We couldn't crossfire with them. We heard this clamor, this yelling. They [the Germans] were doped up ... and they were yelling, yelling wildly. We had a spotter across the road behind the wires, the trip wires in

the bottom, and so forth, that we had out there with a machine gun. I happened to be in that spot at that time. They came close; some of the grenades went off. Some of the bombs went off that were set and they started firing and I started answering them. This went on for maybe fifteen or twenty minutes. The next thing I knew, there was a tap on my shoulder. One of the fellows from across the road came up and says, "Come on Lasner, let's get out of here. The guys are leaving." What's the first thing you do? ...

DE: Leave.

AL: Right, that's the first thing, but what I should have done was open that machine gun, taking the top latch and pushing it down. That would have destroyed the gun so it couldn't be used, but I left it. We both left. When I got back to the road, across the road, nobody was there. They had gone down the back going towards Headquarters Company. We got back towards headquarters. We might have been fifty yards, seventy-five yards from Headquarters Company. Trees were no thicker than a two by four, and all of a sudden you hear, "Clunk," of .50 caliber machine gun putting a slug into its chamber up ahead of us. "Hold it, we're coming in." We finally went in. I remember that night I ended up inside an armored car tire. They had the tire set up. I slept inside the tire of that armored car. I was so exhausted. The next day, the Captain said, "Anybody who could take a rifle, from a cook to a shoemaker, you grab a rifle and you come." And that's how that ended up. For that little I did, I believe I deserved it, is where I got my Bronze Star.

SH: Can you tell us about the availability of supplies and the weather you encountered?

AL: The weather was cold, extremely cold. At night it would snow lightly, on and off. Supplies, until the attack, we had everything we needed. I remember I had a flashlight at one time, it was an army flashlight, and I asked my dad to ship me or send me a better flashlight. Well, he sent me a better flashlight. Well, all of us lost everything that we had. Our possessions were on our vehicles, or on our person. I lost the flashlight. I lost part of the hand grenade that I carried with me for so long.

SH: You left because the vehicles wouldn't turn over

AL: We had to get out to save our own life.

SH: How did you regroup then from that point? Where did you regroup?

AL: At company headquarters, that's where we got back to where that .50 caliber machine gun welcomed us, and that's when we regrouped. When it got daylight, the Captain came around and got everybody together and we all went and continued.

SH: Where did you go when you regrouped? Back up where you had been?

AL: No, not to that area, to a different area. They were forming and probably where the bulge was the greatest. The Germans didn't come down towards the company headquarters until that time.

SH: How many men were involved in this retreat?

AL: "A" troop was captured.

SH: Were they?

AL: Yeah. We didn't hear from them or anything. They were B and C troops that I was familiar with. I would say there were sixty, seventy men.

SH: Why do you think that the Germans were doped up?

AL: The way they were yelling. The way they were screaming. The carelessness of their coming forth the way they did. They were young. They were very young, and if you didn't stop them, they would stop you.

SH: Was Company "A" already captured at that point?

AL: I believe so because we didn't hear from them and they didn't get back to the company headquarters.

SH: Since that time, did you find out what happened to them?

AL: Yes, that they were overrun. Now whether they were captured or killed, there were so many, I have no idea.

SH: Where did you go after you regrouped? Do you know in which direction you headed?

AL: I have no idea. I just followed them.

SH: Did you earn the Combat Infantry Badge?

AL: I got the Bronze Star supposedly because by my doing what I did gave the outfit time to get away. Did I have a Combat Infantry Badge? I wasn't in the infantry. ... My eyesight is weird. I'll put it to you this way, Sandra. I look at Dustin with this eye. This eye is over here. I'll look at you with this eye. This eye is over here. So, that I happen to be an expert on a .30 caliber machine gun, number one. I carry a rifle with me. As far as an Infantryman Badge, I am not an expert with the rifle, but that was my permanent gun. It was fortunate that I was up there with a .30 caliber machine gun.

SH: Where did your group go after the Battle of the Bulge?

AL: Okay. This was already January. We ended up after the Bulge in Ober Leaderbach which was outside of Frankfurt ... and we were doing this security.

SH: Back down south.

AL: Right. We were doing the security for the SHAEF Headquarters. We were there maybe two or three months. ... Then, finally [I] ... was called ... to come back to the States.

SH: Did you have to cook or provide supplies or anything like that for displaced persons at that point?

AL: Did we have to do what about supplies?

SH: Did you have to take care of the displaced persons?

AL: Displaced people? No, no. We were billeted at, let's say, outside of Frankfurt. ... We didn't have contact with the displaced people because we were circulating around the entire area of the headquarters.

SH: You said you had traded for fresh vegetables and things for your kitchen. What was the reaction of the German people to you at this point?

AL: Good question. The ones that we did have contact with, we go out to the farmland to purchase or barter with them. We used German Marks that we liberated in our travels. In fact we built a bar and grill with their Marks and supplied it with our own liquor. They were collaborators. They were defeated. They were hungry. They were still shrewd. ... I'll put it to you this way, we did as little as we can with them and for them. We tried to stay by ourselves.

SH: What interactions did you have with the allied forces?

AL: If you will excuse the expression, 117th was known as a "bastard outfit." We were attached to whoever needed us, and we were available. We were actually with the Seventh Army, General Butler's army, but we worked with different units from different armies at different times. The main period of time, we were with the Seventh Army. As far as English or French, no. One experience I can mention, which was surprising to us, a cavalry outfit, during the war, we linked onto another American cavalry outfit, an all Negro outfit, and that was exciting.

SH: Where did you run into them?

AL: I can't remember in actually what location. ...

SH: In from southern France, north?

AL: Yes, yes. Where exactly I can't remember, but that was exciting to both of us.

SH: What did you do?

AL: Well, we each had our own objective at that time but we spent a good half hour with them. Believe you me, just talking about what we've been doing and so forth and so on. Also, weird, awfully weird. ...

DE: How did writing and receiving letters affect morale?

AL: I wrote as often as we possibly could, which at times wasn't that often. We received mail quite frequently. It will catch up to you. It might be stale but it would catch up to you. Everyone was happy to receive mail. Those who didn't we'd share our mail with. Truthfully, I can say that a number of us, the greater majority of us, did get mail and it helped. You learned what was happening or what's going on back home. When you wrote to them you would write with a guided hand, God forbid something was wrong with you would be a different story. Talking about stories, can I divert from this? I didn't tell you about my second vacation in the army. ... I told you about the first one going to Paris. ... We were in Germany at this point. I had the flu and my name came up for furlough to London, England. Well, flu, or no flu, I wasn't going to miss an opportunity to go to London, England, because, number one, I had a ... nephew of mine who was a major in the Quartermaster Corps back in London, England and I also had relatives in London, England, on my mother's side. So, I flew with the flu to London, England, and while I was there, this was a week's furlough, I caught, what was known as, "walking" pneumonia. This nephew of mine pulled some strings, got me a ration card, and the cousins of mine were able to help me with my recuperation. These cousins went up into the attic and took out sardine cans, which they had, and I lived a life of luxury. The ration coupons helped very greatly. ... I went to different parties. Met more relatives of mine. I had one bad thing that kept happening after a period of time and that was that I had to report to Y-74 airstrip outside of Henden London Airport everyday until I could catch a flight back to Germany. Well, there were plenty of flights coming from Germany and then going to London and then from there to the States, but there were very few leaving from London going to Germany. I guess the airlift wasn't on at that time. Everyday, I trudged to Y-74 Airport and I turned around and came back. The next day, "Bye." Well, I was in London for six weeks and a day before I was able to catch a plane to go back to the outfit. That was my second furlough.

SH: Now, this nephew, was this your sister's son?

AL: No. This was, he passed away since, but he was my mother's sister's son. That makes him a nephew, doesn't it?

SH: Cousin.

AL: First cousin.

SH: Yes.

AL: Thank you for straightening me out. A bit foggy. ... No, no, he did a tremendous job. He was doing, setting what needed to be had in that particular time during the invasion, and so forth. He was working out the logistics. He did a terrific job. ...

DE: Did you have plans of what you wanted to do when you came back home?

AL: Good question. Number one, I knew I wanted to get on with my life once I get out of the service. In fact, when you came home you could sign here and be here in the army and I said, "Hold it! Hold it! Oh, no, no." I really wanted to go back to school and get an education. That's been in the back of my mind constantly during the whole period of time overseas should I make it and fortunately, that's what happened.

SH: How did you get to Rutgers?

AL: I was discharged Christmas Day of '45. I had to go AWOL to come home before that, but I got back in time to be discharged Christmas Day of '45.

SH: Would you like to tell us that story before we go any farther?

AL: I don't think they can do anything to me now. We landed; we finally ended up in Fort Monmouth.

SH: Did you come home by air?

AL: We all came by ship.

SH: Do you remember the name of the ship?

AL: No, and I have papers to prove that I tried to find out where I left from, for sure, and the name of the ship. Our records were destroyed here in the States. There was a big fire and all the records from so many years, well, mine was one of them. Okay, so we were at Monmouth and I think it was the 22nd of December and it would take a while for us to be discharged. There were so many returnees. That's a good word for them. So, I said to myself and a couple of others fellows, "We don't live too far from here. What do you say we stay at least two days, we take off and come back," and that's what we did. We took off, got home, and we saw everybody, there's another story there, and we came back and we got discharged. Okay. The other story. I had a dog when I left. The cleverest dog I've ever had. He was part collie, part Doberman Pincher and he wasn't full size. He was in-between. While I was away he developed cancer. My father had x-ray treatments to arrest the cancer. I came back, he was upstairs at my grandparents and he dove from the top into my arms. The *Stars and Stripes*, yes, we were kept up-to-date of happenings in Europe as well as in the Pacific. Our outfit, for some reason, possibly because they've been overseas for so long, the fellows that left early on points with 100, or some odd points, knew that they would not be going to the Pacific. When I left Europe, I was under the impression, although there was a lot of talk about a lot of them to be shipped to the Pacific, we were going home to be discharged, and when we landed back in Jersey, I knew we were going home.

SH: Did you think that there was a chance that you would be going to the Pacific?

AL: No, I didn't think so.

SH: Can you tell us about the celebration with V-E Day?

AL: Oh, it was wild. Not only was it wild as we first got there, but it continued to be wild while we were there the entire time that we were there. Oh, dancing, singing in the street, partying. The FFE was in town. It was just one humdinger of a time. ... It was a big party and we had in back of our minds that we had to get back, we had to get back, we hated to get back, but we had to get back. So we dragged it out as long as we could and tried to stay awake as long as we could and try to stay sober as long as we could, and finally headed back for the outfit.

SH: When you sold the items that you stored with motor maintenance, who did you sell it to?

AL: Oh, there were a number of places where you could dispose of liberated articles. Cigarettes were easy to panhandle right out on the street. If they knew you were selling cigarettes, they'd ask, "What else do you have?" and then you'd meet and dispose of what else you had.

SH: Were these French civilians or to other military people?

AL: Some to other military people but the majority of it was the French civilians. We were bad boys.

SH: Then tell us about when you heard that ...

AL: ... the war in the Pacific ended?

SH: I was gonna ask first about the death of Franklin Roosevelt.

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

DE: This begins tape two side A of an interview with Arnold Lasner.

SH: I had just asked you about the reaction to the death of Franklin Roosevelt.

AL: It was a shocker to everyone. The man that did what he did in the time allotted him and didn't do what he didn't do in the time allotted him and who carried the torch for this country for so long. Passing away so suddenly was a shock. Now we come to Truman. Who is he? What can he do for this country? Time will tell, and it certainly did.

SH: Did you feel confident in Truman's decisions and his ability?

AL: Well, I was practically on my way home at that time and Truman wasn't in office for that long a period of time before I was discharged.

SH: What did you think of his decision to drop the bomb in August of 1945?

AL: It saved an awful lot of lives, American lives. Knowing what they had gone through, hopscotching islands to get to where they were, and then to try and conquer the country, it saved an awful lot of American lives.

SH: Did you ever encounter any discussions or oppositions to the dropping of the bomb?

AL: At our alumni meetings where a lot of us get together, quarterly, we discussed a lot of things. We had speakers and discussion periods with them afterwards and I can recall of no incident where any of us said, "The bombs should not have been dropped," and I think that's the consensus of opinion there.

SH: What was your interaction to the USO and also the Red Cross?

AL: I had no contact with the USO when I was overseas, as you can see from our discussion, it was hop-skip, and so forth, or with the Red Cross. I can remember getting a doughnut here or there, but no direct contact.

SH: Were there clubs set up in Paris?

AL: Yes, but we were too busy to go to a Red Cross Club. There were other clubs. ...

SH: Did you ever have any interaction with the chaplain corps?

AL: No. No. I had no experience or need to, although I am not that religious, I am religious, but not that religious. I assume if I had the need I would have.

SH: Were there ever any times that you did attend services?

AL: Yes. Yes, it was one or two times that I did, but they were far and few between.

SH: Do you remember where and when you went?

AL: In the States when I was going through basic. Overseas, I don't recall, to be truthful with you, attending any service.

SH: What was it like for a young man from Jersey to wind up in Arkansas?

AL: Weird. Like a young man in Jersey ending up in Ohio or the Carolinas.

SH: Was there culture shock?

AL: Culture shock. Camp Chaffee, Arkansas, was not far from Little Rock. We didn't get to Little Rock that often, so I didn't rub shoulders with these Arkansans, but just being in the country and seeing the vastness and the slate, layer upon layer, didn't strike me that much.

SH: Can you tell us about the decisions that you had to make after being discharged and how Rutgers came into the picture?

AL: When I came out of the service, I knew I wanted to go back to school. I didn't know what I wanted to do, so I did two things. I was interviewed with a psychiatrist or a psychologist from

the VA, as well as from the Essex County Council of Jewish Agencies, and they both came up with the idea that I should be a professional.

SH: Where did you hear about this service?

AL: I heard of the service from the Essex County Council and I knew the VA was giving this service, so I figured, "Try one, try them both." Well, to be a professional, what kind of professional? That's up to you. So I applied to Rutgers knowing that it would either be in New Brunswick or ... Newark branch, before it became Rutgers, and I had to wait for their answer. ... So, rather than sit around, I took a course, by a private individual in shorthand, typing, figuring it would be helpful in school. From nine to three, we had this course and from three to five I would play chess with the teacher. ... Then I would go to Elizabeth and hop a ride with my dad. It did help. I was admitted in Newark and I started taking the general courses and at that time, within three years, you could take an advanced course, an accelerated not advanced and get a degree. Still, not knowing what I wanted to do, after I took the basic, they decided that you have to take something so I went into business administration. I received a degree in business administration. ... I started from scratch and went straight through summer and winter.

SH: Where were you housed?

AL: I lived in Carteret. I commuted ... and wanting to get the college education behind me and my life ahead of me, and that's what happened. I graduated within that period.

SH: What were you involved in at the University?

AL: The only thing I was actually involved in was the fraternity.

SH: Which fraternity?

AL: Beta Sigma Rho. We had our own frat house over a bar, which was convenient ... "You sure you don't want a drink?" [Laughter] ... I finished, got my degree. ... I majored in marketing and minored in economics. I enjoyed one particular professor of mine, Solomon J. Flink, I think I mentioned it. The saying going around the school was, "Flunk with Flink." Two-thirds of his class after the first semester would be gone. Economics professor. Did you ever hear of Leon Hendersen, OPA, Office of Price Administration? Solomon J. Flink and Leon Henderson set up the OPA for this country. I took every course in economics that he gave. The reason I enjoyed his courses was the fact that you were in the dark, three quarters of the class wouldn't turn up, but towards the end, he pulled all strings and pulled everything together and you saw the whole picture. I learned a lot from that man. ...

SH: Did you attend football games or any of the fun activities?

AL: Not really.

SH: Your sister had already graduated from NJC at this point.

AL: While I was in college, yes. ... The soldiers that were taking their courses in college at that time weren't too interested in all the frills and so forth. They were interested in getting the education and getting on with their lives, and that's the way I looked at it.

DE: What was the interaction like between the veterans and the younger students?

AL: We were in the same class. They were more active. We were more sedate. They jumped around, they went to parties. They did this and they did that and we weren't interested, but we got along together. To be truthful, I think there were more GIs in class than the younger people. At least to me it seems that way in Newark.

SH: You said you started all over again. Did you have to take ROTC, which had been mandatory?

AL: No. No.

SH: I always have to ask that because some people actually signed up because of the money.

AL: No, no. Why would they sign up, they were on the GI Bill? Who wanted it? I had enough of it.

SH: You used your GI Bill to go to Rutgers?

AL: I used the GI Bill to go to Rutgers and I used the GI Bill for our first home.

SH: Are there other stories that you want to share about Rutgers before we ask how you met Mrs. Lasner?

AL: Through Rutgers; through the fraternity brother of mine.

SH: Really?

AL: Yeah, he lived in Plainfield. He doesn't today. He introduced Estelle to me on a blind date and we hit it off and we started going together and after I graduated, things happened.

DE: Can you tell us how you went from Rutgers into your career.

AL: Okay. This is 1949. Now, when I graduated and one of my professors had a friend who was instrumental in a clothing company who had an outlet in Newark, as well as in Elizabeth, and they were looking for someone to become a credit manager in one, so he happened to mention it and I mentioned it to him and I got the job. That was my first job. ... I started in their Newark store and then took over the Elizabeth store as credit manager and that lasted for a while. From there I went to Griffith Piano Company in Elizabeth as credit manager and that lasted for a little bit longer. ... From there I was interviewed for a job of credit manager, the company was a Pittsburgh company and, by the way, I got married in the interim.

SH: Should we test you and ask you when?

AL: We got married in 1951, July 8th and I went with this company who had eleven stores and one was in Steubenville, Ohio and I went out to be credit manager of that store and we lived in Weirton, West Virginia which was right across the river where the Allegheny meets the Mohangahela. You know the area? ... I was there and Estelle became pregnant and we decided to come back to Jersey. From there I ended up in Plainfield as credit manager for a furniture store and we had our first child, Jay. ... From there we had our second child, Andrew and Estelle's parents had a store in Plainfield, a ladies wear shop, and they were set to retire. Estelle is one of three girls in the family. The oldest sister worked in the shop and they wanted me to come into the shop. The shop has been in business for forty-five years at that time. So, I left credit managing and went into the ladies wear business and by the time, well, my sister-in-law had passed away during the course of time, my wife came into the business and we ran the business. By the time we decided to retire, the business was in operation for seventy-five years. And we retired. ...

DE: Can you tell us a little bit about your children? I believe one of them went to Rutgers.

AL: Our youngest son went to Rutgers in New Brunswick. Graduated with a degree in microbiology, was a character while he was in school. I had no idea where he got it from. ... Today he is a partner in a company that represents or actually is a manufacturer's representative. They deal in ultra-fine filtrations for the pharmaceutical industry. They sell filters, the housings, and so forth, to the big boys. How long the big boys are gonna be, I don't know, like Merck and Bristol-Myers and so forth. They live in Newtown, Pennsylvania, married. I have two grandchildren, a boy and a girl, twelve-and-one-half and eight. And that's Andrew, who went to Rutgers, doing quite well. ... We have another boy who didn't go to Rutgers but went to a very fine school. Jay is not married. Jay is older. Jay graduated Franklin and Marshall, got in the Navy. The Navy put him through medical school. At the time that this was happening, he became a flight surgeon. While in service, was in and out of Beirut about thirty times during that conflict. Traveled the world after he got out of service. He is, you name it, he did it, just to give you a few. Both boys are Eagle Scouts. Jay is a scuba diver, a ham radio operator. He built his own transceiver, is all over the world with it. It started with a seven foot tower on our garage then with a forty foot tower, a pilot, he's a doctor, you name it. He gets all that from his mother. Today he's in practice with a partner in Florida. I mentioned that Estelle's sister who I went into business with passed away. She had a cancer that went right through her. Jay saw her suffering. He made up his mind, if he ever became a doctor, people wouldn't suffer. Today, he and his partner run a pain management clinic in Florida, in a rehabilitation hospital. They have two satellite clinics, in the hospital, that they run and they have their own clinic that they run, all in Florida.

DE: Are there any questions that we did not ask that you really feel that we should have asked?

AL: I think I told you too much already.

SH: Well, Mr. Lasner, thank you very much for taking time today to talk with us.

DE: Thank you.

AL: You're quite welcome.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Dustin Elias 08/11/02

Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 8/24/02

Reviewed by Arnold Lasner 9/02