RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN E. SOEHL

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Sean Benedict: This begins an interview with John E. Soehl on December 3, 2007, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Sean Benedict and Sandra Holyoak. Mr. Soehl, to begin, I would just like to welcome you and thank you for coming here. First, where and when were you born?

John Soehl: I beg your pardon.

SB: Where and when were you born?

JS: Oh, Roselle Park, New Jersey, 1920, December 29th.

SB: What was your father's name?

JS: Joseph (Ellsworth?) Soehl.

SB: Do you know when he was born?

JS: No, I don't. I know where.

SB: Where was that?

JS: He was born in Prince's Bay, Staten Island, but the year, I have forgotten, to be honest with you.

SB: You wrote on your pre-interview survey that he went to NYU [New York University].

JS: Yes, he did.

SB: Did he talk about his experiences when he was there?

JS: No, I can't say he did. He commuted, by the way. He was teaching school, or, yes, I guess he was teaching school, because he became principal after he got his degree. [laughter] You know, in those days, they weren't teaching with degrees.

Sandra Stewart Holyoak: Where did he teach? Do you remember? Was it on Long Island?

JS: Kenilworth, [New Jersey].

SH: He came to New Jersey then.

FS: Yes, and then, he went to Linden, [New Jersey]. Most of his career was in Linden.

SB: Did he go to NYU for undergrad or for graduate school?

JS: Say that again.

SB: Was he at NYU for undergrad or for graduate school?

JS: I assume it was graduate school. [Editor's Note: Mr. Soehl later noted that it was in fact an undergraduate degree from NYU.]

SB: Okay. What was your mother's name?

JS: Wait a minute; let me correct that. It must have been undergraduate school, because his highest degree was a BS. …

SB: What was your mother's name, for the record?

JS: Carrie Conklin, maiden name.

SB: Do you know where she was born?

JS: Alpine, New Jersey, yes, Alpine, New Jersey, up on the Hudson, and the year, I don't remember.

SB: Do you know where she went to college?

JS: She went to a normal school, but where she went, I don't know.

SB: Do you know how your parents met?

JS: No, I really don't.

SB: You already touched on this, but do you know when and why your father moved to New Jersey?

JS: Why he was in New Jersey?

SB: When he moved from Staten Island to New Jersey?

JS: Oh, as a young boy, he moved from Staten Island. … His parents were dead. The mother was dead; the father had to farm him out to an aunt in Rockaway, New Jersey, where he was raised as a boy.

SH: Did he talk at all about Rockaway and the difference between there and Long Island?

JS: No, he didn't, but he used to take me up to Rockaway. It was a mining area and he loved to wander around and point out things of interest to him, where he grew up, you know, and he wanted me to drink out of a well, you know. [laughter] … He said the water was great, which it was, but we had to stop at somebody's house and, you know, get [them] out and ask for permission to drink. [laughter] No, I can't say I know much about his boyhood.

SB: Do you know the name of the school that your father worked at when he was in Linden?

JS: Yes. He started at School #5, elementary school, and they built a new junior high school, for seventh and eighth grades, and he was appointed principal of the junior high school and he stayed there for as long as he worked in Linden, when he retired. He retired in 1940.

SH: Really?

Marjorie Miller: What was the name of that school, Dad?

JS: Oh, it was named after my father, Joseph E. Soehl Junior High School.

SH: Was this named after him when he retired?

JS: Yes, yes. In fact, it wasn't until after he died that they named the [school]. That's when they honor people, when they're not around to …

SH: Protest?

JS: Protest or accept, right. [laughter]

SH: Can you talk a little bit about your mother's educational background? Did you say she had gone to normal school?

JS: Yes, but I don't know where and I know very little about that. I can't tell you much.

SH: Is it safe to assume that perhaps they were both teaching in the same school district, because a normal school was to train teachers?

JS: Yes. Of course, she lived in Alpine and he was a young man in Rockaway and, later on, working in Kenilworth and Linden. Where they met and under what circumstances, I can't tell you.

SB: You wrote on your form that you are of English and German ancestry. Do you know when your ancestors came to America and for how long your family has been in the country?

JS: No. I'd like to say 1630, you know, in Massachusetts, but I can't, because I don't know. [laughter]

SB: What was it like growing up during the Great Depression? Was your family, or anyone you knew, hit particularly hard by the Depression?

JS: Well, we were fortunate. In Linden, they paid their teachers in money, and so, while we were certainly not wealthy, or even approaching that, we were not desperate. … I had a good home and I was fortunate in that regard.

SB: Your father worked throughout the Depression. He had a job the whole time.

JS: No. My mother, to my knowledge, never worked. We were a one-income family, my father.

SB: Your father always had a job in the Depression.

JS: Yes, yes.

SB: You put on your survey that your parents were both Republicans. I was wondering how they felt about the New Deal and about FDR.

JS: Well, at that time, Linden was Republican. Maybe that had something to do with my father, I don't know, but he was not political, so, I doubt it. I think he just hit it right with the superintendent, and that's really all you needed. [laughter]

SB: Was your family, or anyone you knew, particularly affected by any New Deal programs, like the Works Progress Administration or the National Youth Administration?

JS: Well, we had neighbors, of course. I was not too aware of this, because I was just a young kid growing up. Having been born in 1920, I was, what, ten or eleven? … So, I was more interested in kids' interests. My brother, he went to Rutgers. He worked.

SH: Was this Harold?

JS: Yes, Harold. He graduated from Rutgers in 1930, I think. He was Phi Beta Kappa and he lived at Ford Hall, where I was fortunate enough to join him. [laughter] No, I can't say that we experienced any real desperate situations, like many people did, no.

MM: Mommy's family.

JS: Well, my wife's family, yes, they had a hard time. When it came to paying for the house that they had bought in the '20s, why, of course, it got pretty tough and my father-in-law, he became my father-in-law, Walter Brown, he made arrangements with the bank just to pay the interest, which was wonderful, great policy. Whether Franklin Roosevelt had anything to do with it, I assume he did, but that was good, like many other programs the Republicans condemned, but turned out to be very useful. [laughter]

SB: I know you were young in 1933, but do you remember your parents' reaction to the repeal of Prohibition?

JS: Well, my mother and father, I guess more my mother, you know, you never drank wine. … That's not to say she didn't like it, [laughter] but, you know, they didn't have liquor in the house and Sunday was a day of rest. They were the "old school," in that regard, and they were Methodists and they went to church, and they dragged their sons with them. [laughter] I also had a sister, Edna. She was the middle child. She was in-between my brother and me. I was the last one on the list, the youngest. So, that's about all I can say about that.

SH: She came to Rutgers, to Douglass, NJC [New Jersey College for Women].

JS: She went to Douglass, yes. I don't know whether she flunked out or whether she messed around with the boys and kind of didn't go to class. [laughter] I don't know, but you know how those things go. She did not get her degree.

SH: She must have gotten something out of it. [laughter]

JS: Yes.

SH: Did she marry a Rutgers man?

JS: No, no. He was not even a college man, but, turned out, he earned more money than anybody else. [laughter]

SH: She did learn something.

JS: Yes. It tells you something about the value of a degree. [laughter]

SH: Do not tell us that now.

JS: Well, even with a degree, what are you getting paid if you're a schoolteacher, you know? So, the country doesn't put much value on that stuff. They talk about it, oh, yes, they hand you a lot of words, how great it is, but it's not that great. [laughter]

SH: However, it appears that education was very important for your family.

JS: Oh, yes, yes, it was.

SH: It was expected of you that you would go to college, even as the youngest.

JS: I guess, assuming I could get into one. [laughter] Yes, they hoped I would and, fortunately, I did.

SH: Talk a little bit about Roselle Park; what are some of your earliest memories of growing up in Roselle Park?

JS: A very nice, small town; during the Depression, had about nine thousand people. It was residential. I think there was maybe one industry, or maybe two industries, in the whole town and that was not supporting them, but, like my father-in-law, a lot of the men got jobs in Singer's [the Singer Sewing Machine factory in neighboring Elizabeth, New Jersey]. … He became a very skilled technician and he stuck with Singer's all his life and came close to retiring, but, unfortunately, the Lord had other plans. So, let's see, what was the question again?

SH: I was asking about growing up in Roselle Park.

JS: Oh, very nice. I have no complaints about Roselle Park.

SH: What were some of the things that you did as a young man that people like, say, your grandson, Russell, here, would not be able to do now?

JS: Well, we walked a lot. We walked to school, we walked to the football games, the baseball games. We didn't have any busses in those days, and that was a blessing, not only for the taxpayer, but generally speaking. [laughter] I can't think of much else to say. My brother ran for mayor. He was elected after he came back from Harvard. … He was a lawyer and it was tough going, in those days, to start a legal practice anywhere, so, he went into politics to get to know people and for people to get to know him, and he spent two terms as mayor of Roselle Park.

SH: Did that mean that you had to be better behaved than most? Did you get away with anything?

MM: His brother had a car.

JS: Yes. My brother had an old Studebaker, you know, the open kind.

SH: A convertible kind.

JS: Yes, well ventilated. [laughter] … He got a job, in summers, with the park commission, Union County Park Commission, and he was working at Echo Lake. … Every summer, that's where I used to hang out, with him, up at the lake, and, of course, I was active, as a young kid, in the local street gang, you know. Anyway, … his car was parked in the backyard and, while he was away at school, the car was just idle. … As a young boy, I got in the car, one day, and I backed it out and my father, he was home, but, after coming home from work, as the principal of his school, he was tired and he was taking a nap. So, we backed it out and [went] back and forth and nobody complained about anything, so, we kept playing around with the car. So, we decided we'd go for a ride. [laughter] So, we rode all around Roselle Park, right down the main drag, you know, right by the police station, and you say, "Got away with it?" I got away with it. [laughter] It wasn't because of my brother, this was long before he was mayor, you know, and my parents were mad as hell. …

SH: Can I ask how old you were?

JS: I think I must have been about twelve or thirteen, but, you know, I knew that car. [laughter] … I watched them shift the gears and push the clutch in and, you know, mess with the spark, and I was well equipped to drive this car. [laughter] …

SH: Who was with you? You keep saying "we;" who went along?

JS: Oh, about four or five of the kids. [laughter] … I picked them up as I went along, … but the parents, some of the kids, their parents seemed to be alert to what was going on and they were calling up my mother, you know. "What is Buddy doing, driving a car around Roselle Park, and

my son is with him? Who's going to be responsible?" you know. [laughter] So, we came back in about, oh, I guess we were gone about fifteen minutes, without a dent, knock on wood. … I pulled the car back and put it where we got it, but, by then, you know, I had a lot of people waiting for me. [laughter] So, I got out of the car and I ran away and I hid for a couple of hours with the proprietor, the owner, of the local grocery store. His name was (Hanna?) and, you know, the owner always had a backroom, with an old iron stove there to keep warm. So, he put me up for awhile, but I had to go home, sooner or later, you know. [laughter] So, that's what I did and, well, by the time I got there, the anger had subsided and they didn't beat the crap out of me, which I'm sure they might have done. [laughter] So, other things, oh, probably outside of breaking some windows with a ball, you know, playing ball, and I had a BB gun and, of course, I got in trouble with that, but my father paid to replace the window [laughter] and that was pretty much it.

SH: Did you have an allowance?

JS: No, I don't remember an allowance.

SH: I just thought maybe he would garnish your allowance. [laughter]

MM: His brother was twelve years older than him, too. So, that's why he had the car and was working.

JS: Yes, yes. My brother was more like a father, not that my father wasn't. He was a good father, but my brother was closer to [me]. You know, he could relate a little bit better and I suppose I got into lots of other things, but I can't recall them exactly, outside of the BB gun. So, then, that's about it, unless it comes to mind. [laughter]

SB: When did you get your first job?

JS: … Well, by the time I started college, … the whole family was going to Ocean Grove. My grandparents had a summer home there and my parents took it over, you know, as the family dwindled. … Then, of course, I was with them and that's where I spent my summers, at Ocean Grove, which was a very nice place to grow up, believe me. You know Ocean Grove? I'm not talking about religion now. That had nothing to do with it, as far as we were concerned, not that we weren't religious, but we weren't that religious, and to have a place where you could go where there were no automobiles or trucks or anything moving on the road on a Sunday was a real treat. You could walk the streets and enjoy yourself, but nothing moved in the way of vehicles. [Editor's Note: Ocean Grove, New Jersey, was founded as a Methodist community, an outgrowth of the camp meeting movement.]

SH: Did you get to see, at the big center there …

MM: Auditorium.

SH: The auditorium, thank you. I had forgotten the name.

JS: Oh, yes, the auditorium.

SH: Did you go there and enjoy any festivities?

JS: Yes. My dad used to go to the auditorium frequently, and he'd take me with him, and we enjoyed many a sermon and it was a nice place to go.

SH: Was there a lot of music involved?

JS: There are today, but, in those days, there wasn't so much of that. Maybe it was a religious issue; I don't know. I don't see how it could have been, but, in those days, you know, it was different and I don't remember going to any musicals or entertainment, other than worship.

SH: All right, because I thought, maybe during the week or something, they might have used it for other things.

JS: Well, there were prayer meetings and things like that, but that was about it.

SH: Were you involved with the Boy Scouts at all growing up?

JS: Yes, but not seriously. I was a Scout. I really didn't work at it. I didn't keep, you know, taking the tests and so on, but I was a Scout. [laughter]

SH: What were some of the activities that your mother and father were involved in in Roselle Park? You talked about the church.

JS: Yes, it was mainly church. I can't think of anything else, offhand. I'm sure they had their interests, but, being a young kid, you know, those things are not important to you.

SH: Who was your favorite teacher in the lower grades, in elementary school? Did you have one?

JS: A favorite? No, I don't think I [did]. Well, yes, Miss (Audrey Rowe?), I recall, … thinking of the Sherman School, where I went to elementary school, … she was probably the outstanding teacher.

SB: Let us go back and talk about Ocean Grove for a second.

JS: Okay.

SB: That was where you got your first job, right?

JS: Oh, yes. I was delivering newspapers. That was my first job, *Asbury Park Press*, and they allowed bicycles in those days. So, of course, I had a basket, you know how it is, and I got up early on every morning and sold newspapers. I was no great success at it, I and my dad, but I did that, yes. After that, I waited on; I did not wait on tables. I was a busboy in a small restaurant. I

cleaned up the tables, and then, I got a job working, for ten bucks a week, for the Walter Reade theater group. … I worked at the Mayfair Theater and the Paramount Theater, which are two major, which *were* two major theaters in Asbury Park, and I was an usher at those. What else did I do? I can't think of anything else.

SH: Did you enjoy the movies? Was that something that you enjoyed?

JS: Yes, but an usher's job, in those days, you put in long hours. They didn't believe in an eight-hour day. [laughter] Boy, you went at twelve and you came home at twelve and you were on your feet all day. … That was kind of a tough grind, but, in those days, there was no other place to work and you were lucky to have the job.

SH: Was this theater segregated?

JS: Theater segregated, in those days? If it was, I wasn't aware of it. I don't think so, but I worked as an usher and I don't remember anything about segregation, except that which was based on money. You know, if you wanted to sit in the loge, you paid for it, [laughter] and, otherwise, you sat in the balcony, and that was quite different, right? So, that's my experience there.

SB: What was Asbury Park like when you were working there?

JS: Beautiful place, beautiful place, good entertainment, wonderful boardwalk, safe and sound, no problems that I can recall, in either Ocean Grove or Asbury Park. The main entertainment in Ocean Grove was, occasionally, we had a house catch fire. … If you're familiar with Ocean Grove, boy, those houses are close and they're made of wood and they were built in, well, not in my generation, let's say that, a long time ago. … Now and then, we'd have a terrific fire and the fire hydrant, the fire house, was right up the street. So, when that fire engine went out, we were aware of it and we followed it and that was the entertainment. [laughter] It was a hell of an entertainment, depended on somebody else's misery, you know.

SH: Was there any excitement as far as the ocean and the weather, things like that?

JS: The weather was exciting. As a young kid, I guess about this time, Ocean Grove, I [do not recall] exactly my age, but we had a Northeast storm and the storms, in those days, as they are now, they got to be pretty good, exciting things to witness. … During the day, I was sitting down on the boardwalk and enjoying the ocean and I had an old pair of binoculars. They call it an opera glass, so, it was not that great, but I was trying to focus in on the *Morro Castle*, which was, that day, burning off the coast of New Jersey, and that storm developed into a real dinger. You used to go out at night, go down to the boardwalk and you had to be careful, because those waves were coming in. They were wiping out the pier, you know, and it was exciting to watch those tremendous waves wipe things out. … In the storm, after I heard it on the radio, that the *Morro Castle* was on the beach at Asbury Park, I walked up there that night, to see the ship, and it came in as though … the Lord himself had navigated it. … The bow was right by the convention hall, maybe twenty feet away, and the bow of the ship was stuck against the rock jetty and the heavy seas in the storm were pounding on the side of the ship. … It would rise up

with the waves and go down and, of course, you're waiting for it to crash into the convention hall, which it never did, [laughter] but that was an exciting experience.

SH: Did your father or anybody in your family help with the rescue effort?

JS: No, no, and I didn't know anyone that did. I think some ships from Shark River went out to pick up passengers and so on, and other fishing places, you know, but nothing was going from Ocean Grove.

SB: Can you tell me a little bit about your parents' experiences during World War I? I know your father did not serve, but did he talk about it all, what he remembered?

JS: No, I really have very little information about that. This was before I was born. Maybe that's the reason, I don't know.

SH: Did your mother and father come from large families? You had talked about your father's brother passing away.

JS: His father was a fisherman in Staten Island. No, the family was not large and the Conklin Family, they had one daughter. That was my mother.

SH: Okay. I just wondered if there were other aunts and uncles or cousins around.

JS: No, no. We kind of grew up without that. [laughter]

SB: I know that you were young in the 1930s, but how much do you remember of Hitler coming to power in Germany in 1933 or the conflict between Japan and China? Was that something that was talked about way before the war even started? Was that something that you were aware of?

JS: Not too much. You know, Hitler, growing up, … as a young man, [he would broadcast from] in Nuremburg, I think, and, no, you know, all we had was the radio, in those days. As Al Smith used to say, "The RAD-io," but … my interest developed, of course, later on, as Hitler expanded in Europe, and there was very little about the persecution of the Jews, for instance. I didn't get to hear that, if it was well known, which I'm not sure it was, but things like, "The Germans did very well coming out of the Depression." Of course, Hitler immediately got the war machine active and that created jobs, so, they came out of the Depression a lot sooner than, say, the United States or England, because he had things in mind, you know, which he later carried out, or failed to. [laughter]

SH: Were there any missionaries who came back and were telling stories of what was going on in the Far East or in Europe, that you remember?

JS: No, I don't remember anything like that.

SH: Japan's encroachment into China and Indochina?

JS: No. That was too remote. You know, that was … on the periphery of our lives and we just didn't imagine this thing developing into a world war.

SH: In the late 1930s, when you were in high school, what was the main topic of news at that point? What was of interest to a young man? As you said, you were expected to go to college. Do you remember at all?

JS: Well, going to the prom [laughter] or a basketball game or a wrestling match. Roselle Park excelled at wrestling and one of our guys went on to collect a lot of awards in that regard. (Farrell?) was his name, a little guy, but, boy, he could wrestle. No, I can't answer your question much about that, except, as time developed and it became pretty obvious that guys like me were going to do the fighting, [laughter] then, you became interested.

SH: What was your favorite subject in high school?

JS: Girls, probably, especially one. [laughter] That was my wife, not at that time, of course. Yes, she saw me one day and she glommed on and, after that, that was the end. [laughter] No, I'm kidding. You know I'm kidding about that, but we were companions pretty much all of high school.

SH: Were you in the same grade?

JS: No. She was almost, about nine months older than I was. She was in the year ahead of me. So, I didn't have to compete with her on that score, which is good. [laughter]

SH: What were the activities that you were involved in in high school, besides girls?

JS: [laughter] I wasn't involved in many activities. I don't know why, except that I had a girlfriend and that kind of monopolized my time, and I wasn't like my brother, that I picked things up that quick, so, I had to study once in awhile, you know.

SH: Did you borrow your brother's car to go to the prom?

JS: [laughter] No. By that time, I was legal and my father loaned me the car, yes. [laughter]

SB: What year did you graduate high school?

JS: '39.

SB: Then, you went to Union Junior College.

JS: Yes.

SB: Can you tell me a little bit about what motivated you to go to a junior college, as opposed to regular college?

JS: Well, my father retired in 1940 and, you know, schoolteacher, teaching, … he did well as a principal, but, when it comes to retirement, it was tough. So, that was one consideration. The other, probably, was that I didn't apply to Rutgers because I didn't think I could get in. [laughter] … It's probably true, I don't know, but I was happy. I didn't know what I really wanted to do and my future was pretty cloudy anyhow. In many ways, it was cloudy. [laughter]

SH: Were you working and going to school or were you living at home and going to school?

JS: No, I was not working. I was pretty much trying to pass my subjects. No, I didn't work in the winter at home.

SH: How much older is your sister than you are?

JS: Six years. Six years separates each of us, six, six and six.

SB: Were you living at home when you were going to Union Junior College?

JS: Yes, yes, I was home. There were no facilities in those days.

SH: Had you become engaged to Mrs. Soehl at that point?

JS: No. I realized that I wasn't earning any money, and she knew that as well as I did. [laughter] … She was struggling after she got out of high school, trying to get a job, and, finally, she did find a good job. Good, I say, because, hey, anyone working, with a steady income, had a good job, and it was a good job. She worked for (Berry?) Candy Company in Newark, and then, it was becoming obvious, more or less, … what the future held and I knew, … as I got into Rutgers, I had to do something if I was going to stay in Rutgers. So, I was looking for a Reserve outfit. I wasn't trying to avoid the draft, but I was trying to survive and I wanted to finish college, because, usually, [when] you come home from a war, it's rare [to go back to school]. They didn't have [the] GI Bill, you know, we didn't know about that. So, in most cases, you don't go back and finish school. I wanted to finish school, which I did, fortunately. I was deferred long enough that the college, Rutgers, granted my degree, even though I wasn't there at the time.

SH: You graduate from high school in 1939 and, that fall, you would have gone to Union College, junior college or community college.

JS: Yes.

SH: When did you go and enlist in the Reserves? Was it the Air Corps Reserve or just the regular Army?

JS: Yes, it was the Army Air Corps Reserve.

SH: You did this in 1940.

JS: I think I got into the Reserve in 1942.

SH: When you were at Union College, did you know what your major would be, in 1939?

JS: No, I can't say I did. I still was kind of messing around, you know. I couldn't focus in on anything particular, but I began to realize it would be a good idea to have a certification [in] doing something that they pay you for after I got out of college. So, a degree from a school of education would do just that. So, I figured, "Well, as long as I'm going to college and getting the benefit of it, I might as well come out prepared to do something." That's how I came to be a schoolteacher. [laughter] I'm sure everybody'll be happy to hear how their schoolteachers [made their career choices], but, you know, that's how it developed.

SH: In 1940, everyone had to sign up for the draft. You would have been in your second year at Union. Is that correct?

JS: Yes, yes.

SH: You signed up for the draft, and then, you applied to Rutgers, to go to school here.

JS: … Yes, some time in '41, I guess, I signed up for the draft, probably; maybe before that. I really don't know when I signed up for the draft, but, anyway, they knew I was there. So, there wasn't much I could do about that. [laughter]

SH: When you came to Rutgers, that would have been in 1941, the fall of 1941, if my math is correct.

JS: No, '42 and '43 were my two years at Rutgers, I think.

SH: Okay, but I think, according to your pre-interview survey, you came here in the fall of 1941.

JS: … Okay, probably, '42, yes, yes, that makes sense, because the year is kind of split, right.

SH: Why did you come to Rutgers? Were there other choices? What made the decision to come to Rutgers?

JS: Oh, probably because my brother had graduated from Rutgers. That was probably the main thing.

SH: Had you ever been to Rutgers prior to that? Did you come with your brother?

JS: Oh, yes, yes. As a young kid, my family went down to see him at Ford Hall, yes.

SH: Was your brother active on campus? Was he involved in sports? He sounds like he would, being a Phi Beta Kappa.

JS: … Yes, yes, he was in the ROTC and he became quite successful at that. He became an officer. I remember, in those days, they had sabers. Oh, I was so proud of him, when they had parades, you know, and, well, I guess that's how that developed, yes, but I didn't join the ROTC.

SB: How did you not join the ROTC, because that was mandatory at that time?

JS: Well, it seemed that I was in the deferment and I was subject to the draft and that was all there was to it.

SH: Maybe it was because he came here as a junior, rather than as a freshman.

JS: Yes, yes.

SH: You did not have ROTC at Union.

JS: No. If I had gone to Rutgers, I think it was required, yes.

SH: It was. That is why he was asking. When you came to Rutgers, where were you housed in 1941?

JS: … At Ford Hall.

SH: Same as your brother.

JS: Oh, the first year, I was just off of campus. I forget the name of the street, but I think the house is still there. I lived in a house with about ten other guys, very nice, run by nice people. [laughter] … I have to mention some of the dumb things you do. The bedroom was great in the summer months, but, in the winter, it was cold, just like our bedroom at home is today, and the reason why it was cold, the radiator wouldn't warm up. Well, I grew up in a home with steam heat and I knew how to get the heat up in the radiator. … When I was there, in '42, I unscrewed the valve, which they should have replaced, which would have solved the problem. Early in the morning, I'd reach over, unscrew the valve and the heat would come up and the radiator would get nice and hot and my roommate and I had a good situation, but I forgot to put it back. … Of course, I went to class and, when the next time the steam came up, oh, boy, the room was [steamy]. Well, I wasn't there, but the lady told me all about it, you can be sure. [laughter] You can be sure of that, and the place was full of steam. Fortunately, the wallpaper didn't come off the walls, which is lucky. [laughter] So, that's an event I probably wouldn't have thought of.

SB: What was your social life like when you were at Rutgers? What did you do in your free time?

JS: No, I spent a lot of time going home on weekends. You know, I had a reason, and so, outside of my roommates, I had two other guys; I'm trying to think of their names. I can't. Updike was one of them. Wasn't it Updike?

MM: Yes, that sounds familiar.

JS: Yes. He came from Roselle Park. So, we were kind of old buddies. He was a nice fellow.

SH: Did you go back and forth by train or did you drive?

JS: Yes, by train, very convenient, yes.

SH: Can you tell us what you remember and where you were when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

Dorothy Soehl: We were home.

JS: Give me the question again.

SH: It would have been Sunday, December 7, 1941.

JS: Oh, where I was? Oh, yes, I was home for the weekend. I was working on a term paper, probably a history term paper, I don't recall, and it came …

DS: Over the radio. …

JS: One of my friends, one of my buddies, called and told me, "Turn on the radio," which we did, and then, we got word that the country was at war, had been attacked at Pearl Harbor, and so on, and so forth. That's when I learned about that. So, then, I knew exactly what I was going to do.

SH: What were the reactions within your family and your circle of friends to that news? You had said you kind of felt that something was going to happen to get you involved in the war, or get America involved in the war. Was there fear?

JS: … No, there was no fear. You were just kind of reconciled to the fact [of] what you were going to be doing for the next couple of years.

SH: Did you think that you would have to report right away, because of the Reserves?

JS: No, I didn't worry about that. I don't know why I wasn't concerned about that, but I knew I was being deferred. …

SH: Your deferment was already in the works before Pearl Harbor.

JS: Yes, yes.

SB: After Pearl Harbor, did any of your friends just go right in and enlist?

JS: Oh, yes. One of my very close friends, (Bob Olsen?), he went in the Navy and that's where he spent his time during the war. I think he was on a destroyer. I think they called it a "tin can" in those days.

SH: Did he come to Rutgers?

JS: No, no. He didn't go to college. My other friend, down the street, well, … two of my friends, had infantile paralysis, one of the leg and the other of the arm. They were my boyhood friends. Neither one of them; yes, one of them, the fellow with the bad arm, he went to Maryland's university and he got his degree from Maryland. The other fellow, … he wanted to drive a big truck, you know, an eighteen-wheeler, something like that. That was on his mind and other people, no. By then, you know, you're out of high school, you're losing touch with your old friends and things change.

SH: When you came back to campus then on Monday, on the 8th, what was the mood here on campus? What do you remember? Did anyone talk about it in your classes? Was there a convocation at Kirkpatrick Chapel or anything? What did the University do? What was their reaction? Do you remember?

JS: I think we had an assembly at St. Patrick's [Kirkpatrick] Chapel and Dean …

SH: Metzger?

JS: Metzger, he was … my connection with the headquarters, you know, very nice fellow. Isn't something named after Metzger here now?

SH: One of the dorms.

JS: Yes, I thought so. I thought I saw that name, okay.

SH: Do you have any other Dean Metzger stories? There are a lot of them out there, I know.

JS: [laughter] No, no.

SH: Good and bad, I might add.

JS: Well, in those days, he was known as the "chief cop" of the campus, [laughter] and, I guess, if you had trouble, he was the fellow that took care of it. Fortunately, I was too busy to have trouble, at that time. [laughter]

SB: After Pearl Harbor, when the Japanese-Americans were interned, were you aware of that? Was that something that was in the newspapers and talked about on the radio?

JS: No, it wasn't talked about, and I can understand why, I mean, because, you know, that is discrimination and segregation, no doubt about that. … Here, Roosevelt's putting them up in the

worst part of the country, out in the desert, isolating these people, and they were probably more patriotic than a lot of native Americans. I don't know.

SB: After Pearl Harbor, when America is in the war and you were still at Rutgers, was it something that was on everyone's mind? Are people talking about it? Were you very aware of what was going on in Europe and the Pacific?

JS: Well, the major battles at that time, as I recall, were after Hitler went into Russia, and they were talked about, Stalingrad and other places like that, where the Russians put up a real fight and stopped them. But, they were discussed a lot, because the German war machine, in those days, was the beginning and end of all military, you know, and the Russians were swapping land for survival. They were moving back, and that was a damn good policy, because they couldn't stop the war machine, but, after the Germans got five or six hundred miles into Russia and the winter set in, things began to change and the Russians stopped them. They were very interesting times [to be] talking about, you know the professors used to discuss this. … I found it very interesting.

SH: You were a history major.

JS: I was a history major, yes. I became a history major. [laughter] They wanted to know, "What do you want to do?" Well, you've got to tell them something, and math was not my program, you know, [laughter] … but I don't regret that. History, I like history.

SH: Who were your favorite professors while you were at Rutgers?

JS: … My favorite was a history teacher. My brother had talked about him. He had had him. We had classes at Bishop.

SH: Bishop House?

JS: House. …

SH: Charanis?

JS: No.

SH: Who was the other one? Was he very bombastic?

JS: No, he was a quiet fellow, but very studious, and he was certainly well informed. … I had a Shakespeare professor who was great. I was not great at Shakespeare, but he was good. I enjoyed him, but, of course, he expected me to know something about *Macbeth* and I was kind of short on that. [laughter]

SH: Did you get involved in the social activities here on campus in your second year, or were they curtailed because of the war?

JS: I don't think there were many social activities, to be honest with you. I'm not saying there weren't many, but I don't recall.

SH: Were the classes speeded up? Did you switch from a semester to, say, a quarter system? Did anything change because of the war here at Rutgers?

JS: Well, the population dwindled. The guys were leaving, but, outside of that, I …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SB: During the war, when you were still at Rutgers, were there any protests against the war or any discussions with people who were just against the war in general?

JS: No, no. We were pretty tight in those days. I don't remember any protests or anything like that.

SH: Did you go to school that summer, 1942?

JS: Yes, yes. I was short an education course, they told me. Of course, it turned out to be the same psychology course I had at the junior college, [laughter] but they called it "education," right? So, hey, if you have to have it, I'll go to summer school. Yes, I did.

SH: When you came to summer school, were you still living off campus or had you moved into Ford Hall?

JS: No, I was commuting that summer.

SH: Were you commuting from Ocean Grove?

JS: No, I stayed home that summer and took the course and commuted by train.

SH: After the war broke out, did your family still go to Ocean Grove, or was that curtailed?

JS: Oh, yes. They went to Ocean Grove summers, oh, long after my father retired, until he died.

SH: Along the Jersey Shore, we have heard stories of the blackouts and that there were ships being sunk by submarines off the coast. Did your family talk about that?

JS: Oh, especially in '42, along the coast, the Germans were sinking our ships like crazy, and I don't think the blackout was very successful, because I think, I heard stories, that the Germans could profile, the enemy, our ships, against the light from the beach at Atlantic City or Asbury Park or places like that, you know. That wasn't well done at all, if it was done at all. I don't remember that being done.

SH: Did your family talk about any of the war efforts that they were involved in? Not only rationing, but were people collecting tin foil and different materials like that?

JS: I remember, yes, my father participated in the drive to collect old tires. In fact, not only old tires, he had two brand-new tires, which I guess he anticipated the problem and he had them up in the attic and he turned them in and that's where the new tires went. [laughter]

SH: What about the gas rationing? Did that affect them at all? Your father is retired now, so, he does not have to go to work.

JS: To work, right. Yes, I think, what did we have, three gallons a week?

DS: Yes.

JS: Something like that, and, oh, that was strict. If anybody got more than that, I didn't know who they were.

DS: My mother did.

JS: Oh, yes.

DS: My sister was crippled and she worked, and so that she could take her back and forth to work, she got two gallons extra, [or] something. You had to go through everything imaginable, to fill out forms and stuff, but she got it, because she had to take Ellen back and forth to work. Otherwise, you're out of luck.

SH: Where did your sister work?

DS: In the Western Electric plant, yes.

SH: Was it an essential job?

DS: Yes, it was. She was an office worker, but, still, the company, you know, [needed her].

SH: Being in the Reserves, did you have to report for any kind of training during that summer?

JS: No.

SH: You were totally deferred.

JS: That's right.

SH: When you come back to Rutgers in the fall of 1942, did you have any sense of how long you were going to stay, or if you were going to be able to graduate on time? What was the thought?

JS: Yes, I assumed I would graduate on time, unless I screwed something up, you know. …

SH: How many in your class were still here in the fall of 1942?

JS: Oh, how many? Actually, a number, I can't tell you.

SH: Had a lot of them already gone?

JS: Oh, yes, oh, yes. It was getting pretty lonesome, you know. In fact, they'd see a young guy like me walking along the street and I'm sure people would look at me and say, "What the hell's the matter with you?" [laughter] but no one said that to me, but … I felt that way.

SH: Were you working at any jobs while you were here on campus? Some people talked about working at J&J [Johnson & Johnson] or at Raritan Arsenal?

JS: No, no. I enjoyed the campus, especially … my short time in senior year. That was great, because my schedule was light, which probably was intentional. They probably intentionally did that for everyone, every senior, but it was light. … You didn't have to, you know, grind at the books so long, and I was comfortable.

DS: You graduated in February.

JS: Well, I left in February or January. When, January?

SB: You put February on here, your pre-interview survey.

JS: Oh, all right, left early in the year, something like [that].

SB: Why did you leave early?

DS: They did that. They sent it to the house.

JS: They sent me a "Greetings" letter. [laughter]

DS: "We need you. Report at such-and-such a day."

JS: Yes.

SB: Were you in the middle of taking classes at that point? It was February; did you just have to stop everything you were doing and go?

JS: Well, no, that was no problem. You just stopped and the school seemed to know what I was doing and when I had to go and they had it pretty much lined up.

SH: Were you the only one or were there others leaving on the same schedule that you were?

JS: Are there other guys that had to leave? Oh, yes, yes; in fact, I remember seeing, meeting some of them in Atlantic City and at the College Training Detachment in, what's the school in the middle of Pennsylvania?

MM: State College. That was after.

JS: State College, right, yes. Some of the guys showed up there, you know.

SH: Why were you at State College?

JS: That was called the College Training Detachment. After Atlantic City, basic, they sent us to the College Training Detachment and we were there for six weeks. Weren't we on a six-week schedule?

DS: Nine weeks.

JS: Nine weeks. She knows this. She was with me.

SH: Was she?

JS: She was the camp follower. [laughter] I don't mean that in a negative way, but, you know, she was in on all of this.

SH: In February of 1943, you leave Rutgers. Did everybody leave or was there a graduation in May? Was there a graduation in February?

JS: No. There was a graduation in May and my parents said they received my degree, my diploma.

SH: Did they come down and accept it or was it mailed to them?

JS: No, it was mailed to them.

SH: You knew it was official. It was signed.

JS: No, I didn't know until they told me.

SH: No, that is what I meant, when they told you.

JS: You know, I was kind of out of that environment.

SB: You got married in 1943.

JS: Yes.

SB: When was that?

JS: In May.

DS: May 1st.

JS: 1943.

SH: Where did you get married, in Roselle Park?

JS: Roselle Park, the Methodist church, right.

DS: They would have been [at] State College. First, they went to Atlantic City, for basic, like, preparations, and then, they separate them and send them to other units or wherever, and he was sent to State College, Pennsylvania.

JS: That was a good experience, at State College, nice.

DS: So, then, they let him come home and he got sick and was in the hospital with a cold for the weekend that we would get married and we had to change the whole thing until the next week. Imagine trying to change a wedding, today, to next week, you know. …

JS: Well, I kept going to sick call and they'd keep telling me that I'm okay. [laughter]

DS: Then, finally, he landed in the bed and they kept him that week that we were supposed to get married. We had to call up everybody and tell them, "It's not going to be until next week." Anyway, he came home, then, the next week and we got married and I went back with him and that started. Then, I would get a room in somebody's home in the town.

SH: Your honeymoon was going to State College.

JS: Yes.

DS: Big deal, going to State College for one night, and then, he had to go back to his dorm. [laughter] Well, it was like the dorms. They were in the fraternity houses, [where] the boys were staying, and I was right across the alley, like, in the house where I stayed. [laughter]

JS: Yes. Government had taken over the fraternity houses. …

SH: Was this the Army Specialized Training Program or the V-12 or V-6 program?

DS: They were separating them, … testing them. … In State College, they sent them to an airbase, [to] make sure they could fly an airplane, you know, sit and not get sick or something in an airplane. Then, … each place they went, they were sorting them out, "Who's going to go become a fighter pilot? Who's going to be a bomber pilot? Who's going to be a navigator?" or some other thing, and those were sent to different schools. That's how they kept separating them.

That's why, every nine weeks, they went to a different place. So, every nine weeks, we moved to a different place. [laughter]

JS: So, if you stayed with the same guys, you know, you were lucky, and I was fortunate. Oh, I had a couple of companions I stayed with throughout the whole training.

SH: Were they from Rutgers or just people you met in Atlantic City?

JS: No, no. One fellow came from Connecticut and the other one came from Massachusetts. He had been attending Harvard, where they park the car by the curb. [Editor's Note: Mr. Soehl imitates a thick Boston accent.] I could add to that, but I won't. [laughter] … We're talking about State College, yes? That was general, going to courses, navigation, courses like that, very interesting and good, and that's where they introduced us to flying. We went to a local airfield and got in a Piper Cub and went for a ride. Well, we had quite a bit of training. …

SH: Was that your first time in a plane?

JS: Yes. That was my first time.

SB: What made you want to be a pilot?

JS: Gee, I don't know. [laughter]

SH: The scarf?

DS: … Daredevil.

JS: Yes, the scarf. [laughter] No, those kinds of things, at the time, you know, you didn't think about it. Well, I wanted to learn how to fly. …

SH: Had Charles Lindbergh been someone that you had looked up to?

JS: Oh, of course, but I can't say that …

SH: Was there a glamour attached to flying?

JS: I suppose there was. You know, that's true of any guy that got in this thing.

SH: When you went to Atlantic City, what were you doing there, just testing?

DS: Marching on the boardwalk. [laughter]

JS: A lot of parading.

SH: You were in the hotels down there.

JS: Yes. Do you remember the name of that hotel? Is it still there? It might be still there.

DS: Yes, it probably is. …

JS: Boy, that was a tough time. I mean, you're going from college life in Ford Hall to [the military]. Boy, that was a change. [laughter]

SH: Did you have to report to Atlantic City or did you report somewhere else first?

JS: Had to report to some headquarters in Newark. …

DS: … Newark Railroad Station, yes.

JS: That's where they lined us up, put us on a train, secret train.

DS: And nobody knew where you're going. Everything, at that war, you didn't know anything, like you do today. We didn't know where they were going, and his brother took me and we went over to the train to see him off. So, here, this bunch of guys gets on the train, you know, and, all of a sudden, the engineer gets out there, waving his flag, and started saying, "All Aboard, Atlantic City," [laughter] and all the people that were there for the boys, "Oh, they're going to Atlantic City." [laughter]

JS: Well, then, you knew where we were going.

DS: And we knew they wouldn't be too far away, for a little while, anyway. …

JS: That was top-secret information. [laughter] Oh, boy, I tell you.

DS: … You never forget some of those things.

SH: Is that where you got your uniforms and everything?

JS: Yes, yes.

DS: And everything was all regular Army stuff they gave them then. When did you get the blue uniforms, when they changed to the blue, the Air Force?

JS: Oh, it was a regular Army uniform.

DS: When you first went in. …

JS: Atlantic City, sure. Gee, I don't remember when we got the regular …

DS: Then, they separated the Air Force from the Army. It wasn't Army Air Force, it was just the United States Air Force. [Editor's Note: The United States Air Force was established as a separate branch of the US Armed Forces in 1947.]

JS: Well, we thought we were separate, because we didn't want to go in the trenches, you know, do the tough work.

DS: I guess some that didn't make a course or couldn't fly the plane or something, then, they … would get into something else.

SH: They would be washed out into the infantry.

JS: [If] you washed out, you went back in the service and you were on your [own].

DS: Whatever they put you in next then.

SB: Can you talk about some of the testing that you had to go through to become a pilot? What kind of testing did you take?

JS: A lot of physical stuff, you know, whether you could handle high-altitude, low-pressure chambers, things like that, and, of course, we were pretty good. We were pretty much in good shape at that time. We were young and young kids, generally, were in pretty good shape. So, physically and mentally, they were giving us tests, standardized tests, I think they were, but I think they were looking forward to separating you in the most useful place that they could put you.

SH: This was in Atlantic City.

JS: Yes.

SH: How much time did you have between Atlantic City and State College, PA?

DS: Nine. …

JS: Well, as we said, nine weeks in each place. That was the schedule

DS: But, how did you get there? Your group that got picked to go there, you just … went right to State College.

JS: Went right to State College, right, had no choice. You were in the Army Air Corps and they did as they pleased.

SH: Was anyone taken out of that initial Atlantic City group and not allowed to go on to the Air Corps? Were they weeded out there?

DS: Oh, yes, a lot of boys. …

JS: I suppose there were, but I wasn't aware of it. The people I knew, well, the one guy I knew, my pretty good roommate, at Atlantic City, was. He got sick and, of course, they put him in the

hospital and I went to see him once or twice, but I don't know what happened to him. You know, … in those days, if you were separated, you were on your own, you just had to adjust, not always pleasantly, but … you just had to do it.

SH: Were your drill sergeants tough on you in Atlantic City?

JS: Yes, they were, yes, they were. For instance, they'd get you up, the whole damn hotel was up, at two o'clock in the morning, for a fire drill and, you know, you had to … put on some clothes and get out of the hotel in some kind of order. I don't mean just running out, but, maybe, then, at four o'clock, you'd get the same thing and, boy, you didn't get much rest, I tell you. Well, that's about it.

SH: Was your brother old enough that he pretty much was deferred from the war?

JS: He could have been, but he wanted to get into it, like a lot of guys did. He didn't want to let that go by without participating, but he got into it after I left. How he did that, I don't know, but he did.

SB: When did you go to Selma, Alabama?

JS: … Selma was advanced flying.

SH: Maybe we should back up and talk about State College. You qualify, and then, where do you go from State College, PA? Where is your next school?

JS: From State College, we probably went to a redistribution center, which was in Nashville, Tennessee, … to go out into something else. I don't recall that.

SH: From the time that you signed up to be in the Air Corps, did you know which of the aircraft you wanted, which you preferred to fly?

JS: Well, … I think I knew I wanted fighter training, because, frankly, I felt that I wanted to be alone. I didn't want to be responsible for anybody and, secondly, I probably had heard about our bombing efforts … over Germany, which were not doing well at all. In fact, … practically, they almost discontinued it, it was so bad. You know, when you're losing twenty, thirty percent of your planes, … well, on a bomber, you're losing ten guys. … We had no fighters to go that far. That was the problem for those early days. They were sending our guys in, in B-17s and B-24s, without fighter protection. They'd take us up as far as our fighters could go, like the [P]-47s. They would take us up to a certain point, which was usually over the Ruhr in Germany, and then, they had to return. They didn't have the range, but, then, I heard about their losses and I think the bomber losses kind of impressed me; that's not exactly the place to be. So, that's probably why I wanted to get into fighter school.

SH: From Tennessee, where was your next assignment?

JS: Probably, I went to primary flying at …

DS: (Carlston?) Field in Florida.

JS: (Carlston?) Field, Florida, very nice place, kind of picturesque, you know, Hollywood style, oh, great, and we were flying the double-wing PT-17 there. They were good days.

SH: Was that the first place that you soloed?

JS: That was the first plane I soloed in, right, yes.

SH: Was that exciting, to do that for the first time?

JS: Oh, sure. I think I had seven hours of dual instruction and, one time, he landed and he said, "Okay, Soehl, it's yours." [laughter] So, that's when I started to fly alone, solo, but the PT-17 was a great airplane. You know, it could take a lot of abuse. You could drop it in for twenty feet and survive. [laughter] … The airplane held up under that kind of stuff.

SH: Were you being trained by Army personnel or were there civilians doing the training?

JS: Well, both. The Army personnel were there, but they hired a lot of the private pilots to train the cadets. So, I think, generally, I was trained to fly by a private instructor. Of course, the officers were in supervising. They were there. That was good.

SH: Had these people gotten their training on the, what was that called, the barnstormer circuit, where they would fly and do the demonstrations, before the war?

JS: Oh, no, we didn't do much of that. Aerobatics was discouraged. In fact, if you got caught doing something like that; you know, one guy got caught. He got caught because he brought back part of the ground equipment in the prop. [laughter] He couldn't deny it, … but, generally, they were washed out, no question about that.

SH: They really were strict then.

JS: Oh, yes.

SH: Was it a dangerous thing to begin to learn to fly like that?

JS: I wouldn't say so, no.

SH: There were not people who were …

JS: They trained you pretty well and you know what airspeeds to fly on the base leg and on the approach and, you know, you knew pretty much when to start to pull back on the stick and stall it in, and you learned that a stall was not something you pulled over to the curb. That could kill you, you know, and, if you stalled and you were too high, you were in trouble, and there are lots of other reasons for a stall, you know, but that was the one thing you tried to avoid.

SH: There were few training accidents at this stage of the game.

JS: At that stage, I'd say there were few, yes. The airplanes were getting more powerful with each step, you know. So, actually, there were more; well, I don't know. I don't know the statistics. I can't quote that.

SH: Where did you move then, from that base in Florida?

JS: Moved up to basic training, Montgomery, Alabama, and, there, we flew another airplane, the BT-Basic Trainer-13, it was called, a much bigger, more powerful airplane, and, of course, dual seats. … A student sat in front, the instructor sat in the back, and he was in touch with you by phone, you know. So, I'd say … they trained us well, at least well enough not kill ourselves. [laughter]

SH: At what stage did they make the decision whether you would go to multi-engine or stay with the fighters?

JS: I think that was at basic.

SH: When you were in Alabama then?

JS: Yes, in Alabama. That's where the decision was made, and then, after basic, you went to a single-engine fighter school or to a bomber school, or a navigator's school, depending upon whatever they selected you for.

SH: Where did you go then? I mean, we know you went to single-engine.

JS: … From basic to advanced flying was at Craig Field, Selma, Alabama. You remember Selma from the racial problems.

SB: You were there for advanced training.

JS: We were there for advanced training, yes, and introduction to the P-40, which was the fighter, the first fighter, I flew.

SH: Were there any harrowing experiences in either of these schools for you, that you remember?

JS: No. I know we lost a few guys in advanced training. You had to fly instruments and that was a very important part of the program, and we were trained in what was called Link trainers. Probably, Link was the inventor, I don't know, but these were things on the ground.

SH: Like a simulator.

JS: Simulator, absolutely, right. Well, flying instruments is something you either catch on to or you don't, [laughter] and repetition, repetition, repetition. Pretty soon, you know, it sinks in, but that advanced flying was really where you got a lot of your blind flying [in].

SB: Did you have any close calls when you were flying at this time?

JS: With other planes or so?

SB: Yes.

MM: Wing over wing?

JS: Oh, well, we're not at that stage yet.

MM: Oh, sorry.

JS: That's the next stage. [laughter]

SH: You had said that Mrs. Soehl was able to come with you to all these different places.

JS: Yes.

SH: How much time did you get to go off base and join your spouse?

JS: Well, for a long time, it was very little time.

DS: In the beginning.

JS: … It was pretty lonesome for her.

SH: What kind of a shock was the South to a young boy from Roselle, New Jersey?

JS: What was?

SH: Was it a shock to you to be in the South?

JS: It was different. You didn't see much of the blacks.

DS: You didn't have to close your windows at night, so that you didn't get any air. You didn't have to be afraid. Like, I lived in houses, people's houses, you didn't have to be afraid. …

JS: No, security was not a problem, not a problem.

SH: Were you shocked at some of the signs that said, "Whites Only," or, "Colored Only?"

JS: Oh, yes, oh, yes, or water, drinking from a fountain, you know.

DS: When they'd get on a bus or on a trolley or something, and then, they'd go in the back. …

JS: … The bus is practically empty and, here, you have blacks standing with you and he'd go right by them.

DS: They let them stand there, like, pass right by.

SH: Were there a lot of other men who were married and their spouses were with them?

JS: Yes. More and more guys got married as time went on.

DS: And then, the girls, we got to know [each other], but, see, every nine weeks, we'd go someplace else and everybody didn't go. Your best friend that had a room in the same house, she went someplace else. So, you had to make [new friends]. You know, you knew them a little bit, "Well, I kind of like her," so, then, you'd see if you can find rooms in houses near each other. …

JS: Big adjustment. Well, that was typical of the Army life, you know. You're constantly losing friends, making friends.

SH: How did the civilians treat you? Were they welcoming?

JS: Oh, yes, they were very helpful whenever you had a problem, very courteous. [If] you were looking for a place to stay, and my wife was, frequently, they were helpful, give you directions.

SH: In Selma, were you still being trained by civilians that were hired by the military?

JS: No. By the time we got to, I think it was some time in basic, they were strictly Air Corps pilots, the instructors.

SB: When did you enter officer training?

JS: All of this was officer training. It was melded in with all the rest of it and … we got our commission at the end of advanced training.

SH: In Selma?

JS: In Selma, yes.

DS: They graduated, yes.

SH: Who pinned your wings on?

JS: You were there, weren't you, dear?

DS: Yes, I was there. I guess I did.

JS: No, I think we pinned them on ourselves. Maybe some guy had his …

SH: Okay, I just wondered, because some people remember that.

JS: Yes, yes. Well, that's good publicity, you know, looks good on [you]. [laughter]

SB: What made you decide to enter officer training?

JS: Probably the privilege of being an officer, [laughter] and I couldn't fly unless I was an officer.

SB: From Selma, did you leave for England?

JS: Oh, no, no. I went to fighter training after this.

SH: Where did you go for that?

JS: That's the field in …

DS: Oh, (Bartow?).

JS: (Bartow?) Air Base, right.

DS: In Florida.

JS: Where they had [P]-51s. That's when we knew what fighter we were going to get.

SH: How different is the P-51 from the P-40 that you trained on?

JS: Well, the '51, performance, much better, much better. The rate of climb was phenomenal. You pull that stick back. [laughter] …

SH: Really exciting? I bet it really got the adrenalin pumping.

JS: Oh, yes, oh, yes. I get all worked up, yes. [laughter]

SH: You were all of twenty-three years old.

JS: At advanced flying, instrument, that's where we lost a friend, and he was married, he had three kids. … We were out on a mission, the weather closed down and everybody was on instruments, you know. You were on your own and he just couldn't get back. That's all it was to it. He crashed somewhere, killed him, and I remember going home after we got our commission and our wings, I remember seeing his wife on the train. She was going back to her home, with her kids. That was sad.

SH: It must have been tremendously sad.

JS: … That's where either you caught on to flying instruments or you didn't, you know, when you realize you're not going to survive unless you do it right.

SH: How often did you have problems with the equipment that you were training on?

JS: … Very rare. Even in combat flying, I only had to come back once, when a supercharger blew through the side of the engine. … Of course, I lost oil pressure, gradually, but I got it to an airfield in England. So, you know, it [held out].

SH: You felt that the equipment was well maintained.

JS: Oh, yes, yes. In flying school, I never had an engine poop out. I never had a problem.

SH: What was the interaction between the ground crew and the student pilots like? Was the ground crew in training as well?

JS: That I know very little about, who was servicing [the aircraft]. You know, you used whatever airplane they assigned to you. Like, they had twenty AT-6s, and so, you'd take this one and you'd take that [one], you know, and you don't know who was servicing the plane or who the crew chief was. Somebody was responsible for it. …

SH: In this training at (Bartow?), how many people did your group consist of?

JS: Well, it got smaller as we went along, you know, and, probably at Craig Field, well, quite a few pilots, a number, I don't know. There were quite a few. When you got to fighter training, there were a lot less, and you got to know who was taking care of the airplanes, but, until that time, he was anonymous, but he was responsible. [laughter]

SH: What year were you in Florida taking the P-51 training? Do you remember, roughly, the year or the month that you were there?

DS: … '44.

JS: July '44.

DS: In the summertime, before I went home.

JS: About July, you know. We came from basic.

SH: Were you being kept aware of how the D-Day invasion had gone in June?

JS: No, no. We weren't kept aware of that. You read a newspaper. [laughter]

DS: And they didn't put much in the newspapers in the war, too.

JS: No, no, there was a lot that they didn't tell you.

DS: And nobody was told, not only the fighters, but people didn't know, but, today …

JS: Oh, right.

DS: … [Now], somebody does something, and then, [in] a half an hour, the whole community knows it, the whole state.

SH: You are there for nine weeks, in Florida. When did you realize whether you would be going to Europe or going to the Pacific?

JS: I think [that when] we realized … where we were going was where they sent us for assignment. They sent us to [Camp] Kilmer, but, of course, when we left the airbase in Florida, we didn't know where we were going, but I knew where I was when I got there. I went to Rutgers, right. [laughter] So, we knew, when we got to Kilmer, that we were going to Europe. [Editor's Note: Camp Kilmer was a port of embarkation located adjacent to the Rutgers University campus in the New Brunswick/Piscataway area. Large portions of the military installation were later integrated into the Rutgers campus.]

SH: They sent you on a train from Florida.

JS: Yes, yes.

SH: The P-51 training was the end of your training.

JS: Yes, yes, that was the end of the fighter training, right.

SH: When you were at Kilmer, were you able to get a leave at all?

JS: Yes. In fact, being an officer, "Why did I become an officer?" you had more privilege, no doubt about it. You could leave more often then, so, I would frequently come home. Maybe we were there a week, I don't know about that, and I'd come home and visit, back and forth, every night; not every night, no, but frequently.

SH: Mrs. Soehl had come home that summer. Was that right from Florida back to Roselle Park?

DS: Yes.

SH: To live with your parents?

DS: My mother, yes, and, in the meantime, before he went overseas, our first baby was born. So, we had a little girl and he got to see her before he went overseas, and hold her and love her, you know, knew she was there, not just, "Oh, I've got a baby," but he was lucky, because he was in Kilmer and he was close enough to come home. …

SH: When was your baby born, your little girl?

DS: December 8th.

JS: December.

DS: It's her birthday this end of this week.

SH: December of 1944, you were here at Kilmer, long enough to go home for that.

JS: Yes, right.

SH: Shortly after that, you were sent abroad.

JS: Then, we got on the *Queen Mary,* in New York, and ended up in Scotland, Glasgow. … From there, we got on a train. They took us down south, to this airbase at Honington. That's when I got into combat. [Editor's Note: Mr. Soehl joined the 364th Fighter Group, 384th Fighter Squadron.]

SH: What was the base called?

JS: … Honington.

SH: Where is that near?

JS: H-O-N-I-N-G-T-O-N, Honington.

SH: Bury St. Edmonds, you said, was the nearest town.

JS: Nearest town of any size. It was on the railroad track.

SH: What did your training consist of there, in January of 1945?

JS: We had no training there; we were flying there. [laughter] …

SH: How much time elapsed between disembarkation from the *Queen Mary* and when you started flying?

JS: Not too long between that. You know, you were really moving.

SH: You already knew what group you were going to be with, what squadron.

JS: No, we didn't know that until we arrived.

SH: Were you replacement pilots?

JS: Yes, yes, oh, yes.

SH: Can you tell us a little bit about your first encounters, what your recollections are of that time?

JS: Well, let's see, they wanted to know how well we could fly, which is a good idea. [laughter] So, we went up on some practice missions and they found out we were pretty good. Well, by that time, we had a lot of training, and we were no longer … kids. [laughter]

SH: Amateurs, all of twenty-five years old.

JS: Yes, amateurs is the word, right.

SH: You were all of twenty-four at this point.

JS: Of course, being in England, you're in a combat zone, because the enemy came over, occasionally, to raise a little hell, you know.

SH: What did that consist of?

JS: Being in a combat zone? Well, nothing in particular, except you're better paid, for one thing, and your guns were "hot," if you know what I mean by that. They're loaded. Even when you're training, of course, they're loaded, because you could never tell when they'd [the enemy would] come across the North Sea, and they're looking for you.

SH: When you went over on the *Queen Mary*, were there any incidents? The *Queen Mary* traveled alone, because she was fast and zigzagged.

JS: Yes.

SH: Did you have sea legs?

JS: Have what?

SH: Did you get your sea legs right away?

JS: Well, I don't know whether I did or not. I think so. Being on a boat didn't bother me, didn't bother me, knock on wood, because it bothered a lot of guys, [they] couldn't handle that.

SB: How long did it take you to go from New York to Glasgow?

JS: I think it took us four days, and we had eighteen thousand [troops onboard]. That was the time of the [Battle of the Bulge], about the same time as the Bulge, and they needed infantrymen. Oh, they were sending [many over]. Anyway, there were a lot of infantrymen onboard our ship. … Well, I was going to say it was really a good experience, going over, even though you knew

that you're at sea and you're all alone on this. You know, this ship is all by itself, and every so many [minutes], I don't know what the frequency was, but she'd turn real sharp and the ship would heel over, you know. … You're having dinner and you're eating on plates that are stuck into wood, so [that] they don't go anywhere, but that was quite an experience. … She was a big ship. Boy, you'd get lost on that ship.

SH: Did you have to stand any kind of duties?

JS: Yes, yes. The officers were called on to go on guard duty or fire alert. Fire, one thing they worried about on a big ship like that, and you were assigned a certain place, where the enlisted men were, and it was up to you to stay awake at night and … to take care of any problems that they might have, at least try to take care of them, but that was it.

SH: Were there any problems at that point?

JS: No, I don't recall any.

SB: What were the accommodations like on the ship? How many people were in a room?

JS: Pretty crowded, pretty crowded. They had bunks and they were stacked along the walls of the staterooms and [the number was] depending upon the size of the stateroom. … Of course, if you went down into the hold of the ship, that's where the enlisted men were, another reason why, [laughter] right, and the guys were crowded down there, really crowded, and they knew where they were going, you know. Eisenhower was having a problem.

SH: You were aware of the Bulge at this point.

JS: Oh, yes.

SH: Everybody knew what had happened.

JS: Oh, sure. … Well, by this time, they had spent their power. They had gone as far as they could, because they ran out of fuel. So, now, it's just a question of squeezing them in and recouping, but that took [awhile]. … You know, the Bulge, boy, that was a close one, believe me. If they had gotten to Antwerp, it might have split the British and the Americans, the whole bit, but, fortunately, they didn't. …

SH: When you first got to Honinigton, what was your typical day like?

JS: Well, … we started, they'd wake us up, the intelligence officer. He was stuck to go around and wake the pilots up and make sure they're on their feet, and that was about four o'clock in the morning, but this was late, compared to the poor bomber guys. Geez, you know, they were slower and we were faster, so, we didn't have to get up that early. So, we'd get up and walk out to the flight line, out to the ready room. … A sergeant, a couple of sergeants, would be there and you could have eggs. You'd have whatever you want. You could have steak, if you wanted it, but, usually, you were kind of keyed up and you were interested in getting into your equipment,

making sure you had everything and you knew where to find it. … You know, that was your concern, so, you had a fast two eggs and that was it. Otherwise, you had to have something to eat, at least I did, because the missions were long. This wasn't like going up for an hour and coming back and refueling, you know. When we went on a mission, we had 550 gallons of high-octane fuel on the plane. … If that engine had missed a beat on take-off, [laughter] you know, you wouldn't have done it. So, you had a G-suit to get into. That was around your legs and your stomach and you had to make sure that was … properly on, and then, you had a dingy you had on you. That was right here. …

SH: Right on the front of your abdomen.

JS: Yes, in case you were shot down over the North Sea, or any other water. … So, that was your main concern, to be ready to fly when they said it was time to go and they'd put you on a truck, and you'd have a parachute on your back.

SH: Did you pack your own parachute?

JS: No, no, no. They had skillful guys doing that, and, I tell you, you felt like a mechanical man by the time you were ready to fly. With all this stuff on you, you must have weighed three or four hundred pounds. [laughter] I don't know, but you were pretty heavy and, of course, you had a .45 pistol under your arm, about here. That was to fight your way out of Germany. [laughter] That was a joke, you know. [If] you were shot down and you survived, I think you'd probably [be] happy to see the guy coming, to say nothing of trying to kill him.

SH: What did they tell you to do if you were shot down? What were your instructions?

JS: Well, we had pictures of us in civilian clothes. Now, theoretically, we were supposed to, hopefully, get in touch with some of the Underground, which is theoretical, you know, and maybe they'd get you to a safe house, and then, you'd get in regular clothing and you'd look like a German. Well, you know, there are easy ways of finding out whether you're American or German. They'd ask who was playing on … one of the ball teams, and you'd better know. [laughter] So, that was the flying bit, and then, you get in the cockpit and you had to hook up your oxygen, make sure that's working, hook up the radio, make sure that's working, hook up the G-suit, make sure that's working, and then, … taxi out behind your leader, your flight leader, and you'd take off … to meet a bomber group.

SH: How many would be in your group?

JS: Well, it usually [was] four flights. Four ships, that's a flight, so, there were four, and, on the way out, of course, you're climbing, because your bomber group is maybe at twenty thousand feet. You've got to get above them, and, well, I'm trying to think of some odd things.

SH: They get you up at four o'clock; how long does it take you to join the bombers?

JS: Oh, well, by the time you got there, flying over the North Sea, that took about twenty minutes, with a fighter. Now, you're really in enemy territory, and maybe we got over Germany

about eight o'clock, about that time. … You know, you never can tell, but, usually, and then, we'd look for the bomber group, and you could pick out your bomber group because of markings on the tail, a square or a triangle or something else significant.

SB: You were flying at over twenty-thousand feet at this point.

JS: By the time you were in Germany, yes.

SB: How was the performance of the P-51 at those altitudes?

JS: Well, it got worse as you climbed.

SB: Yes, that is what I have read.

JS: The air got thinner. You know, you didn't have that pressure against your controls and you could move the control and nothing would happen, and then, all of a sudden, she'd start to turn. [laughter] Well, combat, under those circumstances, is not great. So, what was your question? It slipped my mind.

SB: You answered it, about performance.

JS: Oh, I did; [it was] not good, after you got [to] twenty-five thousand feet, you're kind of mushy. You're mushy and you've got belly tanks under your wings and these things are heavy, and you've got a 110-[gallon] fuel tank behind you and the wings are full of gas and you're heavy and, you know, your controls are mushy. … You'd use your belly tanks first, to empty those, because, if you ran into trouble going in, you'd have to get rid of those, so [that] you could fly. … After that, you'd change the gauge and go to the one behind you and you'd gradually get down to your wing tanks. Well, you've got to make sure you've got enough in the wing tanks to get the hell home, you know. [laughter] So, let's see, here we are, twenty thousand feet over the Ruhr, right. Okay, our guys were pretty much, I wouldn't say we were in control of the air, because we weren't, not at that point anyway. … That's why they put us there, to gain control of the air, but our bombers were being protected on a much higher scale by the time I got there. The guys could find their bomber group and we'd fly about five thousand feet over the bomber group, so that we had altitude, and you convert altitude into airspeed. That's why you're way above, and you can see, of course, … if somebody's coming up to attack your bombers, and that's why they came up, to attack the bombers, because your invading their airspace and you're bombing the hell out of their cities and that's what they want to stop. So, of course, they would ignore you until they had to deal with you, and then, you got into a sweat.

SH: What did you encounter on your very first mission?

JS: Nothing, nothing. It was a "milk run." It was a naval port on the North Sea. So, all we had to do was cross the North Sea, and [there was] very little action. In fact, I don't remember any action. I suppose I was disappointed, [laughter] but, in those days, you know, you were dumb. You didn't appreciate what "no enemy aircraft" meant. [laughter]

SH: What did you do on the way back from your missions?

JS: Well, by then, [if] you're on a long mission, you'd released your belly tanks, probably over some town or something that you thought might be useful to them. … If they had any gas in them at the time, that was one hell of an explosion, but, usually, by that time, by the time you got rid of the tanks, they were pretty much empty. So, you're on your fuselage tank now and you're much more maneuverable. …

SH: Do you stay with the bombers on the way back as well?

JS: All the way in and back to a safe point, safe point, and, now, sometimes, early in the war, the safe point was the beginning of France. That would be safe. You could let them go alone. After that, it got further and further into Germany, as our armies controlled the situation, and, of course, their airbases, they were losing planes. That was the purpose of the attack on the airfields. The attack on the airfield was the toughest, I think, that most fighter pilots will mention, because you'd come in on that, on an airfield, and the first thing, you're coming in [at] about four hundred [miles per hour]. You don't want to come in any faster, because you've got to get the target on something and the first thing you're looking for is a plane, sitting somewhere around, and, sometimes, you go across and there's nothing there. You know, it's a wasted trip, but, of course, now, they're alert. They know you're there, and you shouldn't make a mistake of going back twice. That's a mistake, because they're ready for you, which I did, once. I came back twice. Second time, boy, the second time; excuse me.

SH: Take your time.

JS: I guess I'll never forget that trip.

MM: What happened, Daddy?

JS: Well, there was so much stuff coming up at you. It had nothing to do with flying skill. Either they hit you or they didn't. … I saw this guy, out of the corner of my eye, over on this side and he was behind a big machine gun, you know, the swivel type, and, boy, I thought he was firing at me, and I think he was, but I don't know. Somebody was, and they nailed me, right down the damn airplane. It got more bullets in it; I was so happy to be flying as fast as I was or I never would have gotten through, but one of the bullets blew my gunsight right out, blew it right out in front of me, and the next one missed me. [laughter] … You know, that was the way it went, had nothing to do with skill; I wasn't evading anything. I was attacking their airplanes and the Germans were good at defending their fields, no question about it.

SH: Were you by yourself or were there others?

JS: No. We went across in [a formation of] four, to cover the whole field.

SH: Did all four of you come out all right?

JS: Well, yes. I expected, as soon as I heard those fifty-calibers going through my plane, I said, "Oh, my God, I don't think I'm going to get through this," but the engine kept going. You know, I expected to see the instrument panel light up, all hell break loose, and it didn't. Everything kept going [laughter] and I was just amazed. So, I climbed up and I put the heading on … 180 degrees and I went home, and I don't know where the wingman was and, frankly, at that point, I didn't care. [laughter] …

MM: You were able to get all the way back, Dad, with your plane shot up?

JS: Yes, all the way back, right, right, yes, as long as you didn't hit the fuel tanks. Well, maybe they did hit the fuel tanks, I don't know, but they had [the tanks where] the fuel tanks heal [seal] themselves, which was a good feature. If they didn't blow up, they healed. So, the loss of fuel was, it was considerable, but it wasn't too bad.

SH: When did this happen to you, early in your missions or later on?

JS: Oh, that was probably later in my flying, in my combat experience, this attack on the airfield.

SH: Do you remember which airfield it was that you were attacking in Germany?

JS: Pocking, Pocking, Germany, … well, somewhere in southern Germany. It wasn't too far east. Well, yes, it was pretty far east, because this was a German airfield and, you know, they felt that they could have their planes [exposed] on the ground. … [Editor's Note: Pocking is located in southeast Germany, near the Austrian border.]

SH: You made it all the way back to Honington without any trouble at this point.

JS: Right.

SH: This was the only base that you were stationed at in England.

JS: Yes. Well, you know, once you got across the North Sea, you felt as though you had it made, but you always had a feeling somebody's towing that island away. "Where the hell is it?" [laughter] and you get back and, of course, … England was loaded with airfields. So, you're always looking for something, if the engine quit, to put it down, but it kept going. So, of course, I kept going. So, that was a bad experience, but there were lots of times you'd go and nothing. You know, you say to yourself, "Why not?" but nothing, and the bomber guys were happy, and I suppose a lot of our guys were not happy, you know. They wanted to fight. [laughter]

SH: How many missions into your tour did you engage enemy fighters?

JS: … What number it was, I'm not sure, but it was quite awhile in there, quite awhile.

HS: How many missions does a fighter pilot have to fly in order for it to be considered …

JS: A tour? Well, if you flew thirty-five combat missions, you were eligible for relief. When they started out, it was twenty-five, but they found they were losing too many pilots. You know, that number popped up pretty quick. When you're flying a mission that takes four or five hours, it accumulates quick.

SB: How many missions did you fly all together?

JS: Yes. I flew twenty-eight combat missions. I didn't complete my tour. I was just as happy, but, you know, I was glad to be there. [laughter]

SH: When did you realize that you did not have a lot of enemy aircraft to encounter?

JS: Oh, probably after, number of missions, you mean? About, oh, I'd say maybe the tenth mission.

SH: That soon.

JS: It began to … taper off, yes.

SH: Where were most of the bombing missions flying to that you were escorting?

JS: Oh, Nuremburg, Magdeburg, where they were building the engines for the fighters, or for the bombers. These were pretty deep in Germany and it was a long trip and it was cold. You know, at twenty thousand feet, it's cold; I don't care what the temperature is on the ground, and the heater wasn't that great, naturally. You know, you can't expect everything.

SH: Did you have extras that you used to help combat that cold?

JS: No. You wore the gloves they gave you and that was about it.

SH: Did you have any kind of heater in your suits at all?

JS: No, no. The plane had a heater.

SH: What kind of a debriefing would you have after every mission like this?

JS: Well, they'd want to know, especially if you got into some problem, approximately where you were, and, frequently, you didn't know where the hell you were. [laughter] I mean, you know, you'd come out of a bad situation, you don't know where you are; either you're flying or you're not. [laughter] …

SH: When you would land the plane, a truck would come out to pick you up.

JS: Oh, yes. The crew chief would meet you. You'd tell him what you knew, you know, what you think is wrong, if anything, and then, the truck would pick us up and we'd go back for debriefing, to see if our guys knew anything. Well, they'd ask you a lot of questions you just

didn't know. Some, you might, but, you know, it's not all perfect science, [laughter] especially [in] a combat situation, not science. It don't always work out the way the book says.

SB: Did you ever shoot down any enemy aircraft?

JS: Yes. I had four enemy aircraft to my credit, and one of the missions, the flight leader … directed me and my wingman; I was flying this guy's wing. He was the element leader. The element is two ships, a flight is four ships. The pilot flying at the head of the flight was in charge. So, he sent us down to … intercept some ME-109s that had been sighted. So, my leader and I went down together and we saw the two ME-109s, and this is not derogatory in any way, but, you know, at the time, I was most annoyed, because it cost time and time was important. We went down and we were about to come behind these guys and attack them, and we got within gun range, firing range, and this guy pulled his trigger and nothing happened. Now, we're losing time and I'm on his wing. You know, I'm out here, he's here, and he's taking the enemy planes. He was the leader, he gets privilege, right, okay, but, by the time he turned on his gun switch, it's too late. You know, they're all over the sky, and that's when he moved away, because the guns wouldn't work. Yes, you know, if he hadn't moved away, he would have gone in front of them, which would be very bad. So, rather than go in front of them, he pulled up. So, I pulled in behind them and I'm looking at these planes and they're either P-47s or they're … FW-190s, and they're very similar planes, and, for that reason, I know I'm over Germany and I know, you know, what's going on, but why didn't this guy shoot him down? … I got nothing from him, you know, "What's the problem? What's the problem?" nothing. Now, you know, I don't mean that to be derogatory, but, anyway, so, I figured, "Well, the hell with this." I pulled in behind the FW-190 and I shot him down. It was that simple. By that time, the other guy is gone. See, that's where you lose a few seconds and they're gone. Well, I saw him and I went after him, but I fired at him and I got a "damaged" and it wasn't a credit for a plane shot down; it was a damaged plane. Okay, that was right, because I didn't see him go down. I didn't have pictures of [it]. You know, … we had cameras in the wings and you'd better have pictures. If you're claiming an enemy aircraft, you'd better have pictures. So, of course, when I was firing at him, he was so far away, some of the bullets probably hit him, but he disappeared after that. He went into a cloud bank or something like that. Anyway, I lost him. So, that was one experience.

SH: Did your leader get back okay?

JS: Yes, he got back all right, but I was annoyed. He didn't turn on the gun switch. You know, the guys I was flying with, before this, we'd … start over the North Sea, you'd turn on your switch. You're in a combat zone. You … never know what you're going to see. Well, he flew all the way into Germany, for crying out loud, and the switch wasn't on, and, when he needed it, it wasn't working.

SH: Were you transferred? Why was this man flying differently than what you had been flying previously?

JS: Well, you know, they were rotating the pilots. You weren't flying every day with the same guy. It depended upon the number of hours. If you had a lot more hours than the other guys,

you didn't fly that day, or, if you had fewer, you flew until you caught up with combat hours. They tried to keep them together.

SH: What would they do with you in-between times? How many hours could you fly, say, in a week's time?

JS: Gee, I don't know. It'd all depend if it was an active week. Some weeks were slow. Either the weather was down; you know, England can have some terrible weather and there's no sense going. … If the bombers aren't going, you're not going, and so, a very slow week. Another week might be a very active week, good weather, a lot of targets are being attacked, and so on. So, I can't tell you, [cannot] answer that. I don't know.

SH: Did you ever fly missions where you were not a bomber escort?

JS: Well, yes and no. We'd bring the bombers back to a safe point. Now, they're on their own, which was pretty safe. … If we had any fuel and we'd dropped our fuel tanks, we went back, looking for a "target of opportunity," maybe a fuel dump or a railroad train or a concentration of troops, you know, whatever you could find that was worth shooting at. If you had … ammunition in your guns, you used them.

SH: Were you ever called in to give air support to the troops that were on the ground?

JS: No.

SH: Diverted from another mission?

JS: No. That was mainly the responsibility of the P-47s. They were in Europe. They were based in Europe. They were on short-range missions, and the P-47 was a deadly airplane. It had eight guns, you know. So, no, I wasn't.

SH: I did not know whether the P-51 ever did that.

JS: We did strafe airfields or targets of opportunity, but that was not [our primary objective]. The bomber, that was our primary target; not target, purpose in going.

SH: What was life like on the base for you? What kind of interaction did you have with your ground crew?

JS: … Very little. Usually, the enlisted men and the officers did not mix. That's not to say they weren't friendly or they didn't [socialize]; maybe the guys [did] when they went on leave, you know, but it was awfully hard to schedule leaves with anybody, just didn't work out.

SH: Did you get leave at all? Where did you go?

JS: Oh, yes. We'd fly eight days and we'd have four days off, and, [for] the four days, [we would] go to London, go to Scotland. …

SH: Where did you go in Scotland?

JS: That's what I'm trying to think [of].

SH: Edinburgh?

JS: Yes, Edinburgh, right. [laughter] That was a nice place, … a lot of culture up there, you know. That was good.

SH: How did the Scottish people and the British people treat an American flyer like yourself?

JS: Always very respectful, very good. I never had any trouble with an Englishman.

SH: Did you have barracks, officers' quarters?

JS: … The officers were in an RAF base, Royal Air Force fighter base. So, you know, we had the main building and the enlisted men were around that. I'm trying to think of this wording of the Englishmen, kind of a derogatory wording for Americans.

SH: Other than Yank?

JS: Other than Yanks, yes. [laughter] You know, "They're over here …

[TAPE PAUSED]

JS: Fighter pilots, huh. [laughter]

SH: What was the phrase?

JS: "Over here, overpaid and over sexed." [laughter]

SH: That did not apply to you at all, no. [laughter]

JS: Oh, of course not.

SH: When you went into London, were there any times that you were there when there were any of the bombings or anything like that?

JS: No, no, nothing, [not] a problem, when I was there.

SH: Were there USOs [United Service Organizations] near you, or did you have to go to London for the USO or the Red Cross?

JS: Generally, you had to go to London for that.

SH: What did you think of the English beer?

JS: … I enjoyed it. At first, I thought, "Warm beer?" but I got used to it, you know. [laughter] It was okay with me.

SH: When you went to Scotland, did you try their local brew as well?

JS: They had a drink called aperitif, which I came to like, like, you know, what do you order before dinner or something? an aperitif, or a beer, and that was my experience. I was not big on booze. Some of the guys flew better drunk than they did [sober], so, I don't know. [laughter]

SH: Was there an amount of time you needed to take between the last drink and reporting to the flight line?

JS: I never heard of that, would be a good idea, I guess, especially if you knew your wingman was, you know, kind of out of it. [laughter]

SH: Did you ever see any examples of people who just lost their ability to get up in the morning and go fly?

JS: Well, I can't say I knew of anybody, but I knew it happened. You know, they didn't discuss that, really, wasn't gossiped about that. If you couldn't get up in the morning, you knew pretty much why, yes. [laughter]

SH: Could you request time off, or was it mandatory to stay ready all the time?

JS: Well, no, I wasn't put under that much of a strain. I'm not saying I wouldn't have done that, have asked for relief, but I didn't have to, and, as I say, I only aborted one mission, and that was absolutely necessary, and I happened to be flying with the Colonel. [laughter] So, he was the guy that led me to … Manston, the big airfield in England. [Editor's Note: Manston was an airfield in England where many damaged planes landed during World War II, due to the size of its runway and proximity to the coast.] That's where I put it down.

SH: What happened?

JS: The supercharger, I mentioned before, was something … to build up air pressure in the engine, to force the fuel into the cylinders, and … that kicked in about, well, usually, some time over ten thousand feet. …

SH: You had just taken off.

JS: Yes, yes. You know, we'd probably get maybe thirteen thousand feet over the North Sea and the supercharger would kick in and you could feel the power right away, as soon as that kicked in, but you get too high and even the supercharger wouldn't do it. So, that was under a lot of pressure, a supercharger, you know. That thing is going like crazy and it just blew a fuel line, not a fuel line, an oil line, blew it right out of the engine, and, fortunately, I had enough altitude

and enough power left in the engine to get it down. So, I spent a week at Manston, which was nice. I wasn't flying or doing anything. [laughter]

SH: They were fixing your plane.

JS: Yes, they were fixing the plane.

SB: Can you tell me about the mechanic who took care of your plane?

JS: My crew chief. He must have been a good mechanic, because I had no, very few, [problems]. That wasn't his problem. A supercharger can go any time. There's some things you can't control, and that's one of them. Harvey was a damn good crew chief and John, his assistant, was, too. …

SH: Where were they from?

JS: John was from, North Carolina?

DS: I didn't know them. …

JS: Well, you know his wife; we've been in touch with his wife. Harvey, I think he came from Louisiana. I'm not sure. … What was I going to say? Pardon me.

SH: You were going to tell us about your crew.

DS: Something about your crew chief.

JS: Oh, the crew chief. Once again, I hate to mention this, but it's true. …

DS: Don't mention it. [laughter]

JS: … Well, actually, he died, later on, after the war. He was a drunk and he was consuming booze like crazy, and I think John, the assistant, was carrying the load, but I don't know, you know. "Why didn't I complain?" Because I had no problem; why should I complain? I don't want to get the guy in trouble. I'm not looking for trouble. I'm lucky he's there.

SH: He only had to take care of your plane.

JS: Yes. That was his plane, and that was really enough, especially in the winter. Well, anytime, really, but, in the winter, you know, the plane's out there with a foot of snow on it and, boy, it's tough, cold as hell.

MM: But, you knew he was taking care of your plane drunk.

JS: No, not really, but he used to jump up on the wing and help me out, if the engine wouldn't start, you know, and, you know, my eye's red [today]; well, his, every day, the same way, and I

thought to myself, "Gee, this guy, … there's something the matter with him," but I didn't know and I didn't pursue it, and John never said anything to me, you know.

SH: Did you have any interaction with any of the other services or other country's services?

JS: Not much. I did have [some] with one English pilot. We were going up to some field in the north, I don't know where it was, but we had to go into another field first. Maybe the weather was so down or something, you know, they wouldn't clear you to leave. So, the way to get out of there is to go to a field … that's clear, and then, they'll let you go. So, that's what we were doing. So, you go over the field and an English pilot in a Spitfire, … he wanted to play. Oh, boy, he was good. I tell you, I was happy he wasn't an ME-109, [laughter] because he would have clobbered me. So, then, I landed at the field and he landed and we had a nice conversation, you know, a healthy conversation, not an adversarial [one].

SH: Did you tell him that you were glad he was on your side?

JS: Oh, did I? You bet, sure. Well, the Spitfire was a pretty good airplane.

SH: Did you ever fly one or go up in one?

JS: No, no, I never flew one. I don't know. I didn't spend my free time going around looking for what might be a problem, you know. [laughter] I'd do something else. … Maybe I looked as though I needed a rest or something, but they sent me to a college, one of Britain's big colleges, for a week of rest.

SH: Cambridge, Oxford?

JS: Yes, Oxford, it was. Yes, yes, that was it and I went there for a week. It was very pleasant, you know. The meals were good, everything was nice, restful. So, that was a pleasant time. That's all I can say.

MM: Just by yourself, they just sent you?

JS: Yes, yes. They weren't going to send three of my friends with me, you know. [laughter]

SH: You said that you were aware that the war was winding because the amount of …

JS: Opposition.

SH: Opposition was wearing down.

JS: Yes, yes, sure.

SH: What was the reaction when you heard that the war was over in Europe?

JS: Oh, we were elated.

SH: Where were you when you heard?

JS: I was on the base and the Colonel called an assembly meeting of all the guys, out on the field, you know. He got up on one of the planes. He said, "I have an announcement to make." Of course, you were expecting it by this time, you know. You kind of knew what was in the works, and he announced that the Germans had quit, and I think most guys were happy. They wanted to go home, even the nuts that were looking for fights, you know. "Oh, gee whiz, I didn't shoot down twenty." [laughter] You know, you felt like saying, "You dumb, you know, you damn fool, you're lucky you're here," [laughter] but [that] depended upon how old you were. Well, by that time, I was getting to be about twenty-three or twenty-four.

SH: You were almost twenty-five.

JS: Yes, and a lot of these guys coming in, … they were kids. … I don't know, they seemed as though they'd just got out of high school. [laughter] …

SH: Was there any chance that you would have been sent to the Pacific?

JS: Not me, no. I didn't volunteer to go, [laughter] but my roommate did.

SH: Did he?

JS: He was one of the "hot potato" guys. He wanted to just fly, combat flying, I mean, not just fly. So, he volunteered. "Oh, gee, they need pilots over there, this Korean situation," you know, or whatever it was; I forget what it was. No, we were still fighting Japan, for crying out loud, so, that came later then. So, he went. He ended up, this was the guy, came back … to our field, one day, on Captain (Price's?) wing and they're coming back. I don't know what their mission was, to be honest with you, but they're coming back and they decide, "Well, we'll put on a little show for the guys, show them how to fly." So, (Taylor?) and (Price?), (Taylor?) was a good pilot, no doubt about that, but they agreed to do an Immelman, [an acrobatic aerial maneuver], over the field. Now, an Immelman, you go up wing-to-wing, you know, and then, you roll over together and you come out wing-to-wing, going the opposite direction, tricky, but only damn fools do this, you know. [laughter] Well, this guy rolled into him, instead of away from him, and he cut his tail off and (Price?) went in like a rocket, dug a big hole in the runway, and that was a sad, sad day. …

SH: Did (Taylor?) make it out all right?

JS: The other, (Taylor?), … his engine was missing, but he was able to get down on the field, right. Maybe that's why, at the end of the war, he was happy to get out of there; probably was.

DS: And he stayed in the service. … What was he?

JS: Yes. He became a major general.

DS: Yes. He retired just recently.

JS: How about that? but he was one of those guys, you know. That was … what he wanted to do.

SH: Did they try to get people to volunteer to go to the Pacific from your group?

JS: To go to the West Coast and get on a boat? Yes, right.

SH: Did you have to stay in the military?

JS: No. At the end of the war, I was one that, with a lot of other guys, they sent me to Germany, but I no sooner got to Stuttgart and I turned around and got on a train and came back to Antwerp for shipment home. So, you know how things get SNAFU-ed during the war? That was one of them.

SH: Were you still a pilot in Stuttgart?

JS: Oh, yes.

SH: You were going to fly.

JS: Oh, yes.

SH: What were you flying? What was going to be your duty?

JS: I wasn't flying. I don't know what they were going to do with me, but I no sooner got there then they reversed things and sent me home.

SH: How did you come back home?

JS: On a *NYU Victory* ship. *NYU Victory* was the name of the ship. That wasn't the *Queen Mary*. [laughter] I think that took us seven days.

SB: Did you go into New York?

JS: Yes, yes, and that was a great trip, got off of that at Camp Shanks, [just north of New York City, on the Hudson River], and that was the end of my combat days.

SH: Was there any kind of a welcome for you, coming back in?

JS: Oh, the ladies, I forget what organization it was. They met us with food and coffee, oh, yes, very nice.

SH: Was the ship filled with infantry, again, a mix of servicemen?

JS: Most of these guys were Air Corps stuff, out of Antwerp, the guys probably coming back from flying P-47s or something like that.

SH: Do you remember when this was, that you came back?

JS: … November '45, yes, November.

SH: When did you get the news that the war had ended in Japan as well, that the war was completely over?

JS: Gee, I don't remember when we found out. I guess I don't know.

SH: Were you still in England?

JS: Yes, oh, yes.

SH: If your missions had ended, and Germany surrendered, what were you doing for that length of time?

JS: Practically nothing.

SH: Really?

JS: Yes.

DS: Fooling around. [laughter] … Tell them what you and (Taylor?) did in France.

JS: I don't tell people, because …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SB: You were discharged in New York. Did you come right back to New Jersey from there?

JS: Yes, yes, came home.

DS: To Fort Dix.

JS: Fort Shanks. That's up on the Hudson

DS: Yes, but didn't you come to Fort Dix before you came to home?

JS: No.

SH: You were discharged from Camp Shanks.

DS: How did you get home from Fort Shanks? How did they get you home, a train?

JS: I probably got [on the] trains, sure, yes, … no reason to send us to Dix or anywhere else. …

SH: You were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Was there a specific mission that that was awarded for?

JS: Probably for the four enemy planes, I'd say that. …

SH: For a combination of your service.

JS: Yes. You know, the award is written. … I can't even remember some of it.

SH: In terms of the point system, as a man who left a wife and child, who has completed all these missions, you still did not have enough points?

JS: … That's been one of my gripes.

SH: Go right ahead.

JS: … Why the fighter people in the administration building; it occurs to me that they didn't know about the baby, but I must have applied for more allowance. I wouldn't let that go by, you know, and so, they would know. … I don't know, it's just [that] I didn't want to be a cry baby, "Why are you sending me to Stuttgart?" You know, "I've got a wife, I've got a child." You know, "I have finished my tour," but, so, I didn't go to headquarters, I didn't challenge it, I didn't ask.

SB: Did you join the National Guard or Reserves after the war?

JS: Yes.

SB: Can you talk about that?

JS: Well, they recruited the guys. So, of course, you know, I was still young and dumb, "Sure, sure," they're paying you, not much, but they're paying you. So, I joined, went to Plainfield, New Jersey. That's where the National Guard was situated.

SH: This was the Air National Guard or the National Guard?

JS: Yes, after the war, and, finally, after ten years of that, I'm out, and they sent me a discharge and thanked me for my service and promoted me to captain, and I was happy. [laughter]

DS: Wouldn't you have to go once a month or something? You didn't go real often. What was it, once a month or something you had to go?

JS: Oh, about once a month, I think, not often. … We didn't even fly.

SH: Was there any chance that you would have been called back for Korea?

JS: I suppose there was. I mean, after all, that was still the purpose of that thing, but, in view of the fact that I was married now, with children, I don't know, probably not.

SH: Did you come back and use the GI Bill right away? Did you come right back to school?

JS: Yes. I got a job in teaching school in Linden, and then, I started working on my master's degree, went to Rutgers, of course, and I kept taking courses, and then, we had a category of pay, "Thirty-two points above master's," so, I kept going to school.

SB: Were you living in New Brunswick when you were going for your master's?

DS: … No, we were living in Roselle Park. We bought a house.

JS: Yes, yes. I was going to school in New Brunswick.

SB: You were living in Roselle Park.

JS: Yes. We commuted, down Route 9, you know, over the bridge.

DS: About five years after that, we moved to Linden, because he was teaching over there then. So, we thought if we moved over there, it would be more convenient for us.

SB: Do you think you would have gone back to school if not for the GI Bill?

JS: I probably would have gone back to school.

SB: Do you think you would have gone right after the war, like you did?

JS: Well, not until I was earning enough money to pay for the courses, tuition, you know, but the GI Bill made that very easy. It'd be foolish not to do it, you know.

SB: What was Rutgers like when you came back and you were taking classes here? Were there a lot of returning GIs?

JS: Oh, yes. Boy, the buildings were loaded.

SB: Did you feel any separation between the returning GIs and the younger kids who had not served in the war? Was there any kind of division between them?

JS: The kids today, coming back, you mean?

SB: No, I mean the kids who were too young to serve in the war, when you went back for graduate school. Did anyone feel any kind of hostility towards them, because they had not served and you had been through so much?

JS: No. I really didn't have much contact with younger [students]. Well, here, I'm a schoolteacher, but I'm teaching elementary school. … If I had been in the high school at that time, why, I'm sure a lot of the guys might have said, "Hey, what do you know about this?" you know, but I wasn't. So, no, I didn't have much inquiry about that at all, and I really didn't go out of my way to volunteer anything.

SH: You did not really talk about your experiences.

JS: No, no.

SH: Did you talk about it with your family?

JS: Occasionally. I've talked about it, haven't I, some of these things?

DS: Some of the things, yes. …

SH: When you wrote letters home, did you talk about what you were going through?

JS: Oh, no.

DS: You could hardly say anything.

JS: Sometimes, you'd tell them too much and they'd censor it out.

DS: They'd cut it out. They read everything they sent home.

JS: So, you really couldn't tell them much of anything, you know.

SB: When you were overseas, were you able to send and receive a lot of mail?

JS: Mail, yes, it was good. … You know, our living conditions, as I say, were really very good, compared to what the guys in Europe were doing, yes.

SH: Did you ever have to request a specific CARE package, or anything that you wanted from home that was not available in England or in the PX [post exchange]?

JS: No. … I remember, after the war, we were, where were we, somewhere in Montgomery, and one of your relatives sent us some cookies? … It was a bowl full of ants, oh, gee, yes. [laughter]

DS: That was while you were in training. …

JS: Well, whenever it was, I don't know, you know.

SH: A lot of people talked about just getting crumbs. [laughter]

JS: Yes, right, or nothing.

SH: But not ants.

DS: … Yes, bugs were crawling in it when I went to open it.

SH: I think we are pretty much finished. We thank you so much for talking to us.

JS: Okay, you're welcome.

SH: Is there anything we forgot to ask you or any story you would like to put on record?

JS: No. I won't make anything up for you. [laughter]

SH: I would not ask you to do that; I can see you are a very honest man and I appreciate that. I must say, for the record, that Mr. Soehl came here with his, would you call it, a helmet?

JS: Helmet and goggles.

SH: Helmet and goggles, his scarf, with his name on it, and a nice picture that was put together, you said, by your grandchildren.

JS: Yes. Well, my grandchildren, they're the ones that made the thing.

SH: Also, he has the fighter group reunion book.

JS: Yes, right.

SH: Do you stay involved with the reunion? You have wonderful letters here.

JS: Well, we haven't gone lately. We used to go regularly, and we went to Memphis, we went to Branson, … we went to California. While we were in California, we went to Alaska, which was not connected with the trip, but, you know, you get things in like that.

SH: Did you start this right away after the war?

JS: No, this took quite a while.

DS: … Yes, they weren't doing it right away, until a group got together.

JS: Some guy in Tennessee, … his uncle was killed attacking a field, … attacking a target, in Belgium. … Well, that's how he got involved in this.

SH: He was trying to find information about his uncle and he started this?

JS: Yes, right, and he's really the guy that founded the association.

DS: But, you know, the man that just, they dug up the plane in Greenland? That man, his picture was in all the papers and everything; he's in our group.

JS: Oh, the P-38, yes.

DS: Yes, he's one of them in the group.

JS: He was one of them. They were ferrying '38s to England and this particular flight never got there. They got over Greenland and … somebody had trouble, and so, the four ships landed on the ice in Greenland. … Over the years, the P-38 he was flying, of course, was covered with snow and ice, and somebody [who was] interested, I don't know who it was, located this, you know. They knew about where it went down and they found that this thing was in the ice. So, he had money. He spent money to drill a big hole and get this P-38 out, piece by piece, and the guy that flew it was in my group. Right now, his name slips my mind. …

SH: You can add that later, when you do the editing.

DS: … He's probably in your book.

JS: Yes.

DS: It was in all the papers, just a couple of months ago. [Editor's Note: Mr. Soehl later noted that the man's name was Brad McManus and dated the news coverage as appearing on June 23, 2007.]

JS: Yes, right.

DS: … He was on television and everything, this particular one that they dug up his plane. …

JS: They were going to repeat the flight, but, as will happen, the damn P-38, the second time, had engine trouble. So, they came back and they never [did it]. That was it. They didn't try anymore.

SH: I thank you so much.

JS: Thank you both. I appreciate it. It takes your time and you've been very hospitable.

SH: Thank you.

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

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 6/25/08
Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 3/16/09
Reviewed by John E. Soehl 4/6/09