

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOSEPH LERNER

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES OF WORLD WAR II

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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CLARK, NEW JERSEY

SEPTEMBER 19, 1994

TRANSCRIPT BY

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Kurt Piehler: This begins an interview with Captain Joseph Lerner on September 19, 1994 with Kurt Piehler and

Dawn Goldbacher: Dawn Goldbacher

KP: At Clark, New Jersey. I guess I would like to begin by talking a little bit about your Rutgers years and why you came to Rutgers.

Joseph Lerner: Well, that's interesting, because I was a student who was not qualified. What do we call that, if you don't get your degree?

Anyway, I went to the National Farm School to become a dairy husbandry man, and I was amazed, because I had flunked ten subjects in high school. But when I got to the National Farm School, I found that I was very focused and became, I think, the top student in the class, which was the Class of 1938. I had started in March of 1936. That's 5/38 [May of 1938] we would be finished, I think. Or was I the Class of '39? I'm not sure. No, I was in the Class of '39, sorry. And we had a strike in the school. I apparently was the only one who fought the strike. As a consequence, I was getting beat up a lot, and they were concerned about my well-being because I was punched by some pretty big guys.

KP: What was the strike about?

JL: It was stupid, because we were really not college material. So we had had, we were kids with problems. ... But here was a program where you would learn to be an agriculturist. ... We had plenty of sports and ... 1,500 acres where we did our own farming. So I learned raising potatoes and fruit. And we had greenhouses, big ones. We had a big dairy with some championship cattle. And we had a place for the cooling of milk and the manufacture of butter. I would ... sometimes be doing this and go too long and got it really packed up. It was a great school, and I loved it. And I learned a great deal. And many of the men who graduated went on to other things, because then you had to get a degree, because the school was not accredited. So we had to go to another school. Many did. [They] got their degrees, got doctorates. Here are guys who weren't going to amount to anything, who were going to be juvenile delinquents. But, here it was such a wholesome atmosphere, and this might be a good thing for many people in America [today]. If they had schools like ours, they could all be benefitted. We only had 200 students in the school. And a strike was held because, ... I think we had a Doctor (Segal?). We had a Dr. (Cletus?) L. Goodling who was from Penn State. He was the tallest dean in the country. ... Lots of the students did not admire him. He was tall and big, but somehow there was no repertoire, and they tried to get him to change. And suddenly they struck. Well, I because my grades were so good, I never suspected [that] this was a problem, ... because I studied all night long in the lab and loved it. It was great. We had Ph.Ds as teachers. One, he was a Canadian and during World War I, he had to leave Canada, because of the great anti-German hysteria. And his name was Dr. (Schmieder?). ... He changed and came to farm school where there was nothing. There was 200 students and really everybody was poverty-stricken. The tuition, by the

way, I got it for nothing, a scholarship. I wrote a letter, and I explained why I wanted to go to agriculture, because as a child I was on the farm and even owned a horse and buggy at age three. ... So I got to go to the school for nothing-- at room, board, and tuition. It was fabulous.

KP: How did you learn about the school, and what brought you to the school? You had mentioned that you had had some problems in high school.

JL: Yeah. So there was a man, a Doctor (Feinman?), and I just discussed it with my brother and sister yesterday, it may come back. And so he suggested this school. I wrote a letter, and they thought I was worth doing something about, and they agreed to give me a scholarship because I was in big trouble. Oh, actually, I had gone to Fort Dix in 1934, about March. ... And from there we went down to (Dryprong?), Louisiana in a CCC camp, the Civilian Conservation Corps.

KP: So you were in the CCC?

JL: At that time. In army uniform, under an army lieutenant supervisor. I guess we had a captain and a lieutenant.

KP: And from what town did you live before joining the CCC?

JL: I started in Newark.

KP: In Newark. And so you enrolled in Newark, and they sent you to Fort Dix. How long did you stay in Fort Dix?

JL: Well, you only stayed a short time ... it could have been a month. We ... lived in tents, canvas tents. And in the center, a iron heater, which may have used wood as I recall it. It may have been coal, but I think it was wood. ... We were together, and we had a delightful time. And we had good food. But there was in our thing, an incident occurred to me that I've never forgotten. There was in this group of maybe eight, a young man who was the best looking young man, the most cultured one in the tent. And he was well-spoken, well-educated, and came from Montclair. ... Montclair was a fancy town compared to others. And suddenly somebody came in and said, "Look, we cannot allow you to stay." Apparently the color question had come up, and he was a mulatto, or ... what we regarded as a Negro. And he was not allowed to stay. He was forced to switch over. So our group was all-white when we got there. And the worst group, a bunch of guys, you could never imagine, they came from Brooklyn. They were rough. When I wore a set of pajamas, they all made fun of me. ... But they apparently had been on relief. I had not. But it was bad times, because I remember I lost a dollar. I got paid four dollars a week, and in the process, I lost a dollar. We went out looking for that for days. So times were bad.

KP: And you were sent to Alabama?

JL: No, Louisiana.

KP: Louisiana. And what projects did you work on?

JL: We worked, the one I enjoyed most was reforestation. ... And this was a time when, I think it was FDR, had programs of trees that would help in the storms. You know in the (Okie?) storms went. And so we planted trees. But really we were [in] reforestation, because these trees had already been cut down. And we would use a dibble to put in the new plants. ... It was very competitive, and we had a great time competing with one another. ... We also fought fires, and we built bridges over small streams. It was great. ... I left. I went to junior college in Newark, Newark College ... It was a three year school for teachers--Newark Teacher's College--and at night we took classes. ... I took civilization and maybe some math. But, apparently I had good grades, having really become a student at the National Agricultural College. Remember, I had flunked ten subjects [in high school]. I flunked French four times, Latin four times, ... algebra one time. And we drew, drafting, something like drafting, whatever it was called. So, I flunked those ten subjects. But then when I got into the Agricultural School, I was really interested in trees and produce and learned a great deal I think. ... I point out that in 1934 when I went to the Civilian Conservation Corps, and I think it was Company 55, it was really the beginning of life for me, because prior to that I probably never had a decent meal. Then I started to eat regularly and rather well.

KP: So in other words, the CCC would probably be one of your crucial turning points?

JL: Oh, it was the turning point, because I could have been a juvenile delinquent, no problem. I was always fighting and getting into all kinds of trouble.

KP: And you grew up in Newark?

JL: Right.

KP: Why did you come to Rutgers? Was it because it was the semi-state university at the time?

JL: Well at the time, it was the New Jersey College of Agriculture. ... They knew me at the school and (Cletus?) L. Goodling was from Penn State. ... We had some marvelous people there. Dr. Allen, I've forgotten what role he had, but he had been ... in the Near East, either Lebanon or Palestine or somewhere. Oh yeah, in Lebanon they had an American school, and he knew of me and when this problem arose where I could have my life endangered, they suggested that it would be better if I went to Rutgers. Which again was a good break for me, because instead of being in a non-qualified school, now I was in a great university. And incidentally, I think at CCNY the SATs were the highest in the United States. The poor kids with high grades, because you had to have at least an 85 in your Regents. But, because they were poor and selected, CCNY produced higher scores than Yale, MIT, CalTech, or any other school. But Rutgers was number four in SATs, strangely enough. I don't know why that was. It was a state school in a sense, but it was a private school also because everyone had to pay tuition.

KP: Now you had grown up in a city, but you attended agricultural schools. What did you hope to do when you finished?

JL: Well, since I had no idea what I was going to be, but my objective was agriculture research. Remember, at the National Farm School, I was a major in dairy. So I had milked cows and handled calves and the birth of young calves and their early life. And then I dealt also with spreading manure, harvesting wheat, and eliminating the straw which was put in a barn. And then wheat was retained for whatever we did with it. I don't remember whether it was sold. It could have been ground up, because in feeds and feeding, which was part of our training, we knew what animals had to have. ...

DG: I guess I wanted to ask, when you went to the farm school, was this the first time you had been involved with agriculture? What really sparked that interest?

JL: Well, as a child, remember when I was about four we left the farm. It was before five, I know. And at that time we were ... raising horses in order to get the skin, because it would be white and brown blotched. So these could be made into skin for fur coats. But they raised all of the food, in addition. Oh, and tobacco. So tobacco was grown and cured, and I remember that as a child. But then as we went into this horrible thing in Newark, you know in 1920 or thereabouts, there was a tremendous depression, and I imagine many people left the farms and continued to do it so that while we had about 50 percent of the population in agriculture [back then], it may be down to 3 or 4 percent now, or less.

KP: It's even less.

JL: Yeah. ... But it wasn't good for me as it turned out. But being back in agriculture made sense. And I think I would have been happy in it, except that then I got my college degree and the war came in. And now you go back to fancy places, and you can't get back to the farms. Furthermore, I was out of touch with agriculture, because so much had happened in the meantime. ... Well, it had greatly changed and become much more technical. And I think that I had become obsolete pretty much.

KP: In other words, if there had not been a war, you may well have started working

JL: Oh, I would have been in agriculture.

KP: ... at an agricultural research station or something along those lines?

JL: Could have been, right. Yeah, I was actually in research. I was planning on research. I had also worked in the Soil Conservation Corps and in soil conservation from the Department of Agriculture.

KP: While you were at Rutgers?

JL: Yeah.

KP: Did you hold an NYA job?

JL: I probably did have. Yeah, because I think we made about twenty dollars a month on that. And that probably provided all the income I needed, believe it or not.

KP: Where did you work in the summer? Did you work for the conservation corps?

JL: Yeah. I may have done, you know I've actually took a course at Newark College of Engineering, a defense course. And took drafting or planning. And we used to have contour terracing. So all of this training prepared me for the soil and for the laying out of things. ... I probably would have gone into the field. In addition, one summer, I was ... a tree scout for (pserratostameliomae?), which was Dutch Elm Disease. And that was challenging, because when you first got up there and threw the rope, you couldn't get it anywhere, and you couldn't climb it. But in a week or so you were up there like a monkey. So it was good all the way around. Life started with the CCC and everything has been wonderful since.

KP: And what about your years at Rutgers?

JL: There ... I found a ... Professor Frank G. Helyar, whom I actually adored. ... He placed me in the short course building, upstairs, so that I had rent practically for nothing. And, of course, we went to classes there at the Ag school, but many classes were held at Rutgers itself. And I turned out to be ... a splendid student in chemistry, in organic. And math, if there was math. ... Whatever the courses, I came up with a 1.8 average. Which would have been, nowadays, a 3.8 average. So I was the second man in the class at the ... New Jersey College of Agriculture. ... And I don't remember all the courses, but I think I took psychology and didn't do much with it. But I loved zoology and biology and had [a] great professor, Dr. Thurlow Nelson who taught zoology and was the son of a professor prior to Thurlow Nelson, so it was a second generation Ph.Ds. ... They were just marvelous teachers all the way. It was a great school.

Now I didn't belong to a fraternity, but I did belong to the League of Evangelical Students. So I began to have a religious interest. It seemed to be, it was purely selective and volunteer. ... So that was an interest of mine which eventually became, I became a graduate of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. I was ordained and wanted to be in the Chaplain Corps, but this was at the end of the Korean War, because I was in World War II and the Korean War. So that's how I got to be a clergyman.

KP: In the late 1930s and early 1940s, did you think the United States was going to go to war?

JL: I had the impression. Remember this, we were dressed in military uniforms. We probably did some drilling. And we were under the guidance and leadership of reserve officers so in a sense, we anticipated the possibility of a problem. And I was always eager to get into it. I felt that Hitler should be stopped. Although you know the country was torn between those who were opposed to entering the war, just as last week many people were opposed to going to war in [Haiti]. Well, actually it's a job that should have been done even earlier, but we were lucky. Nobody was killed. And I think many will be killed later through ... I'm not too sure, I had a stroke in '93. I'll get it all ten minutes later.

KP: No, that's fine. No problem. That's no problem at all.

JL: I was anxious to go. And we had a doctor who turned out to be the discoverer of streptomycin, Dr. Waxman, who got a Nobel Prize. I would discuss all this with Dr. Waxman, saying, we've got to get in there. He said, "Keep your mouth shut!" But, I was interested in leaving and everyday I tried to enlist. And then eventually, oh one of the most crucial things in my life, believe it or not, was in early 1941 when the Air Corps officers came to interview men for the Air Force, or the Air Corps. ... So man, I was so anxious to go and took the test, passed everything. ... I was destined to go to Harvard for an MBA, become a first lieutenant at graduation. And as I left the sergeant who was examining me said, "Hold it. What have you got in your socks?" Now it turned out I was 5 feet 3 1/4 [inches] and you had to be 5 feet 4 [inches]. And they made me check my socks, and I had lifts. And instead of going in as a first lieutenant, I went as a private, 21 a month. This was one of the most important incidents in my life because instead of being a private, I could have been an officer. Who knows? And I think because I had a lot of accounting and other things that I would [have] become a budget and fiscal officer. So I would have been among those who would have been the great merger artists of that time, but as it is I turned out to be a clergyman.

KP: Religion was very important to you. How did you sort of reconcile the contradiction between war and your religious faith?

JL: Well, in this case, ... you know, I remember the Quakers at our Fitzpatrick [Kirkpatrick] chapel. They were outside. They were protesting even military training, because we all took R.O.T.C. And one day, on Sunday ... I learned more on Sunday than I did the other five days of the week. Remember, I was working. But on Sunday we really got it. So at 8:00 I would go with the Quakers. Later in the day I'd go with the ... Norwegian Free Church, which was kind of Baptist. But, remember, all of Scandinavia was Lutheran. But here the oddballs, the non-conformists, were in the Free Church. So I'd go there. Then I'd go to the service at the chapel where we would have the greatest speakers imaginable. I remember one came from Yale. ... [We had a speaker] who wrote a book in 1941, a famous man. ... I'll think of his name. He wrote a book about the Nazis. Apparently he had been in Germany during this time and then wrote a book which we read. I remember the symbol on the book. So we had the most marvelous speakers. I learned more on Sunday, because I'd take notes and then would (-----?) so I could be Quaker. Then later in the day I'd meet with Thurlow Nelson in a religious discussion group,

and he would try to relate science, because he was a great scientist, with religion, which was fascinating. ... I think we had our classes probably at the girls' college, at the ... New Jersey College for Women, which later changed it's name to ...

KP: Douglass.

JL: What?

KP: Douglass.

JL: Douglass. And then at night, I'd go to a vesper service at the Free Church and then later, the service. So it was a day with five or six services continuously. And it was marvelous. I learned all the time, because my family strictly wasn't interested in religion, period. So this was how I got involved.

KP: How did you initially become interested? What was the decisive turning point?

JL: ... First of all, I remember clearly that I joined the League of Evangelical Students. I also belonged to the Economics Club and maybe the Ag Club. But somewhere in between there, or [through] a lady who was in the library, I got to go to the Evangelical Free Church. So all these things came together. This was a time of experimentation or thinking. So all of this happened to me delightfully, and I loved every minute of it. I didn't smoke. I didn't drink. I didn't have any bad habits which was kind of appropriate. Oh, I wrestled at Rutgers--at a very light weight, maybe the flyweight, because I was under 120. I eventually got to be 180, which I shouldn't have been. I managed to get rid of that weight by just having a stroke and having surgery. I came back to where I was when I left the Air Force, which was about 142.

...

DG: What made you decide that you wanted to enlist, and how did that process end up happening?

JL: Oh man, I could not wait, ... because it seemed appropriate. Oh and I went to Fort Dix again in 1941, in the summer. ... There the guys came in, I guess it was 1940 when the draft started, and I got to meet many of the fellahs, and I just couldn't wait to get in. But as I told you, you know Dr. Waxman said, "Hold, wait it. Wait your time and you'll go." ... And eventually I knew that when I finished, I would go. So it was just time.

KP: Had you tried to sign up for advanced R.O.T.C.?

JL: I did but, remember, I had a height problem. Now, all of this changed on ... December 7, 1941, and I'll come to that in a minute. Remember, I had already been turned down, because I was too short. Well, in ... [1941] after the war was declared, you could have been five feet tall and others went at five feet. And later we had little Puerto Rican girls come in at under five feet

tall and you had to have uniforms made for them. So, it was just bad timing for me. If I had just waited to be examined January the 8th, I would have made it, and I could have made officer right away. But as it turned out ... Now, on December the 7th, where do you think we were? On Sunday, in the chapel, remember the Quakers, the Free Church? Now I'm in the chapel and the speaker is Norman Thomas. And he spoke at this time about the stupidity of war. Because really everything that is accomplished is done by men in small laboratories studying and interested. And this is the way great things were done. ... He was opposed to the idea of war. And then we had a discussion afterwards. ... I probably argued with him. How can you be a pacifist in a time like this? And outside were the Quakers, I think, protesting somehow or another. ... I remember one of them saying, "Well if you decide to go to war, no, if Hitler attacks we will not cooperate. In the United States we're not going to oppose what is happening." And, of course, this had a dramatic effect on me, because on that day, as I walked back to Highland Park, somebody said to me, "You know, we've been attacked." So that's how I learned about the attack on December the 7th, and that's what I was doing earlier in the day when I was arguing with Norman Thomas. Sure it's great, a lot is accomplished by research and study and contemplation, but there is also the necessity of staying alive. So it was the Quakers. And I thought they were illogical. What do you mean you're not going to cooperate when the world is being torn apart?

KP: But there was a great deal of sentiment not to get involved in European affairs?

JL: Yeah, we had the America First movement. And these were rich people in England and, I guess, the smug and the secure in the United States. So it took a lot of happenings for us to ever get involved. We had planned to become the arsenal of ...

KP: democracy ...

JL: ... democracy, never counting on us actually becoming involved because the country was split right down the middle, as it later was in France, because here you had it so they just canceled each other out. And incidentally, I'm the chaplain for the Veterans of the Foreign Wars. ... In my post, we just had a situation where the commander of a post was an alcoholic. Brilliant man, but he cut us right in half. You know, some voted for him and others didn't. There was only one vote, unfortunately I was one of the votes that helped him to get elected. One vote. And I would have gone the other way, but one guy said to me, "Look, I think he's going to be all right." Well, I knew that there was going to be an alcohol problem, because I also, during my five schools that I went to ... I went to Union Theological, Princeton Seminary, ... the Yale School of Alcohol Studies and, in Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Institute, the Bible Institute of Los Angeles. ... I always had an interest in alcoholics, because it seemed like such a waste of talent. Charming men, and I'd wear my Masonic thing, and here I'd ... [say], "How can you be drinking like that when you're a Mason and you know that God is involved in this?" Because as I studied the motivations of alcoholism, we had two concepts. First, that we might have been a younger child and when the oldest child found the new child coming who became the interest of everyone, the center of everyone's attention, then the older one was kind of lost. It is thought that ultimately they put themselves in the place of God. They kind of worship themselves to make up

for what had been lost. The other philosophy, it came also because we all had psychiatric training at Yale. Psychiatrists thought that there might also be a component of chemistry, enzymes. The inability to ... synthesize, and I'll think of the enzymes later. So it was a two fold. Either you got the impression that you were rejected and [then] worshipped yourself or you had an enzyme problem and couldn't synthesize certain things and constantly, once you got the alcohol, you'd keep reaching for synthesis, and it would just never get better. So this was one of my concepts and one of the reasons I got the divinity degrees. I don't know if that explains anything.

KP: ... When you were in the service, did you see much drinking?

JL: I guess I did, because it ... became universal, drinking and smoking. You had everything so cheap. You got a carton of cigarettes for 80 cents. The temptation to smoke, and everyone was encouraged to smoke. Although, because I later flew, I found that we had a lot of planes probably blown out by carelessness.

KP: From people smoking on the plane?

JL: Yeah. Because if there was a leak of gasoline, it could happen. Or it could also happen from a spark. But you don't know which way it happens. And we lost, over the Hump, because I became a member of the Hump Pilots Association. We flew from India to China, and I think we lost half of our people. Now, was it smoking? That may have been a factor, but we also had these huge clouds. And once you got into a cloud, you had vertical, you know, ... you read of shearing. Here we had all these forces up and down, and so you could suddenly bring it as you came down. See because it was coming up and down, you could tear your wings right off. So I think half of our people died. Lots of planes were lost. But this was all to bring stuff in to supply Chiang Kai-shek, who was storing it and never really did use it. He was storing it to use against the communists, and they defeated him. ... As we met the nationalists and the communists, we found that each group would have three officers with them. ... They detested the corruption of nationalist officers, and they admired the rugged people. ... They tried to prevent war by having, always, American officers on both sides. This is an experience I remember, because as we discussed [it] going back from Shanghai. I learned this from these officers who had been assigned ...

KP: ... to the two sides ...

JL: The two sides. I never got to see either of the two sides, but only the officers [did].

KP: So you were trained as a pilot?

JL: I was trained as a meteorologist and as a communications officer so that I had radio men under my control. I would assign them to their planes and keep records and insisted that they kept good code records. But there were a lot of men who died in that, who were privates and yet

very bright young fellows who were able to take code. We did not use, as the navy did, typewriters. They used pencils, which was not as fast as the typists of the navy.

KP: When did you enlist exactly? When did you actually get inducted into the army air corps?

JL: May the 12, 1942. I graduated on May the 10th. I went there on the 11th, ... and I was sworn in on the 12th.

KP: And where did you initially report to?

JL: Again, where I was in 1934. In Fort Dix.

KP: You were enlisted as a private?

JL: Yeah, 21 a month.

KP: And where did they send you initially?

JL: I'm not clear on this, but I think we went to Mississippi. Where was I? ... Recently I've gone back there, you know because I've never left the air force, because I've always been with it. ... I've taken care of all the R.O.T.C. cadets in all the state programs and high schools for awards. ... I'll think [of it] in a minute but, Mississippi was the place where we had, I think, ten to twelve weeks of basic training. ... I loved that, because we'd climb up and swing back on things and

KP: So you had aviation basic training?

JL: It was air corps.

KP: Air corps.

JL: Right. I didn't become air force until 1946.

KP: ... Who made up most of the people in your training unit?

JL: First of all, it was a remarkable group of men, because we just enjoyed each other so much. I think we were a select group. I think they did it with a higher IQ group. And, you're talking about basic training?

KP: Yes, your basic training.

JL: Well, we were tested a lot. ... I had a high AGTC score. ... We were then shipped to communications school at Stevens Hotel in Chicago, Illinois. The biggest hotel in America. I think there were two or three thousand rooms. We went to class and studied code and ... theory.

I think we were into electrical theory. ... I don't remember too much beyond that. But I graduated from that school. I don't remember what I did after that, but somewhere around that time my application--which had been put in long before--called me up, and I went to ... I graduated the school, and they sent me to Pennsylvania. What is the place? ... Where did Washington go?

KP: Valley Forge?

JL: Valley Forge. I went to the Valley Forge Military Academy. ... There we had a British sergeant who was training us. I guess maybe he was a retired British master sergeant, but somehow this is who trained us, and we really got some fantastic training in drilling and coordination. And then on how to eat at the table and how to

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KP: So you were mentioning that you had received this supplementary training at Valley Forge.

JL: Right.

KP: When did you enter Officers Candidate School, and how did that come about?

JL: I went to Yale, and I went to ... what was then the engineering school--I've forgotten, I'll probably think of it--it may have been Stafford, no, anyway, we took classes there. ... We were more advanced with theory and all that. ... We were to consider ... I came out with a 96.64 score at Yale. Then I had to make a decision whether I was going to go to California or somewhere else. So they let me select where I'd go, whether I'd want to come to New Jersey and maybe be reassigned. But anyway, I ended up in California, at March Field, in charge of a communications, with the 7th Tow Target Squadron which was interesting in two ways. First, we were training AA, anti-aircraft. But in our squadron we had female pilots who could not go on combat, who could not be commissioned, but dressed as commissioned officers and could fly anything, in order to ferry from one place to another. So if you got a new plane, you would ferry it to a station. These were called the WASPs, Women Air Service Pilots.

KP: Dawn, do you have any questions?

DG: So their primary role was ferrying the planes back and forth?

JL: Ferrying. Now in our squadron, they were able to pull targets. So while others were doing ferrying jobs, we were pulling (socks?) to shoot at. So they actually flew the tow targets. In addition, ... we would have airplanes, little ones, that would be controlled from the ground. ... You also could shoot at the little airplanes. I've forgot what they were called. Maybe this wide [3 feet], but with a motor, and they would be up aloft and, they would shoot at them from another field outside of Riverside, the anti-aircraft section of March Field. So women and these targets, you know the Israelis use that a great deal. What do they call those? I'm not sharp on this. I can

remember everything after ten, fifteen minutes. That's an interesting phenomenon. In fact, we arrange now to be examined by a neurologist to see whether I'm punchy or whether I'm going wacko or whatever. They may discover that I'm senile. Although ... my memory recall is fantastic. But they think that I'm not recalling. At least my brother thinks I'm wacky, and he drives me to these appointments.

KP: At roughly what time period did all your training take place? It seems like you were in training for quite a bit.

JL: Not really. I ended it in April of 1943.

KP: And your last base for training, was it Yale or was it California?

JL: No, I stayed on through the Korean War.

KP: But your actual training.

JL: Oh, no. I was commissioned at Yale. ... Later on I went to the New York University for meteorological training. So I studied meteorology and then went overseas again for forecasting. I eventually went to Dhahran, Saudi Arabia which was the scene later, of course, for the desert war. Remember, we lost 100 people in Dhahran. But I was there and had a very interesting time.

KP: When were you in Dhahran?

DG: When was this?

JL: I was in Dhahran in 1948. I think I had been stationed in Germany first, and then left for Dhahran. ... In Germany, I remember, for the first time, we used (thermafax?). You know we have facsimile machines. We had (thermafax?) in the weather service. I was in the 5th Weather Squadron, and I remember being in Wiesbaden, but I was assigned later to a big field outside of Frankfurt--and I'll think of that in a minute. ... Later I was sent to the Munich area, Bavaria, and I forecast there. But eventually, I think, I went to Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.

KP: What was so interesting about Dhahran, Saudi Arabia?

JL: Well, it really wasn't. First of all, it was challenging in a sense, because our weather observers were, perhaps Saudi Arabians. And we didn't get good service on that. But, in spite of that, since you had to go all the way from Saudi Arabia to India in our flights, we never had a real problem. We would forecast. But we ... ran into something that was very interesting. I think I was not on duty that day when someone else said, there's a colloidal storm coming, a colloidal sandstorm appearing. Apparently this could happen, and it would sweep down from maybe Iran or from elsewhere. Oh, we had, on the other side in Africa, we had an African colony that the Italians had ...

KP: Somalia? Somaliland.

JL: It was next to Somaliland, or maybe part of it. Whatever it was, we would fly men in from It starts with an 'E'.

KP: Ethiopia? Eritrea?

JL: Eritrea. We'd fly men in to serve in our tables, and they would be Italians. By this time, the storm came in, colloidal dust like a cloud ... like a white cloud, except this one would be a yellow cloud. Colloidal, very fine sand, which probably adhered to moisture molecules. And a plane came in and just made it. But the ... first pilot of the second plane, lost his nerve. Oh, we had to come in, not because there were lights. It was so bad that we had to have fires lit on both sides of the runway. The second plane did not make it, and they landed in the Persian Gulf. But nobody could see them because again, this cloud was over the Persian Gulf as well. ... Eventually they ran out of time. Maybe, finally after hours, water seeped in and, I guess, they went down.

KP: They were never recovered?

JL: They were not recovered. But, one man I was very close to. When I got back from Dhahran, I made it a point to visit the widow and her three children. ... I loved the children, but I started to cough because apparently I was allergic to that California, Orange County. From the moment I got there, I just keep coughing. I couldn't stay. So I stayed a night, I think, and left. But I would have enjoyed being with them longer. I probably would have been interested in marrying her, because he was a fine man, and they were lovely kids, but nothing else happened.

KP: You saw, before you went overseas, a good part of the United States--both as part of the CCC and also in terms of your army training. What did you think of the different sections of the country? What struck you?

JL: Well, you know, I chanced to enjoy everything and everybody, so I really don't have a bias either pro or con. I mean I think whatever I saw and did, I liked. I was also stationed in Alaska. One of the summers in Kodiak Island, and I had taken that course, the defense course. Remember I took it in surveying. ... The year after I went to soil conservation with the contour terracing. See that was in 1940 that they were first drafted. But I went and went to work building the Navy and army bases in Kodiak, because they knew there would be an attack. As it turned out, the Japanese did get there, but they decided to leave. When we finally arrived there in suntans, in summer uniforms, in Kodiak Island, they had abandoned the place, and it was a false call. ... Anyway, I had a delightful time, because it was intriguing work. ... And we had to wear clothes that were about a quarter of an inch thick, canvas, and a hat, which was very firm, with a net, because the flies would just eat you alive. They would sting you to death, and the mosquitoes were big about that [2 inches] big. So we would do this work, but at the end of the day, having sweated in this thing, we would jump into the brook or the whatever it was, it was small. ...

Maybe by this time they had stopped biting or something. And, here, my body would be a tingle, because ... remember this was ice cold, ice that just melted. ... So you'd be completely refreshed at the end of that, and you'd go into the barracks and have a meal. I never had it so good in my life. But, we had a Baptist mission outside of the base. So I would steal stuff off the base for the orphans who were there. There was a minister who had been an engineer. And he decided to get the call. ... So he was in charge, and they had good services. And at each of the little houses, which were like a family, they would have an Italian Baptist from ... Belleville, ... the silver something section. ... They had a great preacher, an Italian preacher. There was a time when many Italians became masons and became clergy. ... So we had girls from Italy, or Italian background, taking charge of each little house with the orphans in it. So we would be with them and relate to them and visit with them and whatever we did. Then we'd go to the church service. It was very exciting.

KP: You mentioned it was an orphanage. Who were the orphans?

JL: These were usually children of seaman who had contacted Eskimo girls, Intuits or whatever it was. And when they were born, I think they had a problem. This happened also in Vietnam. The mere fact that they had Caucasian blood created problems, so they were all shipped out.

KP: Were these merchant seamen or were they U.S. sailors?

JL: Sailors. Well, they were fishermen really.

KP: They were fishermen? Okay. So this had been a long standing problem in Alaska?

JL: I would accept that. Yeah.

KP: In other words, the mission didn't start during the war? It started earlier.

JL: Oh no, no. In fact, this was before the war. It was established, in fact, I was there before war took place. I was there in December of 1941, which was before the attack. But I was working on the base as a surveyor.

KP: So that was your summer job in 1941, it was to go to Alaska?

JL: Oh, the pay was so good that I started a fund for needy students. Now remember I came there with NYA funds. Here I was making money. This is interesting. I worked closely to the dredges or the big shovels. Now they would work seven days a week, twelve hours a day. But on the seventh day, they would oil the machine. They oiled it, because they were time and a half. Not eight hours, 12 hours at time and a half. Not 40 hours, but 84 hours. ... Those men on the shovel earned much more money than the superintendent of the job, because they were on salary. Here they were, on union wages, time and a half, and seven days a week. So, while I was earning 21 bucks a month, they were earning over 1,000 dollars a week. 70 cents a day

contrasted to whatever it was. And the superintendent of the job may only have been earning 20, 25,000 [annually], which is interesting.

KP: In all the places you had been to during training, had you thought of ever settling in one of those? Had you thought of settling in somewhere besides New Jersey after you had been to California, Mississippi, and Louisiana?

JL: And, I'd also seen Paris. And I wasn't going to go back to the farm. But, I was intrigued by Scandinavia. That was a gorgeous area. ... We had Norway, Sweden and ...

KP: Denmark?

JL: Denmark. What a town that was. You were surrounded by all movie stars. Everybody in Copenhagen looked like a movie star. They were a beautiful people, because it was Scandinavian with a touch of the French, because I think the French under Napoleon must have been there. And it was a beautiful place. There was no VD in all of Copenhagen, so it was an interesting place.

KP: You ...

JL: I went to Sweden and Norway. Okay go ahead.

KP: You had mentioned you were in an anti-aircraft unit in California. How long did you stay in California?

JL: Until I left for India.

KP: And when would you ...

JL: By way of, we left ... late in '43, and we went by way of Tasmania, where we stopped. ... This was a very interesting place, because here we were dealing with (limes?), and the guys would probably have conflict, because once you called him a Lime, he might call you a Yank. But I didn't do that kind of thing. I went walking around. Well, while I was walking, I met a man who said to me, you know, "You remind me of somebody." I said, "Can't be. I just arrived. It can't be." ... [He said,] "I know you from somewhere." And eventually, oh, I know, Peter Lorre. Here I am, a Yank kid, looking like Peter Lorre. Anyway, they took me to their home. And incidentally, when I was in Alaska, somebody said I looked like Peter Lorre. In Alaska, when I met some very lovely people, they said, "I know you from somewhere." Incidentally, in Chicago, this happened also. I was sitting in the Stevens Hotel and then we had these metal trays. And here was this guy looking at me while I'm eating. Finally, this man in front of me said, oh, I know, Peter Lorre. What made me look like Peter Lorre when I was a buck private at 21 bucks a month, this is hard to [fathom]. He had bags under his eyes, if you remember in *Casablanca*. Three times in my life I was mistaken for Peter Lorre.

KP: But in Tasmania, you actually got invited to someone's home?

JL: Oh yeah, we had a ball. Now, they had daughters, and you know I was clean cut. ... So we associated, and they had me, because the people were very hospitable. In Chicago you couldn't pay for anything. You'd be invited to three homes, but you couldn't be in three homes. You'd have to settle for one. When you went to the USO, you would have the Mayor's wife serving all the food for free. You got on the trolley car--no fare. Being in the war was something. So, where was I now? Oh, Tasmania. We had a ball. And I called other guys and said, "Look, here's a wonderful family and you're invited." So we all were together and had the meal. Finally we had to get a taxi back to the ship. ... I guess maintenance was poor. We started out ... I guess we had brought some ladies with us to bring to the ship and on the way it broke down. So here all of us went and pushed the car, including the women. Well, that was so funny. We were just hysterical the whole time. Eventually, somehow we got it started and drove to the ship and that was the end of that. But it was a real pleasant, unforgettable time. Oh, incidentally, you could be having the most beautiful girls. The problem was if they were sixteen, their teeth had all had to be pulled out, because they had nothing, but cavities. In Tasmania, apparently, they were short of either calcium or what other of the same family group? What did we have besides calcium in that line?

KP: Calcium is what I always think of. Fluoride?

JL: It could be something else besides, maybe related, to that family that had something to do with teeth. And apparently we, for simplicity, would say we were devoid of calcium. ... They all had false teeth.

KP: Really? Even women in their early twenties?

JL: Young ladies. Now, ... they had not borne children yet. So here they were with false teeth early on. Unless they lost their teeth at that time, which I don't think they did.

KP: You then went by way of Tasmania to India.

JL: I landed at, ... it starts with 'B'.

KP: Bombay?

JL: Bombay. What a town. How amazing. And I was stationed outside of Bombay at a New Zealand base. ... I met all of these New Zealanders who were of fabulous size and great people. ... All rangy and marvelous. ... We slept on rope. We didn't have springs. We didn't have canvas cots. We had these cots and maybe a pallet over that. ... Then I'd go out and visit and among them I learned of the people who were fire-eaters. ... Incidentally, when you got to Bombay, if you stood around, everybody you'd ever seen, you'd recognize. Except everybody was jet black,

blue-black with straight black hair. They had Caucasian features, but were very, very black. So I'd look and (holy there are you...?). How come you're black today, because you look just like, whoever it was. But, not black. But blue-black, like hard coal. But then there were whites and these were the fire worshippers who had to leave Iran or ... what was the country that we call Iran now?

KP: It was Persia.

JL: Persia. See, when Mohammadism came in, or Islam, then they drove out the fire worshippers who almost could have been the followers of the head of the Roman Empire, because there was a question. Is it going to go Christian or-- what was the other? (Masdaq?). Do you know what (Masdaq?) was? Light. Whatever the religion was, it was (Masdaq?) or it's equivalent. ... There was a contest as to whether or not the Roman Empire would go Christian, which was Jewish in a sense, or (Masdaq?), which was the fire-worshippers. Because in Bombay you had the hanging gardens, and you didn't bury the dead as they do in India. Rather you put them out ... in the sun and the birds would tear them apart. So they fed the animals. But here these were the most intelligent people imaginable. They were called the Jews of India. ... They educate their women just like they would a man. ... Their speech was flawless, and they were great business people. So the (Tata?) ironworks or the (Tata?) airlines were of these (Masdaqs?). Now I'm not getting the other name. Incidentally, should you wish to go down and take a bite, it would be fine with me, it's up to you.

[(Masjid?) for (Masdaqs?)? or (Mosque?)]

KP: Well, I think we should try to finish this tape.

DG: We really should.

JL: We're not finished yet now. We're only into the middle of this thing.

KP: Yeah, but this tape runs an hour and a half.

JL: Okay, let's see. Where were we? Oh, I was in India. We went across India to Kanchipuram, which was outside of Calcutta, and there we had to be reassigned. During this trip, there were roaches in there this size [6 inches]. But we ate well and then they would stop. It was all by railroad. They had a marvelous railroad system. Nothing compared to the United States, but compared to anything else in the world it was tremendous, because the British had built it. ... Well, we got there eventually, stopping in many cities on the way. Maybe because I only stopped and because I remembered then, but don't since. We got to Kanchipuram. We did what we were doing. Here men were gambling, guys who were Mafia figures were stripping everybody of their cash, because they knew how to play the games. But when we got to (Shamshanagar?), I was assigned there in control of flying radio men. There we would go from (Shamshanagar?) to China and then unload. ... Eventually I was stationed in China, in Lu Liang. But first, I went to

Yunan province to, what is the town, where the, ... where the fighters from ... the United States who became Khan Ming. I was in Khan Ming. And we had gone to Kweilin for the evacuation of the Chinese when it was overrun by the Japs. Later, I was stationed in Lu Liang as a communications officer. I think I must have gone back to India, because I remember being in (Barakpor?, and Dumdun? and the Canarny estates?). Now that was an interesting place, because (Canarny estates?), for some reason or other, you got paid extra for being in this wonderful motel, per diem. When I was stationed in UCLA, or not UCLA, but in Newark College of Engineering as I eventually was in 1950, or 1949, I was on per diem. I'd been per diemed in (Canarny estates?). It made no sense whatever. You got your meals and all. Maybe they charged you something for it, but it was two dollars per diem.

You know, in 1934, I had a meal in Alexandria, a seven course meal, for 25 cents. Then I was a big shot. I gave him a five cent tip. But what did you have? You had soup. You may have had something before soup, but soup, meat, potatoes, vegetables, coffee, dessert and before that maybe ... [something else]. Seven courses for 25 cents. I used to get my clothes washed, including everything, including heavy woolens, for a dollar and a quarter a ... month. A dollar and a quarter a month. The poor women there. Then I would meet these women in these little towns. Here it is real south and these were abandoned trees with pecans. I don't know what they did to raise food, but the people were fantastic, so friendly. I guess, because we ... [brought] money too. You didn't have money during the Depression.

This would be a great help to everyone. ... So I used to go to a tent meeting here in Newark. On occasion we've had tent meetings where people would come from all over, and they'd be preaching and that's where I kind of got entranced by the preaching. Eventually I became a Baptist minister. But, they were Baptists. There were black Baptists, two or three breeds. ... All kinds of Baptists. ... The point is, these were itinerants. Actually, Methodism is based on the itinerancy of religion of the time. Remember they were all Anglicans until they began to rebel, and they wanted to insist on teaching people the Bible and doing it for free. You know, in the Anglican church you have to pay a fee, a seat fee. And here the poor could not afford that, so Wesley, who had been one of those and came to Georgia with General ... Oglethorpe, ... John Wesley, was one of his crew as chaplain. But they ran into trouble, because there was a widow lady who had her eyes on him. He was not about to marry her, so he returned to England. But on the way to Georgia, he had met people who were called the (*Unitus Fratas?*). They were bohemians, and they didn't believe in what the Roman Catholics believed. They believed in God-given principles. And then they began to be persecuted as they also were in Italy. So a Count Zinzendorf, who was a Lutheran, made place for them, and they were maintained for a while. But then they started to transfer to Holland and to England. And then ..., you would know them, because the first high school or college for women was done by this breed of Christians. And it was they who inspired Wesley one day. When they came to America, they were caught in a storm. And all the sailors were scared to death and so were the officers, but only one group of people prayed and were confident that God was going to take care of them. ... Now who were these people? And I'll think of it as soon as I leave you. In Bethlehem, they would have the bugle. Have you ever heard of, in Bethlehem, they would have services? They blew ... bugles,

about a half-a-dozen of them. And I'm getting to it. ... They went to Carolina, these (*Unitus Fratas?*) ...

KP: Moravians.

JL: Moravians. You're helpful. So the Moravians were the ones who touched a spark in Wesley's mind, because when he saw them behaving as they did when everyone else was fear-ridden, ... they were confident that God had them in the palm of ... [His] hands. When he got back to England, he stopped at Asbury chapel, let us call it, and there he had this heart-warming experience. And then from being a paid person from the Anglican church, he became a missionary to everybody outside the church. He would go down to the mines. He would gather them in the fields. Instead of having a soft job, what do we call that where you're paid everywhere? Now he became an itinerant preacher. He preached 45,000 times. Let's say he was 40 when it happened, but [by] the time he was in his 90s he had given 45,000 services and transformed all of England, because he fought slavery. And so the anti-slave movement started as a result of Wesley. ... There are schools in the United States that have his name, black schools who have acknowledged that role. ... He transformed all of England. Instead of having a revolution as they had in France, here they made many reforms, and they would get the kind of jobs that were almost permanent with provisions for food and shelter. So they lived. And they taught them English. Why? In order read the Bible. So you had a new brand of (----?). So while, Methodists became a very strong force in England and in the United States. So that at a time they even were greater in number than the Southern Baptists, but as they became mainline churches some of that beaded off.

KP: When you were in the war, did you think God was protecting you?

JL: I always felt secure. However, I insisted on adding more life insurance. So that as I was leaving for overseas, I called in a man from New York Life, because I wanted to take care of my mother if ... [I] died. Because remember we had the GI insurance. So I got examined, I gave him a check, and got the policy, [and he] mailed it to me. I never saw it, but it was sent to home. I did it from California. ... How could anybody be stupid enough to write a policy that would give 10,000 dollars for a guy earning 70 cents a day? You know I'd have to be insane not to have it. ... I was so secure that I couldn't afford the damn thing. So if I got killed, that would be great. What would happen? I go to heaven, so I never feared.

KP: You were not fearful during the war?

JL: No. If I got it, my mother was taken care of. And the world is not my home, I'm just passing through. My treasures are laid up way up beyond the blue. I had this kind of point of view. I've learned differently. You can be mugged anywhere.

KP: When you were in the army, did you go to religious services often?

JL: Yeah. Sometimes ... Yeah, I would say constantly. And I would teach the Bible on occasion. Ultimately I got to teach.

KP: In India, there are very few Christians. How did you respond to that?

JL: As a matter of fact, there are a great many. This place was rife with Christians, because every screwball in England who could not thrive under the Church of England would go as a missionary. And one of the great pleasures I had is that when I went on R&R, and I went into, oh, ... I went to (Shalong?) for rest and recuperation. How do you go from the black up the hill to the white? But down below, there were people who moved in, Aryans of some sort. But prior to that there had been people, native people, who were kind of Chinese, very light-colored, and they [were] called the (Cassies?). And they had a matriarchal system so that everything that was owned, was owned by the females. Even the King could not become King. ... He had to be the son of the Queen, then he could become King. So the King was even subject to power of the female. ... If you wanted to marry outside that tribe, you had to leave the (Cassies?), that tribe that they were in, and go to a neighboring tribe where you'd be without any possessions or connections and marry one of the (Cassi?) women because she owned everything. So he had no income. The men walked like gorillas and the women were like little goddesses. Isn't that wrong?

DG: It's interesting, actually.

JL: So this is the matriarchal system. Now when this lady in Wales learned about the (Cassies?) and problems she had been preceded by She was the daughter of a minister, and she read about the revival that came out of the Welsh mines. ... She heard of it, and she became inspired, and she was going to become a missionary teacher. So her name was ...

----- **END OF TAPE ONE SIDE TWO** -----

KP: This is a continuation of an interview with Captain Joseph Lerner on September 19, 1994 in Clark, New Jersey with Kurt Piehler and Dawn Goldbacher.

...

One of the questions I had was, in terms of the war and your service in China and India, ... were you ground-based or did you have air duty?

JL: I had both. Actually, I had a down-base job, but I flew over the Hump.

KP: How many missions did you do over the Hump?

JL: Only about six or seven.

KP: And in that capacity you were a meteorologist?

JL: Yeah.

KP: And you were also then a ground-based meteorologist?

JL: That's true, except that I flew also. I think I did it several thousand hours ... because I loved to fly. And if I could be free, then I would go and take a mission or go as a passenger.

KP: Did you regret that you did not become a pilot? Would you have wanted to become a pilot?

JL: Well, I had a problem. First of all, I didn't pass the exam on the height. Secondly, I wore glasses.

KP: Oh, yes. Being sent to China and India, do you have regrets that you did not fight in Europe? Had you wanted to?

JL: Well, it's kind of out of your control, because you were then assigned. Actually I got orders to go to [Europe]. On June the 3, 1944, I did have orders for Europe, and they were canceled. And I was sent to--wherever it was--later, anyway. Wherever it was. ... See sometimes the intricacies and the tremendous detail that they were able to manage all of these assignments is absolutely fantastic. The record keeping was uncanny. We had no computers and how we did it, I have no idea.

KP: So you were impressed with the job that the army air force did-- you thought that it was a very well-run operation.

JL: Oh it was well-run. These guys were sharp. Now, there were lots of blunders. And you know I think there was an occasion, ... and this is heresy, when some ships came from Africa to Italy, they were shot down by the navy because the IFF, identification friend and foe, hadn't made the right changes. So either the navy was out-of-date or the air force was out-of-date, but they shot down a couple hundred planes.

KP: You had decided to stay in the military after the war.

JL: Right. Right.

KP: Why did you decide to stay?

JL: Well, first of all, I loved every minute of it. And I don't think I had, I had no connections whatever. There was no money. There was no anything. Why not stay with something you enjoy. It was very interesting.

KP: You had flown very dangerous missions by flying over the Hump. Had you ever experienced direct enemy fire?

JL: Only a couple of times. That was with the Japanese. But we got away from it. I guess there must have been some. ... See we were in large airplanes, the C-109, which was carrying cargo and excess gasoline and whatever. ... We did have fighters once, but actually the danger was in blowing up and having the wings torn off.

KP: From what you described it was a very dangerous assignment.

JL: I lost half, we lost half of our group.

KP: When the atomic bomb was dropped, where were you?

JL: I was in ... [It] was August. I was in India, I think, yeah. In (Shamsanagar?), I believe. It was in August of 1995.

KP: '45. Yeah.

JL: ... Did I say '95 or '45?

KP: Yeah, but no that is a common slip.

JL: ... We were shocked. Oh, you know, I had had background, remember in communications and electronics and what not? We had had, in 1941, a lecture by a man who came from the University of California in B ... What is it?

KP: Berkeley.

JL: Berkeley. Now I should remember his name, but I don't. But he told us about atomic energy. ... Furthermore, we studied in the New Testament the ... end times. What is the last book of the Bible?

KP: Revelations.

JL: Revelations. And having that background of his lecture and knowing Revelations-- and we were studying Revelations together in the League of Evangelical Students-- when I heard about the bomb, there it was. Remember you're going to be wiped out. The old world would be put away. So I was prepared. I was really vindicated by having that thing happen.

KP: You saw the bomb as an indication of biblical prophecy?

JL: That's right.

KP: You had stayed in the military, but you eventually went to become a Baptist minister. Why?

JL: Yeah, well, it was a question of using the GI Bill, and it had to be done. ... You know I went to a lot of bases: Castle Field, Forbes Field in Topeka, Kansas and eventually at Wright-Paterson Field. I had contacted the Southern Baptist Seminary and thought I could commute. Let's say you had a three-day--like firemen, you work three days and four days you're off, you can have another job. I thought I could commute, but it became burdensome. I did start that way, but eventually I just left in October of 1951. Remember I went to Korea starting in 1950, just before June ... the 23, 1950.

KP: So you were in Korea when the Korean war broke out?

JL: Not really. I came just after. ... Remember, I was teaching at the Newark College of Engineering. There I was assigned to a base outside, because we must have sent something. And I was among the first group to go, but I didn't arrive there, I think, until July or August. Probably late July or the 1st of August of 1950. By '51 I was already out, in October. Maybe the latter part of October 1951.

KP: What were your duties in Korea?

JL: Oh, I had changed to become a first sergeant, because at some point along the line I ... went back to enlisted rank. And I was the first sergeant of an air support squadron, and our men would go into Korea from (Iwo Kuni?), which was an island in Japan or, not an island, but a place near, ... close to Korea. ... Our men would go with jeeps--remember, I was a communications officer--and communicate from the ground to the air, so that they could get vision from the small airplanes, little P-19s or whatever they were, and then communicate by jeep radio and then communicate to our headquarters. Now this happened only once or twice and once we were overrun, a few men, badly damaged, but apparently it was a false thing. But this is what it was. Communication in a primitive way. Now, theoretically we should have excelled in seeing everything from the air and having fighters to support it, but you know, they just had two airplanes, not airplanes. ...

KP: Helicopters.

JL: Helicopters shot down. But that's what we used to do back then. As a matter of fact, at Anzio, a sergeant, a buck sergeant from the National Guard, was commissioned in the field---three of them. Within minutes, two were gone. But (Vessey?), who became Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was commissioned in the field, survived, and then ... many years later was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. So that kind of occupation was worthwhile. We did it with jeeps and primitive equipment, flying small airplanes.

KP: Why did you leave the military? It seemed like you were destined to make it a career.

JL: Yeah, but I guess I did have the call to. ... I was beginning to teach a lot more, and kind of preach. And lots of people said to me, you know, "You ought to be a chaplain." And I was a key. I'd rather be a chaplain than ... a weather forecaster, because that ... was strictly guess work.

It's amazing that I didn't kill people. Because as I told you, the information we had gotten in Saudi Arabia was often way too late.

KP: Yes.

JL: But we still forecast on the basis of what we had. And strangely enough, the best forecaster in our entire group, ... I was a first lieutenant at the time. There was a captain, head of the section. But there was an enlisted man, ... not enlisted, but the rank just below a ...

KP: A sergeant?

JL: No, no. ... But there was a rank between commissioned officers and non-commissioned officers. In between.

KP: Warrant officer?

JL: Warrant officers. I was with a warrant officer named Hoover, who was by far, the best forecaster in the place. And he could have saved that crew, but the colonel in charge, O'Keefe, had illegally brought his 15 year-old son into the airplane. And now here he was going around hoping for the thing to clear, and it didn't. Eventually they decided that everybody was to jump. Everybody but the crew chief, the pilot and the co-pilot. But the 15 or so people who were in the airplane plus that 15 year-old, he jumped over our place. They were saved. But the reason they couldn't jump--and that was the problem--one of the Italians accidentally pulled the cord and blew that parachute. Now you're left with two parachutes and three men. They, unfortunately, could not stay together, except in the Persian Gulf. If they had been able to see each other, and there were plane[s] and craft in the area, but they couldn't be seen so they all, ... the three of them died. Because that one chute was, whatever we call it-- fluffed, or whatever, opened by error.

KP: One of your tours of duty in the air force was in Germany. How did you feel about living in Germany after the war?

JL: Well,... of course, I saw a lot of destruction. And if you're young ... of course, I was always very gracious to everybody and visited with many Germans in their homes and tried to give them things to eat. ... But, everything I did was an adventure. Every person I met, it was fun.

KP: Did you think that the Germans ... had any sense of responsibility for the war? In causing the war?

JL: When you get down to the people level, I don't think you, I think I was not conscious of it. Because when they're suffering and they're in trouble, ... you know, Americans are kind of empathetic.

KP: You mentioned that you enjoyed Paris a great deal. Did you see Paris when you were on duty in Germany or were you stationed in Paris at one time?

JL: I was not stationed in Paris, but when I'd get a leave from (Kuftburen?), which was in Bavaria, then I'd fly down to a nearby ... oh, and sometimes from (Rhine-mein?), I would take a train down to Paris. It didn't take terribly long, didn't cost an awful lot of money. But flying was faster.

KP: You were in the army air corps that became the air force. How did you see that transition go?

JL: You know, I hated losing the greens and pinks and going into the blues. That was one of the reasons I didn't hesitate to leave the air force. Because the greens and pinks I loved. The blues looked like they might be mailmen. Incidentally, you could sleep in the greens and pinks, because they were of a very ... kind of a loose thing. So you could, you always looked brand new in them.

KP: But the blues you couldn't. The blues you couldn't sleep in them?

JL: Well, it was just different. ... It was elastic. We had had them and the officers had them for quite some time. I don't know how many years, but after World War I, they may have eventually gone into the elastics.

KP: You also saw the military, at the end of your career, efforts to desegregate the military.

JL: Yes. You know, remember I told you, here was this nicest guy that I could imagine, the best in the crowd, that made a big impact on me. So I was rather happy when Truman decided to [order desegregation]. ... Was it the air force that we started? Of course, they had done a job with Tuskegee, who became officers and did an outstanding job in Italy. ... But see, I didn't really get involved too much about the change, because chances are that people didn't get into the air force as quickly as they did into the army.

KP: Did you have any black airmen in your unit in Korea?

JL: I don't remember. I don't remember. Apparently not. Because remember, ... this is still happening in ... '43, '44 and '45. No, there was not the desegregation.

KP: ... I know in World War II, but in your unit in Korea.

JL: Oh, after Korea. No, there I didn't have any in that unit, because I was in the air support squadron, who were technically trained.

KP: You said one of the reasons you left the military is because you felt the call ...

JL: To preach.

KP: To preach. You did go to seminary.

JL: Five seminaries, yes.

KP: What led you away from the ministry as a full-time profession?

JL: Well, the key to it was that I was not planning to be in a family ministry. Remember, I'm a bachelor. My brother's a bachelor. Apparently, we're not family oriented. As a matter of fact, we're completely different. Although I was with my brother yesterday and today. Well, I wanted to be a chaplain, because everybody said, you know, you ought to be a chaplain, because I listened to everybody, and I'd know what they were feeling and the relationships between their wives and them and--what would you do--and then the alcohol bit. See, all of this is kind of oriented in that direction. I wanted to help on the alcoholism business. As it was, and I was being trained to be a chaplain, when at the end of the Korean deal, what happened?

KP: They needed fewer chaplains.

JL: They eliminated chaplains just when I was ready to become a chaplain.

KP: So if there had been a place for you in the air force, you may have been a chaplain?

JL: I'd have been a chaplain. Now, not in family practice in a sense. But with the guys in the planes and what not.

KP: What did the chaplains have to offer to the men in the units you saw, both in the army and then later in the air force? How effective were they from your perspective thinking back?

JL: Well, I know that I got to preach rather well. I was pretty good on Bible, and I think we enjoyed each other. ... There were some very good men who were chaplain's aides. They were fantastic. And, of course, in the family situation, you'd try to keep the family together. I can't give you any more than that. I really didn't get that deep into stuff.

KP: On any given Sunday when you were in the army air corps during World War II, did most men go to chapel?

JL: I would say no. They would rather drink beer.

KP: There is also the slogan that "There are no atheists in foxholes." Was prayer very important to a lot of men flying the Hump?

JL: Not as much as if you actually were in a ground unit, being shot at. See there you were perfectly happy until the wings fell off. Then you wouldn't be able to talk about it. So, it was a different kind of situation. But, I was into some sermons that were very moving. I remember one in Japan where the preacher said, "You know, before God can use you, you've got to be broken." Everybody has had something wrong in his life and before we knew it, everybody in the place was sobbing. All the men were sobbing. That was a unique experience. So the concept of being broken is important to people if they really want to get close to God.

KP: You remained very active in veteran's organizations.

JL: Yes.

KP: Have you always been active?

JL: Yeah, I'm a lifetime member of the American Legion, the Veteran of Foreign Wars, the Air Force Association, the Hump Pilot's Association, the R.O.T.C. ... I do all of the awards. So in a sense, I've never really left the service. In fact, I did get a job after I stopped getting paid.

KP: Do you sort of view in a sense the military as a family? Why have you been so active? Is it out of duty to country, duty to ...?

JL: Well, that's a good question. I have a feeling that I owe. ... Remember, I had nothing really until I went to the south and ate regular meals.

KP: So it's even going back to the CCC?

JL: Right, yeah. So I've always had a warmth for the military and always wanted to join up, but I had a height problem which eventually disappeared. I tried to get into West Point, [but I was] a half-inch too short.

KP: How did you come to the insurance business? Is there a story there?

JL: Well, remember I bought the life insurance, because I didn't want my mother to be without, ... incidentally, I have that policy yet. It cost 289 dollars and 60 cents a year for a 10,000 dollar policy. My dividend this year was 2,200 dollars and change, non-reportable and tax free. And now that ten thousand dollar policy, although I used some of the dividends, is worth over ... 40,000 dollars. So, I kind of liked the feeling that I had from ...

KP: From this experience of buying insurance.

JL: Buying the insurance for my mother, not for me. Just so I could be free of stress and concern. But, because I could, and I could volunteer anything. I couldn't afford to pay, lets see 50 dollars a month or whatever I was getting paid and pay the G.I. plan and the ... lets say 300 dollars, 25 dollars a month. I couldn't afford it. I'd rather get knocked off and be a hero to everybody and be back to the Lord. So, it all worked together. Having life insurance was a great peace maker-- ... giving me a sense of security. Well, life insurance meant something to me.

KP: Your mother, how did she feel about you being in the military?

JL: Well, she was in a (-----?), but I think she was proud of the fact that I did it. Oh, in fact, both boys enlisted. My brother enlisted in the navy, [and] I enlisted in the army, for the air corps.

KP: I have one more question. ... As part of your meteorology training, did you do any training in gas warfare?

JL: No. Now, I may have been a chemical officer somewhere along the line when I was assigned duty as a communications officer. And it was useful knowledge, and I had background, because I had had inorganic chemistry and I think organic chemistry. In fact, I have lots of papers. For instance, through this I met Einstein in Princeton. I went to the Princeton Seminary, and he had me in his home. And in India, I met Gandhi in private audience with him through some friends who were the highest ranked Hindus. What are they, the highest caste is what?

KP: The Brahman

JL: So two Brahmans were introduced to each other by Mahatma Gandhi. ... One of them said to me, I was at the Moral Rearmament Group in Calcutta, and I met many of the British and Indians. But with the Brahmans, Ghandi introduced them to each other, they married, they stayed close to each other and one day (H.M Boe?) says to me, "Would you like to meet Gandhi?" I said, "Boy, I'd like that." So it was arranged and I went to the Ashram in (Soudapor?), outside of Calcutta, and I brought two chaplains with me, a Methodist and a Roman Catholic, and we had a private session. It was, I mean, this really was an interesting time in the military.

KP: How did you meet Einstein?

JL: That was after I left Kodiak Island. ... I had flown into the capital of Alaska, at the moment the name ...

KP: Juneau.

JL: ... Juneau. And as I got there to buy a ticket to Washington state--Seattle--on the desk there was "Lerner." I couldn't understand it, Lerner. Is that me? No, no, no that's for Michael Lerner.

It's a wire for him at the (Baronoff?) Hotel. So I contacted him, and I got to meet him and her. And then he introduced me or ... said to me ... I think we had a former German doctor who became the first, or maybe among the first, governors of Alaska. And [he said], if you ever get into New Jersey again, why don't you stop down in Princeton and meet Dr. Einstein, which I wrote him a note, and I have a response to the note. ... I met him and then when I went to Princeton-- I used to come more frequently. And then my friends from the Southern Baptist Seminary when they'd come to visit, if they had a mathematical background, I'd arrange for them to meet Dr. Albert Einstein. [laughter]

KP: I guess that's a good story to wrap up for today. This has been an interview with Captain Joseph Lerner, with Kurt Piehler and

DG: Dawn Goldbacher.

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

Reviewed: 11/10/95 by Linda Lasko
Reviewed: 5/14/97 by G. Kurt Piehler
Edited: 5/15/97 by Tara Kraenzlin
Edited: 5/31/97 by Joseph Lerner
Entered: 6/4/97 by Tara Kraenzlin
Reviewed: 6/4/97 by G. Kurt Piehler