RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH THEODORE SYMANSKI

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

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

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

GREGORY FLYNN
and
DANIEL RUGGIERO

EDISON, NEW JERSEY
JULY 31, 2009

TRANSCRIPT BY

DOMINGO DUARTE

Daniel Ruggiero: This begins an interview with Mr. Theodore Symanski on July 31, 2009, in Edison, New Jersey, with Gregg Flynn, Dan Ruggiero …

Theodore Symanski: … Ted Symanski.

DR: To begin, we would like to thank you for having us here today. For the record, could you tell us when and where you were born?

TS: I was born on October 29, 1933, Perth Amboy, New Jersey.

DR: Could you tell us a little bit about your family background, such as where your parents were from?

TS: … My father was born in Jersey City in 1898 and my mother was born in Brooklyn in 1900 and I have one brother who is going to be eighty-two soon and my sister is seventy-and-a-half at this point.

DR: Did you grow up in Perth Amboy?

TS: Yes. I went to the Perth Amboy school system and I graduated from high school in 1951. … Right after graduation, I joined the Marine Corps and I was in the Marine Corps from 1951, June 1951 to June of '54, 1954.

DR: Do you remember the neighborhood well from when you were growing up? Did you have a lot of friends in Perth Amboy?

TS: Yes. I had two friends that lived right on the same street and I had another friend that lived a block away, and several people that lived on the same block that I was friendly with.

DR: Was it a nice neighborhood?

TS: Yes, very nice, yes. It was right up the street from the oldest church in New Jersey, St. Peter's Church. [Editor's Note: The congregation at St. Peter's Episcopal Church dates its founding to a congregation established in 1685.] Yes, I went to all the schools, … right up through [high school]. The high school was only a few blocks away, so, I was able to walk, and, yes, had a pretty diverse group of people. They split us up by the alphabet and I was in with all the "Ss" and the "Ts" and, yes, in fact, I met my wife in high school. …

DR: Were you interested in going to school?

TS: Well, that was …

DR: Did you enjoy it?

TS: [laughter] Yes, I accepted it. It was no problem. … Usually, I [was] a "B" average student, all through school.

DR: What did you like to do in your free time? Did you have any hobbies or play sports?

TS: Yes, I used to like to play basketball and, of course, we always had the pickup games in the street, but mostly the basketball. We had a little team from the church. …

GF: Which church was that? Was that St. Peter's?

TS: That was St. Peter's, yes, yes.

GF: Is St. Peter's a Catholic church?

TS: No. It's an Episcopal church, but I converted to [become] Catholic when I was in the military.

DR: As a child, did your family go to church often?

TS: Well, yes, they went every Sunday, same as I did, and they belonged to organizations in the church.

DR: Could you tell us a bit about what your father did?

TS: Yes, my father was a dentist. He was in the Army Reserves and, when the Second World War started, he was one of the first to be called in to active duty. He stayed in the States all his time, except, in the First World War, he was in France, but, at that time, he wasn't a dentist. … When he came out of the Second World War, he became the city dentist. He … had a clinic where he worked on anybody that couldn't afford a dentist and all the schoolchildren.

DR: Did he ever mention any of his experiences in World War I?

TS: Well, only that he was kind of thin and he almost couldn't get in because he was so thin, and that's about the only thing he ever mentioned.

GF: Do you remember the day he was activated for World War II?

TS: I remember more the time when Pearl Harbor was [bombed]. I was eight years old at the time and I remember hearing it on the radio, was on a Sunday, and I guess it wasn't long after that that he was called to active duty, maybe a few weeks. [Editor's Note: Pearl Harbor was attacked on December 7, 1941.]

DR: Being eight years old, did you really understand the significance of what you were hearing?

TS: No, not really, and I more remember when it ended. … I was twelve at the time, I believe, and, yes, I remember … all the excitement and all the noise and everything like that.

DR: Did you see the neighborhood change during the war at all?

TS: Well, yes, I saw most of the neighbors that were that age, the draft age, … go away. I guess that some of them were volunteers.

GF: Were there other kids your age who also had fathers who were called up?

TS: No, I can't remember any. … Mostly, they were older, the fathers that I knew.

GF: Did your father and your mother talk to you about the Great Depression at all, or did you maybe see its effects?

TS: No, I don't remember them saying much about that. I remember my wife's family talking about it. He was more of a working-class person and, you know, … it made a big impression on them.

GF: Did he tell you stories?

TS: I just remember that their reaction at the present time had a lot to do with how they had to live in the old [days], the Depression times.

DR: What did your family do while your father was away during the Second World War?

TS: Well, we took part in any of the drives that they had, to collect metal and stuff like that. Basically, you just [waited for your father]. Every once in awhile, he would come home on a leave and that was about all you did, was look forward to that. … In Perth Amboy, they had a naval base, down about a block away. So, I used to see a lot of the military there, the Navy, and, in fact, they had a small ship stationed there, too.

DR: Did your mother work during the war or did she stay at home?

TS: No, no, she just stayed home, really.

GF: When did your father and mother meet?

TS: I don't know. Now, I don't remember them mentioning where they met, no.

DR: Having a naval station so close by in Perth Amboy, did that put the idea in your head to maybe join the Navy or the Marines?

TS: Oh, yes, that helped, and I think the movies that we saw, after the war, made a big impression on all the kids.

GF: Which movies, like John Wayne movies?

TS: That would be mostly John Wayne movies, yes.

DR: When you were going to high school, did you have any plans for afterwards? When did you know you were going to join the Marines?

TS: Well, that was the reason I joined, because I wasn't sure what I wanted to do and I figured it would help if I learned something, matured a little bit, and maybe learned a trade or something, but it did enable me to go on the GI Bill to Rutgers. I started, went one year of days, and then, I got married and went at night for the rest of the [degree]. Well, that actually takes you eight years if you go nights, but I only had to go six after the first [year].

DR: How did your parents feel about you joining the Marines?

TS: Well, they had no problem. I just had to have them sign for me, because I was only seventeen, but, of course, my father was all for it.

GF: Why was he all for it?

TS: Well, he probably felt the same way I did. I didn't know what I wanted to do, so, it would give me a good start.

GF: You signed up in 1951. The Korean War had already started.

TS: Yes.

GF: Was that a motivating factor, too?

TS: Oh, yes, that was a motivating factor, yes.

GF: Were you following news updates on the situation there?

TS: Yes, you couldn't help but follow that, yes. …

GF: Did you perhaps know an older kid in the neighborhood who had already signed up?

TS: No. We didn't have too many that were around. … I went up to join with a friend of mine from high school, and, yes, he joined the Navy, but, at that time, the Marines was only three years. … So, I thought that would be the best, just the three, and then, I'd [get out], but it did set me back a little bit, because, when I got out, the people that I'd graduated from high school [with] already almost had their degrees and they were starting their jobs.

GF: When you went in, the GI Bill was definitely a part of your reasons for signing up.

TS: Yes.

GF: Were you planning to eventually go to college?

TS: No, I think it was [that] I realized, after I was already in, that would be the best bet to do

that. … Originally, I thought I would go to become an officer, but … that actually wasn't much of a challenge, see. [laughter] So, I figured it'd be better to get the degree and get a good job.

DR: How soon were you sent to basic training after you went and enlisted?

TS: That was about a week later. Yes, you enlist in Perth Amboy, and then, they send you to New York, and that's when you get your physical, and then, they send you right out.

DR: You were sent to Parris Island.

TS: Yes, Parris Island.

DR: Could you tell us a bit about basic training, what that was like?

TS: Well, at that time, it was kind of a surprise, because they were kind of [strict]. They were able to discipline you by hitting you, if they wanted to, and I got hit a couple times. Once, they didn't think I shaved thoroughly, and the other time, he caught me smiling while we were marching. [laughter] … They brainwash you to do what they tell you to do without any question.

DR: Were there a lot of people from around the country with your group in basic?

TS: There was mainly people from the New York area, I would say. … So, then, after basic, they sent me out to [Camp Pendleton]. Well, actually, during basic, they ask you what choices you want, what area you want to get into, and I didn't feel like I wanted to get into the infantry. So, I signed up for the tank or artillery, and then, they sent us to Camp Pendleton and that's where I got the tank training.

DR: Had you ever traveled much before you joined the military?

TS: No, never farther than maybe Metuchen and Perth Amboy. [laughter]

DR: Does anything stand out about your trip from the East Coast to the West Coast?

TS: That was the first time I was on an airplane, just a new experience, but, once I got on … a draft to go over to Korea, and that was in the sixteenth [draft]; it was actually the sixteen month from the beginning. … A draft every month would go over, and then, I got as far as Japan and there was about, I guess, four or five other guys, that we got taken off the ship and I never knew why. They told me [it was] because I was the sole surviving son, but my brother was still alive. He wasn't even in the military, and I think it was probably because I had maybe just turned eighteen. I think they were a little sensitive about sending guys into Korea that were so young, and so, they sent me to Guam for, … it was actually just guard duty. … Guam became an Air Force base, because, from World War II, they needed those stop-offs for the planes, and so, … I had guard duty for, well, it was actually ten months. You could put in to be transferred to either Hawaii or Kwajalein or the Philippines, or you could put in for Korea with ten months. So, rather than wait for a year, I put in for Korea and, when I got over there, they started to put me

into an infantry unit and I had to remind them that … I had tank training. … So, they sent me to a tank platoon.

DR: Could you tell us about your training with the tanks?

TS: Well, we actually trained on the old World War II tanks. They used a more advanced tank in Korea, which was the Patton tank. It's an M46, and we had trained on the M4, the Sherman tanks. … It was like a semi-truck. You had to double shift them, you know. … It was very difficult to drive those things, but, when I got over to the platoon in Korea, … I had some people there that showed [me how]. The guys that were getting ready to leave would show you how to drive the tank and all that. [Editor's Note: In 1951, the M46 Patton, along with the M4A3 Sherman, replaced the M26 Pershing, which was considered underpowered for maneuvering in mountainous terrain, in the Korean Theater.]

DR: Was that your position? You were a driver.

TS: Well, you start off as a loader, and then, as the guys move back to the States, you take their spots, and then, I became a driver.

DR: In training, were you trained on all the positions in the Sherman?

TF: No, you really don't get the loading [training], because we weren't doing any firing. So, it was mainly the driving that they taught you.

DR: What were the conditions like when you were training on the armor? Were you out in the field much?

TS: In Pendleton? … They'd truck you over to the depot where they had the tanks, and then, … they'd just take you out in the field and you'd drive around, take turns driving, and then, that was about it. You really got most of your training when you got there and the other guys in the platoon would show you what to do.

GF: Was tank training ever dangerous?

TS: Well, yes, you always had somebody outside guiding the driver and, sometimes, the drivers weren't too careful. … In Korea, I saw a guy almost get hit, run over, [laughter] but he moved fast enough. … Yes, in fact, next week, I'm planning to go down to Branson to meet with some of my friends from there. Of course, they're gradually [passing away]; … we're losing them.

GF: Branson, Missouri?

TS: Yes.

DR: Do you remember any accidents during training, people who made mistakes?

TS: No. We did have one of our tank commanders [who] was killed, and it was only about a

month before the ceasefire. [Editor's Note: The armistice that ended the Korean War went into effect on July 27, 1953.] Yes, it's very difficult to drive when your hatches are closed. In fact, in the hills, … they had dugouts where we would have to drive the tank into the dugout, and then, fire. When they gave us coordinates to fire, of course, the tank commander would take care of all of that, and the gunner. … If you can't see where you're going, it's up to the tank commander to open the hatch and guide you, and, unfortunately, … a mortar round hit the front of the turret and killed him.

DR: Could you tell us a bit about what it was like on Guam, what your guard duty entailed?

TS: Yes. You start off, yes, in these shifts. You would have eight to twelve, twelve to four, and then, back to … four to eight. … It was okay during the day, but [it was] just the night shifts that were kind of grueling, because all you did was stand around guarding these; they had fuel storage tanks there, in a lot of those fields, with storage tanks. … You'd have to walk around and there was nothing going on.

DR: There was never any trouble.

TS: No, there's never any trouble. [laughter] The only trouble we had [was] when the lieutenant in charge of the guard would come checking you out. That's about the only time you had any trouble, and then, after that, once you did that, you could be transferred to the gate duty, which happened later on. I got transferred to gate duty, and the same shifts, but … at least you had some activity going on, with people coming and going.

DR: Did you ever have any trouble with your commanding officers?

TS: No, I wouldn't say [so]. Most of the time, they just stayed where they were. …

DR: They never gave you a hard time.

TS: No, usually, any hard time you got was from the sergeants, because … the sergeants actually run the Marine Corps, yes.

GF: Were most of your superiors World War II vets?

TS: Yes, most of them were, yes.

GF: Would they talk to you guys about things that, maybe, they had picked up?

TS: No. … In boot camp, I'm sure they were from [the] Second World War, but, no, they didn't say much.

DR: Did you get to write home a lot or get letters from home?

TS: Oh, yes, … I used to write almost every day. …

GF: Were you writing to your wife at that time?

TS: No, we weren't married at the time. … Yes, I used to write home, but maybe once a week, I would write home, but I'd write almost every day to my girlfriend.

DR: Was there any downtime while you were on Guam?

TS: Oh, yes. … Usually, you had Sundays off, but most every day, no matter what shift you were on, you still had to clean up everything and they'd inspect the barracks. … It was mainly the kind of military life you didn't really care for, because you always had to keep everything clean and there's a lot of drilling.

GF: What was the food like?

TS: Well, there, you had a huge mess hall, because we were on a base with the Navy and you had a mess hall with maybe four lines of meals. … Every once in a while, … you had to work on mess duty for a week. I think, now, … they've sort of realized that they [can] hire outside people to do that kind of work, but, in Korea, I did a lot of it, had to wash the pots and stuff.

DR: Is there anything that stands out from your time on Guam? Were there any strange assignments that you had?

TS: No. Sometimes, … you'd get MP duty, and I was always afraid. I had no training as an MP. I mean, I was always afraid that there might be something [that would] happen, that I'd have to do something. Usually, you were out with some of the Navy people, and there's nothing much. Guam was a very small place. … They had one big city there and, … any time off you had, you had to be back by, like, eleven o'clock at night. So, there wasn't much going on.

DR: Did the USO ever put on any shows?

TS: Yes, we had one show that I remember, yes.

DR: What was that?

TS: I don't remember too much about that one, but I do remember that … we did have one in Korea, that the USO came, and that was Rory Calhoun, I don't know if you remember him, and Lita Baron. There's a few others. … They were pretty close to the main line. Then, when Bob Hope came, he was back in Seoul and he didn't have to worry about anything. Yes, that was the only thing. I do remember those.

GF: Were you following the developments in Korea on Guam?

TS: No, I mean, not really. … I was more anxious to get away from there, because it was kind of monotonous. … Sometimes, you even get guard duty in the brig and that was terrible, because … the prisoners could sleep, but you had to stay awake and walk around … these boards on top, so [that] you could look down on them. … Guard duty was not what you joined the

military for. [laughter]

GF: Did you ever have any experience as an MP beforehand?

TS: No, never had any training in anything like that. In fact, I carried a .45 pistol all the time I was in, except when I was on guard duty with [a rifle]. Well, we did drilling with an M-1, … but, other than that, I always had a .45, but I only fired it maybe once or twice and that's all. All the time I was in Korea, [I] never had to fire a pistol.

DR: What was Korea like when you got transferred there?

TS: Well, I was the only one that came into the company, because … I was the only one with the training in that group, the little group I was with. We were in Japan for awhile. Well, that was before I went to Guam and, when I came back from Guam, they knew exactly where [to put me], after I told them I was in a tank company in the States. … So, I came into the platoon and I was the only one that came in at that time. … They put me in the twenty-sixth draft, and that's how you know when you're going to [come home]. A year later, you're going to go home, when the whole draft would go, and I met up with some friendly guys, my first tank commander, who I'm going to see next week, I hope. … He was a guy that was drafted into the Marine Corps. … When he went down to have his physical, they said that they needed volunteers for the Marines and he, the recruiter, just said, "You, you and you are going in the Marines." He was a little older than me. … His driver was another guy from Indiana and he taught me everything about the tank, and so did the tank commander, and we got along pretty well.

DR: How did you get to Korea? Did you fly in?

TS: Yes, … I flew from Guam. … I guess they put you on a standby, and then, … when the plane goes, you go with it, yes.

DR: How did you get to your unit in Korea? Were you driven through the countryside?

TS: On a jeep, yes, in a jeep.

GF: Where was your position? You were not in Seoul. You were right on the line.

TS: Yes, we were about eighty miles above Seoul. … Well, at that time, … from April 1952 to June or July, when it ended, in 1953, it was called the "Outpost War," and a lot of people only talk about [the war] up to that point, but there were almost seventeen hundred Marines [who] were killed … in that period of time. What it was was, they would send a platoon of Marines out to an outpost and they were the first warning. If the Chinese happened to attack, they would be the first ones that would stop them, and the Chinese would attack in huge numbers, and then, they [the Marines at the outpost] would call the tanks. … We would go up in the firing position and, when there were a lot of Chinese coming, … they had dugouts in the trenches and they would get in the dugouts, the Marines, and we would fire the ninety millimeters at them. … Of course, they would retreat and, sometimes, they would overtake the outpost and the Marines would have to take their wounded or whoever and go back to the main line. … Then, the next

day or so, they'd go back and take it back from them. It was just a constant [back-and-forth], you know. … They would go out on patrols when they were out there, too, and we had these big searchlights on the tanks and we would go up on the hill and shine the lights. So, that would help them in their patrols.

DR: Do you remember any of the places you were stationed along the front, any names?

TS: Well, … we were … basically on the west coast. They moved the Marines from the east coast to the west coast, I think because it was mainly Chinese on the west [coast], … and, plus, it wasn't quite as hilly in the west. The hills were … high, but not that bad. Sometimes, we had trouble getting the tank up the hill, but that was kind of rare. That maybe only happened a couple times. … I think the tankers we had were pretty good. We got back to a bunker during the night, so, we were pretty safe. We didn't have to worry too much about any firefighting. They would fire mortars a lot and we found that on holidays, the Communist holiday, May 1st, we would exchange a lot of fire, and then, on, like, our Memorial Day and any other American holiday, we would exchange a lot of fire then. … In fact, I think it was a Memorial Day, … in May, … [that] our sergeant on one of the tanks got killed. He was a pretty good friend, from Texas, although you don't really … know their first [names], any first names. I only found that out afterwards; you only know them by their last name. Yes, so, … I thought I would go home right after the ceasefire was signed, but … I did have to stay until my draft left, which was from July to October, but, in the meantime, we exchanged prisoners and we did put on a show for them. [Editor's Note: From August to December of 1953, a series of prisoner exchanges, known collectively as Operation: BIG SWITCH, were made between the United Nations and Communist forces.] We had some flame tanks go up and, when the train went by, they were quite a distance away, but they would shoot off some flames. I guess they wanted to make sure they didn't, you know, think about coming back. … I got in trouble, because I got in one of the tanks and I was looking through the telescope to look at the train. … Of course, you have to move the telescope and, at the same time, the gun moves, and I did get yelled at for scaring them. [laughter] So, [I] never thought that they would be scared of the tank. … There was more just waiting to see what would happen between July and when I left, and then, when I got back to the States, I helped train new tankers. We had the newer [tank], a newer tank, and we had the M60, I think it was. [Editor's Note: Mr. Symanski is referring to the M48 Patton tank.] They were a little more advanced. … Supposedly, they had a rangefinder on them, but not too many people knew how to work [it]. … I was in Camp Lejeune at that time and we went down to Vieques in Puerto Rico, off the coast of Puerto Rico, and trained. … We did some firing and that was pretty good training for the new guys coming in.

GF: You said that there were many things you did not feel were current in your training until you actually got there.

TS: Right.

GF: When you were doing the training, was it just that those were the things that you had to learn there?

TS: Yes. … Some guys were in actual tank companies for awhile before they went, were sent to

Korea. I've met some of them and I'll see a couple of those guys when I go next week, and so, they were basically doing a lot more than we were doing. We only had maybe about two months of going out [and] training and, even then, we didn't do any firing that I remember. … So, we were just in training, we weren't in a company. … Some of these guys were a little older, they had been in real training, but it really doesn't take you very long to learn from somebody that's been there.

DR: When you were in Korea, were there any typical days? What would you do? How would you find out what you were going to do each morning, what position you would go to?

TS: Well, they would have a little assembly of the different platoons. … There were five platoons and each platoon had, like, five tanks and we would get out there and … we would find out whether we were going to go out. Usually, the tank commander would get all that information. … He'd get the maps and everything, and then, … he would say, "Let's [go]," tell us where to go, and then, sometimes, you did have to go out at night. … You knew about that in advance, and then, the next day, they'd let you sleep a little longer.

DR: You mentioned that you got to stay in the bunker at night. What were the conditions like?

TS: Well, you usually had one [tank crew to a bunker], … whatever, the five guys that were manning the tank were in one bunker, and so, you had, like, five bunkers. … Sometimes, they would bring up your meals to you from the main mess hall, … but, other times, you would eat C rations, canned stuff, leftover from World War II, and it's that same thing. You just go out and go up to where they told you to fire. … By then, I think they knew what every range of every place was, and they had spotters flying over in the small Piper Cub-type planes.

GF: By the time you got over to Korea, the Chinese had already entered the war. You said that you were dealing primarily with the Chinese. Was it clear that it was the Chinese and not the North Koreans?

TS: No, I really never could tell. I mean, … we did have an instance where we saw a couple, but I didn't know whether they're Chinese or North Koreans out there firing at us with a bazooka. That was one of the first times I was there, … but we really couldn't tell the difference. … We just heard that they were Chinese, I mean, from people that were there. … The first time I went out, they had put some bodies up on the hill, … of Marines, and, of course, you know, they [the US Marines] have to go get the bodies and they [the Communists] were just daring them to go get them, and they did. So, [it] was a pretty good experience.

DR: Do you remember seeing any prisoners that were taken?

TS: Well, only the ones on the train, you know. … For awhile, we were attached to a Turkish company, because they came over and they were … infantry and we were supporting them with the tanks.

DR: Were there any communication difficulties, a language barrier?

TS: No, no. The communications are dealt with between headquarters, and they would call us. … We would sit down behind a hill and they'd call us, and we had to have the radio on all the time, and we'd have to go up and do whatever the [mission called for], fire wherever we had to. I do remember some Turks. I watched them attack a hill. I was watching them run through the trenches and, you know, it was a UN [United Nations] action. … One time, we did visit an Australian tank company, just a get-together. … They played a little cricket and stuff like that.

GF: Did you ever play cricket?

TS: No, no.

DR: Just watched?

TS: It didn't take, yes.

GF: Did you ever figure it out? It seems kind of hard. [laughter]

TS: No, actually, when they were getting together, we took off and went to find a place to swim. So, we found a little pond to swim in, because, you know, you don't really get to wash that often. You're really dealing with a bucket and water and that's about it. … In the winter, like when I got there in October, I didn't get a shower until the next spring. I mean, you're not going to go out in the winter and shower. … When we were in the battalion reserve, you were living in tents, twelve-men tents, and you had a stove in the tent and you could heat water on that, and so, the winter wasn't too bad, … but, once the spring came, they would have places where they would have these outdoor showers. So, that was a help and, of course, I did get the lice, body lice, you end up [with]. It's almost impossible to avoid it.

DR: What were the conditions like in the tank? Was it ever unbearably hot or too cold?

TS: Mostly, the cold was what you had there. … Whenever you're in position, you had to get out and start up this auxiliary little engine they had in the back, and you had to get out and start that to keep the battery from going dead. … Of course, you could start up the engine and warm up on that a little bit, but, then, the heat didn't really stay very long in the engine. … That was the only thing. … The heat, well, really, that didn't bother me too much. I wasn't there a lot during the heat, because I got there in October, so, most of my time was in either the spring or the winter. … You did have a lot of mud in the spring. You did get rainy weather.

GF: Did any of the tanks ever get stuck in the mud?

TS: Oh, yes, yes, we would have tanks get stuck. We had a lot of problems with the [mud]. See, these tanks were converted from the M26, which … didn't have as powerful an engine and it didn't have as big a cannon on it. … So, they put this twelve-cylinder engine in them, but there was a drive that would run the sprocket to run the tread and, those things, we had trouble with them. They were about that round, about six, eight inches round, and they would break, occasionally, where you're going down the road or making a turn, and so, we'd have to take the track off and replace those things.

DR: How difficult was that, in those field conditions?

TS: That was … pretty bad.

DR: Did the whole crew get out?

TS: Yes, that you had trouble getting [the tread off]. There's a main link in the track and you had to take that [off] with a sledgehammer and get that off. Once you got that off, then, you could take the track off, and then, replace the final drive.

DR: How long would that take? Would that take all day, usually?

TS: No, that would take you maybe a couple hours, yes, and, sometimes, you'd just be going down the road and … it'd just hit, and then, you couldn't steer the tank then.

DR: Did you ever have to get out and work on the tank under fire at all?

TS: No, no, usually, … [for] instance, I never would drive with the hatch closed, because I knew that was almost impossible, but the one time, we were going up to fire and there was a lot of incoming and we came on it. Just before we got up to the top of the hill, there was a truck, a big, I don't [know], what'd they call them, six wheels, eight wheelers? whatever, [perhaps the GMC CCKW truck], was stuck in the road and we only had one way to get there. So, I lowered my seat, which was probably a big mistake, but, anyway, the tank commander, he got out and he went over and he tried to start the tank, … I mean the truck, and, of course, it wouldn't start for him. This was my second tank commander. He was a guy from Alabama, but I thought that was pretty good, but, then, when we were ready to go, I said [that] I really didn't want to move my seat up. [laughter] I had to get all my nerve up to [do so], because there was still a lot of stuff landing back there. A little piece of shrapnel landed on my leg and burned a hole in my pants. [laughter] No, I didn't really want to move up, but I eventually had to. … We backed around and we had to go back to the CP [command post] and, while we were there, I don't know whether it was [that] they thought we were up there, … they were getting a lot of reports of … people [attacking], a lot of incoming, … but we were … in the CP, sitting out there … in the open. … At that point, I got out and got underneath the tank. … When you're eighteen, nineteen, you don't really think about those things too much.

DR: Do you remember seeing any of the enemy yourself in person? Did they ever get close enough that you could see them?

TS: Well, the two that were firing, that's about the closest, firing a bazooka at us. They were close enough. You couldn't really tell, … I don't think I would ever be able to tell, the difference between a North Korean and a Chinese, but their uniform was a little different. … Yes, that's about as close as I got to them.

DR: Did you ever see any enemy tanks?

TS: No, thankfully, no, we never did. We did see [one]. They had one in one of our battalion reserve [areas]. They had one there, a T-34. They were the Russian tanks that they used, but … I think they were probably more difficult to drive than ours.

DR: When you say they had one, was it captured?

TS: Yes, it was just sitting there. … Also, we did have the flame tanks, but they were the old M4s from the Second World War [that] they had rigged up to have a flame shooter on them. … There was one of those sitting in the CP and it had holes in the turret, because … one of the lieutenants was killed on it, but they didn't have much use for the flame tanks when we were there, because they would never get close enough to [use it]. They did have the Corsairs go over with the flames and we would see them at a distance.

DR: Did you ever have to call in air support?

TS: No, that would be up to the guys on the outpost. They would do that.

DR: Did you ever have any leave behind the lines, a few days off?

TS: Yes. … We did get one week of what they call R&R. … They'd send us to Japan for a week. I went with another guy, one of the guys that I will see next week, and, yes, we went to Japan for a week, and then, … occasionally, … they'd take us in a truck, we'd go back to Seoul. … At least there was more there than there was where we were.

DR: What did you do when you had time off, sleep or explore the area?

TS: No. Sometimes, I would walk. After the ceasefire, I would hitch a ride. Two times, I went back to go to the dentist. I had to hitch a ride. You'd go out on the road and the jeeps would go by. … I went back to the dentist one time, and then, I went up to visit a guy from New Jersey that was in my … boot camp, in the same platoon, that I knew from New Jersey. … A couple times, I went with him on the bus. When we were coming home, I went with him.

DR: Did you interact with the South Koreans at all, the civilians?

TS: We used to see their bases, but we didn't interact with them.

DR: After the fighting stopped, what did you do? Were you just stationed at the front?

TS: Well, we were in battalion reserve and, at one point, … whether it was a couple weeks or a week, I don't remember, but … I went and worked at a storage area where they had the boxes of cans of food for [the soldiers], and then, we would load the trucks, like that.

DR: Do you remember any black market activity going on, or stealing?

TS: No. When I was back in Seoul, on that little daytrip they sent us on, one of the Koreans asked if I would sell my .45. Of course, I wouldn't do that. [laughter]

DR: Were you just biding your time, waiting to be shipped back?

TS: Yes, that's about it. … I kept thinking that I might go back anytime, but … I did have to wait until that October before my draft went back. … Then, you go back and you have your sea bag full of your uniforms and stuff, because you checked them out when you get there.

DR: Was there any anxiety about the North Koreans breaking the ceasefire and the war starting up again?

TS: I think they did have trouble, at some point, up in the Panmunjom [area], where they had the talks. I think there was an attack there, and this was after, well after, the ceasefire, and I think there were some Marines who were killed, or some Army. [Editor's Note: Mr. Symanski may be referring to the "Axe Murder Incident" in which North Korean soldiers killed two US Army officers on August 18, 1976, which led to a standoff between United Nations and North Korean forces.] I don't remember who was there, but they have a nice [memorial]. Some of the friends of mine, a couple that I'll see next week, I hope, they went back to Korea only a few years ago and they said they have a nice area there at Panmunjom where they have the plaques and everything and … they have the names of the people that were killed.

GF: Have you thought about going back at all?

TS: Yes, I've thought about going back, but I probably won't. I don't think I will. No, I might, you know. Well, about two-and-a-half years ago, my wife died from cancer, so, … I stopped going on a lot of trips, but I figured this one, … next week, I probably won't see these guys again. Some of them … already are [not able to make it]. One's in the hospital now, that he won't be there. The other guy, … I think he's got a little dementia, so, he probably won't be there.

DR: Have you kept in touch with the people you served with?

TS: Yes, we have a tanker's organization. … Some of them are members, but not all of them; some, we lost track of them, don't know where they went.

DR: How did you get back to the US?

TS: Well, you go back on ships with the draft, … because I first originally went over on a ship, … then, got sidetracked in Japan, then, it was all airplanes after that, … except, when coming back, you come back on a troopship.

DR: Do you remember anything about the ride? Was it an easy trip back?

TS: Well, there were some rough times, and I think the only time I got sick coming back was when we came into San Francisco, and then, it was kind of rough there, probably because I hadn't been home for two years. So, that didn't help, but, then, they kept us there in San Francisco. … You're just around the Alcatraz Island, you could see it from where we were, and

then, they assigned you to a base, and then, I got my assignment to Camp Lejeune.

GF: Had you continued writing letters since training, when you went over to Korea?

TS: You mean with people that I was with in the military? There was one fellow that I wrote to. He wrote to me first, I guess, and, of course, when you have these magazines, [under veterans of] the First Division, they have names and addresses in there. So, sometimes, you get in touch with people that way, and I did. One of the guys in my platoon was from Freehold. I went down to talk to him, but that was only when I first got out. Since then, I haven't seen any of them.

DR: Were you still keeping in touch with your family at home during the war?

TS: Oh, sure, yes.

GF: What kind of things would you say in the letters to them? Were there just general things, such as, "I am fine?"

TS: Yes, that kind of thing, and … what we were doing and, yes, I think my father understood most of that kind of living. He went through that. …

GF: As a dentist in France, had he actually seen trench warfare?

TS: I think he just drove an ambulance when he was in the First World War. The Second World War, he … usually ran a clinic. … At that time, he was, I think, when he got called back in, … a major and he finished up as a lieutenant colonel and he used to enjoy that, because he was head of the clinic and he would see that all the dental work of the military was taken care of. … Most of the time, he was down South. He was either in Mississippi, Georgia, sometimes in Florida. … Yes, he enjoyed that, because he was in charge and he didn't have to worry about patients and things like that, [such as] in private practice, and, of course, when he got back, … he had no private practice. It was all gone. So, that's when he got the job with the city.

DR: When you were sent to Camp Lejeune to train the other tankers, what was that like? Was it easy for you to train them?

TS: Oh, yes, yes, they were just boys like me coming in, seventeen, eighteen, and, by that time, I was, you know, pretty well advanced in what was going on. … They were asking me to reenlist, but I decided I wanted to go to school. So, the only bad part was, when you got leave time, it was hard to get back from North Carolina to [New Jersey]. I would get a bus from [Camp Lejeune]. Well, at the time, you would get your return fare. [It] was, like, you always got a fare for a penny to get back. They wanted to make sure you got back. So, … we would get the bus from Camp Lejeune to Washington, DC, and then, I'd take the train up to Newark. … Then, I'd usually have to hitch a ride from Newark to Perth Amboy, because the busses were not running at two o'clock in the morning. … So, that was the only hard part.

DR: Long ride. [laughter]

TS: Yes.

DR: When you were in the South, the military had just recently been integrated. Did you encounter any segregation?

TS: Well, … one of the fellows that I would ride occasionally [with] on the bus, it was a black guy from New Jersey and he would have to go into the "colored only" section of the [bus], wherever we stopped. It was a bus stop. They'd have the white section and the black section, and I never [expected it]. It was kind of a surprise, because we didn't have any of that in New Jersey.

GF: Did you think that, overall, the integration process was going smoothly or was there tension?

TS: No, … I didn't notice a lot of blacks in the tankers, but we still had some. We had one fellow from New Jersey and we had one from West Virginia, … and there were other platoons that had some. In fact, our barber, whose last name was Barber, [laughter] but [the] commanding officer called on him to be the company barber, so, yes, he was black. … I guess he learned how to cut hair while he was there, because he didn't know anything about it before that. Yes, so, … I saw very little problems with that [segregation] in the military, and, when I was on Guam, we had quite a few blacks in our company. In fact, some of them were boxers. Yes, they would [box], we had matches against the Navy, … had a good time.

GF: When you were training people, what sort of situation in Korea did you think you were training for? Was it a stalemate at this point?

TS: No, you just get them familiar with the tank itself, how to clean the weapons, and we would go out on these training missions, a bunch of tanks go out, and then, it's really all you can do at that point. You just get them to be so familiar with it [the tank] that they know what they're doing.

GF: In Korea, as the war was still going on, did you feel that there was progress being made?

TS: Well, … no, at that point, with the "Outpost War," you weren't supposed to take any territory. [Editor's Note: Mr. Symanski is referring to the period in which ground combat consisted largely of battles over outpost positions after the main line had settled approximately along the 38th Parallel.] You're just supposed to stay there and make sure that they didn't attack and get to the main line, and that's basically all you [did], and, fortunately, they never got to the main line. They would just go and take an outpost and they stay there until it was taken back. I mean, when I was there, … they called the different hills by different names. We had the Nevada cities; they had called one hill "Vegas," "Carson City," different hills there. Actually, they have numbers, based on the height of the hill, so many 150 feet high, or whatever it was, and then, they would name them, have certain names for them, and they would change occasionally. [Editor's Note: Hills Vegas, (Hill 157), Reno (Hill 148) and Carson (Hill 229) were located in an area approximately sixteen kilometers northeast of Panmunjom.]

GF: Were there any problems with the tanks going up the hills?

TS: Yes, that one time was a problem. I remember, when the weather was kind of humid, they ran better, because it was a matter of the evaporation of your [fuel], of the gas. … Sometimes, they would get up so far, and then, the tracks would just start moving. … One time, I just could not get it up the hill, but, then, we would just go back to the command post and wait for orders to do whatever we had to do.

GF: Were there landmines at all?

TS: No, we had no worry about landmines, I don't think, at that time.

GF: Do you remember any close calls, aside from the ones that we talked about?

TS: No, it was mainly this mortar fire was what they [fired], because you had the hills. That [the mortars] can go over the hill without any trouble. … Once it started, you just found some place to hide, and that was about the only time you worried about anything, very small. Small arms, you never got any of that.

DR: Were you ever harassed at night by planes flying over?

TS: No, no. They say there was, like, a small plane that they would fly over some of the Air Force bases and drop mortars, but they never bothered us, and so, yes, that was no problem.

DR: Were there any worries about the Chinese or North Koreans sneaking through the lines to perform sabotage missions?

TS: No.

GF: Do you feel that the Chinese were well-trained? Did it seem like they had a plan for what they were doing?

TS: No. I think they just had more [troops], a lot of numbers of people. I think they lost, then, like a hundred thousand of their troops, but that's [mostly riflemen?]. [Editor's Note: The official casualty statistics declared by the People's Republic of China include over 114,000 combat deaths.] Fortunately, they didn't have tanks, they didn't have much, there was no flyover. Any of those dogfights you see on [the] History Channel were all Russian pilots, and that was up north of us. We never saw any of that. We only saw the flame, [when] the Corsairs come over with the flames that they would drop, and that's about it. … I can't remember any other problems.

GF: How clear was the Soviet involvement?

TS: Well, I've learned more about it since I've been home and I see it on the History Channel. I've … read books about it and it does seem as if this was a real great thing of, well, Stalin

convinced the Chinese to wage the war and, after he died, that's probably why they did sign the truce, because they were losing so many Chinese and they weren't really getting anywhere. … When [General Douglas] MacArthur decided to go up to the Yalu River, he probably shouldn't have done that, because, at that point, … he had the 38th Parallel. [Editor's Note: US Army General Douglas MacArthur, United Nations Commander, drove North Korean forces out of South Korea and up to the Yalu River, the boundary between North Korea and China, which led to a massive Chinese intervention that drove the UN Forces back to the 38th Parallel.] He should have just stopped at that point, because that's what it ended up [being]. I mean, we ended up where we started, and so far, I understand the North isn't accomplishing much, but they … have accomplished a lot in the South. You have … their Korean cars, you have a lot of industry going on over there. You know, in fact, our Mayor of Edison, [New Jersey], is from Korea. [Editor's Note: Jun Choi, Mayor of Edison from 2006 to 2009, was born in Seoul, South Korea.] We have a lot of Koreans in Edison.

DR: You mentioned the programs on the History Channel about Korea. Having been there, do you find some of these shows to be accurate or are they way off?

TS: Well, they're accurate up to a point, but they don't really deal at all [with the later period]. If you get these DVDs on [the] Korean War, they just go up to when the "Outpost War" started and that's it. They just stop. They don't deal with that … hardly at all. … There were quite a few people that got the Medal of Honor, [the highest military honor given by the United States], in that period of time. [In] fact, there was one that I think he got one about a month before they had the ceasefire [on July 27, 1953]. …

GF: You received a few awards, right?

TS: Well, they're mainly unit awards. I mean, you get the Korean Medal, it's given by the Government of Korea, [Republic of Korea War Service Medal], and you get the UN Medals, you get those, [United Nations Service Medal for Korea], and … our two tank companies got unit citations.

DR: Were you involved in any of those actions that they earned citations for?

TS: Yes, that was the B Company and C Company; we were [with them] in that time period. I think it was mainly when we were supporting the Army and the Turk Army, [Turkish forces that fought in the Korean War as part of the United Nations]. That's that period of time, yes.

GF: Did you interact with the Turkish forces?

TS: Well, we would see them. I mean, we were doing the same thing they were. We were waiting for them, for something to be done, and we would see them walking around, and then, I did watch them in the trenches. … We were sitting in a tank on another hill and I watched a Turk running up around [the area], looking for the Chinese.

DR: Did they fight any differently?

TS: No, I think they did pretty much … just as good as our infantry. Yes, I have [a book]; there is a sergeant from … the A Company, and I was in B Company. This sergeant wrote a couple books about the period, that outpost time and that. So, I got a lot of information from that, pictures and stuff. [Editor's Note: Mr. Symanski is referring to *The Outpost War: US Marine Corps in Korea, Volume 1: 1952* by Lee Ballenger.]

DR: You mentioned the Australians. Did you interact with them often or was it just that one time?

TS: No, just that one time, yes. You know, there were Scottish troops there, but they were, a lot of them, were on the east coast.

DR: Being in the Marines, did you interact with the Army much?

TS: That was that one instance. We did support the Army, too. … See, using tanks as mobile artillery was kind of new for this, for the Korean War, and we did train the Army in how to use them for that purpose.

GF: Where did you train them? Was it in Korea?

TS: Yes, right in Korea, yes.

GF: Was there any rivalry among the branches of the US Armed Forces?

TS: No. The Marines are mostly in competition with the Navy, because … we were under the Navy, and that was usually our usual times. … Now, when I went down to Vieques, [an island between Puerto Rico and St. Thomas] in Puerto Rico, we were on an LST [landing ship, tank] which was run by the Navy. So, we ran into some Navy then.

DR: Did you have to do any amphibious landings with tanks?

TS: That was the training, yes. That was what you went down there [for]. You were on an LST, you had to learn how to chain them [the tanks] down and all that, and then, how to get off. It wasn't really that hard, but it was the first time we did that, and I guess, at the time period before I got to Korea, they did have the Inchon Landing. That was when they cut the … North Koreans off at the 38th Parallel. [Editor's Note: Beginning with an amphibious landing on September 15, 1950, the Battle of Inchon led to the liberation of Seoul and allowed UN forces trapped in the Pusan Perimeter to the south to effect a breakout.]

DR: Did you train at all in amphibious tactics before you went over?

TS: No, no. … When I was down in Vieques, they filmed the movie *Battle Cry,* [a 1955 film staring Van Helfin], and some of the actors came down and we simulated a landing.

DR: Were you involved with what was in the movie?

TS: Yes. It was only about maybe a minute of that in the movie itself, but, there, we saw [film star and musician] Tab Hunter and a few of the other actors that we had seen in the movies before.

GF: During R&R [rest and relaxation], did you play basketball or watch movies?

TS: No, I played a little basketball when I was on Guam, but, no, … other than Guam, I didn't play any basketball.

DR: You mentioned a few stays in Japan. What was that experience like?

TS: Well, that was okay there, if you didn't really have much money. I mean, when I first got there, I was taken off the ship. … We had to do a little bit of going around to find [the paymaster], get our pay, and, well, there wasn't much going on in Japan. I mean, you go out and you go to the shops and stuff.

DR: Did you stay in any major cities?

TS: Yes, we did travel around Kobe, [the capital of Hyogo Prefecture, on the southern side of the island of Honshū], and I think Yokosuka, [in the Kanawaga Prefecture, located at the mouth of Tokyo Bay, home to the US Navy's largest Western Pacific naval base], some of the towns. … I don't remember a lot about it.

GF: What was the attitude towards the American military stationed in Japan at that time?

TS: Well, they were welcomed. … There was no problem with them.

DR: Having grown up during World War II, did you have any idea of what Japan would be like?

TS: No, no. We didn't know what to expect from the Japanese, but, at that point, they were pretty much accepting that we were there.

GF: The Korean War was a motivating factor for you joining the Marines. Was the war seen as a fight against Communism?

TS: No, it's more that you want to test yourself, to see what you can do. … I think that's it, yes.

GF: The debate about the Korean War is always over whether it was a conflict or a war …

TS: Police action? [laughter]

GF: Yes. [laughter]

TS: Well, it was kind of strange. … It was a UN action and, … once the North attacked the South, we were pretty much obligated to help them out, because they were part of the UN. … I

never really questioned much of that, and we know [more information] now, after reading some of the books about it.

GF: What did you see happening in Korea when you left? Had it wound down at that point?

TS: No. I did see Seoul during the times they let us go down there, but it didn't look like much. There was not a lot of buildings standing. They had been through a lot, and so, I didn't see any progress at that point. I mean, they're mostly agriculture there and I was surprised to see what it looks like now.

GF: Is there a sense of pride in South Korea's success?

TS: Oh, sure. … I mean, when I see the KIA automobiles, I see people buying Hyundais, I say, "Well, you know, that wouldn't have been possible if we would have let them be under North Korean influence." [Editor's Note: The Hyundai Motor Company, headquartered in Seoul, South Korea, is the world's fifth largest automaker. KIA Motors, founded in 1944, is South Korea's second largest automobile manufacturer.]

GF: Do you have any vivid memories of your experiences before, during or after the Korean War that we have not really talked about?

TS: No. … You remember the times when there was a lot of incoming [rounds] and that time when I lowered my seat and I couldn't get [up]; I had to get the nerve up to get back up again, stick my head up. That's where you learn … that what you were doing is, could be, dangerous, and the guys, a couple guys, firing at us were [there to kill us]. That was an experience, but those are just a couple of things I remember. … I also remember a lot of times when I was on mess duty and all the work that had to be done. The lack of sleep, the conditions, the sanitary conditions, … I remember that. … We used to have to cook our clothes. I mean, we used to have to lug the water up there. We had half fifty-five-gallon drums, that we'd have to put a fire under them, and we would usually take gasoline and use that [to start a fire]. … So, that was an experience.

DR: Did you ever encounter any soldiers who could not take the pressure of combat on the front lines?

TS: No, I don't think [so]. … When I talk to the fellow from New Jersey that I went to visit, he's mentioned something about one of the guys that … wasn't too willing to fight. … We never had anybody in our platoon, or in our company, for that matter, [who was not willing to fight]. Pretty much, … the training you get pretty much makes you hesitant to not do anything they tell you to do.

DR: When you left Korea, did you think that you might ever wind up back in Korea, with the military?

TS: Well, … when you join, … it's really like you're three years as active and five years inactive. … During that five-year inactive period, you could get called any time, but, during that

time, of course, … I got married after I got out, … I guess maybe a year or so after. … A year later, I had one child already, and then, I actually had four all together, but, at one point, I think I had one or two children and I tried to join back up again. I went to the Marine Corps first, in the Reserves, and he said, "Well, if you have dependents, we don't want you." … My father knew a general that was in Camp Kilmer at the time. They had a unit there and I talked to him, but he said no, and, once you have a couple dependents, they don't really want you anymore. So, it was probably good, because Vietnam started not long after that.

DR: What made you want to go back in the Marine Corps?

TS: Well, I really wanted to go in as a Reserve, because, then, … you get payments for going monthly. … You know, I had a family and I figured that'd be extra money, but never thinking that, you know, something like Vietnam would start up, and then, I'd probably be one of the first to go.

GF: Did the buildup for the war in Vietnam seem similar to the buildup for the Korean War?

TS: Yes. I never could understand why people were so much against it [the Vietnam War], because it was basically what we did all through every war. We went in and helped the people that were being oppressed and couldn't help themselves, and especially Vietnam, … they were not prepared for that kind of thing. … Yet, people thought that was the worst thing we could have done and I never could see it that way.

GF: Your wife was your girlfriend while you were in Korea.

TS: Yes, right, yes.

GF: Did you get married when you came back?

TS: Not immediately, no. It was about a year, I guess, that we went together, and then, decided to get married.

DR: When you got out of the Marines, did you go back home to Perth Amboy?

TS: Yes, yes, I went back with my parents and … I stayed with them until I got married and I got a house in Avenel, [an area within Woodbridge Township, New Jersey]. My father had to help me with the down payment, and then, of course, at that time, … whatever your wife did, whatever income she had, … didn't enter into it [the mortgage], because they figured that she would be out of work … as soon as the babies were [coming] along. So, that was why it was tough to get a mortgage, but I got one, and then, eventually, … I went to Edison after that and got a house.

DR: What were you doing for work?

TS: Well, … of course, I was going to college in the evenings, at that point, and I got a job with, … it was then the Raritan Arsenal, … which is now where Middlesex [County] College is.

[Editor's Note: Part of the former 3,200-acre Raritan Arsenal site, once used for ammunition storage, renovation and disposal, became part of the Middlesex County College campus in Edison, New Jersey.] Yes, I worked in the accounting office there, and then, … I was still going to school at night. … I wasn't majoring in accounting, but I was majoring in business. … Well, actually, I started to major in chemistry, but that was a little bit too tough to go at night [while] doing that, so, I went into the business [major]. … At that time, business management was pretty much in demand. … You'd be hired as a management trainee. … A lot of big companies were doing that, but, then, by the time I got my degree, that had sort of leveled off and the Raritan Arsenal was closing up [in 1963], because that was around the time, I guess, JFK came in, [in 1961], and they were reducing the military spending. So, they closed it up and I happened to work with a woman whose husband worked at RCA [Radio Corporation of America] in Somerville, [New Jersey], and she said, "Go over there and get an interview." … I went over a couple times, got a couple different interviews, and I got the job there and I worked for them for twenty-seven years. … Well, I did go back and take more accounting courses.

DR: Was this at Rutgers-New Brunswick? [Editor's Note: Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, founded in 1766, has its main campus in New Brunswick, New Jersey.]

TS: Yes, yes, University College, they call it, yes. [Editor's Note: University College was a college within Rutgers University established in 1934 in order to meet the needs of adult and part-time students. It was eliminated in 2007 with the creation of the School of Arts and Sciences.]

DR: You were there full-time for a year.

TS: I was there for full-time for a year and, at that time, I was majoring in chemistry, but, when I went to nights, I changed to business.

DR: Did you commute?

TS: Yes, I commuted all the time, yes.

GF: Were you involved with organizations at the school?

TS: Yes. … Near the end, I got on the yearbook committee. I was on a few of the other organizations, … but, usually, when I was winding down, finishing up, I started joining some of the organizations. Yes, that was kind of tough, … because, … by then, I had at least three kids and it's kind of hard to get study time in, [laughter] but … my wife was managing okay. She got me study time all right.

DR: Did you feel any difference between you and some of the younger students at Rutgers?

TS: Well, yes, the first year was kind of a surprise. I mean, there weren't that many veterans around and we had the [chapel services]. Yes, you know, you had to go to these get-togethers in the chapel [Kirkpatrick Chapel] over there, … learn the cheers and the songs. You were supposed to wear a little beanie type hat, [commonly called a dink], and a black and red tie. …

No, I didn't much care for that, but, of course, when I went at night, it was much different, and I think it was better, because you were in classes with people that wanted to be there and they would ask the questions that the kids didn't ask. … I met a lot of people … there that I got friendly with and it was a good experience.

DR: Do you remember any activities on campus or going to any football games?

TS: No, but we went once to a football game and … that was about it. At that time, Rutgers was not in the Big East, [Rutgers' current collegiate athletic conference]. They were playing the Cornells and the Lehighs, [smaller, regional universities], and they had a good season after I left, though. … Yes, … we did try to go to some of the activities.

DR: Would your wife go with you?

TS: Yes, she would go, yes

GF: As a veteran who had experienced more than your fellow students, did professors address you differently because of this?

TS: No, … but I did … find I had to go to some extra help. At that time, I hadn't been doing much math and we had college algebra, which I had to go and get some extra help [in]. … I guess it was [that] I was one of the few that was a veteran. In fact, I took the entrance exam down in North Carolina, in one of the high schools, while I was still in the military. … I did have to go to summer school, because I didn't have; yes, what was it I didn't have? One of the math courses, I didn't have, and, at the same time, … somebody gave me advice, I should … go for the English [requirement] and take the Davis test. Do they still do the Davis test?

DR: No, I have not heard of that.

TS: [laughter] Yes, it was all grammar. … The Davis tests, you had to pass that before you could even get out, … [before] you go from a freshman to on up. … So, I went and took that during the summer and passed that all right. … It was trigonometry that I didn't take in high school. [laughter] So, I had to do that. … It did help, because I didn't have to worry about that English course, freshman English. I didn't have to take it, and so, … that helped.

DR: Were there any classes that you really enjoyed?

TS: No, the one I remember taking [was] "Western Civilization," and that was very [interesting]. It was kind of interesting, although you didn't really have the time to go into [it]. This professor had written a book that, of course, it was about different instances during the history, specifically, … what happened at a certain time, but we never got much chance to go over that. We were just with all the basic Western history stuff, history, and so, that one I remember quite a bit. … Some of my business law stuff, I remember that, but, other than that, you were dealing with mostly commuters. They used to have a little building over there on the campus that we could go [to] and have our lunch, and that was okay.

GF: Did you find that you were more prepared for your business administration classes because you had the experience of being an accountant?

TS: No, … at that time, I wasn't. I was just like a clerk, if I remember, but I think it did help to work at a job at the same time you were learning the stuff from the book. The cost accounting and stuff like that, it did help.

DR: When you were working and going to school, was your wife staying home with the kids?

TS: Yes, yes. She didn't start working until the last kids were in, like, junior high. … My youngest, I think, was in junior high at that time. Yes, she worked at the supermarket, in the customer service department, yes.

DR: Do you remember anything about graduation? Did you go to graduation?

TS: Yes, it was … one of the disappointments I [had]. They gave me the wrong, not the wrong diploma, they gave me a dummy diploma, for a guy [laughter] with the same [name]. His name was Tom Symanski and he didn't return a book to the library [laughter] and they got me mixed up with him. So, that was kind of a [letdown]. You know, I wouldn't have minded if I hadn't returned a book, but it wasn't me. [laughter]

GF: Did you consider any other schools besides Rutgers?

TS: Yes, I thought of going away to a small school, but, then, when you saw the amount of money it was, and, plus, … this was before I got married. I was thinking of doing that, but, as it turned out, it worked out for the best to just commute to New Brunswick, yes.

GF: You said there was not a very large student-veteran population.

TS: Right. At that time, there wasn't, no.

GF: Did you know anybody else, at the time, that had returned from Korea and was now attending Rutgers?

TS: No, I can't think of any. In fact, most of the fellows that I still communicate with didn't go to college. … I think in New Jersey, we were well aware that that was one of the things you had to do, because the competition was so tough around here.

GF: Have you stayed in touch with anybody you met at Rutgers, such as professors or other students?

TS: No. I worked with one of the accounting professors at the Raritan Arsenal. He came in to be a consultant and I worked with him. I remember him, but I'm sure he's probably long gone now, and, let's see, well, I still meet some of them that I graduated with, not many, though. They're from all over the state.

DR: Have you ever gone to any reunions?

TS: No. I don't remember going to any reunions for that. … My wife and I used to go over to the Mason Gross [School of the Arts at Rutgers University] music place, for their free concerts they have over there, yes. I haven't been over there much since.

GF: Have you been to Perth Amboy in the last ten years?

TS: Oh, yes, I go there fairly often, yes. Well, my parents' gravesite is in the St. Peter's Church yard, so, I go there quite often and see that it's taken care of, and then, on the way in, I stop in at my wife's gravesite in the cemetery, yes. … They have concerts there in the summer, every Sunday, and I usually contribute to that group and go in there, see a lot of people that I know from Perth Amboy.

GF: You mentioned that you converted while you were in the service. How did that come about?

TS: Well, I knew that my wife's family would [prefer that]. I went to the junior prom with her and I know they weren't too pleased that I wasn't a Catholic and I knew that was going to be a problem. So, I didn't go with her to the senior prom, but, then, while I was in the military, I thought, "Well, I [should convert]." … Actually, it's not very much different than the Episcopal [Church]. It's almost identical. So, I figured I had the opportunity, in the period of time when I was in Camp Lejeune. So, I would go over and I signed up and got … everything done down in North Carolina.

GF: Did you know your wife through high school?

TS: Well, I met her in my junior year in high school. That's when I first met her. … Her homeroom was next to mine. She was with the "Cs" and the "Ds" and I was with the "Ss" and the "Ts." [laughter] … We still have reunions that we go to.

DR: What did you do after graduation? Is that when you worked for RCA?

TS: You mean after college?

DR: Yes, after college.

TS: No, I think I was still working towards [my degree]. Well, actually, [when] I got my degree, I think I was still in Raritan Arsenal, but, then, when I got the job with RCA, I realized I should take more accounting courses. I only had, like, the basic accounting and that was it. So, I went and took the cost accounting and … the next step above the elementary [level]. So, then, I had about twenty credits in accounting at that point and that seemed to be enough.

DR: Did you find accounting interesting? Is that why you pursued this career?

TS: No, it's mainly because … that's what I fell into. … At one point, … [in] the first job, I worked for a construction company in the office, out in the trailer, … and did the payrolls and stuff. … So, then, when I had my experience, that's the experience I had. So, when I worked for the Arsenal, that's where they put me, in accounting. … That was a pretty big depot there. They had several thousand people working there. We had the Government Printing [Office], or one of the printing offices were there. They had the [area] where they re-constructed tanks and motor vehicles there. …

GF: Could you briefly describe your career at RCA?

TS: Yes. Well, I started, of course, as just a general accountant in inventory accounting, because, in a major company, you really segregate things into little details, and then, went from inventory accounting to cost accounting. … Eventually, I worked … for the sales accounting group and I was responsible for the rental cars for the different guys, … and various jobs. We used to work on budgets and things like that. … [Eventually], RCA sold to GE [General Electric Company], and then, GE started selling off the divisions to pay for the purchase. … Our division went for about a year or so before they sold us to a company from Florida. … At that time, they were making the transfer, I would look for another job and I got one interview, because I was, at that time, … fifty-five years old. So, I got a job with a General Automotive [an automotive parts store] down in East Brunswick. … [The] building is gone now, but they used to make, like, detectors for your heating system and stuff like that, and made small parts. … So, I worked there for from [when I was] fifty-five until I was seventy-two, I think; no, it wasn't that long. … I was fifty-five at the time of the sale. I can't remember now. …

GF: You were at General Automotive from 1989 to 1996.

TS: It was that long, yes. All right, so, then, … oh, that's right, it was sixty-two; I'm thinking seventy-two. Sixty-two was when I wanted to retire. I always figured that would be the best bet, to get the Social Security, even if it was a little less, get it earlier, and that's what I did. Yes, I get the [year wrong], keep thinking seventy-two. … The years go so fast; I'm going to be seventy-six this October, hey.

GF: Did you make use of any GI Bill benefits aside from education, such as the VA [Veterans Administration]?

TS: Yes, … I think, I'm not sure, … I did drop my GI insurance and bought a regular … life insurance policy, because the GI insurance, at that time, as you got older, the premiums would go up. They did transfer it, later on, to a regular life insurance policy that you could keep for the rest of your life without the premiums going up. … I'm not sure if I got a [mortgage]; I don't think I got a GI mortgage, because, at that time, I remember we had to put a third down, … in those days. Of course, … my first house was 15,500 [dollars], so, it's quite … a small amount, but it was pretty big at that time.

DR: Did you live in Perth Amboy most of the time?

TS: No, I lived in Edison. I had a house down off of Amboy Avenue in Edison. … When I first moved there, it was Central Avenue, but Edison didn't have a main post office, so, we had two Central Avenues in Edison and my mail would to go the wrong one sometimes. So, eventually, they got a central post office in Edison and they changed our street to Cabot Avenue and I lived there for, hey, I guess, about thirty years, maybe. … Yes, I'm pretty sure.

GF: How has Perth Amboy changed over time?

TS: Well, it's become mainly Spanish now. I mean, they're doing pretty well. … I'm surprised. They have done a lot with the waterfront, they've done a lot with the homes there, but … they lost a lot of the industry. They went there because there was a lot of industry. There was an AS&R [American Smelting & Refining Company], they had some Chevron Oil there and we even had a DuPont location there, they had a cable company, copper works, a lot of industry that attracted the people from Puerto Rico. … I worked with some when I worked for the Carborundum Company, [a manufacturer of abrasive products], for maybe a summer or so. … They were there and … they're mainly what's in Perth Amboy.

DR: In retirement, have you traveled at all?

TS: Oh, we did a lot of traveling, before my wife died, yes. We joined the AARP [American Association of Retired Persons] chapter in Edison and … we went on a lot of trips with that group and we did some traveling on our own. We did go to the Rose Parade, [held in Pasadena, California, to celebrate the New Year], in 2000, and so, we've done quite a bit of traveling. We did, yes.

GF: You have four children. Can you talk a little bit about each of them?

TS: Well, the oldest is same name as mine, different middle initial, but he … went to Middlesex College and got a job as a programmer, and then, later on, he got a full degree from Kean while he was working. … He started off with AT&T, [a telecommunication services company], and then, they branched off to Telcordia, [a telecommunications research and development firm], and so, eventually, they cut back. … He now works from home for a former boss of his, doing computer analyzing, and then, my oldest daughter, she went to …

GF: Delaware Valley.

TS: Delaware Valley College, [a private college in Doylestown, Pennsylvania]. Yes, she went there for four years, and then, right out of college, she got a job with Engelhard, which is now BSAF, [a chemical company], bought Engelhard. … Then, the next son after that, he went to Rutgers. He went to Cook [College, for] food science, and he started off working, … his first big job was with Nestle. He lived out in Mahopac, New York, and then, … Nestle left to go to the West Coast, moved their headquarters to the West Coast. … He's had a couple different jobs and, now, he's working for the … Dale and Thomas Popcorn Company. … He does food development with them. … My youngest, Sally, she went to Middlesex College, but she did various jobs with banks and things, and then, when she got married, she stopped working. … She has two kids that she takes care of.

GF: How do you think your service shaped your life afterwards?

TS: Well, I think it got me to do things on my own, [before] which my father used to do most of my thinking for me, but this way, because I had to go on my own, I went, left on my own. … You basically learned to take care of yourself, and then, when I got out, I figured I wouldn't have him pay for my education. That's when I took advantage of the GI Bill.

DR: You mentioned you are going to a reunion next week. Have you gone to many?

TS: … I think I've gone to several of the tankers' [reunions], down in Kentucky, and that was in Louisville. … I've had a couple down there, and then, this one we're doing on our own. Just one of the guys in the platoon, he got it organized and made the arrangements. So, there will only be about maybe eight couples there.

GF: Going way back, what ethnicity was the Symanskis?

TS: Well, my mother was Irish and my mother's [side] can trace her family back to when they came to the country there. She had relatives in the Civil War, but my father's family came from Poland and he was born here, but they came over, I guess, … [in the] 1880s, maybe, I don't know, but, yes, they came from Poland.

DR: Did you know your grandparents at all?

TS: Oh, yes. I knew the grandparents. They lived in Jersey City. He was a chiropodist, whatever, foot doctor, whatever they call them, and he was pretty successful. He owned a building in Jersey City, with offices in there. … I have one uncle, that he isn't living anymore. I have a couple cousins, but I used to go visit them in the summer a lot. … They lived in Ridgewood, … but I haven't seen my cousins in quite a few years.

DR: Is there any traditional family food that really sticks out in your memory, Polish or Irish?

TS: No. We're more connected to my wife's family, [which] is the Hungarian [cooking]. Yes, we had the Hungarian traditions in the family. … They have a certain thing they do at Easter and they have certain things they do at Christmastime. … So, we basically did those things.

[TAPE PAUSED]

DR: We were just discussing Rutgers women's basketball. [laughter]

TS: [laughter] Yes. … My brother-in-law worked for Rutgers. … He worked as, like, a job shopper. He was a draftsman and he needed to get some medical insurance. So, he got a job with Rutgers and he would get free tickets to the Rutgers Women's Basketball team. So, we would go over with him and his wife and we started enjoying going to those games. … Then, so, we kept going to them, and from the time when Theresa Grentz, [head coach from 1976 to 1995], was there until now.

DR: In the past few years, when they were doing pretty well, that was pretty exciting.

TS: Oh, yes, yes. We traveled down to Florida, watched them play, and we'd go around quite a bit with them. … Then, even after she died, I still keep getting my season tickets. I take my son-in-law with me to the games and we really enjoy it. … Of course, we still donate to the Foundation. … Some of my senior friends go to the games, the football games, and, also, the basketball games, and we have discussions about the team.

GF: Is there anything else that you would like to comment on?

TS: No, I can't think of anything. … I guess … my sons look at what I did in the [business world and] they try to avoid [that]. My work thing was, … at the time I worked, I was always sort of devoted to the company I worked for, and they have a different attitude. … They figure that they're not going to be the same way I was, but, at that time, I guess that's something you get from the military. You get devoted to something, you feel you have [an obligation], you owe them your allegiance.

DR: Did any of your kids ever consider the military?

TS: No, they had to sign up for the draft, I guess, … but, no, they never were much interested in it.

DR: They never asked you any questions about your service.

TS: Oh, yes, my oldest son has always been interested. He's read every book that I've given him, that I've read, and he's more interested in it than my other son is. … He's from a different period.

GF: Is there anything else?

TS: No, nothing that I can think of.

GF: Thank you very much.

TS: Okay.

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

Reviewed by Brian Shemesh 10/20/10
Reviewed by Andrew Esler 10/20/10
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 11/30/10
Reviewed by Theodore E. Symanski 12/2/10