Leon Lombard Oral History Interview

CHARLIE SIMMONS: This is Charlie Simmons. Today is the 22nd of October, 2012. I am interviewing Leon Lombard. This interview is taking place with me at the Nimitz Education Research Center in Fredericksburg, Texas, and Mr. Lombard, you are located in what city?

LEON LOMBARD: Arlington, Massachusetts.

CS: Arlington, Massachusetts. Very well, then. The interview is in support of the Nimitz Education Research Center for the National Museum of the Pacific War Texas Historical Commission for the preservation of historical information related to the site. Now Leon, if you would, please state your name, your place of birth and your date of birth, and we'll take it from there.

LL: Well, full name is Leon Ernest Lombard, and I was born in North Adams, Massachusetts. Yeah, what year?

CS: OK.

LL: Seven-twenty-twenty-five. OK.

CS: All right. Did you have brothers and sisters?

LL: Yes. I had a sister two years younger than myself, a brother four years younger, and another sister six years younger.

CS: OK. What -- did you go to school there?

LL: No, actually I started school in Somerville, Massachusetts, when I was age six. I went there just for a couple of months, and went to Rowe, R-O-W-E, Massachusetts, and I attended/finished the first grade in a one-room schoolhouse, which was quite interesting, because I had two of my aunts in the same class. But there's one teacher and six rows. So she taught a row at a time. But it was very good, because when I went to another school for the second grade, it was boring. I'd learned it all while I was in the first grade.

CS: Yeah. What did your father do?

LL: Actually, my father worked for John P. Squire, it was a meat packing house. And he was a foreman, and eventually became the head of the curing department.

CS: OK. And did you continue on in school in Rowe? Or did you change after that?

LL: Actually, the next school I went was two, for the second grade, was in Morningdale, Massachusetts.

CS: OK. Were you living in the country mostly? Or in small towns? Large towns? What sort of life?

LL: They were -- actually, Rowe was a rural town and the Morningdale was just a small town also.

CS: OK. Did you just continue through school and through high school?

LL: We moved a lot. I went to the third grade in Cochituate, Massachusetts. It was close by Morningdale.

CS: I'm not going to try to spell that. We'll use the phonetics on it.

LL: Cochituate, I don't blame you. C-O- oh, Cochituate.

CS: That's OK, we'll use the phonetic spelling on that.

LL: All right. I used to spell it all the time. I did the third grade in Cochituate. And the fourth grade, I lived in Waltham. The fifth grade, I went to West Medford, Massachusetts. In West Medford, I did the fifth, sixth and seventh grade.

CS: Oh.

LL: Then I moved to Somerville, Massachusetts, where I continued up into the 11th grade, and I left 11th grade because I was going into the service.

CS: OK. And what year was that that you left the 11th grade?

LL: That was in probably about November of '41. No wait a minute, no. It was after that. It was after Pearl Harbor. Actually, I guess it was December, late December of '41.

CS: OK. So right after Pearl Harbor, then.

LL: Yes. Mm-hmm.

CS: OK. Do you remember the impact that Pearl Harbor had? Do you remember December the 7th specifically, the day?

LL: I remember it very clearly.

CS: OK.

LL: I was riding in a car on that Sunday afternoon with three of my buddies. And we're just sightseeing, listening to the radio, and all of a sudden the announcement came on that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. And we couldn't believe what we were hearing at first. But as the development kept going on, we realized it was true. And the thought we had in the mind was that the next thing, they're hitting the West Coast, so we would have to defend the country.

CS: Mm-hmm?

LL: I was 16 years old, and another one was 17 and 18. But the oldest one was 18, in the car. And we all wound up in the Navy.

CS: Well, how were you able to get in at 16 years old?

LL: OK, just a few weeks after the December 7th, I'd been down to a recruiting office in Somerville, where I lived. And the Marine recruiting office sounded very interesting. But for some reason or other, instead of going to their recruiting office, I decided to go to the federal building in Boston and sign up. And this was in January, I was still 16. I went in, and when I got off the elevator, I saw everyone in Navy uniforms. So one of the sailors said, "Can I help you?" I says, "No, I guess not. I came to

join the Marines, and I guess I got off on the wrong floor." They said, "No no, you're on the right floor. Come right with me," and got me in an office and talked me into the Navy. And I filled papers out and everything there at the time, and they said, "You need to get your parents' permission." So they gave me papers to sign and bring back.

CS: So they would let you in even at the age of 16? You know, I was under the impression if you were 17, you could get you parents to sign. But I wasn't aware that 16 was OK too.

LL: Well, at 16, what they said, I went in, took the physical, and everything was all set. And they said, "We'll call you when you turn 17."

CS: Oh, OK.

LL: So they called me, and I was sworn in at 8:00 in the morning on July 20th, 1942, on my birthday.

CS: OK. So that's very interesting. What made you decide that you wanted to join the Marine Corps, at firsts?

LL: You know, it might have been the uniform. I don't know. It was just the first recruiting office I happened to go into. The guys are very nice, they looked very sharp. And I said it looked like a pretty good outfit. But when I got into talking, the Naval thing, he said actually, there's a

lot of things you can do differently in the service, and the possibility of going into service school. And I had taken several years of metalsmith in school. So I thought I'd like to be an Aviation metalsmith.

CS: Uh-huh. OK. Well, that really makes sense. So what happened when you went back home with your papers for the Navy? Were your parents OK with that? What was their reaction?

LL: They had a tough time dealing with it, but everything was happening so fast, and a lot of people were going in. I had to do a lot of talking, but I think, I guess they figured if I didn't go in right away, I'd be going in sooner. If it's really what I wanted to do, and it was a patriotic thing to do.

CS: Yeah.

LL: And others that were 17 years old were going. So they reluctantly signed the papers.

CS: OK. You decided, then, not to finish out your high school --

LL: Yes. I felt that I was going to finish high school anyway, so I went up and told them I was quitting school, and looked to go in the service. So I wanted to do something a little different. So I went in Boston (inaudible), and

wound up getting a job as a runner in the Boston Stock Market.

CS: Oh.

LL: That was very interesting. I stayed there, actually I was a runner, then I got promoted to switchboard operator. And then when it was time to leave, I just left. But there was people leaving the stock exchange, brokers and everything, every few days I'd see one of the brokers come in with a uniform on. They were off. So I filled in as a substitute switchboard operator. It was a case where they had up on the floor, there were no women allowed up there at that time. And they wanted a male at the switchboard.

CS: Oh, OK.

LL: So I stayed on the switchboard. Gerald, the operator, was drafted, and I stayed on the switchboard until the day before I went in to report for duty.

CS: Yeah. Well, perhaps at another time you could -- I'd love to hear a rundown about how the stock markets worked in those days before the computerization and all the online things we have now. But I guess that'll have to wait for another interview someday.

LL: It could take a little time.

CS: Yeah, I can imagine. But it would be very fascinating to get that. OK. So July the 20th, 1942, and you're signed up for the Navy. And what happened after that?

LL: Well, we took a physical, we passed the physical. And we had to get sworn in. We boarded a train to Newport, Rhode Island, and then I went to boot camp in Newport, Rhode Island.

CS: OK.

LL: After the boot camp, after we completed that, they gave us a 10-day leave, so I went home for 10 days. And when I reported back, there's be drafts going out every few days, and we'd just line up and wait to see if our name was called. One day I was pleasantly surprised, they said, "The following named men fall out for Aviation metalsmith school in Jacksonville, Florida."

CS: OK. Well, you got what you wanted.

LL: I headed down there. That was -- it was the first part of September of '42.

CS: Now, back up a little bit to your boot camp. How long was your boot camp? About?

LL: I'm thinking it was -- I thought it was about six weeks, I'm not sure.

CS: OK. And you just learned basic military procedures, how to drill and how to solute, and wear a uniform, and those basic things?

LL: Right. Uh-huh.

CS: OK. Did you have any rifle training? Any weapons training at all?

LL: Yeah, we did, I remember because we all went to the dentist, and the dentist decided I had two teeth that needed to be pulled. So he pulled those two teeth. And there wasn't much -- they gave Novocain, but the Novocain was off practically before it was done.

CS: Yeah.

LL: And soon as I got there, they said, "Report down to the rifle range for target practice." And that was an uncomfortable experience, my first rifle practice with two teeth aching.

CS: Do you remember, did you use the old Springfield rifles? Or did they have the M1 out by that time?

LL: I believe they were .22. I don't remember what kind, I think they were .22 caliber rifles.

CS: OK. So, yeah, OK, well --

LL: And the reason I say that is because we also had the hand guns, and they are -- I thought they were .45s. But later on I found out that they were .22 on .45 frames. They

didn't give the same kick. The next time I went to a target practice, I got the .45 that was a real .45. And that was a little different to handle.

CS: Yeah, I can imagine. OK. So you took a train down to Florida, then?

LL: Yes. Took the train down to Florida, and I got down there in early September, and graduated, I think, the first week in February.

CS: OK.

LL: And I went from there up to a Naval Air station in Norfolk, Virginia, and I was assigned to what they call the Assembly and Repair Unit. And that was a big complex where the planes that came in for a major overhaul, they'd take the wings off. They went to the wing shop, fuselage to the fuselage shop, engine to the engine shop, etc. And there was a date for final assembly. And so in each shop, when you've got something to do, you knew when you had to get it out on time. And an interesting part was, when I got into the wing shop, I got a new guy that got in the same day. And there's mostly civilians in the wing shop. But the lead man came over, and he said, "Why don't you boys start on this one here?" And there was two sawhorses, and it was a wing off an SBD, dive bomber, and was about a third of it, was the root that attached to the plane, and about a

third of the wing there. And I said, "Where's the rest of the wing?" He said, "That's damaged beyond repair." And I said, "Well, where do we get the thing to splice on?" I was only 17. I couldn't figure it out. And they said, "Do you know where the blueprint room was?" Well, the blueprint room was a whole big building. And I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "That would be a good place to start." So we went, my partner and I went over there, and we worked for three days ordering pieces that you could order, and finding the pieces that we couldn't, that we had to manufacture. And it's hard for me to believe now, but the two of us were teenagers, we rebuilt that wing. And the wing shop ran three ships. But this was complicated, and we knew the parts and all of that. So they said we've got to do it just with one shift. So we thought we'd never make it. So I said to Fred, "We can't do it. Let's work double shifts." So we did. We worked 16 hours a day, double shifts, but we did complete the wing and got it out on the plane at final assembly.

CS: So you had the raw materials to form, to cut and form all of the struts and the skin?

LL: Yes. The whole thing. When I say that, there were some -- what do I call them, the ribs-like section in between, and several beams. We were able to order those in. But there

was a lot of attachments and things like that to a smaller, that we had to manufacture. But we followed the plan. And it worked.

CS: Well, this is quite an introduction to the trade. Did you --

LL: Yeah, it was a lot of education.

CS: Did you have a --

LL: It was a good education at the school, but this one here was good on-the-job training.

CS: Yeah. Did you have -- so it sounds like you had an adequate supply of the raw materials and equipment to work with, to (inaudible).

LL: Oh yeah. Yeah, it was great. We had all the tools and everything to work with.

CS: Wow. Well. So was that sort of a typical job for the things that you ran into?

LL: No. Actually, I was in the fuselage shop first, and we did a lot of repairs. Damaged skin, and holes and things like that. And then I went to the float shop from there. And those were a little easier to work on, and didn't take long. But there was -- everything had to be inspected. Even beginners, we could do things. But if we didn't get every rivet exactly the way we were supposed to, they inspected us, told us to take it out and do it over again.

But I went from the fuselage to the float shop, and then over to the wind shop. And that's where I really learned a lot.

CS: So did you stay in the wing shop then after that?

LL: Yes, I stayed in the wing shop. But what was happening was, every month or two they were taking people out of these shops and putting them aboard ships.

CS: Yeah?

LL: And I really didn't know if I'd like to be aboard ship, even though I'd signed up in the Navy. But there was an Advanced Base Training Unit on the other side of the base, and I said I think if I've got to go in combat, I'd rather go in the Advanced Base Unit. So I put in for that a couple of times, and they said no relief available. And I kept putting it in every month, and one month I got to it. So I went to the Advanced Base Training, and after I completed that, go out on a troop train out to Alameda, California, for transfer out. And it was interesting for a while. There wasn't really much to do. They had so many people going through there. It was basically mustering every few hours, to make sure you're around. But one day, I got called out, just a half a dozen of us, and said we're being transferred down to Crows Landing, California. And when we got down there, we found it was just an auxiliary

field. There wasn't much regulation down there. What it was, a lot of pilots and crew that had been overseas and come back that didn't seem to fit into the military, the way they liked it up at Headquarters. So they were down here. It was nice duty. I stayed there until one day we got the order to be ready the next morning to ship out.

CS: Were you working? When you were at Crows Landing, were you still -- you working doing metalsmithing at --

LL: Oh yeah, yeah. No, it was -- they actually had a squadron there and we made all the repairs, and the next did all the engine checks, and everything. It was really good duty, and kind of a pleasant experience, before having to leave.

CS: Where is it located? I don't think I've heard of that before.

LL: It's close to Modesto, California.

CS: Oh, OK.

LL: That's the biggest town. But we used to go -- actually, we got a notice one time that they were starting a small USO in Patterson, California, which was the next town. And they asked for volunteers to go in, because they wanted somebody to show up. And we went there, and it was very nice. It's a small town, and we got to know the people. It was almost like being home.

CS: Yeah. How long were you in Alameda and the Crows Landing, combined? More or less?

LL: I'd say probably about two months.

CS: OK. And this is on top of your time in Norfolk, so about what timeframe, then, was it that you finally left Crows Landing?

LL: When we left Crows Landing, it was in June of '43.

CS: June, '43. OK.

LL: I was a long-time veteran by that time. Been in the whole year.

CS: Yeah.

LL: But when we got on the busses, we traveled. When we got to our destination, they pulled up alongside of a ship. When I got off the ship, I said to the chief, I said, "What are we doing here?" He says, "We're going aboard that ship." I said, "I put in for Advanced Base Training, and thought I was going to an Advanced Base." He said, "How did you think you're going to get there?" Well, the matter is, I thought I was going to fly. But he says, "No, you're going on here." I was aboard that ship for 20 months.

CS: Twenty months? Oh, my God. What kind of ship was it?

LL: It was a seaplane tender. We tendered the PBMs, the big flying boats.

CS: OK.

LL: A lot of people remember the PBYs.

CS: Yeah.

LL: There were a lot of those around. But a lot of them didn't see PBMs, for some reason. We saw them for 20 months.

CS: Yeah. So and where did you travel while you were on board the seaplane tender, then?

LL: We went out to -- we stopped at Pearl Harbor on the way out, just for a couple of days. And then we pulled into Enewetak, and I think we picked up some people there. Then we went onto Kwajalein, and we were there for maybe a week or two. Then we went out and we were at sea for quite a while. We were with a fleet, and we were zigzagging all the time, to avoid contact with any submarines, I guess. Then one day we pulled in, and it was in the Marshall Islands. And we pulled in off the shore of Saipan. We anchored in there, and other ships began to come in. And the middle of the afternoon, there was a battleship right alongside of us. And they opened fire, and it was just a lot of -- all the ships along the shore there were firing on the island. And later on that day, the Marines went in with the landing craft.

CS: Now, were you servicing the seaplanes during this time you were at sea? Or stopping at the islands as you were going over?

LL: No, we didn't see our squadron until after we got to Saipan. And it was -- the Marines took the end. The first thing they took was the air base, which was a seaplane base. And as soon as the Marines took the seaplane base, our planes came in. They were all anchored off the coast and close to our ship. But when they were damaged, they went up on the beach and then it's an engine check. So we went on the beach almost every day to work.

CS: OK.

LL: And the Japanese weren't sure they wanted to let that go, so there was several attacks while we were there. But the Marines drove them back. And so we stayed there until Saipan was totally taken by the Marines and the Army. Then they went over to Tinian, which was the adjoining island, and took that. And after they took that island, we saw planes that we never saw before, but that was where they had the first B-29s.

CS: Oh. OK. Now what was the basic function of the PBMs? Were they doing patrols? Search and rescue?

LL: Yeah, they were -- they carried bombs and they did bombing runs. And they did a lot of picking up of pilots. Didn't have the helicopters back then.

CS: Yeah.

LL: So the pilots, the PBYs and PBMs that pulled them out. Actually, I was ground crew. So we didn't get regular flight pay. But they had flight pay a certain number of -- they call them "flight skins" for the ground crew, because they wanted the ground crew to be up in the planes that they were working on occasionally.

CS: Uh-huh?

LL: But my partner that I worked with all the time, V. J. Buckner, well, they used to call us the "eager beavers." We liked to work, and would volunteer for a lot of things. But the time goes past, by faster when you're working.

CS: Sure.

LL: So we didn't seem to get any flight pay. And until one day, they told us that we were -- no, I guess this was later on in the story, because we went, after Saipan, the next place we went was the Palau. And we operated at a place called Kossol Passage, which was off the shore of the island of Babeldaob, and that was an occupied island in the -- it was occupied, but they were bypassing it. They weren't taking it. So we stayed off the coast a ways, and our planes were moored to buoys around us. There's always a watch to see if anyone was coming off the island during the day. And at night, the 40-foot launch had a crew on

that and patrolled our ship. And I remember serving duty on that, and standing up on the bow of that launch with a machine gun, and nobody ever told me how to shoot it. (laughter) But I figured you pull a trigger.

CS: Yeah.

LL: And I didn't ask any questions. But when they had the late watch, so you're on when it became daylight, is we were patrolling around our ship, we saw the Japanese patrol boats going along their post. But we never made contact, anything, with them.

CS: You didn't feel like going over there, duking it out with one of their patrol boats, just to get a little combat experience, I suppose?

LL: Yeah. We really weren't looking for trouble.

CS: Yeah. OK. (laughs)

LL: But actually, our ship rode out the four major typhoons during World War II. And we had one typhoon right there while we were at Kossol Passage. One of our -- when the planes, during the typhoons, the plane crews stayed on the planes and kept the engines running into the wind to hold their position on the buoys. And they did very well. But this one night, one of the planes broke loose, and we shot a number of lines to them, but they didn't get them, and they just disappeared into the darkness, and we never heard

any more. So just a few years ago, I saw a report or a story from someone who had been over there. But it was his -- that squadron. And he was aboard that particular plane, and the plane did sink a little earlier on. And they were picked up by friendly forces. So we were glad to hear that, because we thought there was 11 men on the crew, and I'd hate to think that they were lost.

CS: Yeah. Well, it's a pretty adventurous amount -- I'm surprised they wouldn't try to get the PBMs, just fly them out of the way and get them on an island somewhere, where they'd be a little bit easier to tie down in a typhoon. But I guess --

LL: I'm not sure what the reason was for that. But I can remember at Saipan one time, that we were working out on the planes, and all the -- we saw the flight crews coming out, and they picked us up and send us back, and said, "What's happening? You have to get underway because we're right in line," the (inaudible), didn't know how much Japs it was, but they said the Jap fleet was heading our way. So our planes all took off and left there. And I don't know where they went for a few days, but they did leave when they had to.

CS: Yeah. OK.

LL: But we didn't receive any damage. A plane went over us and dropped a bomb, but he missed us by about 20 feet.

CS: Wow. Well, that can still do some damage sometimes, even that close.

LL: What's that?

CS: I said, that could do some damage sometime, even those near misses, those (inaudible).

LL: Oh, yeah. In Saipan, actually, as we're going across, they had us go up in a seaplane deck, and the ordinance kind of got out there, and they gave us all carbines and told us how to use them, break them down, clean them, break them down and put them back blindfolded, and all that. And I said, you know, what a nuisance. We're never going to use anything like that. But when we went in on Saipan, we took the carbines and our hardhats, even though it's hot, and we didn't like them. But we did have them. But one day, my part-- I made a patch for a plane, and he had mis-measured it. And they said to me, a man named Lombard, they all called me, "Lom," and he says, "Hey Lom," he said, "Go over in the field over there." There's a Japanese plane that had crashed. He said, "Go over there and see if you can cut enough metal out of the side of that plane to make a patch here. So I went over there and was out in the field, and I started to cut the patch. All of a sudden there was

a shot, and about three feet from me, a bullet hole went in the fuselage. And we'd been told if we came under sniper fire, to move as fast as you could out of there, because they only had single-shot rifles. And they had to reload.

CS: Yeah?

LL: I think I beat all records getting back to the plane and got a hold of my carbine. But then we started firing in that (inaudible), and the Marines came in, and I guess they took everything out. They drove them back, anyways. But it was a little nerve-wracking. I thought afterwards, I was just out in the field, and I was the only one that guy was trying to get.

CS: Well, yeah.

LL: Lucky he was a poor shot.

CS: Yeah. Lucky indeed.

LL: What's that?

CS: I said that was very lucky, indeed, that he was a poor shot.

LL: We were there one other night, where it was -- we thought everything was under control, so they told us we could have floodlights on while we worked. I was outside driving rivets, and my buddy was inside bucking them. So there was a lot of noise. But all of a sudden, I heard a lot more. And I looked, and there was all kinds of gunfire going on;

tracer bullets going in there. So I yelled for him to come out. And this day we didn't bring any carbines over. We thought it was not necessary. So we just hunkered down behind a big concrete abutment, part of an old hangar, and stayed there during that battle. But when the Marines finally figured they had it secured, of course we couldn't put any more lights on. But we had cots that we were going to stay there and sleep that night. And the Marines said, you know, "Where's your" -- well, he didn't say carbines, but whatever it was, they wondered what we were doing to protect ourselves. "Oh," he says, "Don't you even have side" -- we told him we left our carbines aboard ship. He says, "Don't you even have a side arm?" We said, "No." He says, "Well, we're going to be patrolling here, but you sleep with one eye open, because they're trying to get here and get food, and they're libel to slip through, and they'll slit your throat." So the only thing I had was -- I don't know why I had it, but I happened to have a small hatchet, so I slept off and on all night on top of a small hatchet.

CS: Yeah?

LL: But it worked out all right.

CS: So it wasn't quite the kind of experiences you were expecting for an Advanced Base operation, it seems like.

LL: No, I thought I was going to be in a shop working. But I found out the Advanced Bases were active places.

CS: Yeah.

LL: So when we got back from after the battle at Palau, we got back to Saipan. And we were moored there for a while waiting. Then the skipper came on one day and said that he had tried to get the next invasion, but he was unsuccessful, but we were standby if they needed us. So the invasion was Iwo Jima. And we saw the ship that went out. And it was about a week later, they towed it back. And it had big shell holes and everything through it, it had taken a pounding. So I was not really --

CS: This was your seaplane tender? I'm sorry, this was your mother ship? Your seaplane tender?

LL: Yeah, this was a seaplane tender just like ours.

CS: Oh, OK.

LL: That had gone up off the coast of Iwo Jima to operate. And they just got hit bad up there.

CS: Yeah.

LL: And they came back. But I thought, well, we were standby, we'd go up. But they said that -- skipper came on and said they came back and they decided the waters were too rough up there. So our planes, our squadrons, operated out of

Saipan, and did their operation, what they had to do up around Iwo Jima, bombing and picking up pilots.

CS: So how long did you stay on Saipan, or at Saipan, from the time you got there until -- this is quite a bit later than, I assume, from the invasion of Saipan to the taking of Iwo Jima was a few months?

LL: Yeah, it was a few months. It's hard for me to keep track of this, but after Iwo Jima, one day a group of us got transferred to the USS Onslow. Our ship was the USS Chandeleur, and transferred to the USS Onslow, which was a converted destroyer escort, and it was auxiliary seaplane tender. And we left and we went down to Ulithi. And there was supposed to be an invasion, but when we got there, we found the Japanese had left. It was kind of nice duty for a while.

CS: Yeah.

LL: And I was hoping I'd stay on that ship. But one morning I woke up and looked, and we were back alongside of USS Chandeleur, so we went back on there. We operated there for a while, and then one day, we got the notice that -- actually, what they did, they took a big part of our crew off and put them onto Saipan. And we didn't know what the story was until after they were gone, but they said they had reduced the complement of the ship, because there was a

good chance they were going to lose it. I wasn't really happy about being aboard ship, but they said what we were doing, we had orders to go up to Kerama Retto at Okinawa, and set up a floating seaplane base three days before the initial landing. And so there was the USS Curtiss and the USS Whiting, and us three, full-size seaplane tenders, and I believe it was two auxiliary seaplane tenders. And that was an experience, because I never saw my bunk for 72 hours. So those three days, they were just under constant -- well, not constant, but the time between kamikaze attacks didn't give you enough time to go down and crawl under your bunk. So we just slept on the position, we slept up on the floor someplace.

CS: So you were at battle stations in all this time?

LL: At Okinawa was an experience. And we were fortunate. I was on the fantail of the ship one night, and there was a kamikaze plane coming into us. I was on a firefighting crew. You couldn't go anyplace. And I was thinking of what to do, but I was standing there, and I just thought that it was all over, because on target practice on the way out, I don't think our gunners hit anything. But standing there watching, I thought it was all over. But then all of a sudden our gun crew hit that one and blew it up on the way in.

CS: Wow.

LL: So I felt very relieved from that. And but later on, after we thought that it was pretty secure. One night we were up on the seaplane deck, and we were relaxed, there was no general quarters or anything. And we just had the -- they were playing volleyball. I wasn't playing, but somebody missed the ball, so I went over and grabbed it so it wouldn't go off the deck. And as I picked it up I looked and I saw two Jap planes come over the island. And I yelled, "Jap planes!" Somebody else says, "No, P-38s," or something. But it wasn't. I could see the meatballs on the side. They came over, and they turned around. One headed in right at our superstructure, and the other was heading for the superstructure up on the -- up on the bow, the bridge of the USS Curtiss. And I didn't have any assignment that time, so I got off the deck and went down below, and waiting for the explosion, but it never came. Come to find out, one of the three-inch gun crew was playing cards up in the turret up there, and they saw it. General quarters has never been found, and they never got any orders at all. But they were able to knock that plane down.

CS: Wow.

LL: So we got two kamikazes to our credit while we were there.

CS: Well, that's a pretty good record for a seaplane tender.

LL: (inaudible). That was the -- we stayed there for a while, and then we got a notice our 18 months was up. And they were rotating us back to Alameda, California. And on the way, we were just one day out of Pearl, and the captain came on and announced that they had dropped the bomb and the Japanese had surrendered, so the war was over. And we were quite happy. At least we were back in the States for the celebration, but we were just happy it was over. But the next morning, the skipper came on and said our orders were changed, and we go back for the occupation of Japan. So we turned around and headed back north. And we weren't in Tokyo for the surrender, but we were at a seaplane base up on the northern tip of Honshu, called [Oganata?]. And so we operated out of there for several months. And then headed home, for leave. I'd been away for two years by that time.

CS: Now when you were at Okinawa, did you have a chance to go ashore and see any of Japan?

LL: I'll tell you the truth, I was a first class metalsmith, and at one point in time, at another place, I had everybody working, except one guy. And he was an older guy; really didn't like to take orders from a young guy. So rather than give him a discrepancy to go out on the plane, I

grabbed my tools and went out and did the job myself. When I got back, the chief was at the gangway. He said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I just went out to the discrepancy." He says, "Are all of your men working?" And I knew he was there for a reason. I said, "No." I said, "I got a little trouble with one." And I said, "I'm trying to work it out." He says, "You give him the next discrepancy." And I said, "He won't take your orders." He said, "You give him that discrepancy, and if he won't take the order, you put him on report." I said, "I don't want to put anyone on report." "Well, you don't do that," he says, "You go on report." So I did what he said. And the guy didn't -- he was a little upset, but he worked. But that eliminated that problem. But after that, the chief came to me and he said, "I don't want to see you going out on any job working unless you have all of your men working." So I said, "OK." Well, when I got up to Japan, from what I'd seen on Saipan and everything, I was a little nervous that they might not all realize the war was over.

CS: Yeah.

LL: And so we had ships that went in on the seaplane route, and worked there every day. I kept sending men over, but the chief had told me not to go until every man was working. Well, I never had every man working. My feeling was I

survived the war, why put myself at risk and take a chance of something after it was over?

CS: Yeah.

LL: So I was no hero.

CS: (laughs) Yeah, well, OK. So you were there -- how long were you there, then, at Okinawa?

LL: We were there about two months.

CS: Uh-huh. Then did they transfer the squadron back to the States at that time?

LL: Yeah. I will add one more thing in there in the story that I forgot. We weren't in the plane crew, but I told you they wanted the men to go up that were working on them to go up in the planes once in a while. So when we got the orders to go up to Okinawa, my buddy, Earl Buckner, says, "Guess who's getting flight pay this month?" I said, "No, they wouldn’t do that." A half hour later, the chief came by and said, "We just noticed that you haven't had flight pay. So you got flight pay this month." So actually, I did fly up there, and what we used to have was, some of the planes didn't come back. But we had one flight that went up around Northern Japan and came back between Japan and Korea. And almost every time we had a plane on that run, it came back shot up. And so one day, a plane didn't come back. We felt pretty bad, but the next day, I knew a

friend of mine was on the plane. And he said they were shot down, but it was just at sundown. They all got out on rubber life rafts, and they were there all night. And they said the next morning they had drifted towards land, and the Japanese were starting to shoot at them. But the shells were falling just short of them. But they were drifting in. But just about that time, a PBY came over, and they picked them all up and got them out of there.

CS: Whoa.

LL: So that crew was saved. But when it came my turn to go out, of course they give you gold and flags and all of this, and tell you, in case you're shot down, try to head for the coast of China. And they'd recognize the flag and everything, and would help us out. But when we got out, I didn't know what flight we were on. When we got out part way, I said to the plane captain, "Do you know what run you've got?" And he asked the pilot. And the pilot told him it was that particular run. I really wanted to dive out and swim back to the ship, but I didn't. (laughter) We did go up, and it was a bombing run. We had to go in and bomb a section where the Marines were pinned down. Our plane was hit, but none of us were hit on it. We did some patches when we got back, but after that, after we dropped

the bombs, we went out looking for pilots. But it was uneventful the rest of the day.

CS: Where was this --

LL: That was my lone combat mission.

CS: Where was this that you were dropping the bombs, then?

LL: It was -- I don't know. It was one of the islands up in Okinawa.

CS: OK.

LL: I don't know just where, which one it was.

CS: OK, one of the -- Okinawa or one of the nearby islands.

LL: I think it was one of the nearby islands, yeah.

CS: Yeah. OK.

LL: I really didn't check too much.

CS: Yeah. Yeah.

LL: I was a little nervous. That wasn't the kind of Advanced Base Duty I was thinking about.

CS: Yeah. Well, it sounds like a pretty exciting episode there, for a guy that just went --

LL: Yeah, it was.

CS: Yeah?

LL: When we got back, they tried to talk us into staying in the Reserves, but I decided not to. So I got discharged on January 5th, 1946. But later on in June of that year, I kept getting notices -- well, actually they wanted to come

back on active duty in Squantum. But I finally settled for going into the Active Reserve. And I stayed in the Active Reserve for an additional 20 years, and during the Cold War, we had PTVs, the patrol, submarine anti-patrols.

CS: Uh-huh?

LL: So we flew those patrols during the Cold War. And that was interesting. Then nothing too exciting, but we picked up Russian subs in close where they shouldn't be. But they didn't have the nuclear subs then. So our planes would stay on them as long as they could, waiting for them to come up and charge their batteries and get air. If a plane that was on them was running out and had to go back, they'd send another plane out. Of course, the subs would always go out into international waters, but they'd take a picture of them out there. So we knew who they were, and what they were doing. But no major incidents.

CS: So the PV -- the PTVs were following the subs by dropping sonar buoys and listening to the sub --

LL: Yes. Mm-hmm.

CS: -- as it was moving submerged?

LL: Right. Yeah.

CS: Did you ever go out --

LL: My position on the plane was an ECM operator, which is kind of boring, because just watching a screen. And if a sub

came up, they would just do one -- whip around with their radar to see if they could pick up anyone on them. So you just get one blip, and have to go in on that. Sometimes there were false blips. But we did catch a few of them.

CS: OK, so you were out of the metal bashing business in the Active Reserves, is that right? You changed your --

LL: What's that?

CS: You changed your occupation when you went into the Reserves, and you were actually crewing on the --

LL: Yeah. Actually, I was a chief -- they changed the rate to Aviation Structural Mechanic.

CS: OK.

LL: So I was a chief Aviational Structural Mechanic. I was on the flight crew, and I had ground duty, too. I had to keep track of all the flight time, flight pay, and the security clearances. I had a good friend by the name of Lenny -- Leonard Bell. I was surprised one day when I first got the job, looking through the security clearances, I came to his folder, and here was a big birth certificate, a little different than anything I saw. But he was born in Russia, and his name was [Leonid Beleruski?]. But he definitely had become a citizen, and he had the secret clearances and all. But a great mechanic, and a great plane captain.

CS: Wow. Wow. So you stayed in the Reserves, you said over 20 years?

LL: I stayed in the Reserves for 20 years. And then my business was keeping me pretty busy, and I figured I put in enough time, and I've got to go to that. But then somebody said, "Why don't you transfer to the Fleet Reserve, because your time continues on for longevity." So I transferred to the Fleet Reserve, and got my discharge when I -- on my 60th birthday, and a nice letter from the Admiral thanking me for 42 years of service.

CS: Oh! Well, that's quite a record. Then you said you went into business, then, after you got out of the Navy. What sort of business were you in, then?

LL: Yeah. Actually, I came out and my father-in-law was a builder. I really wanted to get into sheet metal work, but I went to work for him temporarily. He needed a painter, and so I painted for a while. Then he started building again. So I went on as a mason's tender. So I mixed mortar and lug bricks for two tenders, which was a backbreaking job, for several years. But then I went on with a framing crew and started carpentry. Then my father-in-law put me in with a finish carpenter, outdoor and inside finish, so I could do anything he wanted me to do. And while that was going on, my brother-in-law graduated

from high school, and he went in the Naval Air Reserve, and he was in the squadron with me at Squantum. And when the Korean War broke out, the metalsmith rate was what he went in for. He became a metalsmith. But he was called to active duty in Korea. And when he came back out, he said, "Why don't we form a partnership and build houses?" And I said, "Well, what would your father say?" "He'd say do it." So we went in partnership, and we built houses together for a while. Then I decided to go on my own. So basically, I was a builder and land developer, until I quit. The last building I built was a high rise condominium, and it was the first condominium in our Town of Arlington. And it was the first high rise building that I built, all first class construction. But we built it in '72-'73, and that was a tough time in the economy. And it was a tough time getting through there. We did get through and made a little profit. But after that, I said -- oh, in the interim I built a few apartments. So basically, I said I'll just quit building and take care of the apartments, which now my son takes care of instead. I sold units to him.

CS: Well, it sounds like you learned the business from the ground up, just about everything you did.

LL: I learned it all. But I loved every minute of it. Even the bad days, I loved to get up and get out and physically work.

CS: Yeah, well, it looks like we've kind of wrapped up your World War II history here, Leon, unless you've got some more stories you'd like to add here before we close this out?

LL: One thing, it's a little interesting. I was chairman of the Board of Regents for a small college out in the western part of the state. And I was out talking to the president one day, and he said, "Are you still going down to South Weymouth in the Reserves?" I says, "Yes." He says, "We have a student here this year, a new student, and he's in the Reserves." And he gave me the name, and he says, "Maybe you'll meet him." Well, I figured there's four different weeks, all different squadrons, and I had all I could do to keep track of the ones in my own squadron.

CS: Yeah.

LL: I said, "My chances of meeting that man is like zip." But the next month, I went down there, and I was out on the line. All of a sudden, this pilot came up to me, he was full commander, pilot. And he said, "Chief, can you tell me where I can find Chief Lombard?" I said, "I'm Chief Lombard, sir." And I just looked, and he could see I

didn't know who he was. So he says, actually, he says, "I'm Commander John Perry," he said, "And President [Taber?] said to look you up." And it was a little awkward. A full commander, and a new student at college.

CS: Yeah. And here you are, the chairman of the Board of Regents. I mean, talk about a topsy-turvy --

LL: That was a little awkward, let the man talk, and a commander. Was I a chief under a commander at this point? Or was I the chairman of the board of his school? I didn't know exactly what to say, but I said, "You're a new student at the college?" And he says, "Yes." So he says, "Actually, I'm in your squadron today." And he's the one that I had to report to. He was a fantastic officer.

CS: Oh.

LL: But my wife said to me, I called her, and says, "Why didn't you invite him home tonight for dinner and stay overnight and go back in the morning?" So I said, "OK." I didn't know exactly if that was the right thing to do, but he said yeah, he'd like to. Well, as we went through the gate, he saluted at the gate. And when we pulled out, he threw his hat in the back seat, and it was Leon and John all through the evening.

CS: Oh.

LL: When we got back in the morning, before we got to the gate, he put the hat on, and it was Chief and Commander.

CS: Yeah. Well --

LL: You know, you notice a difference.

CS: Yeah.

LL: But he was a fighter carrier pilot for 16 years. And he said -- I asked him how he was down here. He said they wanted him to change over to jets, and he said he'd been through World War II and Korea and part of Vietnam. And he said they cracked up once on the deck and gone (inaudible) twice, and to change into jets, he said he figured he was just pushing the envelope too much. So he asked for a ground (inaudible). They said they didn't have any available. So he said, "What do I do?" He said, "Well, you can revert back to a Chief Petty Officer for four years and stay in the Navy and retire as full commander, or you can go stay in the Active Naval Air Reserve for four years as your full commander, but you won't be able to get your pension until age 60. Well, he said he felt the Lord was calling him to the ministry. And he wasn't even a high school graduate. So this college, Berkshire Christian College, was a bible college. So he decided to go there and get his education and become a pastor, which he did.

CS: Oh.

LL: But a couple of years ago, I went down to the retirement village down in Dowling Park, Florida, and he was (inaudible). "Were you in the Pacific in World War II? And I was, but I never asked you where you were, or you never asked me where I was." I said, "Well, the first invasion for us was Saipan." He says, "That's my first invasion." He says, "I came in on a jeep carrier," and he said, "Myself, I was the leader, but I had two wing men. And we were the three men to scramble if there was something to attack. And we were on duty and we just pulled into the harbor and hadn't dropped anchor or anything," and he said, "All of a sudden, there was two Jap Zeros came up over Tinian. So they sounded the attack. So we scrambled, got into our planes. When I took off, I recall," he said, "They told us that the Jap Zeros were faster than us. And they gave us a maneuver where we could get the advantage." And he explained the maneuver, but I forgot it by now.

CS: Yeah.

LL: But he said, "I got (inaudible), I sure hope this works." But he said he pulled the maneuver and he came right in on the tail of the Japanese -- one of the planes. And he hit that one, and he was lined up for the other one, but he

said he saw his wing man was lined up, too, so he let the wing man take that down.

CS: Yeah.

LL: I said, "John, you know, I watched a lot of those things while I was in Saipan." I says, "I probably saw that one, but I never realized you were there." Just a small incident that came back.

CS: Yeah. Small world, you know?

LL: I'll tell you one more.

CS: Yeah?

LL: When I was down on Ulithi, we rode out another typhoon there, and there was a black PBY. And that PBY broke loose from its mooring. And we shot a line to it, and the first line we shot, they snagged onto it and so the plane swung around behind our ship, and it was a long line. So it was out quite a ways. But this was a tornado, and the waves were really, really high, and the wind was blowing. It just happened that my buddy, Earl Buckner and I were standing on the fantail at that time. So the officers told us to stay there and give these men a hand when they got aboard. So they hooked up the life raft, and they came over that line one by one. And several times a rubber life raft tipped upside down. But each time the guys hung onto it and got back into it. So we got that full crew aboard

our ship. We never thought we'd do it, but we saved them all, and then let the plane go. So 14 or 15 years later, or down maybe even later than that, down on the squadron in South Weymouth, and we'd come in. The planes are coming in gradually. A group of us are standing there waiting for the last plane. Someone said something about their scary experience that happened; it wasn't anything about the war, but a scary experience. And the next guy said, "Well, the scariest experience I had was in World War II." And he told his. And then that stuttered around the line. And George Mullen was a chief Aviation metalsmith -- a chief ordinance man, sorry, chief ordinance man. Good friend of mine, lived in Arlington, and we used to travel back and forth together quite often.

CS: Mm-hmm?

LL: We'd been friends for years. Came to his turn, he said, "Well, you'd think being shot down would be the scariest experience," he says, "But we were shot down, but we were able to get in close to the coast. And when we crashed, we all got out OK, and swam ashore." But he said, "There were some natives there, and said there was Japanese-occupied, and we had to go with them. And they took us up on the mountains." And he said it was the best duty in his life. He said, "We had all kinds of food, sake and everything.

It was like being back home." He says, "We hoped we never got rescued." But he said, "But the scary experience was, they eventually contacted a sub. And these natives had to take them through the enemy lines over to the other side." And that was his scary experience. So after he was through, I said, "George," I says, "Was your PBY painted black?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Did you go aboard the USS Onslow?" He looked at me, he says, "Yes." I said, "I was the guy that helped you aboard ship that night. (laughter) Just to show you a strange coincidence that happened.

CS: Talk about a small world! And by the way, why was their PBY painted black?

LL: My only thought, it might have been basically night flying, or something.

CS: Oh, OK.

LL: But most of them were with the bluish color on top and the white on the bottom.

CS: Yeah. Uh-huh.

LL: But a number of them I saw on there were painted black. And his was the only black one in their squadron.

CS: That's an interesting observation. Well, it sounds like you had quite a few coincidences that happened during your 42 years, as one might expect.

LL: It was interesting. And I enjoyed the peace time, Reserves. Yeah.

CS: Yeah. So OK, well, with that, if it's OK, we'll go ahead and wrap this up. And I would like to tell you that I've really appreciated your time today. And of course, we all appreciate your service to the country in World War II, and in the Reserves, too.

LL: Well, some people say that. But let me throw one thing out that has nothing to do with this. I went into Boston, had an invitation to go into the commissioning of the USS (inaudible), these attack destroyers, the newest ones. And one of the speakers at the thing, and there was a lot of people there, he was a retired Admiral. And he said, "I'm looking around in the audience, and I see a lot of people from my generation." And he said, "We're quite often referred to as the greatest generation." But he said, "When you go aboard that ship" -- I get a little emotional -- he said, "When you go aboard that ship, you look at those young men." He said, "They're very every bit as patriotic as any one of us, and they are better-educated." Well, I went aboard that ship, and I tell you, I was impressed.

CS: Yeah.

LL: There were a lot of technical things there, but those men were really trained. And each of them were trained for -- even the mess cooks were trained for a technical position, in case somebody lost in battle, there was somebody else to take care of them.

CS: Yeah.

LL: So even the mess cooks had a technical rating.

CS: Yeah. Yeah.

LL: That was interesting. It wasn't World War II, but when somebody said, "refer to our duty," we only did the same thing everybody else would do. And we feel blessed that we survived. And I just come back from our 44th ship's reunion in San Antonio, Texas in September of this year.

CS: Well, I wish we had had a chance to do this when you were here; that's only 60 miles from where I am, because I would have loved to have been able to do this in person. But you have done a beautiful job, and I couldn't think of a better note to, then, what you just said, to close this out.

LL: The funny thing about it was, you know, I'd seen a lot -- some things affect you. But I was pretty self-collected. But when I got to Iwo Jima, I wasn't even in that battle. But when I got at that part of the display, a lot of the things came back, and I saw the number of men, they were

killed and everything, I had a tough time getting through that part of the museum.

CS: Yeah.

LL: But we survived. But at any rate, I appreciate your patience in listening.

CS: Well, you've had -- you've got a great story there. So thanks again, Leon, and we'll close it out now.

END OF AUDIO FILE