RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES W. LAUBACH

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Mr. James W. Laubach on December 20, 2007, in Bridgewater, New Jersey. Mr. Laubach, thank you very much for having me here today. To begin, can you tell me where and when you were born?

James Laubach: I was born in Bayonne, New Jersey, on June 19, 1916.

SI: Can you tell me what your parents' names were?

JL: … Oh, my father's name was Clarence and my mother's name was Lottie, L-O-T-T-I-E.

SI: Your father, where was he from? Tell me a little bit about his background.

JL: Well, he was from Phillipsburg, New Jersey, where he grew up. Then, he was employed on the Jersey Central Railroad as a locomotive engineer, and the family, eventually, well, they moved to Bayonne, where I was born.

SI: What about your mother and her background? Where was her family from?

JL: Well, she also grew up in Phillipsburg and worked, as a youth, in a silk mill in Phillipsburg and met my father, who worked on the trolley car, and she used the trolley car to go to work, and so, that was the beginning of their association. [laughter]

SI: Do you know anything about their family backgrounds, like where the families came from, why they came to the United States, that sort of thing?

JL: Well, the Laubachs came from Germany and arrived in Philadelphia in 1738. My mother's side, we don't have much definite information. Her grandfather was a boatman on the Morris Canal, which happened to run through Phillipsburg, in back of her mother's house. [laughter]

SI: By the time you came along, the family had moved to Bayonne. Was that because of your father's work? Why did the family move to Bayonne?

JL: I beg your pardon; when did they move?

SI: When, but, also, why, did they move to Bayonne?

JL: Oh, I do believe it was convenient for my father's work, because they, [at] one time, lived in Rockaway, New Jersey, and, as I understand, from there, they moved to Bayonne, … which, of course, was very close to the Jersey Central Railroad, which ran through Bayonne.

SI: I see you have a couple of brothers and sisters. Can you tell me about them, what their names were?

JL: My oldest brother's name was like my father's name, Clarence, my older brother's name was Charles, and my sister, who was six years older than I, her first name was Elizabeth. That's about it, I guess.

SI: You are the youngest in the family.

JL: I was the youngest, yes, sir.

SI: Can you tell me about some of your earliest memories of growing up in Bayonne?

JL: [laughter] I was kind of, as a little kid, a problem, in a sense, but not a problem, just that I used to pal with the boy across the street. Their family was German, migrants, but we became very good friends. … When he would become angry with me, or with people, he would bite them and, one day, his mother said, "Bite him back, so [that] … you can teach him," and I looked at his dirty hand. I said, "I will not bite that dirty hand back," [laughter] but we were in kindergarten together and we got ourselves in little minor troubles with our parents and so on, but he later grew up to become some sort of very bright engineer, with a rating of a genius, as time went on.

SI: What kind of neighborhood was it? Were there a lot of immigrants?

JL: Oh, a typical Bayonne neighborhood, the houses close together, you know, the streets were not too wide. … I was happy with my neighbors. [laughter] Sometimes, the neighbors would get in minor quarrels; the women would, you know. They were home to quarrel, every once in awhile, [laughter] but, in Bayonne, there was a very large population of Irish people and some of my friends were Irish, and I had an assortment of friends, Jewish and German and everything. … It was nice. The school was … very close to my home, maybe a half of a block.

SI: How did all the different groups get along? Did they get along well?

JL: Oh, sure, as far as I know, except, once, a couple of Irish kids and a German kid got into an argument, then, their mothers got in an argument. [laughter] My mother said, "I'm not arguing. By the time we argue, they make up. I say, 'Let them fight.'" [laughter]

SI: Your family was there during the First World War, right? That was when you were born.

JL: Oh, yes, yes. … Most of it; let's see, First World War was '14 to '18. …

SI: There was a lot of anti-German sentiment during that war. Did your family ever talk about that, if they ever felt prejudiced against?

JL: No, I didn't know of that at the time, no.

SI: Your older brothers and sister, they did not either.

JL: We were known [as], we were regarded as, what you'd call "Pennsylvania Dutch." Any of that German characteristic was lost in the years of … time, you know.

SI: Nobody said anything because you had a German name.

JL: No, no, never, not in those [days], no, never.

SI: You went to elementary school in Somerville.

JL: Elementary in Somerville, yes, sir.

SI: You moved out of …

JL: Bayonne, yes, sir.

SI: How old were you when you moved out of Bayonne?

JL: About eight.

SI: Do you have any other memories of Bayonne before you moved out and started going to school in Somerville? Does anything stand out about that period of your life?

JL: Oh, different little things. At the close of the World War I, the United States sought reparations from Germany and among one of the things was a German dirigible, because they had made quite a bit of advances during World War I, and that dirigible was flown across the ocean. … I recall, as a youth, since we lived close to the bay in Bayonne, I've seen a dirigible come over New York City and so-called salute it and make a sort of maneuver. Then, [in] later years, this country went into making dirigibles, you know, and established a center at Lakehurst [Naval Air Station] and one of the dirigibles, I do believe it was the [USS] *Macon* [(ZRS-5)], got lost. *Macon* may be not the right name, *Macon*. During a summer storm, it came drifting very close, down at low altitude, down the street where I lived, in the nighttime, and you could hear the propellers and look up and see the lights of the thing, a very low altitude. I mean, those things stood out, as a kid, you know, events. [Editor's Note: Mr. Laubach may be referring to the USS *Shenandoah* (ZR-1), which was torn from its mooring mast at Lakehurst NAS by a winter storm on January 16, 1924, and drifted across Northern New Jersey, including Bayonne.]

SI: Would you say you were interested in aviation even then?

JL: No, no, not particularly, [laughter] but where we lived in Bayonne, not far from the bay, we had a good view from the street of New York Bay, seeing … some of the ocean liners come in, at that time, into the Harbor of New York. You know, the major ones had more than one smokestack. … At the nighttime, you could see the Staten Island Ferry, from the lights, going from New York to Staten Island, going back and forth. So, we used to like to go down to the bay, with Mother's permission, to play near the water. …

SI: Bayonne was a pretty busy port, also, right? There were a lot of ships coming into Bayonne.

JL: Not to Bayonne, no. … Bayonne, there was no shipping port developed then, at that time, that I knew of. Maybe down towards Jersey City, there would be something, but not Bayonne.

SI: I thought there were oilers, oil vessels, coming in.

JL: Well, the oil refinery, the Standard Oil, was down towards Staten Island and the ships came in down around Staten Island, into what we called the Kill Van Kull, and the refinery was [in] what we called "the Hook," where … oil was processed. Sometimes, the fumes would drift across the city and, if you had a garden, sometimes your tomato plants were killed by the fumes that drifted across the city. [laughter]

SI: Do you remember any recreational activities that you were involved in in Bayonne, such as sports or clubs?

JL: Well, when I left, at the age of eight, there wasn't too much at that time, that I remember, you know. In the schools, they were not developed very much.

SI: Why did the family move to Somerville?

JL: I guess Daddy wanted more space and, since he grew up in more of a country atmosphere, maybe that appealed to him, and, also, at the time, there was what you call a minor railroad terminal in Raritan and trains would originate at Raritan and go to Jersey City. So, his route or his assignment ended in Raritan, which is … close to Somerville. So, he moved to Somerville.

SI: That was a good fit for his work. What do you remember about your neighborhood in Somerville? Could you describe that for me a little bit?

JL: Oh, it was nice. It was rural. I mean, when we moved to Somerville, our house was one of the last on that street and across the street was a field, wherein, sometimes, there would be a traveling circus that would tent down there. So, as a kid, we would go over there and look at the animals and, once, they gave us the job of … doing some work, hauling, I guess, water for the animals, or whatever, to get admission to the circus. … Also, that same open field was a ball field for sports, but they never amounted to much, and then, once in awhile, there would be some traveling gypsies that would tent down in there and we would see gypsies. [laughter] My brother used to like to trap animals, like muskrats, that he got a small amount of money for, and so, he would go up to the brook, outside the borough limits, and trap muskrats, and I had a nice young man next-door there; well, I say young man. He's only two years younger than I am, saw him a few weeks ago. So, I had good neighbors and people to play with. …

SI: You saw him recently, but he was your neighbor when you were younger in Somerville.

JL: … Yes, next-door neighbor.

SI: All right, and you just saw him recently.

JL: He still lives in Somerville. He's a graduate of Rutgers, too.

SI: Really? What is his name?

JL: [Frederick] Schmelz, S-C-H-M-E-L-Z, [Class of 1940].

SI: I have never heard of him. Maybe we will contact him. During this whole period, it was the period of Prohibition. Do you have any memories about Prohibition? Did you know anybody in your neighborhood who was a bootlegger or anything like that?

JL: No, not in my neighborhood there.

SI: Or in Bayonne. Do you remember Prohibition being a big issue?

JL: … No, I remember it being discussed and, up the street, at the corner of the street, at Broadway and where we lived on 39th Street, there was a saloon, but that's all I knew. I didn't know, you know. [laughter]

SI: Was it one of these saloons that had to operate in secret?

JL: No, I don't think so. I don't remember that. See, I wasn't too much aware, as an eight-year-old kid, you know.

SI: It sounds like Somerville was very rural then.

JL: Well, it was a small town, at that time, even though it was the county seat.

SI: Did you do a lot of outdoor activities, such as hunting, fishing or camping?

JL: No. Mostly, my time was spent playing with the neighbors' kids. … Sometimes, you know, kids sleep out overnight in a tent in the backyard, you know, and that sort of little thing.

SI: What about the schools in Somerville? What did you think of your education there?

JL: I thought it was good. I enjoyed the school, didn't have any problem.

SI: Were your schools near your house? Did you walk to them?

JL: We walked, always walked, in those days; not many people had cars.

SI: Was there any subject that you were particularly interested in in school?

JL: History, I always liked history. [laughter]

SI: The Great Depression started in 1929.

JL: '29.

SI: What do you remember about either the beginning of the Depression or any point in the Depression?

JL: Well, it was in the news, a lot of activity, you know, in a sense. You'd read about people in the Wall Street area jumping out of buildings to commit suicide and people selling apples on the street to make a buck and take the few dollars, whatever, you know, and I think the price of some of the goods depressed somewhat. … Like, we could buy a pair of shoes, good shoes, for three dollars, a loaf of bread, maybe fifteen cents, that sort of thing. My father's job on the railroad was quite steady and, sometimes, there would be drifters or …

SI: Hobos?

JL: Men drifting through town. They'd knock on the door and ask for food, and my mother said she would never turn them down and she'd give them a plate of food and they'd eat at the back stoop or whatever. They didn't come in the house, but she was very kind that way.

SI: Did they do any work around the house?

JL: No, no, just gave them food. That was all, just … so [that] they could go along on their trip.

SI: From your perspective, did you see the Depression having a big impact on Somerville? Did you see people losing their homes, that sort of thing?

JL: No, I didn't, that I recall. I do remember, the government started the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] and looking out at the living room window, in a very cold winter night, a young man carrying a suitcase, walking past the house in the direction of the CCC camp, or headquarters, and I can always remember that. You know, at that time, the government gave them maybe two or three dollars, put them on the train to come out to Raritan, where this headquarters happened to be, and I guess they gave them a little suitcase to carry their things. …

SI: How close were you to the headquarters of the CCC?

JL: There was an operation that was up close, right on the same grounds, as the Central Railroad terminal, because, at the time I got out of college, there was not much work and I took a job then with the CCC. … They were scouting for the Dutch Elm Disease.

SI: Okay.

JL: Okay, and we would go around, get on the truck and go around with the foreman, and go in the woods, where we'd try to spot evidence of the disease. If we found it, they tagged the tree. We'd climb up, take a sample and bring it down, so [that] they could mark it. The idea was eradication that way, which, of course, is a very poor way of eradicating a disease, but it was a boondoggle in a sense, you know, and it paid me some money. … I worked on that for a few, I don't remember, weeks, or how many, and then, I forget what I did with that. But, events from there, as I recall, my employment, was also climbing trees in the Doris Duke Estate, you know, in Somerville, where I was employed in the tree gang. They maintained a crew that went around and pruned the trees and put them in condition, and so on, and I worked at that for awhile.

SI: Did you have any jobs when you were in high school or maybe even earlier?

JL: Mowing lawns for friends.

SI: Other than that, you did not have a steady job anywhere.

JL: Oh, no, no.

SI: Do you remember anything that you had to do to survive during the Depression? Did you have to gather wood or look for coal?

JL: No.

SI: Your father's job was able to keep you guys afloat pretty well.

JL: Yes, well, he had a steady income. We were provided for steadily, no.

SI: Did your mother ever work outside of the home, after you were born?

JL: No.

SI: Were you involved in any organized activities, such as Boy Scouts?

JL: Yes, the Scouts, and we had a high school organization, … for high school, Hi-Y, … associated with the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association], but that was a minor activity, yes.

SI: Were you heavily involved with either one of those or was it just something you did every once in awhile?

JL: … No, just [intermittently]. I played tennis. We made our own tennis court, [laughter] out of clay. It was a good court, put up a backstop, and, with the neighborhood kids, we played tennis.

SI: Would you say that you spent most of your time with just the neighborhood kids or was there something else that took up a lot of your time?

JL: I would say mostly. It was my playtime, free time, yes.

SI: Was your family involved with the church?

JL: Yes, they were. Father and Mother were involved in church, yes.

SI: What about the kids? Were you involved in that?

JL: Oh, yes, except, well, my oldest brother, by then, was away from the family. He was working and my sister also was working and, as I recall, yes, she married and was away from the family. So, that left my more extensive association [with] my older brother. He was more extraverted and he was more involved in the church and school affairs and he was quite, quite popular.

SI: Did any of your older siblings go to college?

JL: No, … only my brother. He went to the Newark College of Engineering.

SI: Which brother?

JL: The older one.

SI: Clarence.

JL: No, no, Charles was his name, yes.

SI: You graduated from high school in 1934.

JL: '33.

SI: Okay. Did you go right into Rutgers?

JL: No, no. I worked a year, to get some money to go to college. I worked a year as a surveyor's assistant in the Calco Chemical Company in Bound Brook, which, later, became American Cynamid, and, during the Depression, it was quite a feeling, that here I was, a kid about seventeen and employed, and, outside, there would be lines of men needing work, men with families, and I was walking past them, going in and making a little money. I'll never forget that, but, after all, I wanted to work and they employed me.

SI: As a surveyor for Calco, what did you do?

JL: A surveyor's assistant. I held the rod [laughter] for the surveyor to look at, through the surveyor's scope, and so on, and measured out things for him on the ground, whatever.

SI: Was this because they were building new facilities?

JL: Oh, yes, yes. They were preparing for World War II. They knew something was coming along.

SI: Were they long hours? What were the working conditions like?

JL: It was cold in the winter. One winter, it was the coldest on record. It dropped to thirty-seven below zero, for a few hours, but not too long, thank goodness, and we did not stay out in the weather that day, but it could be cold. … In the spring, when the thaw came, there were large

ice [chunks]. Well, the chemical plant bordered on the Raritan River, in which they dumped all their dyes and the river, at times, turned blue, purple, yellow, whatever, and even when I went to Rutgers, [in New Brunswick, downriver], sometimes, we could look at the river and see colors, but, in the springtime came the thaw and down that river was ice cakes as thick as …

SI: A few feet thick.

JL: Tossed up on the ground. [laughter]

SI: People were not as concerned about the environment and pollution at that time.

JL: No, no, no. … They weren't so concerned. We would eat lunch in the cafeteria with the workers and I remember seeing men who worked in the dye plants and they would come in to eat lunch. Their faces would be purple or yellow, depending on the dye they worked in, you know, and, once, we were working as surveyors, outside the nitric acid plant. If I kneeled on the ground too long, … after awhile, the acid in the ground ate holes into the knees of my pants, or the metal tape would start to rust very shortly.

SI: I actually interviewed somebody who worked for Calco recently. He said that, for one chemical they worked on, they had to keep themselves covered and, if they sweated, then, there was a problem. The chemical would seep through. There were a lot of things to watch out for.

JL: Yes, yes.

SI: Were there any accidents while you were there?

JL: No. Did they have accidents, you say, or did I?

SI: Both, you or that you saw.

JL: Not that I remember, no.

SI: Were you still living at home then?

JL: Yes, oh, of course, yes. I was only seventeen or eighteen, you know, seventeen.

SI: When you got the job, you were doing it so that you would be able to go to college.

JL: Yes, to save some money for college, and so on.

SI: How did you choose Rutgers? How did that come about?

JL: It was close by and, … I guess, because I was interested in flowers and plants, and so on.

SI: Did you apply to the College of Agriculture?

JL: Yes. I applied and, since, in those days, it was required … to enter, you should have had one foreign language in your background, which I did not have, but they allowed me to pick up a language in Rutgers the first year, an extra, to qualify, you see, at the same time, the first year. So, I opt for German. … My next-door neighbor was German. Anyhow, I opt for German and used that as my entrance language.

SI: Was there anybody who helped you get into Rutgers, any professor or a friend?

JL: No. I did enter on a scholarship, though.

SI: Which scholarship?

JL: Well, the church we belonged to had two scholarships for Rutgers that were up for grabs, as we say, and so, I applied for it, and then, got it. That's all. It was there to take, but you had to keep up your grades, of course, or you'd lose it.

SI: What do you remember about your first few days or weeks at Rutgers? Was there a hazing period?

JL: … No.

SI: Did you have to wear the dink? Did you have to wear the cap when you first got there?

JL: The what, sir?

SI: I think it is called the dink. It is a little cap that freshmen had to wear.

JL: I don't remember that, whether we did at that time. We were asked to go out for a sport in the first year. I went out for swimming, and then, … of course, we took, we were required to take, ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps] for two years, which we did.

SI: Did you stick with the swimming?

JL: Did I what, sir?

SI: Did you continue to swim?

JL: No, just enough for the first year. It was always done after class, and then, I had to get a way to get home from Rutgers, because I commuted.

SI: Oh, you commuted.

JL: Oh, yes, with other friends, yes.

SI: Did you commute all four years?

JL: … Yes, oh, yes. We carpooled.

SI: About how many people would carpool together?

JL: Maybe four to five at a time.

SI: Did you have a car then?

JL: My last year, I bought my father's old car, a '29 Buick passenger car, which had two spare tires on each side, that were in the wells in the front fenders, and a trunk rack on the back, if you wanted to carry a trunk for long journeys. [laughter]

SI: Was it difficult to commute?

JL: No.

SI: Was it a hardship?

JL: … If you didn't carpool, for awhile it was possible to take a bus. A bus ran from Raritan to New Brunswick, for about fifty cents.

SI: After awhile, did you have to choose a major? What did you choose for your major?

JL: Now, let's see, the major was landscape design or landscape gardening, I think, something like that. I was in the College of Agriculture all the time.

SI: Were all of your classes on the College of Agriculture campus?

JL: Oh, no, no. We sometimes had to walk from downtown, you know where downtown was, you know, George [Street].

SI: George and College Avenue.

JL: Oh, yes, … walk up College Avenue to classes at the College of Agriculture, unless we had a ride, but, sometimes, … most of the time, we'd walk it.

SI: Were there any clubs or anything that you were involved in?

JL: You know, I forget. I don't have the best memory, but a friend of mine, … I had a party on my ninetieth birthday and this person did some research on my college activities and she came up with the idea that I belonged to Alpha Zeta, which was a college agricultural fraternity. I didn't remember.

SI: That was the honor fraternity.

JL: I don't know if there was. She said there was; I think there was one. [laughter]

SI: You must have been a good student if you got into that.

JL: Alpha Zeta, yes. Well, then, again, I had to maintain good grades for the scholarship, too. It was not difficult. I just studied conscientiously, you know.

SI: What did you think of the classes and the professors at Rutgers?

JL: I thought they were excellent.

SI: Do any of them stand out in your memory?

JL: Well, yes, we had, in the first years, classes in mechanical drawing. They wanted to make sure we could draw things, and we had to be very precise in that class. Your drawings could not be a sixteenth to a sixty-fourth of an inch out of line. [laughter] That professor required neatness and accuracy in everything, and then, there was another one who his teaching was more informal. You would go out and they would teach you how to rake soil or handle a shovel or prune a shrub. We had those practical applications of teaching, you know.

SI: Would you do any work on the farm?

JL: No, no, no.

SI: What about the ROTC training? You were in ROTC. Were you just in there for two years or were you there for four years?

JL: Just two years, yes.

SI: Does anything stand out in your memory about that?

JL: We had the weekly drills, or whatever it was, you know, with the gun and marching. … I had classes where the instructor would be an Army officer, you know, and, sometimes, he'd tell us some minor things about his experience, but nothing too much, and, of course, … those ROTC classes were very simple ones. I mean, you didn't have to be real [smart]; they were very easy. I guess they were meant to be, I don't know.

SI: At that time, were you thinking that there might be a war at some point?

JL: No.

SI: When you were in college, did you follow what was happening in the world, particularly with Hitler and Mussolini in Europe?

JL: Not particularly, no. The only time when I was made conscious of the possibility of war was when I worked at Princeton Nurseries, after I left the Duke Estate, and, there, the owner was a grandson of a German family and, of course, they knew of some things that were going on, you

know, by their association of relatives in Europe, or whatever. … Then, we were told there was going to be, in a conversation, … a conflict, a war.

SI: Was that before Hitler invaded Poland or after?

JL: Before what, sir?

SI: Was that before Hitler invaded Poland and the Second World War started?

JL: I forget when. … I just read something recently; he invaded Poland in '38.

SI: 1939.

JL: '39?

SI: Yes.

JL: Okay. Now, this would be, see, I'd been out in '38. … So, I guess it'd be just shortly after he invaded Poland, because I would have been over there in '40, maybe.

SI: When you graduated, you mentioned it was difficult to find jobs.

JL: Oh, in those times, yes, it was.

SI: Did you and your fellow classmates talk about how difficult it would be to get work? What did you think about that at the time?

JL: Well, we were anxious to get out and make our way in the world and to earn our living, and we knew it was difficult then, you know. In those days, a clerk in, say, like, a department store of New York, might make twenty-four dollars a week. Wages were small. That was not too bad for some people.

SI: What did you think of FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt] and his New Deal programs?

JL: Well, they were socially excellent, because it's a case of where the government steps in to try to change or rectify a poor condition, yes. They're doing it now with the mortgages, the same thing, you know, but, you know, they had these camps for the CCC and the others. You know what they did, made parks and other things, and the WPA [Works Progress Administration].

SI: Yes, they would build roads.

JL: Yes, that went on for awhile, because, when I was at Princeton Nurseries, I had a job of laying out some plantings at Johnson Park, [in Piscataway], you know, on the …

SI: On the bank of the Raritan River.

JL: Yes, and then, … I was there to help supervise the crew to do these plantings on the job. The nursery sent me there as a supervisor, [to] interpret the plan and see that the job was carried out. … That was the WPA employees that did the work.

SI: Okay. The WPA worked with the Princeton Nurseries.

JL: Well, the county gave the contract to Princeton Nursery and WPA was the labor that installed it into the county park, which is Johnson Park.

SI: Working with the WPA workers, what did you think of them?

JL: They were good workers. They didn't break their backs too hard, but they worked as best they could, you know.

SI: How long did you work at the Duke Estate before you went to Princeton?

JL: I don't remember, not too long, because I worked at Duke's, and then, I got a better paying job, of a few dollars more a week, at Princeton, where they wanted a salesman, and so on, and I worked there for awhile, and then, I went back to Duke at another better paying job again. [laughter] So, back at Duke, the second time, I was a supervisor of the Japanese garden that they installed just outside the residence. [Editor's Note: The Duke Estate is a 2,700-acre estate in Hillsborough, New Jersey, developed by tobacco tycoon James Buchanan Duke in 1893.]

SI: What did you think about working for Doris Duke's estate? [Editor's Note: Doris Duke was the daughter of James Buchanan Duke.]

JL: What did I think of it?

SI: Did you enjoy it?

JL: Oh, very much, yes, very much, yes. … The supervisors and employees, they were very congenial, and I knew one of them. I went to high school with one of the boys, whose father was superintendent of the estate, and so, I mean, they were not strangers to me, you see.

SI: Did you ever see Doris Duke or her husband?

JL: Once, I saw her, yes, walk through the garden.

SI: Where were you working when the war broke out?

JL: In the Duke Estate.

SI: Do you remember where you were the day that Pearl Harbor was attacked?

JL: If I recall, yes, I think, as I recall, it was on a Sunday, wasn't it? and one of my hobbies, at that time, and I still have the same hobby, was watercolor painting. I belonged to an art

association and, Sundays, we were these typical Sunday painters who would go out on the weekends to paint, because, during the week, you're employed, and it was a Sunday when I went out. I think I was with one of my girl[friends], it was a girlfriend who had also [been] a member of the association, to paint, when I heard about it.

SI: How did you get involved with painting? When did that start?

JL: I've always had a sort of inclination to paint or sketch, and part of the Rutgers program was to sketch. They taught us how to sketch at Rutgers. So, we could sketch, maybe, a tree or a house, and show it to a client or a customer, and, there, it was developed, but I had a natural skill for it, you see.

SI: When you heard the news about Pearl Harbor, how did you react? Were you afraid or angry?

JL: I don't know. I wouldn't know what to say, at the time. Of course, after that, … I had to solve the question of enlisting or being drafted or whatever, you know. I was of that age. [laughter]

SI: Did you have to worry about the pre-war draft?

JL: To worry about the pre-war …

SI: There was a draft instituted in 1940. Did you have to worry about that?

JL: … Well, I knew it would be coming along, so, I decided to volunteer.

SI: How soon after Pearl Harbor did you volunteer?

JL: Oh, yes, sure, I volunteered. Yes, it was, I think it was, it had to be after Pearl Harbor, I'm certain.

SI: Was it that week?

JL: No, no, I forget just when. I would have to look at; my discharge paper would show the enlistment date.

SI: This record says January 9, 1942. You enlisted pretty soon, about a month, after.

JL: … I know it was in the wintertime. Was it January 9th?

SI: Yes. National Archives has digitized the enlistment records of many of the people who enlisted in World War II. Your record was digitized and it said that your enlistment date was January 9, 1942.

JL: Okay.

SI: You enlisted as an aviation cadet.

JL: Yes, yes, that's right, yes, at Trenton. I enlisted at Trenton. That was the place for that, yes.

SI: Why did you choose the Army Air Force?

JL: My mother said to me, [laughter] "Look, … they want to give anyone who enlisted in the Air Corps [money], and, if you became a lieutenant or an officer, you would then qualify for a ten-thousand-dollar bonus on completion … of your tenure in the war. So, why don't you go take advantage of it?" [laughter] "Okay, Mom, whatever you say. I'll join the Air Force." [laughter] Isn't that funny?

SI: Where did she hear that? Was that a real thing or was it just a rumor?

JL: What, about the ten thousand? No, that was on the radio. They wanted people, you know, they wanted college graduates, yes.

SI: What was it like to enlist? What do you remember about enlisting? Do you remember having to take a lot of tests or getting a physical? Were there a lot of people enlisting at the same time?

JL: Well, from Trenton, I was sent to Montgomery, Alabama, by train, and the enlisting officer went to the safe and took out two dollars and he said, "This is for you to buy your food while you're on that two-day," or whatever, "train trip." He was a little bit apologetic for only [having] two dollars to feed me. [laughter] Well, they helped. … The first night there, in this barracks, I was in the upper bunk and the other enlistees there were playing cards and very relaxed, and I had the feeling, "Oh, my God, how can they [relax]? … I'm in an organization where they can say, 'We control your life.'" … I mean, I … didn't know where I was, on the edge of a cliff. They had the power of life and death over me. I was in the … Army, yes. I didn't feel relaxed, you know. This whole thing was strange. I mean, I wasn't a country bumpkin, but, I mean, … going into this tremendous thing. That didn't last long. I soon found my way around. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: You were talking about your first couple of days in the military.

JL: Well, as I said, that first night, I mean, this whole thing, you know, … thrust in this tremendous thing, an air corps, an army or whatever, you know, this whole thing was so big, in my feeling, but, as I said, … after the first day or two, making friends and finding my way around, it was a different feeling.

SI: Was this the first time you had lived away from home?

JL: No. I'd been away from home on day trips or night trips, you know, like visiting. My girlfriend went to Bryn Mawr, [Pennsylvania]. I went out to see her one day. I took a trip down to Williamsburg, [Virginia], on my own. I got away from home.

SI: You were sent down to Montgomery, Alabama.

JL: Yes, sir.

SI: What was the train ride like? Does anything stand out about that?

JL: The train ride? Nothing; I can't remember.

SI: Was that Maxwell Field?

JL: Maxwell Field, yes.

SI: Had they given you a uniform before you went down, or were you just sent down in your civilian gear?

JL: I don't think I got a uniform until I got down to Maxwell Field.

SI: What happened once you got there?

JL: What happened?

SI: Yes. What happened once you got to Maxwell Field?

JL: I don't know. Now, you see, my memory, I don't have the best memory. … I don't know too much. I have here some pictures that would remind me of things. I can refer to that, if that will help us.

SI: Whatever you want to do.

JL: Whatever; I mean, it may refresh something. … See, I kept this thing. … That would be one of my earliest, in Maxwell Field, you see that I wrote home and [was] supplied with the uniform. … Some of these are out of order. Montgomery was some sort of a capital. … That's just pictures of the capitol, … but these were the fellows, friends I made, people I made friends with at Maxwell. He graduated from the Citadel, [Military College of South Carolina], and he, of course, became one of the leaders of the platoon or the organization, you see, because he had the sword he carried. The one who had charge of that regiment, or whatever it was, in the parade, he had the sword. [laughter]

SI: He was the leader.

JL: These are my local friends. Then, I made these different sketches of the barracks activities.

SI: Wow, you made all of these.

JL: So, those are the early ones of Maxwell Field. Then, we had the flight instruction in the PT-17 [Boeing Stearman], which may be in other interviews, a very stable airplane. That's why we were [flying them], because we could do all kinds of things, but the plane would do the right thing, but I drove my poor instructor crazy. [laughter] He was glad to get rid of me, because I didn't qualify as a pilot.

SI: You originally went in for pilot training.

JL: Yes, I went in for it. I figured I wanted to be a pilot, [laughter] and I, therefore, we called that "washed out."

SI: Were you disappointed when you washed out of flight training?

JL: Out of pilot.

SI: Yes. Were you disappointed that you would not be a pilot?

JL: … I'll tell you, I went in for an interview with one of the officers who said, "You're washed out," and he says, "You don't seem upset." [laughter] I didn't see any reason to be upset, … okay. Some of them would lie on their bunks for two days. They wouldn't eat. … Their world was shattered, see. So, with a couple of other friends and I, we were therefore given a sort of leave, for a few days, to recuperate, so, we went to New Orleans, to have a good time. [laughter]

SI: What was New Orleans like?

JL: Oh, we had fun. … We didn't have much money. You know, as cadets, you didn't have much. We just sort of bummed around and saw the sights, more or less.

SI: How did you adjust to military life, in terms of having to take orders and all that?

JL: I got along all right. I knew the right people, who didn't always get assignment for KP, kitchen police, you know what that was, … and I got around, got along all right.

SI: Would you make these drawings during training or did you make these later?

JL: In training.

SI: Wow. These are very vivid watercolors.

JL: Yes, yes.

SI: After you washed out of pilot training, did they put you right into bombardier training?

JL: Well, you had to take some tests and, since they thought, in some of those tests, that my hand manipulations were good, that I could be a bombardier, if I chose it.

SI: Were you okay with that? Were you happy to become a bombardier?

JL: Yes, I guess so.

SI: Did they keep you at Maxwell Field or did they send you somewhere else?

JL: Oh, no, no, no. … I forget just where. We went to Santa Ana, California, from Maxwell, yes, to Santa Ana, California. That was in the spring.

SI: What do you remember about your training there?

JL: Most of the training there was school training, you know.

SI: Working in the classroom.

JL: Classroom training. …

SI: Was there a lot of math and physics?

JL: Minor math, but I don't remember too much.

SI: When did you start flying training missions?

JL: Well, then, … I think, from there, we went to Tucson, [Arizona]. … In Tucson, we got onto a plane to learn how to drop a bomb.

SI: Did those planes have the Norden bombsight or a different bombsight?

JL: I don't remember now. … No, I don't think we had that. We didn't have the Norden bombsight. I forget. … We probably used a different sort of thing, you know, a simplified thing, to focus on the target.

SI: Does anything stand out in your memory about those training exercises?

JL: I didn't do too well, but I managed to pass.

SI: Did they put a lot of emphasis on accuracy?

JL: You're supposed to have a certain score, you know.

SI: From what I have heard from other people who were bombardiers, they would usually have targets out in the desert and you would have to try and hit those. Was that how it was for you?

JL: Yes, it was out in the desert, yes.

SI: How did you feel about flying? Did you take well to flying?

JL: It was all right. Maybe, only one time, I might have had a little bit of airsickness, but nothing at all. It didn't bother me.

SI: Were there any accidents in training?

JL: Not that I knew of. Well, in England, there was, but that wasn't in training.

SI: All right, we will get to that in a little bit. When did you join your crew?

JL: … We didn't get our crew until we were assigned to go overseas. … We were in Tucson, we were in Clovis, New Mexico, let's see, we went up to Walla Walla, Washington. I think in Walla Walla is when I had the crew. Of course, I have pictures in there of the crew members, yes.

SI: What did you do at Clovis?

JL: Bombing and exercises, yes.

SI: More bombing. When you went to Walla Walla, was that when you joined the 389th?

JL: I guess it was, or, when we got to England, we joined it.

SI: What do you remember about your crew? Was that the crew that you stayed with?

JL: [Yes].

SI: What was it like, meeting them and becoming a crew?

JL: Well, we had a good crew. Everybody got along all right and, of course, I had more what you'd call intimate association with the other officers than the enlisted men, and we never had a problem amongst us.

SI: Where were they from? Were they from all over the country?

JL: One was from Sault Ste. Marie. That's up in Michigan or Canada, up there. One was from El Paso, Texas. … I don't know where the pilot [was from]. … Maybe in the eastern area, you know, around New York or whatever.

SI: What was your pilot's name?

JL: Lambert, L-A-M-B-E-R-T, like Listerine. [laughter] [Editor's Note: Jordan Wheat Lambert co-invented Listerine, which was originally sold as a Warner-Lambert (later Pfizer, currently Johnson & Johnson) product.]

SI: It sounds like you had confidence in your crew. They were a good crew.

JL: I had excellent pilots.

SI: Did you do training missions out in Walla Walla as a crew?

JL: Yes, yes.

SI: Was that the first time you were flying with a lot of other planes? Would you practice formation flying?

JL: I imagine it was. I don't remember too much.

SI: How did you get over to England after that?

JL: We flew, landed in Reykjavik, Iceland, as one stop. Rome, New York, was one stop. … I guess we flew from Walla Walla. How else would we get over … across the country? but I don't remember if there were any stops on the way. Maybe there were, I don't know, but, as I said, it was Rome to Reykjavik, and then, we landed in England, from Iceland to England. I remember passing Ireland, the green fields of Ireland, landed in England.

SI: Does anything stand out in your memory about the trip over? Were there any hairy moments?

JL: No, just a dull, monotonous trip, you know.

SI: As the bombardier, since you did not have to drop any bombs during these flights, did you have any other duties while you were flying?

JL: No, I don't recall any. We had certain classes or whatever, you know, just so [that] we wouldn't get too stale or, you know, keep us moving around a little bit.

SI: After you landed in England, then, you were sent to the 389th.

JL: I guess we were then. I don't remember the procedure.

SI: Do you remember approximately when you joined the unit you flew with?

JL: When I what, sir?

SI: Do you remember when you joined the unit?

JL: Joined the …

SI: Joined your bomb group, or your squadron?

JL: Joining my squadron, you say?

SI: Yes. Was it in 1943? What month was it?

JL: Oh, that we were into combat activity, you mean?

SI: Yes, when you joined that.

JL: Oh, it would have to be '43, I think. …

SI: Was it in the summertime?

JL: I don't remember that. … I think it was in the winter when we arrived in England, as I recall.

SI: How soon after arriving did you start flying combat missions?

JL: Combat missions? I don't know, can't remember that. … I didn't have too many missions. I don't know if I had ten or twelve. We were shot down and that ended the mission bit, you see. [laughter]

SI: Do you remember anything about your first mission?

JL: No, nothing substantive.

SI: Do you remember where your base was?

JL: Norwich.

SI: What was the base like? How was it set up?

JL: It was an English base that we moved into. They were English. They had one building where you could clean up and bathe. There were a lot of bathtubs. They called that the "ablutions." The bunks or beds were pieces of mattresses, three of them. They would call those "biscuits." [laughter] They were not too comfortable. Sometimes, we would get a double layer, because they were more comfortable to our soft bodies. … There was a lot of cold weather or damp weather in England. [laughter]

SI: Can you tell me a little bit about some of your missions, what you remember about those? Are there any that stand out in your memory for being particularly dangerous?

JL: Well, we'd go out and drop the bombs when we were supposed to and we were always glad to get back, if we did.

SI: Were there a lot of fighter attacks?

JL: We saw some. That's what hit our plane, you see, knocked out a couple of the motors.

SI: When you would drop your bombs, did you have to aim the bombsight or were you bombing on other planes' releases?

JL: We were supposed to use the bombsight.

SI: Some bombardiers have said that it was arranged that they would just drop their bombs when the lead bombardier was dropping.

JL: That's what it got down to, because they realized that mass bombing was the most effective way of carrying out their missions, as opposed to accurate bombing, because it wasn't always that accurate. So, what they did [was], put a lot of planes there, this is the target they wanted to mass bomb, put a lot on and be sure to hit it, yes. [laughter]

SI: Did you have to man a gun also or just the bombsight?

JL: I did shoot the gun at one time or other. I figured I'd walk back into the bay and … use the gun. … I forget, I guess I was shooting at a German plane, probably. … [I] didn't have to.

SI: Could you see a lot of what was happening from your position?

JL: See what, sir?

SI: Could you see what was happening around you well, from your position, for example, other planes getting hit?

JL: Well, you could see, sometimes, the bombs hitting the Earth and that, because we weren't flying [at] great altitudes, you know.

SI: Were your missions usually long missions?

JL: Yes, usually, yes, some of them.

SI: What would a typical day be like when you would fly a mission?

JL: A typical day?

SI: Yes, when you were flying a mission.

JL: I thought most of the winter days were gray days. … I don't remember too much of bright sunshine, until we would head back and, maybe, as we got close to [France], but, most of the time, over Germany, it was in the wintertime and it was a gray atmosphere. Then, when we'd come back toward the English Channel, we would see sunshine and we would know where

England was, because there were always clouds over England. England had a damp atmosphere. [laughter]

SI: Did your plane ever have any mechanical problems? Did you ever lose an engine?

JL: No, no. We were in B-24s. It was always the B-17 that could come in with one or two engines or something like that, but I was in a [B]-24. We also went to North Africa. … I was over in Benghazi, Libya, and, from there, we did fly, I don't know, one or two missions. … You know, I forgot, until I read my discharge, it mentioned a mission over Italy. I didn't remember it. [laughter] [Editor's Note: The 389th Bomb Group was deployed to North Africa several times in 1943.]

SI: Do you remember any of the targets that you had in North Africa?

JL: Only the one. I think it was Foggia, Italy. … Then, I guess, I only remember it, because, a few days or a few years back, I read it in my discharge, yes.

SI: Do you think it was just one mission when you were in North Africa or more?

JL: … That's all it mentions in the discharge.

SI: How long were you there, for a couple of weeks or longer?

JL: Oh, I don't think it was more than two weeks.

SI: What was the base there like?

JL: Kind of crude, but they did their best, you know, and we could go to town and go to the British [facilities]. … The British were established there earlier than we were and we could go into the British officers' club for a meal, you know, or whatever, … but North Africa was kind of a crude place.

SI: What about in England? Did you get to go into town a lot in England?

JL: Oh, yes, in England, yes, quite, as frequently as ever, yes.

SI: Did you get to know a lot of the British civilians?

JL: I met some girls there in England. … One of my friends had, in his room, a little cage of mice on an exercise wheel. This was entertainment. I thought, "Oh, good, I think I'd like that." I went to the pet store and I said I wanted to buy some mice for pets. "Well," she said, "I'll sell them to you, but don't you take them to the dance floor and let them out … in the room," because, you see, there was panic if the girls saw them. Some of them did that. [laughter] You see, in England, they had these [dance halls] for entertainment. It was a permanent installation, a dance hall, where people could get together and dance every week, and, of course, we went there

to meet the girls and to dance. … She didn't want us to upset the program. [laughter] I didn't buy the mice. That wasn't my intention, but it was too much of a nuisance.

SI: Did you get a sense that the British were suffering a lot in the war?

JL: Oh, yes, they had their problems, you know, of food, and, like, … we went to the barber and you had a haircut and a shave, they would use cold water to shave you, because they were, you know, trying to be economical with fuel and coal and all that. The buses, … they didn't use gasoline, they used a charcoal burner to propel the motor on the bus.

SI: Do you think the British people were happy to see the Americans there?

JL: Well, for the situation, yes, and they were friendly. I always found I got along well with them. I had never a problem with anyone.

SI: When you were flying your missions, were you afraid? How did you feel about what you were doing?

JL: Just hoped we weren't destroyed, [laughter] you weren't hit, that's all.

SI: While you were with your unit, did they suffer a lot of casualties?

JL: Say what, sir?

SI: Would your unit suffer a lot of casualties on these missions?

JL: Not that I remember. … I lost a couple of friends, some very good friends.

SI: Do any of the missions stand out in your memory? How about the targets?

JL: … We were flying back, we had completed our bombing, flying back, and a bullet, or whatever, hit the plane; what a noise that made. That made me jump, brought out the adrenalin. [laughter] That's all I remember, on one of them, and then, of course, the last mission was the one where we were shot down. That, of course, is something else.

SI: Did you encounter a lot of flak [antiaircraft fire] on your missions?

JL: Yes, a lot of flak, and you'd look forward, you see that, … and it'd make the plane jump. So, it was hard to keep the bombsight on the target, because the plane was bouncing around from the flak and the flak was right ahead and you were headed right into the flak. … I took a picture on the plane. I had a camera on the plane, a little folding camera. I took a picture of the flak. [laughter] Yes, just hoping that you wouldn't get hit, that's all.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: We were talking about the flak. Was anybody ever injured on your plane?

JL: No, only when we crash-landed. …

SI: Did you always fly with your crew? Did you ever fly on any other planes?

JL: Yes. I don't remember flying with anybody else. Maybe I did, but I don't remember it.

SI: Did you fly the same plane all the time?

JL: Most of the time.

SI: Do you remember the name of the plane?

JL: *Iron Ass.* There's a photo of it in there. I think you might have a photo.

SI: Did the flight crews and the ground crews interact a lot? Did you have a relationship with them?

JL: No, no. …

SI: You were fairly separate. Can you tell me about the mission where you were shot down? What was that like?

JL: Well, I remember the name of it. It was a city in Germany, Osnabruck, Munster. I think it was a ball-bearing plant, but that was the one we were targeting.

SI: Were you shot down on the way to the target or after?

JL: After.

SI: What happened?

JL: It was on the return that they shot out the motors. One of the motors was on fire, but I think that either blew out, or they put it out, but we're disabled. We had to crash-land.

SI: Where did you crash-land?

JL: … I don't remember the name of it. It was in a rural field, a country field, in Germany.

SI: Was there a lot of panic on the ship during that?

JL: No. I had to go back and get rid of all the bombs, so [that] we wouldn't crash-land with bombs. … You walked back on the little catwalk, about that wide, in the middle of the bomb bay and you open the bomb bay doors. … You're on this little catwalk, looking down at the Earth, many thousands [of feet] down there, but, anyhow, I released the bombs, went up, back to position in, … we called it the "pilots' cabin," or whatever.

SI: It was after you hit the target, but you still had some bombs onboard.

JL: After we hit the target, yes. We were on the return, or whatever, or close to return.

SI: You still had some bombs onboard that you had to get rid of.

JL: Yes, we had some bombs on there yet.

SI: Did the pilot let everybody know what was happening?

JL: Yes, he told us we had to crash-land, so [that] we could prepare.

SI: Did anybody talk about bailing out?

JL: Nobody bailed out, no.

SI: What happened once you were down on the ground?

JL: Well, the plane, of course, in a crash-landing, skids across the field and, in doing so, the floor in the back part gave way and one of the crew members was therefore crushed by the plane. He was a fatality. One of the others was laying in the field, outside the plane. He was injured, and there was a hole in the front cabin that I crawled out of, got out on the ground. … The poor man; so, I knew enough to give the man, we had a first aid kit and we were told, in times like that, to give him a shot of morphine, to, you know, satisfy the trauma. So, I gave him a shot of morphine in his belly. … The people were all around us, the civilians, and they called that the *Landwacht*, you know, [an auxiliary force which would] watch for planes. … So, I said to some of them, … "Get a doctor." I talked to them in German, because I could speak some German, "Get a doctor, the man's hurt," and they came with a stretcher and took him away, but they took us and locked us in a rural schoolhouse, [laughter] … [waiting] for the others, from there, to take us, you know. … While we're in there, two of the German pilots came in; … they claim they shot us down. I thought, "I'm lucky. We're going to be visited by a couple of monsters." They were two handsome, young men who shot us down, and I was like, "What? They're not monsters," [laughter] very clean-cut looking guys, you know, in the German *Luftwaffe* [Air Force]. So, that was the beginning of our trip to the prison camp.

SI: There was no opportunity to try to evade capture, because the people were right there.

JL: To escape? no. They took well care of that. [laughter]

SI: Were the people around you hostile?

JL: No, not particularly, because, like I said, … if I told them to get help, they got help. They weren't particularly [hostile].

SI: Do you remember the crash-landing? Were you injured in it?

JL: Some very minor thing. I think it was my ankle [that] was pretty bad, but, in time, I was young then and it would self-cure.

SI: Did the crew member that was taken away in the stretcher survive?

JL: … I think so, I'm not sure, you know. We lost track of everybody.

SI: Did they try to interrogate you at all when you were in the schoolhouse?

JL: We were interrogated in a different location, yes.

SI: How long were you kept in that schoolhouse?

JL: … Oh, probably, I think it was very brief, maybe a day or so, if that, you know.

SI: Was there any mistreatment?

JL: … Not there, no.

SH: After you were taken, did the *Luftwaffe* troops come and take you from there?

JL: … Somebody came, maybe it was the German enlisted men or the guards, or whatever, you know, they had there, [we] went by train. What was the name of that? It doesn't matter. It was a city and, there, there was an interrogation. On the train, we officers kept together, were kept together. … The European train carriages, you know, [had] a seat here and a seat there, with three or four people facing one another and a German guard with a gun, and the train stopped at a station and there was the German Red Cross giving food to the German soldiers who felt they wanted a soup. … The German, our guard, knew we hadn't eaten. He says, "I'll get you some food." So, he got something for us, just to, you know, [take the] edge off the appetite, and, I remember, we were provided, as part of the uniform, an electric flight suit, with wires that we could plug in and keep warm at the high altitudes. … It was blue and there was a wire that came out from the rear-end that went in there, and that's about all we had, [or] I had on, at the time. The Germans, of course, they took almost everything, or did I have the coveralls? Anyhow, I always said to my friends, later, that, "Here I am, running around in Germany, in a blue bunny suit, with my tail hanging out," but we got to the place of interrogation and two German officers, of course, in English, talked to us, and I had my hands in my pockets in my coveralls. He said, slapped [me] across my face, "Don't put your hands in the pockets in front of a German officer." [laughter] …

SI: They slapped you in the face.

JL: [laughter] So, I wasn't supposed to do that, and then, there was a long train ride, … maybe a good part of a week or so, to the prison camp, no, very little, food. The only thing we could look forward to was a cold shower. You know, you're dirty, you don't smell well, you're uncomfortable, you're hungry, you're everything else.

SI: What was the rest of the interrogation like?

JL: Oh, names, your number, you know, your dog tag number, and that's about it, and they'd [say], "Well, we know this about you, anyhow. You were so-and-so." So, they knew what they wanted to know, anyhow.

SI: You just gave them name, rank and serial number.

JL: … That's all, yes. That's all you're supposed to do, enough; they don't need any more.

SI: They did not rough you up or anything.

JL: No, no. That was the only time, when he slapped me across the head, you know.

SI: Were you kept separate from your crewmates?

JL: Only on interrogation, but, from then on, we were together.

SI: Just the officers. Were the enlisted men separated?

JL: Just officers.

SI: Do you know what happened to the enlisted men?

JL: Not at that time.

SI: Was the train out to the *stalag* [German prison camps] the same type of set-up as the train that took you to the interrogation?

JL: … No, no, a different train, different train.

SI: Was it more packed? Were there more people packed together?

JL: Yes, we were. I mean, we could sit down, or whatever, and all this sort of thing.

SI: When you got to the prison camp, what happened then?

JL: Took a shower, gave us clean clothes, such as [they were].

SI: Where were you housed?

JL: … Housed? It was a wooden barracks that used to be for the German enlisted personnel, years back, or whatever.

SI: What did you think of your living quarters? Were they adequate?

JL: Never, never was anything adequate, [laughter] in that respect.

SI: When you got there, was it mostly British airmen?

JL: The British had been there previously and had had things organized and, of course, I think they may have dominated the population at the time, but the Allies kept pouring in, pouring in.

SI: Were the conditions cramped when you first got there?

JL: … No, about the same, you know. … I think we were six, six to a room. … The whole thing, in the room for the bed and sleeping, everything, [was] about as big as this living room, for the room we had, the average room. There were a couple of rooms that were larger. Whatever the Germans used them for, I don't know.

SI: Can you tell me a little bit about the daily routine in the prison camp? What would you do every day?

JL: … Well, of course, Germans would not make officers work. They could make the enlisted men work, but not the officers. … Most of it was boredom and trying to make the best of your situation, of food, monotony, cold, seal [out] all the cold air. I mean, … you only had one blanket and you slept with your overcoat, your Army enlisted man's overcoat, as a blanket. You had a mattress of straw that, every six months, you were allowed to go out and re-stuff it, because, in your period of sleeping on it, it compressed to the feeling of sleeping on wooden boards, you know, and food was rationed, so, you had to learn how to cook and allot it and ration it, and so on.

SI: Tell me a little bit about the food situation.

JL: Well, the Germans gave you some things, like potatoes and cabbage and some watery soup, once a day, one bowl that you used for the six in your room, your allotment of coal, … because in each room was a coal stove, and your diet was supplemented by the packages from the International Red Cross, which included a variety of things, canned meat, prunes, sugar, a chocolate bar each time. A chocolate bar was money. What else did we have in cans? It was all canned, you know.

SI: You would get this food, and then, you would cook it and distribute it amongst yourselves.

JL: Yes, we'd cook in our own room. We appointed somebody. The pilot willingly … served as chief cook and he was very good [laughter] at making things last. It was only when, toward the end of the war, the Red Cross parcels didn't come in and we were going through a period of, we would call it starvation, which is something you never forget. … From starvation, you're weak, you don't have strength, your facilities diminish in operation, and whatever else takes place, you know.

SI: Did anybody die as a result of the lack of food?

JL: No, not from that. The only deaths I recall, I guess somebody was probably shot for escaping and a couple of cases of meningitis. One party … took the prunes and made alcohol out of it, with sugar, you know, and went blind in the eyes from … all the alcohol, which can do that to your eyesight, because that was very strong alcohol. So, those were fatalities. …

SI: Was there a lot of illness, such as pneumonia?

JL: No, not a lot, no.

SI: How frequently would you get a Red Cross parcel?

JL: Once a week, for one parcel, one man. So, I think it was once a week. Yes, we pooled our food assets in the room and let the cook handle it. It'd be a can of meat, maybe like [what] we'd call a Spam, you know.

SI: You mentioned that the candy bars were like money.

JL: Yes.

SI: What about cigarettes? Were they also like money?

JL: Oh, yes, yes, yes. Well, you see, I could write home. We could write [to] them [at] home, send letters home. I requested they send me some cigarettes, because they were worth money and, with the cigarettes, I could trade with the Germans, even though I wasn't supposed to. The German guards would come around each night, to close the windows, put shutters over them, and they'd say, "*Haben sie zigarette*?" "*Ja, ich habe zigarette*." So, I made trades with [them], got a German pocketknife, a German mirror, … right from the guards. … Chocolate bars were so desired in Europe, because they had a stronger taste for chocolate, that you could buy your way out of Germany with so many chocolate bars. If you could [escape], you see, … you were provided with the [candy], by the escape committee, [if you] volunteered you wanted to escape, and they thought you could do it, you were provided with all the necessaries and a number of chocolate bars, so [that] you could pay the civilians and get your way out of Europe.

SI: There was an escape committee.

JL: Oh, yes, yes.

SI: How often would people try to escape?

JL: I can't say too many. … We didn't always know.

SI: Were you involved in the escape committee at all?

JL: No, I wasn't in an escape [committee]. One man; you see, there were thousands in our encampment that we called the German prison camp, and many, many tin cans went out for

refuse. Your bedding was, like, a burlap sack, I think it was that. One man got the idea of sewing all tin cans all on the sack, so [that] it was covered, and crawling in the sack; his friends would throw him in the garbage and, when they took the garbage out of the compound, … he could escape, but he got caught. [laughter] They had ideas, you know, that you've probably heard this from other people.

SI: No, go ahead.

JL: Oh, so, they were digging tunnels to get out and the food always came in a cardboard, red, Red Cross box. See, we saved the boxes. Of course, we always needed everything we could to do things for hobby or entertainment, or whatever. … So, they're digging the tunnel. They take the empty cans and make a pipe, because, in a tunnel, there's no ventilation, no air, and they made a bellows and the bellows was concealed in, like, a chest in a room. So, when they're digging, they're pumping the bellows to supply air for the deed, and then, they would take the dirt and some of them would carry it in their overcoats and their pockets and they're walking out in the parade ground, they'd empty [the] dirt out. So, the Germans never knew, you know. Then, one time, they took the dirt and stored it in these boxes and put it up in the ceiling of the barracks. One time, the ceiling gave way, the dirt came down and the Germans were furious. [laughter] … Then, in the big grounds, I might even have pictures of it, we asked the Germans to flood some of it, to make, like, an ice puddle, so [that] we could ice skate, you know. We had to have something to do. We asked the Red Cross for ice skates. So, the man in the room next to me, they took the runners off the skates, … we had coal fire, and he put them in the fire and he treated them in such a way as to harden them, so [that] he made wire cutters to cut through the barbed wire and supply that to the [escapees]. So, we were always doing things, you know, to keep the Germans happy. [laughter] … My job, I took on the job of carrying the daily or nightly news bulletin. Contraband news came in on a secret radio. I would pick up the report and take it from room to room, so that everybody got it, and [in] some of the Red Cross parcels were pieces of radio and, somehow, they knew which ones [they] were and we'd put together a radio that we could get BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] information. … From that, they made a newsletter, because the Germans only gave us propaganda, things to discourage us. They made a newsletter of what was going on outside [in] the world. … Then, they would disassemble the radio when the Germans come through to search us, you know, "Out, out, *aus*, *aus*." Each one would take part of the radio and hide it in his coat, so [that] if the Germans searched the room, they wouldn't find the radio. So, people took part in that, you see. Then, … [they] got all the roll call, the count was finished, get back to the rooms, put the radio together.

SI: What kind of propaganda were they feeding you? What would they say?

JL: Everything in favor of the Germans. They wouldn't acknowledge much of their losses or the Allied victories and things like that, you know. It was supposed to keep you in the attitude of, you know, "No future; we're losing."

SI: Do you remember some of the news you brought that was particularly inspiring?

JL: No, no, [I] don't remember.

SI: When you found out about the Normandy invasion, was that big news?

JL: We would get news of that sort of thing, yes.

SI: Would you see the news you would bring positively affecting people's morale?

JL: … Well, they looked forward to it, you know, and … they liked the encouragement.

SI: You mentioned that one incident where the dirt fell through the ceiling. Were there any reprisals by the Germans when things like that would happen?

JL: There may have been in that particular instance. It was not in my barracks. More so would be if you tried to escape or [were] caught in a tunnel activity; that was something else.

SI: Would they just retaliate against the people involved or would they take it out on the whole camp?

JL: Mostly just those involved.

SI: You could speak German, so, you could interact a little more with the guards. What did you think of the guards and how did they treat you?

JL: The guards, they just did what they were supposed to and kept out of our way. We're not supposed to talk to them, but … they talked and we talked to them. We communicated. They were just ordinary citizens in a low rank of the Army, doing the best they could, you know.

SI: Did any of them mistreat the prisoners? Were there any sadistic guards?

JL: No, no, not that I remember, you know, unless they violated something. There was one man. … You had barbed wire, a space, barbed wire and a big fence, oh, I remember, maybe there were two fences as tall as this room. He made a bet that he could get out over those wires in sixty seconds or something, a phenomenal, short time, and he did it, just to show them it could be done. [laughter] …

SI: Did they shoot him?

JL: No, no, not in that instance, no. … I think, as I recall, he did it in, like, a bet with the Germans that he could do that.

SI: Okay, the Germans knew he was going to do it. Did you ever consider trying to escape, since you could speak German?

JL: No, I didn't. It was too much beyond me, and a lot of us.

SI: What other kinds of things would you do to fight boredom?

JL: We had a library that had been set up. So, we'd have books to read. They had an amateur theater. If you wanted to, you could take part in certain plays. You could volunteer in the community kitchen. The one thing I never made much of while we were in that period of starvation, like, one man I know, he was trapping sparrows, so [that] he could eat them. I scraped potatoes out of the garbage, potato skins. One room, they caught a cat and they said, "Oh, we're going to cook the cat to have a feast." [laughter] I was not invited, but had I been invited, I would take a taste of cooked cat. I was that hungry, too. One little kitty doesn't go very far and that room was a bigger room than ours and maybe they had ten people. All it would do is give them a little bit of a taste of a cat, [laughter] but you got pretty desperate to eat almost anything, at that time.

SI: What was your morale like then? Did you feel that you were going to make it or not make it?

JL: … Oh, my outlook? We thought, eventually, we would, I guess. You know, after all, we were getting some news on the radio. …

SI: Towards the end, as the Russians were advancing, did the Germans become more aggressive?

JL: They came into our camp.

SI: Okay, before that, did the Germans start …

JL: They flew. They disappeared. [laughter]

SI: Did they get meaner?

JL: No, no, no.

SI: Were you worried that they were going to move you out of there?

JL: … No, they just gave up and left us there to the Russians. The Russians went away and left us to ourselves.

SI: What do you remember about that period, the liberation period?

JL: Well, I said, "My bed isn't very comfortable. Maybe they have better beds and better comfort and better blankets than I have." … I also had an assignment of manning the switchboard to communicate to the outside, because we maintained a certain communication to the civilians in the town, and, since I knew how to run a switchboard, which is one of those old-fashioned things that you put plugs in; maybe you're too young to remember what they were like.

SI: Yes, I know what they are.

JL: Okay. I knew how to run one, and so, I had the job of running that, because I could speak German and English, of running the switchboard. So, I thought, "Well, I think I'll go sleep in a better barracks." … I was in there one night and I got so bitten by fleas, I went back to my old bed. Those Germans had fleas, yes. [laughter]

SI: How long were you in the camp between the Germans leaving and when you were returned to Allied hands?

JL: Oh, I don't remember how many, not too many weeks. We knew they were coming. They come in, … we were marched to the airport, we got on the airplane, an Allied airplane, flew to a camp in France.

SI: You mentioned that the Russians basically left you alone. Did you have any interaction with the Russian troops?

JL: I think the Germans just got out of the way of the Russians. They did not like the Russians.

SI: What about you, the prisoners? Did the Russians ever come into the camp where you could talk with them?

JL: No, they had more to do than to bother with people like us, you know.

SI: What was your physical condition like after you were liberated?

JL: I was very skinny. [laughter] I went down to about 112 pounds then.

SI: How much had you weighed before?

JL: Well, I'd be up around 130, 140 and more, you know. I never was very heavy.

SI: After you landed in France, did they put you in a medical facility?

JL: Oh, yes, yes, good food and all that bit, you know.

SI: How long were you in that?

JL: Maybe a month or more. Another friend of mine, a close friend of mine, said, "Look," we took off, we left; we went to Brussels. We came back and they didn't keep good track of us. Then, we went to Paris, went to the *Folies Bergere*, [a Parisian music hall], and, in Paris, I went into the USO [United Service Organization] and I met this lady who was doing volunteer work at the USO. We talked about art, and so on, and [she said], "Well, my family runs an art gallery. … Go see my husband." It's the (Durard Durell?). They were an old art gallery, very outstanding art collectors and gallery in France for many years, many generations, and they were very hospitable. She said, "Come to the house for lunch." I had lunch with Mrs. (Durell?) and the family and Mr. (Durell?), and they were telling me how they hid paintings under blankets in the closet, so [that] the Germans wouldn't get them. They had lived very well, this (Durard

Durell?), and I spent a good part of that day there, entertained by the French. Of course, they were very nice to us. … After I met him at the gallery, … we walked to his apartment in Paris. Then, I went back to the rehabilitation place. …

SI: When you were in the camp, did you continue to draw?

JL: Well, there wasn't much paper and pencil for that. I think I have a portrait, yes; no, no, they weren't in camp though. There's a couple of sketches, portrait sketches, in there. What we have that [was] put out by the YMCA, I think it was a better book on all that business. … They had good memories of camp. … Oh, yes, yes, yes, that's it. …

SI: Okay. This was put out by the YMCA, *Yankee Kriegs*.

JL: Yes. That gave a good story of it, you see, and the barracks, the rooms. … Now, somebody did this. This is a sketch of the camp. Somebody would be a barber. I think we paid him, probably in chocolate bars, the typical [payment], all that business, the food. …

SI: Were there ever any air raids?

JL: Yes, there were air raids. We had to put out the lights. … If a fellow were caught, we'll say, digging a tunnel, he was put in solitary confinement, very little food. … We prisoners had our own kitchen. We did the cooking. We had a bowl, each had a bowl, but, like, we would be, maybe would be, delivering the food to the prisoner, we'll say, but, inside that bowl, we would have an empty can we would turn over with more substantial food [inside], like some meat, and cover it with soup, and the prisoner would then carry the soup to the prisoner. That was all he's supposed to get, but we would sneak some good food to him by that process, you see.

SI: You would give that to the man in solitary.

JL: Give that prisoner a little boost. That's what that was for. We're always trying to outwit the Germans, and we could do it in a lot of ways. That's about the food. They'd bring the soup around, and so on, … but this book … tells about the tunnels and all that. …

SI: Did anybody ever get out through the tunnels?

JL: No, the tunnels were unsuccessful; oh, and, of course, we had sports.

SI: Do you remember any of the inspectors coming from the Red Cross?

JL: Yes, oh, periodically, yes. They would see that we were not mistreated, you know. … Then, we had the theater; I mentioned that.

SI: Did you ever speak with any of the Red Cross people?

JL: No, they don't usually talk to us. … You know, we would elect an officer [as] the head of the barracks and they would talk to him, you see. We had a band. They had a tailor who could

repair your uniforms. They also made German uniforms. If you wanted to escape, they could give you a German uniform, to get out.

SI: Did they have people forging documents?

JL: … I don't know, you mean, like, … when they got out, documents?

SI: Yes, something they could show as identification.

JL: … Your committee could provide you with maps, tell you what town to go to, what part of the town to go to. The low-class neighborhoods were more favorable for a prisoner escape than the higher-class, provide you with chocolate bars or maybe even German money. … All those things were available. … We had hobbies, whatever you could make out of nothing. …

SI: That looks like a letter.

JL: It's a copy, probably, of a letter I wrote home.

SI: How important was getting the mail from home?

JL: How important was it?

SI: Yes.

JL: Very important to have a letter, yes. [laughter]

SI: Did you get a sense that your family was worried about you?

JL: … Yes. … All they got was an MIA [missing-in-action] for awhile, for quite awhile, before they got the notice of the internment.

SI: Is there anything else that you would like to say about the time in the prison camp, anything that we missed?

JL: Well, there's always little things. I used to conduct a business with prisoners. … For example, in one room, you'd be in a different room from where I was and you might say, "Well, I'd like a can of meat," and I would locate somebody who I could buy a can of meat from him, for so many chocolate bars, and deliver it to you for more … chocolate bars and make a profit. You were happy to get the meat and he was happy to sell it, and I was only making people happy. … Just to entertain myself, I had a little business like that. I wasn't the only one, and I made some money on it. [laughter]

SI: After the rehabilitation camp in France, where were you sent?

JL: Home, by boat.

SI: What do you remember about that trip?

JL: Long trip, pleasant water, you know. … It was in June, I believe, yes. We did see a whale. Came down to New York Harbor, it was a misty morning, but it looked beautiful. Nothing looked so beautiful to me as that.

SI: Did anybody come out to greet the boat or was there any kind of reception?

JL: No, I don't remember that, no. We were just taken to, over here in New Brunswick

SI: Camp Kilmer?

JL: Kilmer. [Editor's Note: Camp Kilmer, in Piscataway, New Jersey, was a major transportation hub and processing center for soldiers heading to and returning from Europe during World War II.]

SI: Then, you were discharged, or did you have to go somewhere else?

JL: The discharge was not formal until November of that year. We went to Atlantic City, recuperation, you know. I forget how many weeks down there. All you did was eat and go to the beach.

SI: Do you think you had any lasting physical or mental effects from your time in the service?

JL: From the prison?

SI: Yes, from the prison or from your missions.

JL: No. We had a thorough examination and they told me, at the time, that my hearing would deteriorate, which it has, of course, and, now, my hearing is not good, which runs in the family, too, but I've got to expect those things, you know, at my age, yes.

SI: Did you have nightmares after the war?

JL: I don't remember nightmares, no.

SI: Any fears?

JL: No, I don't remember them.

SI: After you were discharged, what did you do next? Did you get a job right away?

JL: Well, the formal discharge, [as] I said, was in November, but, prior to that, I didn't have a job, so, I would hitch a ride with a service airplane; go to Newark, get a ride and go to the operations [area], tell them I wanted a ride, "What do you have?" Maybe [they] had a ride to

California, had a ride to Florida, had a ride flying over the Niagara Falls and came back. … I forget where all I did. You know, I'd hop around, relax.

SI: When you were in the service, you got to see a lot of different areas of the country. What did you think of these different areas?

JL: The country is very beautiful, very beautiful.

SI: Did you ever think of staying in the military?

JL: I thought I'd go to California and live. I met a girl out there. It must have been [on] one of the trips I made to LA. I met a girl out there in LA who was from San Francisco. … I kept in touch with her even after I was out in civilian life, and that goes ahead. Shortly after I got into civilian life, I thought I'd go to California and … hopped on a plane. … Previous to that, I worked at the Duke Estate and one of my acquaintances was a fellow who took care of what they called the Boxwood Garden, very close to the Japanese Garden. We made friends, and the war parted us, whatever. So, after the war, you know, the war was four years, and I decided, as I said before, to go to California. In California, I pick up the newspaper and I read this man was looking for a qualified landscaper to help in the business. I applied for it, and who it was but the one I knew in Duke's for all these other years, in that Boxwood Garden, the same man. By coincidence, he goes across the lot, I go across the continent, we meet, [laughter] and my clothes were on the way in a trunk. I even worked with him for two weeks or whatever. I was restless. I said, "I don't think I want to stay in California. I think I want to go back to New Jersey." I come back to New Jersey, my clothes are going to California. Anyhow, they came back, but that was quite a coincidence, meeting somebody after all those years, just by reading an article, "Help Wanted," in the paper. …

SI: You were just restless. That is why you came back.

JL: Oh, yes, yes, yes. You are restless.

SI: After you returned to New Jersey, did you get a job in landscaping?

JL: … Now, I forget the sequence of these things.

SI: That is all right. Take your time.

JL: Yes. I had a job with a florist in Millburn. I took a job in Westchester, with a landscape firm, to do customer relations and design and, for more than a week, I commuted from Somerville to Westchester. I'd leave in the morning about five, drive to Westchester, crazy, to the job, and then, drive home in the night, if you can imagine such commuting. … Then, I moved up there and took a room, … stayed with that job about two or three weeks, whatever, said, "I'm going back to Jersey;" restless, worked for a florist in Millburn. … Eventually, I met this fellow in Long Island and went in partnership there in landscape contracting, and I was in that for four years, and came back to Jersey, started my own business. Funny, I can't have the exact sequence of things. …

SI: That is fine. You remained in your own business.

JL: Well, I was with a partnership for awhile, and then, I decided to breakup my partnership and leave. … Then, I came back on my own, here, in [the] Somerville area, and I was in that from '49 until I retired, when I was seventy-three.

SI: It sounds like you enjoyed your work.

JL: … Yes, design and contracting.

SI: You mentioned before the interview that you have lived here for forty years.

JL: In this house, forty-two years, yes.

SI: Would you say you were that restless before the war?

JL: … Restless before the war? Well, not quite as much as when I came out. [laughter]

SI: Do you think your time in the service had an effect on making you more restless?

JL: Many veterans are restless when they come out, many, many.

SI: Did you ever use the GI Bill for anything?

JL: No.

SI: Did you ever join any veterans' organizations?

JL: In Long Island, I did for awhile, the VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars].

SI: What about the American Ex-Prisoners of War? Were you ever involved with them?

JL: … Yes, … when I was in the partnership, in business, in Long Island.

SI: Have you ever gone back to anywhere you were during the war?

JL: You mean such as to go to Europe?

SI: Yes.

JL: No.

SI: Was that deliberate, or you simply never went back?

JL: I didn't feel that I had a particular interest in going back to see it.

SI: Did you stay in touch with your crew or anybody you served with?

JL: I think it was about five years back. … See, I joined a POW organization, picked up a name of the crew and contacted one or two of them, and that was a very brief contact, both on their part and my part. We had all now, by this time, gone different ways and our lives were already determined as to be different.

SI: Is there anything else you would like to add or anything I missed?

JL: No, no, I think you've been very thorough, good questions. …

SI: This concludes my interview with Mr. James Laubach on December 20, 2007. Thank you very much, I appreciate it.

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

Reviewed by Lisa White 10/15/08
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 11/10/08
Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 11/14/08
Reviewed by James W. Laubach 10/26/12