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AN INTERVIEW WITH JOSEPH A. VATER

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

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

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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Michael Blatt: This begins an interview of Joe Vater on April 14, 2007. First of all, we want to thank you on behalf of the Rutgers Oral Project for participating in this interview. I am here with Andrea Blatt and for the record would you please state your name.

Joseph Vater: My name is Joe Vater. I live at 18 Warbler Drive, McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania.

Michael Blatt: Can you tell us where you were born and when that was?

JV: I was born March 14, 1917 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I went to Langley High School, graduated from Langley High School in 1934, and went to work in the painting trade. I worked in the painting trade until I went in the service in 1941.

MB: How did it end up that your family was located there?

JV: My family, grandfathers and grandmothers, all come from Germany and they landed in Pittsburgh. So the four of them come from over in Germany.

MB: So, that was the original site. Do you know what your parents did for a living?

JV: My dad was a painter, and my mother worked in the hospital prior to getting married.

Andrea Blatt: She was a nurse

JV: No, I think she just worked cleaning up, and stuff like that.

MB: When you went to school, at the time you were going to school, what were you thinking of doing when you got out of school?

JV: Go to work. [laughter] The Depression was on at that time and it was very difficult to survive, both in the way of trying, my dad had a hard time keeping the family together. There was eight in our family, eight children in our family.

MB: Where were you in that order?

JV: Second to oldest.

MB: Second oldest, so, some of that responsibility fell on you, to be able to get a job after high school.

JV: Oh, yeah. Well, that's the only thing to do. There was no possibility of going on, to other schooling. In 1939, or something like that, I went to art school and [was planning on] taking up interior decorating, and then when I went into the service, why, I hadn't graduated yet from that. Then after the service, I finished the course.

MB: Where was that school located?

JV: Pittsburgh.

MB: So you stayed right in Pittsburgh.

JV: Pittsburgh Art Institute.

AB: Did you volunteer for the Air Corps? How did that happen?

JV: No, I was drafted on June 21, 1941 and went down to Fort Belvoir, well, I went to Fort Meade first and they distributed us to the various other locations, but I went to Fort Belvoir for training on the 24 of June '41.

MB: What kind of training was that?

JV: Engineer training. Where you build bridges and tore bridges down, and build barracks, general construction work is what it was. I was, the only good thing about it, they put me in a field I knew something about, being in construction background.

MB: How long were you in basic training before you were deployed?

JV: Well, we left Fort Belvoir in September 24, 1941, and, after four weeks on the train, we arrived in Fort McDowell, California. They took us out to Angel Island, that's where, we were there for about six days. October 4th we left there and we got on the ship to go over to ...

AB: What ship were you on?

JV: It was the old *Cleveland*, *Cleveland Line*, it was one of the presidential lines. *Cleveland* was just converted into a troop ship but it hadn't been completely converted so half of our equipment wasn't working, [laughter] such as the latrines, and stuff like that.

MB: Gets you prepared. Now had you been following what was happening in Europe? Had you been hearing things about how the war was going on?

JV: Well, naturally, I kept track of it. I wasn't concerned about going in the service. I figured if I had to go I had to go, you know, that wasn't a question that I had a choice on. I figured I might as well make the best out of this.

AB: Did you have a choice about going to the Pacific, or did they just send you?

JV: No, they just sent us. Well, Fort McDowell, of course, that's a distribution point on the West Coast. So, I guess, normally everything coming out of there goes to the Pacific. Probably any place in Florida would be to the Atlantic. So, we were sent over. We went over, stopped in Hawaii, stopped in Guam, then on to Manila.

AB: So when did you actually get to Manila?

JV: We got to Manila on October 23, 1941.

AB: So, you weren't there too long before Pearl Harbor.

JV: No. We went up to Clark Field. They had a big field there with unit tents, twelve, or whatever, to a tent and we stayed there for a couple days. Then they sent us over to a place called O'Donnell, it was near Clark Field.

AB: Were you a group of guys going together, or did they just say, "You go to O'Donnell."

JV: No, no, no, no. We operated the whole thing, 803rd Engineer Battalion. We had Headquarters Company, A Company, B Company, and C Company was formed from the 809th from Hawaii. I was in A Company and they sent me, our group, out to O'Donnell. Headquarters stayed at Clark. B Company went to DelCarmen Field, and C Company went to Nichols Field. So they split us all up. So they were, at the same time building four separate either additions to air fields or a brand new one, and we went to O'Donnell. We went through the Filipino camp, which they called O'Donnell, and we went through there and down below there and that's where we start building an air strip down there. But we were just Company A's, but everybody in, our people were selected because everybody in our group knew something about engineering. You know what I mean? We didn't have the shoe salesman and stuff like that. We had plumbers and electricians and equipment operators, and things of that sort, so we were able in the short time before the war to get the field prepared for the top coating, so we were doing pretty good. We had about three barracks built for the Air Force, and stuff like that.

MB: Did you feel your background had prepared you well, and you had supplies to work with?

JV: Well, we just went to work like normal. The only thing, we were working twelve hours a day, that's all.

MB: Long days.

JV: Well, they were trying to get this ready, you know. Then, when the war started, we were pretty close to the Japs, so they started moving us down. We started doing engineering work on the way down, either working on the air strips, they had an air strip in Orne, and they were like auxiliary strips, you know, then we got into it then.

AB: When Pearl Harbor was bombed on Sunday, and it was Monday for you, what were you thinking that day?

JV: I was watching airplanes go over.

AB: You were.

MB: Had you heard of the bombing in Pearl Harbor?

JV: Well, again, we didn't have any communication out there. They sent a runner who came from Clark Field, back and forth, for whatever business they had. But, probably 10:30AM or eleven o'clock in the morning, the runner come out and told us that they bombed Pearl Harbor, so they issued us rifles and machine guns, and stuff like that, to set up.

AB: Had you been trained in any kind of infantry?

JV: No.

AB: They just said, "Here, take this gun, you might need it."

JV: Yeah. About 12:00, well, noontime, we all come together and had lunch together, you know, and while we were having lunch, here comes a fleet of Jap planes over top of us, and they hit Clark Field, within hours of when they hit Honolulu [Pearl Harbor] because of the change in the times.

MB: So, what was the mood of the company like?

JV: Well, I don't know, you know, we had it. What do you do with it? But, being that they were so close to us, they started moving us down. We went to different places, San Jose, Oranie, and places like that. In Oranie we built a lot of plane revetments, because prior to the war, why, you know, they just set the planes out on the field, you know. But so now, we had to build revetments to put them into, to try to save them from shrapnel, and stuff like that.

MB: Had word gotten back to you, or through your company about how many planes were lost at Clark Field?

JV: No, we didn't know the losses. The only thing was that we saw them bombing everyday. They were bombing everyday, and then, they start strafing and so we, more or less, our company, we worked on Oranie and San Jose, on airstrips. But then, after that, they put us on repairing roads and bridges. So, all the bridges were built out of wood, you know, so we had to go and make duplicates of every bridge, so that if a bridge was bombed we could get it back in shape. Because over there, if you come to a creek you better have a bridge to take you over. If it was blown out someone better get over there in a hurry.

MB: Were you still working twelve-hour shifts at that point?

JV: Well, yeah. I wouldn't say that we worked a twelve-hour shift everyday, but we did whatever we had to do.

MB: Whatever they told you to do?

JV: Whatever was proper.

MB: What were you doing when you weren't working?

JV: Sleeping. Eating, sleeping. There was nothing else to do, you know what I mean? Wasn't able to go into the *barrio*.

AB: So then what happened?

JV: Well, we got down to kilometer post 201, and we were working on the roads, and stuff like that, and the Japs landed behind our lines on Agaloma Point and so about two 'o clock in the morning, we were bivouacked up around 201, and they get a call, that our captain, I guess, they said they wanted us down there at Agaloma. They took us down to Agaloma and with our rifles, and issued some machine guns. We went in, trying to find the Japs that had landed, because they'd come in on the shore and come up into the woods. So we went through there and scampered on through there, and got lost a half of dozen times. [laughter] It was chaos.

MB: It was the hope to engage them in battle or to report them?

JV: No, the idea was to get rid of them. Shoot them, find them. But what we ran into a lot was the Japs would tie themselves up in the trees, and you'd think you were protected, and they'd shoot you.

AB: So they were like a sniper, waiting for an American to go by, and they would pick them off?

JV: Yeah.

MB: Do you remember your first fire fight, when you were on expedition?

JV: Well, I remember firing the rifle, but whether or not I was hitting anything I don't know.

AB: Right.

JV: I was hoping.

AB: Well, you weren't really trained for that, you were trained to be an engineer.

JV: Nope. Yeah, yeah. We didn't have any, well, down at Fort Belvoir we went one day on the rifle range. I think I hit more of the guy next to me, but, we were down there for about three or four days and I, we had had quite a few men killed; in fact, I had a man on either side of me killed down there.

AB: That must have been tough.

JV: We were also working on an eight-inch gun for the antiaircraft, and so, the colonel, or general, who was in charge of that area, sent word to fire that gun. They said, "Well, the gun isn't ready yet." They said, "Why isn't it ready?" "The engineers are down in Agaloma." "Get them the hell out of there." So, they pulled us out, but we were in pretty bad shape, the whole thing. So, they decided then to send us over to Corregidor, A Company over to Corregidor, to

work on the stuff over there, because they, too, had been bombed. So, we got over there, I don't remember the exact date, it was, oh, February 4th [1942]. The day we got there, the Japs bombed and shelled Corregidor.

MB: That was your welcoming.

JV: Yeah, so, what was on Corregidor was an existing airstrip that had a grass strip, you know, that was sloped a little bit, so they decided that they needed a longer runway. So, we built a runway going downhill, as they would take off, going downhill, and then land uphill, because it was a short runway.

MB: So they could use the gravity that way.

JV: So, we worked on that.

MB: You mentioned before that, just going back, that the troops were not in good shape. Were you already getting weaker at that point, or not eating that much and losing weight.

JV: No, no. We were doing okay. The only thing that they cut down a lot; prior to the war starting, you couldn't go through chow line without taking a quinine pill. But after that, they didn't have them. So, a lot of that type of stuff was knocked off.

AB: So, that was part of reason so many guys were getting sick later, they weren't getting the quinine anymore.

JV: That was part of it, yeah.

AB: Part of it, right.

JV: Well, we worked on Corregidor. We set up another eight-inch gun over there. Started working on the airfield. So, then, the Japs made a landing there, so that was ...

AB: What was that like when you first saw those guys landing? What were you thinking?

JV: Well, we were up on the nob, you know, as far as that's concerned, but they were shelling one after another. In fact, the day of the emperor's birthday, that was the heaviest bombed or shelled place in the world, including over in Europe. It was like seconds.

AB: The noise must have been deafening.

JV: Well, and the shrapnel, too.

MB: Had you heard how things were going on the mainland, or the islands?

JV: Well, we knew what was going on in the Philippines, because everything was going downhill.

MB: Okay, you heard about that.

JV: Well, we seen it. We're not gonna be going downhill like we were going down, if everything was going right. It was a situation we knew wasn't going to be too good, or how long it was going to last.

AB: Where were you on the day of the surrender?

JV: Well, the day of the surrender, I was, I had another two guys killed alongside me. One was Chester Bailey, and what was the other guy's name? But, they were killed on the night the Japs landed. Then the Marine Corp took over. Our officers were down, we were split up again, because we didn't have a place to protect the men. The group I was in was up near the Navy tunnel, up near where we were building this strip. The other group was down near Malinta Tunnel, on the side of the hill down there. So, they landed in our area, so, we did the best we could right there, you know, but then they landed down below. But it was constant shelling, constant shelling.

MB: Prior to the surrender of Corregidor had you heard, again, of the surrender of Bataan?

JV: I don't know that I heard. I don't know that I heard, but, I guess, we knew it because immediately after they had taken over Bataan, they just lined the rifles up and just started shelling,155s [mm cannon artillery pieces], and stuff like that.

MB: So, who had you actually heard it from, in terms of your command structure, that Corregidor had surrendered?

JV: I don't know that we actually got a word from anybody.

AB: So they didn't actually gather you together and say, "Hey, we have bad news, we surrendered."

JV: Oh, hell no.

AB: It was just chaos.

JV: Yes, it was all chaos. We didn't have much to, stand by, [we are privates], nobody comes around and asks you what you think. We had a Marine in charge. The Marine Corps, Fourth Marines, they were on Corregidor and they had some of the Marines out there, near the Monkey Point. So there was a Marine officer in charge of everybody who was there, whether they were sailors, or artillery, so they were up there directing, "Do this," "Go there."

MB: So what happened next for you?

JV: Well, this lieutenant gave us a machine gun to set up in this, one of these holes that was blown with a … bomb, crater-like. So there was a Sergeant Greer and myself, he was out of the

M battery of the 60th, he was somewhere together. So this lieutenant said, "Set that machine gun up." So, the two of us, in the hole, so we were in there trying to get the darn thing set up, and once a grenade came in the hole with us, of course, we both flew back for a split second. Sergeant Greer, he got it right in the chest, you know, and he was bleeding pretty bad. So he said, "Slim, where do they have the first aid station?" And I said, "I think it is down at the Navy tunnel," the Navy communication tunnel out there toward Monkey Point. So, he started going. About that time I could feel blood coming off my fingers, so I said, "Wait a minute, I'll go down with you." So, about half-way down he passed out. I carried him down into the first aid. That was about 11:30 or something like that; the Japs took over at noon time.

MB: Now, had you sustained any injuries yourself?

JV: Yeah.

MB: Tell me more about that.

JV: Well, I got hit in the arm. Matter-of-fact, probably ten or fifteen years later, shrapnel come out.

AB: Really?

JV: Yeah.

AB: From that grenade.

JV: Yeah, little pieces, slivers. Then, we stayed, they got us all together. Well, the Japs got details. You know, they took us, maybe fifteen or twenty guys. We went up and buried all the dead. We put the dead in any kind of place we could, whether it was a rain gutter, or whatever, and then covered them over, you know. Then, we did that until we got them all picked up, including Japs and Filipinos and Americans, and then they had us pick up all the metal. Guns and any piece of metal and we carried them from down there at Monkey Point, all the way up to Middle Side. They started getting this cache of metal, you know. We must have worked on that for a week or more. Then they took us down to the 92nd garage. The 92nd garage was a cement little slab, where they, the people on Corregidor used it for repairs. They called it the ninety second garage. They took us down there, and there were just thousand of guys with nothing.

MB: Now, did the Japanese ask your troop to do any work on the airstrip?

JV: Not the airstrip, no, but we had to do other work, roadways, and stuff like that there. They had no intentions of using the runway.

MB: From there what happened? Did you go on the Victory March that they made you go through?

JV: We were, let's see, by May 24th we were taken off Corregidor on a Japanese landing craft, to the mainland, and they marched us down Dewey Boulevard, down to Manila. We were taken

to Bilibid Prison from down there. We arrived up at a place called Cabanatuan. We were sent, out or taken out, to Cabanatuan Number Three. These were Filipino units before, they were stationed there. They had Cabanatuan One, Two, and Three. But they took us to Three. The people from O'Donnell didn't come over to One, at that time, and then, what we had to do was, they would take a detail of men down on long poles, maybe thirty, forty guys on the side, to pick up these Nippon huts and carry them up the road and put them up in Camp Three. So, they enlarged Camp Three.

AB: Was Camp Three as bad as Camp One?

JV: I have no idea. The only problem I could see was they brought the guys from O'Donnell in very, very bad shape and so they would have, normally, been worse off than we were.

MB: At that point, what shape were you in and the rest of your guys?

JV: Well, I guess, I was in pretty good shape. I had been in real good shape. I was 184 pounds and I could take care of, you know, and I never started feeling sorry for myself. I always said, "If one sucker walks out of this place it was going to be me."

AB: So, you had that feeling, the whole, in camp you always said, "I'm going to make it, I'm going to make it."

JV: No question in my mind I was going to make. I got down to eighty-four pounds.

MB: So, you went from Bilibid to Cabanatuan and then some of these other work details. What were some of the other work details you did?

JV: Most of them were either cutting something down, or picking something, or working on the roads, or whatever. I didn't really didn't get into a real lot of outside work, because we had a lot of people there. The Japs didn't have that many people to leave there to watch us.

MB: So, there were some days you didn't go on a work detail, you just stayed.

JV: Stayed in camp.

MB: What did you do there, when you were staying in prison camp? How did you pass the time?

JV: Most of the time just sit around and talk to somebody.

MB: What were you talking about? Do you remember the types of conversations you were having?

JV: No. We didn't talk about coming home, yet. [laughter]

AB: Too early. But you were with a couple of buddies at that point?

JV: Yeah, our whole unit was there.

AB: So you had kind of a group.

JV: Yeah, we weren't all in the same place, but in the camp itself, and, they had a few activities that they let the guys do. Then, there was one time when three guys took off, escaped. They finally captured them. They brought them back and beat the hell out of them. They had them hanging outside for a couple days, then took them out and shot them. They gathered everybody around and, we had to watch them shoot them.

MB: Did you ever think yourself about escaping, or wondering if you could escape?

JV: Where do you go? I couldn't see a way out, that would make any sense at all. If I could have got through the fence, and had somebody help me on the other side, that would be one thing. But I wasn't in no position to ever try to escape.

MB: Did the guards ever say to the prisoners what would happen if you did escape?

JV: Oh, yeah. They put us in ten-man groups. They promised to shoot the other nine if one escaped. I think they would have done it, too.

AB: Did you ever come across any guards that were descent? Or were most of them playing mental torture with you?

JV: I never really had much to do with guards. I tried to keep myself out of trouble and not have to answer, and have other people be with a chance of them getting hurt, because of my stupidness.

MB: How much, at that time, did you know the language?

JV: I didn't know it. Still don't know it. I never intended to learn it.

AB: How much were you being fed at that point, do you know?

JV: It would vary. But, we would have some rice and stuff they would raise. The camps started a garden of their own. It varied. It varied.

AB: So, after Cabanatuan where did you go?

JV: I went up to, they took us up to Manchuria. We got up there on November 11th of '42. But, on the way up, we were torpedoed, and we were lucky. It took us, let's see how long it took us to get up there?

MB: How long was the trip?

JV: We were on a freighter that was built in 1908.

AB: What was the name of it?

JV: *Tottori Maru*. October 4th we left, there was fifteen-hundred of us aboard, fifteen-hundred Americans. We had some Japanese soldiers they were taking back, and we were probably a couple days before we got to Okinawa, not Okinawa, Formosa. We were heading for Formosa, a couple days out. It's a little crude but they had an outhouse built over the side. You had to line up for this outhouse, because it was the only one, and people had diarrhea. We weren't in the best of shape. Anyway, I was standing there and looking out on the water and I see two wakes coming. I thought they were fish, myself. [laughter] So, there was a Navy guy, happened to be ahead of me, he spied them and he hollered, "Torpedoes," and the captain was able to turn that dunkin thing around and there was a torpedo on either side of us.

AB/MB: Wow!

JV: So, they got us into Formosa. We lay there for a while, maybe a couple, maybe three days, four days, then they took us out again. Then they spent, maybe, a day out and they brought us back in again. So we were back in three or four times.

AB: Why were they doing that?

JV: Well, I guess there were American subs in the area, and they didn't have anything to protect us. So they got another group of other, probably, freighters, and they were for their purpose, and then they put a naval safeguard with them. Then they took off then and went all the way up to Korea.

AB: Korea.

JV: Pusan, Korea. It was fifteen-hundred of us got off the ship in Korea. We picked up, no, it was about ten to twelve-hundred of us got off. Then we picked up some Australian, British, and New Zealanders, who had been prisoners from China, and so they put four to five hundred of them with us. Our other people went over to Japan on the ship we came up on. Maybe five, six hundred of them went over to Japan proper. But we took a railroad from Pusan, Korea all the way up through Korea, up into Manchuria.

AB: Were these the kind of boxcars people talk about, or a different kind of railroad?

JV: No, this was a not a sleeping car, but, a regular passenger train, because there were civilians on the train with us.

MB: Were you told along the way what you would be doing when you got to Korea?

JV: No.

MB: No information.

JV: The only thing about it was, again, they selected the people who had experience in either construction or that type of heavy equipment, and stuff like that.

MB: They knew who you guys were.

JV: They knew what they needed up there. We got up there in November of '41.

MB: Or '42?

JV: '42.

MB: Then what happened when you got there?

JV: Well, we got out there and they put us in a camp that was used in the Russo-Japanese war in 1912. The buildings were set in the ground, about three to four foot in the ground, and about three or four foot sticking out of the ground. They would try to save heat.

AB: Well, it would be cold there, right?

JV: Only forty below.

AB: Only forty below. [laughter] You were up in the mountains.

JV: No, that's off the Gobi Desert.

AB: Wow.

MB: Did you intermingle with the people from New Zealand and, or did you stay separate?

JV: We were in separate barracks. But we worked together, you know. We started work in December, December 21st. We got there November 11th. So they took us down to work on December 21st. We got down there and we had about a five to six mile walk, down to this MKK factory. This factory was being set up by Americans prior to the start of war. I think it was Ford Motor Company that was going to be there. But all the equipment in that thing, in that factory, was all American-made, to the screwdrivers to the plug gauges; everything was American-made, with American signals on them. It wasn't Japanese.

MB: So you guys became very important to them to be able to work on that.

JV: A lot of equipment, well, there was some equipment assembled prior to us getting there, but, when we got there, we were setting up equipment, putting equipment together, and stuff like that. Even some of our guys were draftsman, and things like that, and they put them doing that type of work.

AB: What were you actually making, do you know?

JV: Well.

AB: What was the end product?

JV: The end product was supposed to be an index machine. That was, I could put a piece of metal in one end of it and you could put screws or threads on it, or you can do most anything. That was the real thing. They had copies of these American-made machines. That's the reason they were using the engineers, to try to duplicate the things.

MB: How were you treated, at that point, by the guards and what type of conditions did you live in?

JV: Well, if it hadn't of been so doggone cold, and if we had got a little more food, we could have, well, we survived, anyway, but we could have survived ...

MB: What kind of clothing did they give you, were you prepared?

JV: Well, the first year we were there, we did receive, down in Korea, they issued us some heavy coats, and stuff like that there. So, we still had them. The following year, Spring come, we had to turn everything in. We never got them back.

AB: You were hoping, "Please don't let me need it again."

MB: Did they ever allow you, for example, you started working there December 21st, did they at Christmas-time allow the guys to do anything, or New Year's Eve, or was it just another day?

JV: I think, they did have some kind of celebration on Christmas. They did do that.

AB: So you were going from the camp to the factory each day, and you walked.

JV: About five miles each day. One day was colder then the next. And everybody had dysentery, so you can imagine.

AB: You stayed there until the end of the war at that factory?

JV: At the factory, yeah. They moved us into some new barracks, which was probably a mile away from the factory. I don't remember if I have the date of that or not, but I would guess it was probably within a year that we moved into these new barracks. They were halfway decent barracks. I think what they were being built for, they were being built for the people who were going to be working at the plant.

AB: Were you actually being supervised by factory workers, or Jap guards, do you know what I mean?

JV: Mostly people were factory people. The guards would roam back and forth and if there were any problems, of course, they were there.

MB: So, back at the camp you were under the supervision of the guards.

JV: All the time.

MB: But when you got back to the factory then you were ...

JV: They would search us going in and out of the factory. But the factory itself had guards as such.

MB: Okay

JV: I guess the army came as far as bring us there, and taking us back. I don't know if this company was paying them or what.

AB: Was it less dangerous to be a day in the factory, or less dangerous to be a day in the camp?

JV: Oh, I would rather be in the factory, because you could get away with something down there.

AB: Did you ever try to do anything to throw a monkey wrench in the whole works, or were you watched too carefully?

JV: Well, the Japanese were dumb to think that they would give somebody a box and put a piece of machinery back together and it was going to work perfect.

MB: You were saying about how the Japanese had thought you could just put something together.

JV: For instance, there was a gray lathe, that was the name of it, and, of course, it was all in cartons, and so forth. But it had a table, the lathe, and it would go back and forth. This was, like a planer. So, we had to build a foundation for this, underneath, because it weighed tons. So, we built the foundations and when it got all settled, they would run the table down, and the thing would slope that way, run it back, it would slope that way. So, they were able to use it, but not very well, and that was ...

AB: Was that something you guys did?

JV: I guess.

AB: You did it on purpose.

JV: It happened. At the same time, they were very, very foolish. Like if you were putting a piece of equipment together and you were missing one part, they would take the part you were

missing, and the two parts that come with that, and they'd have one of the Americans design gear, or whatever you needed.

MB: Like a replacement part.

JV: Yeah. So, it would take maybe a month, or so later, to get this piece of equipment that's missing back to the machine and then they would lose the other two parts. [laughter]

AB: What a coincidence.

JV: Yeah, and stuff like that did go on. There was one lathe that had a faceplate, at least four foot across. They never did get that working, all the time we were there, and the day we left it still wasn't working.

AB: If you had been home, how long would it have taken you to get it working?

JV: Probably a short time.

MB: Were they annoyed that the Americans couldn't get it working, or did they just figured it was harder then they thought.

JV: I don't know what they actually thought. But what we were building was this index machine, and this index machine, you put a piece of steel in one side, and you can do any number of things, cut it smaller. So, they were building this particular machine, it was a copy of a Warner and Swasey machine here in the States. We built about thirty-five of them. They were going to have a big display, with the heads of, generals, and all the people. They start this sucker up, and it was nothing but a cloud of smoke. [laughter]

MB: On the inside you were probably smiling.

JV: They closed it off, shut it off, and they didn't say a word, but they put the machines on skids and put them on a flat car and hauled them away somewhere.

MB: Ship them out and let somebody else worry about it.

JV: Some else worry about it.

MB: Build another one. Now, at the time, were any of the guys trying to escape from this camp, or did they pretty much say ...

JV: No, we had three guys escape.

MB: You did. What happened to them, did they get away?

JV: No. They eventually caught them up near, up north; they brought them back and really worked them over. Then they claimed they had killed a Chinese, so they put them to death because they killed the Chinese.

MB: So you continued, you mentioned before, through the Spring of '43 and then you moved to a different camp and you stayed there another year.

JV: Yeah, we stayed there until, I think, they started to bomb us on December of 1944. They hit us with the B29s.

MB: The Americans.

JV: The Americans, right. They killed about sixteen, eighteen of us, and injured forty or fifty.

AB: That was the factory or the camp?

JV: The camp.

AB: Oh, really.

JV: Well, the ground was froze so hard that when the bombs hit they just killed the guys. Busted the glass in the windows in our place. It was chaos. The Japs really didn't know what the heck to do. So, the Americans really took over and got their people into hospital rooms, in buildings there used for hospitals. They just took over. The Japs just stood around looking. The building was on fire and we put the fires out.

AB: These were the prisoners doing that, taking care of themselves.

JV: Oh, yeah, because if all the buildings would had burned down, we'd have been in trouble, too.

MB: Now, had you heard at all how the war was going at that point? Were there rumors, was there any discussion among the men, that we were winning, we were losing?

JV: No, we didn't have any news that you'd say was worthwhile. The only thing was when we saw them bombing us, bombing Manchuria, we knew something was in the wind.

AB: Did you get that little flicker of hope that it might almost be over?

JV: Well, except the fact that we had lost so many men, and injured so many men, that, it would have been preferred that they wouldn't hit us, they would have hit somebody else. But there was no question that this plane had dropped them bombs, they came over in threes. This bomber came over, right over our place, and he did like a, we thought he knew we were down there.

AB: You thought he was waving at you.

JV: We jumped up and "Phew." We thought he knew we were down there and was waving at us. [laughter] So, no, we got clobbered, clobbered real good. All the windows were blown out and, you know, it's thirty, forty below zero.

MB: Did that happen again?

JV: No, it just happened the once. But they did run, various times they run B-29s up there. In fact, one particular night, or during the day, one day one of the Zeros ran right into one of the B-29s.

AB: Really?

JV: Yeah, crashed right into it.

MB: You could see that, and then what happened? Did you remain at that one camp?

JV: No, no, I stayed in that one camp until the war was over.

AB: How did you hear about the war ending?

JV: Well, we would go to work and sometimes if there were bombers coming our way, they would run us back into camp and get us behind the walls. Well, this particular day, it was maybe ten o' clock or nine o' clock, I don't know which, but anyway, they run us back into camp, but there weren't any air raid sirens.

MB: Literally run you back? Did you have to run the mile? Did they say, "Get going."?

JV: They wanted to get us behind the walls. They got us into our camp and put us in the barracks and didn't say nothing, you know. Oh, might of been twelve o' clock, one o'clock, or two o' clock, something like that, and here comes a B-24 flying up over our camp, and we see some parachutes dropping down. We didn't see anything more because we were behind the walls, but there was an area where you could see into the Jap quarters, in one of the corners, and somebody saw an American colonel, or an American officer anyway, with his feet up on the desk of the commandant. So we figured something was up.

MB: So, the Japanese guards didn't come in and say, "We're leaving, the war was over?"

JV: No, they just left us go.

AB: Did the Americans know you were there? Why didn't the Americans come over and say, "We're here!"

JV: No, see, they got there, and the Japs themselves didn't know that the war was over, and they took the guys that parachuted in, I guess, to get the word that they had the right to parachute in.

AB: What were you thinking when someone told you, "I saw an American over in the Jap building?"

JV: Well, it was maybe a day later when they got it all situated over there, that the war is over. They called us all together, and they announced the war was over, and that we had to stay there until the Russians came down and liberated us.

MB: And when that news was said, officially, what was the reaction? Was there quiet? Was there cheering? Did people just walk away?

JV: I think most of us just said "It's about time." "It's about time."

MB: Now, had you heard of the atomic bombs?

JV: No.

MB: You had not heard that it had happened.

JV: No, the only thing, some of the Manchurians, down at work, had told some of the guys, "Kaboom," motion like a big bomb or something like that, but we had no idea what it was.

AB: Once they told you, "You guys have to stay here but the war is over," how long before someone actually got you out of there?

JV: Well, they had to wait on the Russians to fix a railroad. See, we were up in (?) and it took the Russians a week, or more, to get down to us. The Americans flew in planes. They would fly in a B-24 and a C-18, or something, a cargo plane to haul guys out. The reason they had to bring two planes in was because the Russians wouldn't give them no gasoline, so they had to fly the gasoline into get the other planes.

MB: At that point, who were you, in the command structure, who were you then taking orders from? Did the regular routine structure take place?

JV: Yeah, the colonel.

MB: The colonel was in charge again.

JV: Yeah, yeah. So, then they brought B-29s over, they dropped more food, supplies. We could have lived there another ten years.

AB: Oh, really?

JV: Yeah. The first couple of days nobody was allowed out of camp, you know?

MB: Right.

JV: They enforced that pretty good. But then, afterwards, why, they had a little, well, once they started dropping all this food, and stuff like that, they had a little bit more leeway. So we would, most of the guys, just got shoes, or something, and took them into town and sold them and got local money.

MB: Got money to trade with.

JV: Yeah, yeah.

MB: So how did you literally leave, how did you leave the camp? Did the Russian then build the train tracks and you left that way?

JV: Yeah, the Russians eventually got the railroad operational and then we went from there down to Pusan, or, no, Darien, China, Darien, China. We went aboard a hospital ship down there. [Editor's note: USN. Relief] They took us to Okinawa. But an incident happened while we were, like I said, when we were out, we sold shoes and whatever, you know? But, I had picked up an old saber, Jap saber. In the crew of one of the planes coming in and out, you know, a guy had a Brownie, not a Brownie, but a Nikon box camera, and, so, I traded him the saber for the box camera. Of course, he didn't have any film in it. So, again, I had plenty of money, so, I'm going into town and these shops had nothing in them, you know. But I would go in, and they'd have a little bit of stuff, and try to explain to them I wanted film for this camera. So, finally, I went into one place doing this, and the fellow come up to me in plain English, Manchurian, and said, "What are you looking for?" [laughter] I told him, "I want to get film for this camera." So he said, "Come with me." We must have went into a dozen places. Finally, I found a place that had film. They had thirteen rolls of film. I bought all thirteen.

AB: Boy, what happened to those pictures?

JV: I still have them.

AB: Do you really?

JV: Yeah.

MB: You took pictures immediately?

JV: I took pictures of up in Mukden, on the way back, on the troop ship, on the way down on the railroad. Then over to Okinawa, yeah, Okinawa, then we flew from Okinawa to the Philippines, and then we came home on the *USS. Bollivar*, and I saved the last pictures for the Golden Gate Bridge.

AB: That must be a nice collection.

JV: Yeah.

MB: Now, Joe, when were you first allowed to either write home, or what did your family hear about you? Did they get any word back in Pittsburgh what was happening?

JV: We were supposed to be able to write cards. I don't know if it was every six months or every year, or whatever, but I don't know how many of them ever got back, to tell you the truth. It wasn't until I got to Frisco that I called my parents. They knew that we were free, of course, by that point.

MB: So, they knew that you had been liberated.

JV: Yeah.

AB: Somehow they had been notified that you were, in fact, a POW?

JV: The army may have, I don't know. I'm not sure.

AB: So what was that like when you called them? What did you say?

JV: Well, I was down in, I ended up in Woodrow Wilson General Hospital, down in Virginia, and so I had some work done, and then they gave me a thirty-day furlough. I called them and told them what bus line I was coming in on, and so forth. Well, I get up to Fredricks, or one of those towns down there, and the damn bus was going straight through. [laughter] So I said, "What in the world do I do now?" So I went into the little shack there that they had for a bus depot. The guy said, "Greyhound went on strike, but Blue Ridge is still running." [laughter] So, I got the Blue Ridge line an hour earlier. So I got in Pittsburgh. They were going to meet me at the Greyhound station, you know, so I got in there an hour earlier so I got off at Liberty Tunnels there and I grabbed a cab and went home. I got home before they left to go get me.

AB: So, you just walked through the door and said, "I'm home?"

MB: Were you traveling by yourself? Was there anyone else?

JV: No, I was by myself.

MB: You had mentioned earlier that you had at one point, had gone down to eighty-four pounds. At what point was that in your imprisonment?

JV: That was when I was up in Mukden.

MB: So that was your lowest time.

JV: Yeah, yeah. We had been on that ship and then come up on the train. The change in temperatures and everything.

MB: You had dropped that much. But, when you were making your trip back home, you had convalesced enough that you were pretty much better?

JV: Well, I would have probably been up to about hundred and twenty-five, something like that, I don't know.

AB: When you got back home, did you ever take advantage of the GI Bill, or anything like that?

JV: Well, I finished my course in interior decorating. I finished that, because I just had another semester to go, but I went to work right away.

MB: You didn't take any time off, just to cool your heels?

JV: I went to work within two weeks of when I got home. I was home on a hundred and four day furlough.

MB: You weren't discharged that quickly.

JV: No. I went out for a couple days, and I thought to myself, "What the hell am I doing, staying out all night?" And I just said, "What am I doing to myself?" So, I went to my old boss and said, "You got something for me?" Oh, he was glad to get me back.

AB: How long did you stay with that company?

JV: Oh, until about eight years ago.

AB: Oh, so you stayed with them forever.

MB: So that was the same company. How long was it after you got back that you were given your papers and processed out of the service?

JV: We had a hundred and four day furlough.

MB: And then after the furlough, what happened?

JV: Well, I had to get discharged. I had to go up to Pennsylvania.

MB: You had no thoughts of staying in?

JV: Oh, hell, no. [laughter] I think it was sometime in December of '44. No, I had no use to be in the army again.

AB: So, you had a career as an interior designer.

JV: No, I studied that. But I went to work, actually, painting. But, I was able to grain the door or marbleize, you know, do the finer things. Do a little bit of, put a gold leaf on, do things of that sort, so, I used part of what I do.

AB: How long before you got married?

JV: Oh, we were married, I don't know, in '47.

AB: So a couple years. Did you raise a family?

JV: Yeah, I had two boys, who are attorneys, and a daughter that teaches Special Ed. I got six grandchildren that are scattered all over the world.

AB: Really?

JV: Yeah, one of them is over in Europe now. He goes to some college up in Ithica.

AB: Cornell?

JV: No, in Ithica. Is that the name of the college up in Ithica?

MB: Maybe, or possibly Ithica has its own college. Now did you get any treatment through the VA system? [Veterans Administration]

JV: Oh, yeah. They treated me fine.

AB: Did you get your 100 percent? [Editors note: 100% disability from the VA]

JV: I got 100% now.

AB: Do you remember what year you got it?

JV: I don't remember exactly. We run into some problems with the VA in '55, or something like that. They had a program that was, I think was the first program that they were honoring the POWs, you know, MIAs. So I went over to it in the Federal building, downtown Pittsburgh, and this guy is up there talking about what he wants to do for us. A group of us had been down there trying to get something. The way the system worked, there, was you had to lay off a day's work to go down there, because you might go there at nine o' clock but not get taken care of until two o' clock. I'd get so doggone mad, and I started out Liberty Avenue, and I wasn't in my right mind. I said, "Stop," and I stopped. "Get yourself together." But, anyway, we talked together, a couple of other guys, we finally went down to see the man who was in charge of the Pittsburgh Office. We told him, "We are getting all these reports back, signed by this one man, and nobody can get anything from him. What's the problem?" He said, "Well, that man is only the adjudicator. He can only adjudicate what you give him, and what the medical psyche says. The problem is not here, the problem is at the hospital." So, we got the, there was five of us, he made arrangements with us to see the man in charge at the hospital. So, we rigged it amongst us what we were going to do and say, and so forth, one would do this the other ... We went in and met with him. Well, when we got there he had the head of the nurses, the psychiatrist, he had dental, he had everybody in that office who was in charge of something, around a big table. So we got up and told them our story. You know, we can't get any help, and this and that. He stood there

for a while and he said, “Doctor So-and-So you take care of this, and you take care of that, and you take care of that,” and he said, “We’ll have a monthly meeting and we’ll see how this thing goes.” From then on, we made up a protocol on what each guy should get, sleep studies, and this and that, you know, and, he agreed to it all.

AB: That was fortunate.

JV: Guys started getting ten, fifteen, twenty percent and, eventually, why, most of us got one hundred percent. I couldn’t get one hundred percent until I quit working.

MB: When you say “we,” you mean just other people from the service, or just the prisoners?

JV: Oh, no. We were just looking after the prisoners.

AB: Other guys who lived in your area.

JV: Well, eventually, they started a program ninety-seven, thirty-seven, that’s the law that said that they were supposed to take care of the POWs. So they formed a presidential advisory committee down in Washington. How, I have no idea, but my name was put on it. So I went down to the meetings down there. At that time, the army and the VA, the VA wasn’t part of a stand-alone outfit; they were part of, under the army.

MB: Okay.

JV: What the heck was that guy’s name? Anyway, there was a woman in charge of the army down there, and so, we start talking, and stuff like that. So I told them, we ought to have a card, and this and this on it. “You can’t do that.” “Well, that’s what we’re doing in Pittsburgh.”

MB: So, you became the model of how it could be done.

JV: She fought everything I took down therem but it all was used. But that group in Pittsburgh was the ones that did it all.

AB: The rest of the guys thank you for it, I’m sure.

JV: Well, everybody gained by it.

MB: Thank you. Is there anything you would like to add?

JV: No. I’ve been lucky. Been able to keep my head above water all the time. I’ve had a good attitude and never thought I’m going to hit the wrong road, or anything like that. Now I’m getting too old to ... ninety-years-old.

AB: Is that what you are. ninety?

JV: Yeah.

AB: You look great for ninety.

MB: Well, Joe, thank you on behalf of the Rutgers Oral History Project for agreeing to this interview, and for having your story be a lesson for many people in the future.

JV: Well, I hope so. Would you by any chance want this? [Editor's note: Mr. Vater's outline of experiences]

AB: I would. Thank you.

MB: This concludes the interview of Mr. Joseph Vater.

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

Reviewed by Elaine Blatt 6/27/07
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