

John Corbisiero Oral History Interview

ED METZLER: This is Ed Metzler. Today is the 19th of December, 2013. I'm at the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas and I am interviewing Mr. John Corbisiero. This interview is in support of the Nimitz Education and Research Center Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War Texas Historical Commission for the preservation of historical information related to this site. So John, good morning and thank you for coming up here from San Antonio and spending your time with us to share your World War II experiences. I'd like to start by having you introduce yourself. We'd like your full name, place and date of birth, and then we'll take it from there.

JOHN CORBISIERO: OK. Ed, thank you for inviting me here to give this dissertation on what happened during World War II. My name is John Vincent Corbisiero. I was born on August 8, 1926.

EM: OK. Where?

JC: In Boston. Boston, on Charter Street. And I left Boston when I was four and a half years old and we went out to the -- to the community of Medford. Massachusetts is where I grew up, went to high school, and so forth.

EM: And what did your parents do for a living?

JC: My father was a baker. He actually sold bread and he was on -- he started out with a horse and carriage type thing in Boston in the old days, and then he finally got a truck. You know, the Model As and all that and --

EM: Now, was he first generation, second generation American? He came from Italy, right?

JC: He came -- he came from Italy when he was 18 years old. He met my mother. My mother was first generation here. She was --

EM: Was she Italian as well?

JC: She was Italian, born of Italian parents who came from Italy, and she was born, though, in Boston. He met her and married her in Boston.

EM: Now did you have, or do you have, siblings?

JC: Yeah. I have -- well, my brother just passed away a couple of months ago. I had a brother, Joseph. I had a sister, Amy, and a sister, Rosa, that all have passed away. And I have, now, a sister [Rita?] who's living in Medford.

EM: Now, were you the youngest, or in the middle, or what?

JC: I was next to the last. My oldest sister was 10 years older than I was, and then I had -- Rosa was next and she was eight years older than I, and my brother was five years older than I, and my younger sister is two years younger than I.

EM: So, grew up in Medford? Is that --

JC: Really grew up in Medford, Mass.

EM: Went to high school there --

JC: Yes.

EM: -- and that kind of thing?

JC: Right.

EM: So let's see, if you were born in, you said '26?

JC: Mm-hmm.

EM: So you were about 15, I guess, when we were attacked at Pearl Harbor. So you --

JC: Yeah. Right.

EM: So you were in high school somewhere.

JC: Yeah.

EM: What do you remember about that day, if anything?

JC: Well, I remember that day --

EM: Everybody seems to --

JC: I remember President Roosevelt getting on the radio and telling us, "The -- the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

EM: How did things change?

JC: Well, things changed very rapidly. They had the draft. And not only the draft, when I was in high school, friends of mine were leaving high school. I mean, as I got older.

EM: When they get up to 17 they can go.

JC: I guess 17. They were a lot -- quite a number of them did not graduate. They wanted to get into the war. Everybody was -- all the guys were anxious to get into the war. A lot of my friends joined the Marines, Navy. Navy and Marines, mainly. It seemed like everybody. And so I was eligible, eventually became eligible, for the draft and I wanted to. I was interested in seeing -- and my football coach was interested in seeing if I could get into a program to become an officer. So I actually took the pilot training examination for the Army, which I passed, but I went to the physical and I thought, "The physical is going to be a piece of cake." Well (laughs) what happened was I didn't pass the physical. My eyes were -- my depth perception was bad and so --

EM: So how old were you when you were going through all of this?

JC: I was -- I'm trying to think. I graduated when I was 17, I think.

EM: So you were out of high school.

JC: I was out of high school. I was around early 18 years old.

EM: OK. OK. So this is going to be '43, '44 time period, isn't it?

JC: Right. Right. Yeah. I graduated in '44.

EM: OK. You graduated in '44.

JC: Right. And --

EM: So you're lacking the depth perception to be an Army pilot.

JC: Yeah, so I missed that deal and then I tried with the Navy, and then now the draft boards started getting after me and saying -- I mean, I actually got into the Navy Aviation Cadet program, but my draft board wanted me to join -- to go in the Army and they said that it was -- that what I had done was kind of illegal, going to the Navy. Of course, I didn't know any different. And so (laughs) I had to get my uncle who was an attorney to kind of get me out of this thing, but I did spend some time in the Navy because of that.

EM: So you were actually into the Navy?

JC: I was actually in the Navy, and I have a discharge from the Navy.

EM: (laughs) Is that right?

JC: Yeah. It was something like three months or something like that. So --

EM: So where -- did you go to basic training?

JC: No, I didn't go anywhere. I took the exam for pilot and I passed it in the Navy, and what the draft board was concerned about was that I wasn't going anywhere. The Navy, see you had all these guys doing the same thing I did. You had a lot of them. So to get into a program like

that, you might have to wait six months to a year, and the draft boards didn't like that.

EM: Yep. They wanted to fill their quota.

JC: They wanted to fill their quotas. So I had -- I left that program. Then in the meantime, (laughs) my f--

EM: Well, how do you just get a discharge from the Navy? I mean, that's something just --

JC: No, they gave me one. The Navy didn't want to get into it with the draft board so they gave me a discharge.

EM: OK.

JC: Then, my football coach asked me if I'd be interested in going to the Merchant Marine Academy. He said, "This is a real good deal. You go to the academy. It's like going to the naval academy. When you graduate, you're an officer. You don't even have to go into Merchant Marine. You could go -- you could choose the Air Force, or you could choose the Navy, or whatever." So it sounded awfully good to me, so he said, "I think I can get you in through Senator Saltonstall." So I ended up getting a senatorial appointment to the Merchant Marine Academy.

EM: This is Senator Saltonstall, right?

JC: Saltonstall.

EM: That's a famous name.

JC: Yes. So that, now this is the program that (pause) overshadowed, I guess is the best, one way to put it, the draft board. Now I was committed to go to the Merchant Marine Academy so they said, "OK."

EM: That's like being a candidate to go to Annapolis or West Point.

JC: Right. Right, right. So (laughs) things were happening pretty rapidly and I had -- I had done very well in athletics in school, and academically, in athletics and --

EM: What was your position on the football team?

JC: I was a fullback, mainly fullback. A newspaper writer, it was a sports writer, boys' sports writer that became very friendly with me. In fact, he was a -- he was the Chicago Cubs New England scout for baseball and he wrote for the *Boston Herald*. And he had a team that used to play in the Boston leagues, and I played for him several years. Even when I was in high school, I played a couple of years with Ralph and he told me, he said he was interested in me signing professional baseball, and I said, "No, I'm not. I'm not going to sign professional baseball." (clears throat) I said, "I want to go to college."

EM: If you need water, there it is.

JC: Yeah. I said, "I want to go to college." So he says, "Where do you want to go?"

EM: Watch out. It's spilling. I don't know why. There we go.

JC: So I said, I thought about it. At the time I was interested in maybe going to Duke because they had a real good baseball program. They were national champions. The University of Notre Dame was national champion in football in 1943. So to make a long story short, I said, "Ralph, I want to go to Notre Dame." So he said, "OK, I'll see what I can do." He called me that night and said, "You're ready. They want you right now." (laughs) So I jumped on the train that weekend, and out I went.

EM: Off to South Bend.

JC: Off to South Bend. I didn't have the foggiest idea of what I was doing, to be frank with you. Here I'm going. I'm going to play football on a national championship team. To be frank with you, my coach said, "You'll never -- you shouldn't do that. You'll never do it." I had the head coach of Boston College, Moody Sarno, call me and (laughs) chewed me out. I didn't know Moody but he -- (laughs) I remember him calling me and saying, "Who do you think you are? You're going out there and playing Notre Dame?"

EM: Playing with the enemy, huh? (laughs)

JC: Yeah. (clears throat) So anyway, I went out there and all I knew was I took -- got my bag and went to the football field and met the coach. And fortunately, there was a guy

there from my hometown, Mike Manzo, who had a brother Joe Manzo who played at Boston College who was All-American who was a friend of my brother. My brother knew him. So Ed McKeever, the head coach at Notre Dame, says, "Mike, you take care of John. Make sure he's, you know, that he's OK." So I got set up. I got a uniform. I went out there. First thing I know, boy, they're going to check me out or else the other guys -- met all these young fellows out there. They had about 10 fullbacks that I was going to go against. (Ed laughs) And there were, you know, "I'm All-State from Chicago," and "I'm All-State from Texas," and all this. (laughs) So anyway, I figured, "Boy, you really got it. So you've got to make a s--" Boy, he's -- McKeever says, "Go over there on defense." So I go over there on defense and I said, "I've got to tackle." So they're running plays at me and I was bumping them. My head was ringing like you can't believe it. I was hitting everybody I could possibly hit. So he was impressed and he says, "John, you come over here on offense. See what you can do on offense." Well to make a long story short, I ended up eventually being first -- first team at Notre Dame.

EM: Wow!

JC: As a freshman in 1944.

EM: Wow.

JC: So I played in the first seven games, and the seventh game was against the Army. I played against the Army and Navy. I played against Blanchard and Davis.

EM: Oh, my gosh! (laughs) Namedropper.

JC: And I even tackled Blanchard. And (pause) I -- those are the only two games we lost. We lost to the Army and Navy. Army and Navy, yes, and we had an eight and two record. But when I went back after the Army game, there was a letter that said, "Report to the Merchant Marine Academy."

EM: Oh, man!

JC: Yeah. So I left Notre Dame. I didn't even finish the semester. So I'm (laughs) -- as it turns out, I'm at the Notre Dame --

EM: How are you feeling about that? Are you devastated? Are you saying, "Thank God, I'm finally getting into the Merchant Marine Academy"? How did you feel?

JC: I was devastated to leave Notre Dame at the time.

EM: I mean, that's --

JC: Well, I've left something out. One of the things McKeever, the coach, said was they -- at Notre Dame, they had a huge Navy program called V-5. It was an officer program.

EM: I've heard of V-5, yep.

JC: They said -- well, he said, "We're going to get you in that program. All right?" So, and it never turned out. So I was disappointed at the situation. But I left immediately and went to the M-- I didn't go to Kings Point. Kings Point was the central part of the Merchant Marine Academy. It was in Long Island. But they didn't have enough room for all these guys who were coming in, like myself, so they had two satellite places. One was Corpus Christi, Texas. The other one was Alameda Naval Air Station out in California. Well, they sent me to Alameda Naval Air Station and I think the reason was I was at Notre Dame and they figured, well, that's the closest place -- which it wasn't, but they -- I guess (laughs) they --

EM: Hey, they just wanted you out there. (laughs)

JC: Yeah. So I went out there and when -- and I enjoyed it. I really enjoyed being in the academy. I kind of liked the military. I really did.

EM: So you're like 19 years old, 18 or 19.

JC: Eighteen. I was 18.

EM: Yeah. (pause)

JC: So they said, "Do you want to be a deck cadet or an engine cadet?" I said engine cadet. I was interested. I was in engineering. So I went in the engine cadet program and I -
- we had (laughs) inter-squad program -- kind of

interesting situation. They had kind of like a football program for all the different units at the Naval Air Station there in Alameda for the Merchant Marine Academy. So they said, "This June it's going to have a football team." So they asked me to run it, so I ran the football team.

EM: At 18.

JC: At 18, and I had a guy -- met a fellow there that was in our group. His name is Dick Kempthorn. OK? So Dick was a big, bruising guy and he played with me in the backfield on that team. Well, we went out -- we went to the, all the way to the championship and darn we lost the championship seven to six.

EM: Champ--

JC: Seven to six in that --

EM: But championship of what? A military --

JC: Of the base.

EM: OK, the base. OK.

JC: The base football program. So the reason I bring up this guy Dick Kempthorn is that, I'll just say Dick and I were -- became very good friends and then, well I went my way. He went his way. Dick ends up eventually at the University of Michigan. Dick ends up on the University of Michigan national championship football team. (Ed laughs) So I

mean, that's -- that's another thing. But anyway, I won't say too much more about Dick, but I did talk to him a while back and it's kind of interesting that --

EM: So he's still alive?

JC: Oh, yeah.

EM: Oh, good.

JC: Oh, he runs a huge auto dealership in that area. He took it over from his father. He was going to go professional football. His father said, "No. You're not going to play professional football. You're going to work for me and you're going to take over this thing," and that's exactly what happened. But he was involved in making the College Football Hall of Fame, getting that started.

EM: Really?

JC: Yeah.

EM: Well now, tell me what Alameda was like.

JC: Al-- OK.

EM: Was that a tough training regimen? Was it easygoing and just a lot of tests? Tell me about that.

JC: Well, I didn't consider it a very difficult program considering that it was an academy and a fourth degree, usually fourth degree guys get taken care of pretty toughly. But I remember that the academics were not too difficult. A lot of it had to do with seamanship, (laughs)

tying knots and that kind of thing. (Ed laughs) But it was, what I thought, it was a real -- if I had gone to the academy at Kings Point, I think it would've been much different. I think I would've had to put up with a lot of garbage as a fourth -- fourth degree, fourth class. But out there at Alameda, there were no upperclassmen. That's what the thing --

EM: Nobody to haze you. (laughs)

JC: No one to haze you. That's why -- the only hazing could come from the officers and I -- I got along with all the off-- the officers were, well one of the main guys was Earl Brown. Earl Brown was a Lieutenant J.G. in the Navy and he was in this program at Alameda and so was Chet Gladchuk. Chet Gladchuk played at Boston College, All-American center at BC. He was terrific. And then he went on and played for the Giants.

EM: You guys had a heck of a football team, didn't you?

JC: Yeah. Well, no he -- they didn't play for us. They were officers.

EM: Oh, OK. That's right. They were officers.

JC: They ran the program. Earl Brown played at Notre Dame. Earl Brown went on and coached at Dartmouth. So they knew that I had played at Notre Dame and they treated me -- I'll be frank with you. They treated me like a king, those

officers. I got along great with them. So I enjoyed that program and I did well academically and so forth. So then when I graduated into third class, I was assigned aboard a ship called the SS Clovis Victory. Victory ships was something really new. A lot of the guys got assigned aboard these old Liberty ships, diesel engines pounding up and down.

EM: Boom, boom, boom. (laughs)

JC: You know, going about six knots at the best, five or six knots. This Victory ship I went aboard was amazing. Twin, it had twin steam turbine engines. I mean, that thing could fly! It could do 22 knots.

EM: I guess but it had the same service as a Liberty ship.

JC: Well --

EM: Or no?

JC: I don't -- it's similar. I'm not sure that it could carry as much as a Liberty ship but it carried its -- a very good portion. The thing about it was the Liberty ship, (clears throat) to be protected, had to go in a convoy. All right? This thing could outrun any sub. When I reported aboard, I reported to the captain.

EM: Was she a new ship? Or --

JC: Yeah. Well, not brand new because it had -- it had to come back from a trip but it was, you know, I considered it a

very new ship. The captain was -- I think his name was Johansen. I think he was Norwegian or something like that. These ships were from companies. Shipping companies owned these ships. OK? And I guess they leased them to the government, to the Merchant Marines. And --

EM: Were they given a whole designation or a whole number like --

JC: No, just SS (inaudible, overlapping speech).

EM: OK. OK.

JC: (clears throat, pause) All the guys that had something to do with running the ship were civilians. And --

EM: Now, where did you board her? In Alameda?

JC: No, I boarded her in -- I'm trying to think here. San Francisco.

EM: OK. So this is what, late '44?

JC: This is, no this -- now we're talking about March, April '45.

EM: OK. OK.

JC: So I go aboard ship and I meet the Captain Johansen and I said, "Captain, where are we going?" He said, "I can't tell you." He said, "Go out in the town. Have a good time for a few days and come back." Come back next weekend or whatever. So I did. I went with my friends and we had a good time. Then I went back to the ship and boy, I had a

nice stateroom. They gave me a stateroom and I was really happy about that.

EM: So they're treating you like an officer.

JC: Right. Oh, yeah.

EM: Now, how far through the full regimen of going to become a graduate of the academy had -- had you done? Because you told me you never ac--

JC: One fourth.

EM: OK.

JC: There's four classes. Now I was third class, and when I came back from this ship, I was essentially second class.

EM: Got it.

JC: When I went back to the academy.

EM: Now, tell me why they pulled you out and put you aboard ship.

JC: Oh, that -- oh, yeah. That was the curriculum, that when you became third class, they sent you to sea aboard a ship.

EM: On-the-job training.

JC: On-the-job training.

EM: Got it.

JC: All the guys went aboard a ship somewhere.

EM: Yeah. Hands on.

JC: Right. And --

EM: Only in this case, you're going out to the war zone.

JC: I didn't know where I was g--

EM: Well, you didn't know that. Yeah.

JC: Yeah. I mean, it didn't hit me that I was going to go to war. (laughter) You know? So anyway, so I get aboard ship and I -- I was an engine cadet so I worked for the chief engineer. There's a chief engineer. There's the first engineer. There's a second engineer. There's the third engineer, and then there's me.

EM: Then there's John.

JC: Yeah. (Ed laughs) And I was told, "You're going to learn everything there is to know about that engine room and you're going to stand duty." There's three different watches. Eight to five --

EM: So it's a twin-screw ship?

JC: Yeah.

EM: So we got two of these steam turbines driven off of steam from a boiler, fired by what? Bunker C fuel?

JC: Fired by oil. I mean --

EM: Fuel oil number six probably.

JC: Fuel oil. Yeah, yeah.

EM: That old sticky, smelly black stuff.

JC: Right, right. We had a fireman that that was his job, and I -- I had nothing to do with that guy, and I guess he worked for the chief engineer, but the fireman, I didn't

have much -- that's all we had. We must've had three or four firemen that worked the different, you know, the different shifts, and there were three shifts that had to be worked. And the other thing was, when I'm down there, I will answer -- I answer all the responses from the deck that say, you know, full speed, half, whatever. I have to answer all that. It's one of my jobs.

EM: Now, what have you got? Like an intercom type --

JC: No, no, no. It was a big brass, remember, a big brass thing with a handle on it. And when they did something up there, it went, "Ching, ching, ching!" And where it stopped --

EM: That's what you did. (laughs)

JC: -- that's what you do. But you had another handle that you had to go, "Ching, ching, ching" to say that, "Yeah, we're going to do that." OK? So there were two handles.

EM: So they got a confirmation that you had had it, and that you had made that change.

JC: Right. Right. That's the only communication I'm aware of that we had with the -- there might've been something else but I'm not aware of it. It's interesting in that if it had been a Liberty ship with those great big pistons and stuff, there would've been a lot for me to learn and do.

These steam engines are turning. They're in a thing -- I can't even get in to do anything to these things.

EM: Yeah. It's all enclosed.

JC: All enclosed, and they're whining away, "Eeeeh!" And the main thing is that, boy, try to protect your ears. And it's very noisy down there, as you can imagine. So you got the guy, the fireman, down there firing -- firing. You got a water cycle. It heats the water, makes it steam. The steam goes into the engine, turns the engine, comes back out, goes back in.

EM: Condensate. Goes back --

JC: Condensate. It's a water cycle thing. And I'll tell you something about that as we go on. (laughs) It can be very dangerous if you don't know what you're doing --

EM: Oh, you bet.

JC: -- and you do something wrong. So now the first job, real job they gave me was there's a storeroom over there and nuts, and bolts, and you name it. All this garbage that was in the storeroom, and they said, "You go in that storeroom and you straighten that out. That's your job." So I spent a long time (laughs) there. It was a mess. So I spent a long time in there straightening out that storeroom. The other big job, well kind of big job I had, in addition to learning what was going on, that I would

have responsibility for was what they call the "smooth log." Everything that happens in that engine room is written down. And that's the rough log and that stays in the engine room. My job was to take that rough log every day and put it in what they call a "smooth log." I had to transfer all that information into a log where somebody could read it. That was my primary job. That was my responsibility. So I spent a lot of time on that. Oh, and then of course, then of course I was given -- I haven't mentioned but I was given this document before by the academy people to be filled out by me by the time I was through with my six months' tour aboard a ship.

EM: So this was like your -- I'm going to use the term "school project" --

JC: Right.

EM: -- while you were aboard ship.

JC: This was my grade.

EM: What'd you make on it?

JC: I had a 95 or something like that.

EM: That's good.

JC: Yeah, I had a good, very good --

EM: Just for the purpose of this recording, that's about a two-inch thick, 8.5 by 11 loose-leaf document that John has here and it's the original with all of his handwriting and

hand drawing here. It's really an impressive document. Go ahead, John.

JC: Yeah. So I did spend a lot of time on this document. So between that, and the smooth log, and doing my -- I was very busy, to be frank with you.

EM: Busy is better than not busy.

JC: Yeah. Well, I did pick up some additional duties that I have -- now that comes to mind. (laughs) The captain, as we went -- well first of all, let me say we left San Francisco, went underneath the Golden Gate Bridge, and as we got through the Golden Gate Bridge, we had a sub warning.

EM: Right away?

JC: Yeah. And boy, we called -- put the call to the thing and just, phew, outran them. So there we go by ourselves across the Pacific Ocean. And it was no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Turn right. No, no, no, no, no, no, no --

EM: OK, so you're doing the zigzag.

JC: The zigzag all the way to Hawaii. And I was stunned, absolutely stunned, at how calm the Pacific Ocean was.

EM: At least when you were there. (laughs)

JC: I mean, well you know pacific means --

EM: Means calm.

JC: -- calm. And it was like a lake, and we had the gooney birds chasing us from the back. They were there all the time, but at night, I guess they came on the ship and probably somewhere on the ship they landed.

EM: They'd be down. I'll be darned.

JC: But they were there all the time checking when we put food out --

EM: And garbage.

JC: -- garbage and stuff. Then the other thing was in the front was the flying fish. (pause) And you'd go along, yeah. You'd go along through and then the flying fish, I don't know whether they were chasing us or (laughs) the whole Pacific was full of them, but they were there all the time, and we didn't see much of anything else but that. It got there. So we go to Hawaii and went in the port there and --

EM: Now, did you get seasick at all?

JC: Oh, I was sick.

EM: Sick as a dog?

JC: I was sick like you couldn't believe it. Oh, I was sick. And --

EM: I guess you got over it.

JC: No. I never got over it. I never got over it. To this day, if I go out fishing, deep-sea fishing, I'll get sick.

So anyway, and they -- well, the other thing was, and the tables where we ate, they had these little sides that came up because when the ship went left and right, the dish, some dishes (laughs) --

EM: Well, the dishes didn't go on the floor. (laughs)

JC: Didn't go on the floor or whatever. (laughs) So anyway, and the thing that really got you was this really smooth, and back and forth. That's where you got sick, on that stuff. So let me tell you about the job and now the captain, I was told -- by the way, the third engineer was a graduate of the Merchant Marine Academy and we got along very well. I mean, it was -- he was a fun guy. I forget his name. I'm sorry.

EM: It's all right.

JC: I don't remember any names. He was a super guy and I really, you know, I really miss him because he was a -- he was really helpful to me and looked out for me. So he told me, he said, "John, your job is going to be when the captain goes aboard -- goes ashore, he's going to use one of the lifeboats and your job is you're going to be the engineer aboard that lifeboat, and you'd better make sure that engine's working." So he showed me how. During the trip, I had to climb out over the -- out on the lifeboat

and start that engine and make sure it was working all the time, and I --

EM: What kind of engine did we have here? A little two
(inaudible, overlapping speech) --

JC: Yeah, it was just -- I don't know what exactly, but it was just a -- I had to say it's a -- it was not an internal engine. It's an external engine.

EM: OK. So it's like an outboard.

JC: Right, it's an outboard. Yeah. So my job was to be the -- so every time the captain went ashore, I went with him. And the captain, usually there's a captain and the first mate, I think, went with him. So we took on, I don't know -- I was never told what cargo we were taking and didn't know what cargo we had. So I suspect that we got some beer at Hawaii because our next stop was Eniwetok.

EM: Now, did you have shore leave when you were in Hawaii? Did you get in to Honolulu?

JC: No. No.

EM: But did you take the captain and first mate in, and then what'd you do? Stay with the --

JC: Yeah. Stay with the boat, yeah.

EM: -- with the boat while they're doing whatever they're doing.

JC: Right. Right. So we went, we got back, got in the ship.
(coughs) Excuse me. Headed west again and we stopped at
this island, little tiny island called Eniwetok. Eniwetok
does not exist anymore.

EM: I know. (laughs)

JC: Yeah. It was blown --

EM: It got topped off by a hydrogen bomb.

JC: Right. Right.

EM: Yeah, right. (laughs)

JC: So I went ashore with -- took the captain ashore and who
was on this island? It was just an island where it was an
airstrip. That's about all it was. It was all Marines
there. The one thing I remember more than anything was we
bought beer for the guys aboard and gave them beer. And I
got thirsty, so I wanted to drink some water, and I ended
up drinking some desalinated wa-- it's the only wa-- there
was no water on the island. They had to take the seawater
and desalinate it. And it was so, oh my! (laughs) That
was really bad. It's not too good to drink [in?]. But the
(laughs) Marines, I guess they could take it. So anyway,
that --

EM: So how long were you there? Just a brief stop or --

JC: Brief, very brief stop. Just kind of, I don't remember too much about it except the fact I was thirsty and wanted something to drink and --

EM: Let me interrupt your train of thought for just a second. Aboard ship, did you ever hear Tokyo Rose or hear any of those propaganda radio transmissions from the Japanese? Did that ever --

JC: Later on.

EM: Later on.

JC: I got to know the radio guy and I started spending some time there in there listening to Tokyo Rose.

EM: In that song. OK. Well hey I interrupted you. So out of Eniwetok we go.

JC: Yeah. We leave Eniwetok and we go to Guam. Now, during this trip, I remember counting. We had 18 days. It took us 18 days to get to Guam, I believe. We had --

EM: That's a long haul.

JC: Yeah, and we had --

EM: Was that from Pearl?

JC: No, from San Francisco.

EM: All the way from San Francisco. OK.

JC: We had many, many days where there was nothing but ocean. No land. I remember counting 18 days without seeing land.

EM: And is your ship alone or is she in a convoy?

JC: Alone. Alone.

EM: OK. Pretty amazing.

JC: Yeah. So --

EM: It is late in the war, though, and we did have control of most of these areas. That's good.

JC: Well, there was Japanese subs all over the place.

EM: Really?

JC: Yeah. So we go to Guam and I don't remember hardly anything about Guam. We left Guam and I -- once again, I didn't know where we were going. We left Guam and we picked up four destroyer escorts, two forward and two aft. And on the way to where we were going, there must have been subs chasing us all the way because these guys were dropping depth charges all the way like crazy. And we had a chief engineer that had been sunk twice.

EM: Really?

JC: Yeah. And I'll tell you, now that I heard that boom, boom, boom, boom, and I'm down in that engine room, and now I know that there are subs in the area and so forth, and I'm looking up at the water line (Ed laughs) is above me.

EM: Yeah, you're below water level for sure.

JC: Right, right. The chief engineer was so spooked that he wouldn't go in the engine room. He stayed up there, refused to go in the engine room. I remember that so well.

Here I was in the engine room and he's up (laughs) in the -
- he locked himself in his room, I think.

EM: Really?

JC: Yeah. So --

EM: What do you think about that? Do you classify him as the
coward or just --

JC: Well the poor --

EM: -- a realist?

JC: You know, I can't say he's a coward. The guy had been
torpedoed twice. He was probably really spooked. You
know, he lived through two torpedoes and he probably didn't
want to deal with another situation. But I remember, boy,
I was -- I was getting really antsy now. Now I was
thinking this is dangerous situation.

EM: This is the real deal, huh?

JC: Yeah. So what happened was we went along like this and one
-- I'm in bed and I hear this boom. Boom, boom. Boom,
boom, boom, boom. And I wake up, and it's daylight, and I
look out the window and I see all these ships, and I see
land and I thought, "What in the hell is going on here?"
And I put my clothes on as fast as I could and ran out on
deck and said, "What's going on?" And that's when I was
told, "We're in the Invasion of Okinawa." (Ed laughs)
That's when I found out where we were and what we were --

EM: You were the last to learn, I guess. (laughter)

JC: Yeah. And the thing is, what are we doing here? Well, I should explain a little bit about who was aboard ship. I mentioned the fact that we had deck men and so forth that were civilians, and we also had what we called the Armed Guard, Navy guys, Navy guys that I got to know.

EM: I mean, I thought that's what the Merchant Marine did.

JC: What?

EM: Was basically help provide guard duty for --

JC: No.

EM: -- merchant ships.

JC: No. The Navy did.

EM: Still Navy, all right.

JC: The Navy. We had two 20-millimeter guns mid ships, and we had a three-inch gun forward, and a five-inch gun aft, all manned by the Navy. Now, here we are in the invasion and the Navy guys that were running the three-inch gun said, "Will you help us? Will you be a loader on that three-inch gun forward?" I said, "Sure." So (pause) then the thing was what will we -- what were we doing? Why were we important to this thing? We were important to the invasion in that we provided what they call "fog oil." We had the -
-

EM: You're making smoke.

JC: Making smoke. There were 50-gallon drums that went aboard these little putt-putt boats and they would -- they'd light them off and putt-putt around the harbor and make smoke around the ships. And that was to -- really the reason for that was to hide from the kamikaze. Now all of a sudden, we're -- got to deal with kamikaze and things started getting real dicey. And the first night, (pause) the battleships come in. We had a battleship, I think it was the same one that they signed the treaty on.

EM: Missouri.

JC: Missouri. It came in right nex-- almost next to us and I'm in the three-inch gun forward and that's -- that's where I spent all the time I was there, in that. I mean, I couldn't sleep or anything and this -- they were firing these 16-inch weapons all night long! All night long! And when they fired, they set up a wave that would to-- put our ship bouncing up and down every time they fired. And that went on there so you didn't sleep at night. You had to get some sleep to -- that was -- you could sleep during the day because the kamikazes came over early in the morning and just before sunset. Those two times, you would look for kamikaze.

EM: Did you see the kamikazes at all?

JC: Oh, absolutely. We shot -- I was -- I wanted to bring some photos that showed -- we had our stack on the ship. We had two Japanese flags that we shot down two kamikazes. The three-inch gun forward I was on shot one down and the 20-millimeter to our left shot one down. And they were, I mean, when you see these kamikazes coming in and you know that they're going to hit somebody, you didn't know who --

EM: But generally bigger ships is what they went for, huh?

JC: Yeah. Well, they look for these Navy ships. They went for the -- well, there was a destroyer right next to us that got blown up that got hit by a kamikaze at night and --

EM: Were you up on the gun platform for that?

JC: Oh, yeah. Yeah. And --

EM: Tell me what you saw.

JC: Well, I heard the -- well what, I'll tell you what the situation was. We're sitting there at night and there was fog. And we hear this bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum. Airplane. Kamikaze. Fly-- it was obvious at right our right.

EM: It's dark though.

JC: It's dark. The destroyer next to us all of a sudden started firing at this airplane, I guess, that was up there. And then the thing is that that's what that was waiting for.

EM: That's what they're waiting is to see where the fire comes from.

JC: Right. And it went right into that, hit that -- I mean, it blew that destroyer really well. I mean, there was fire. I heard the sirens going on. Guys jumping overboard screaming and all that. You know? It was really terrible. Yeah. That bad.

EM: You don't know which destroyer it was.

JC: No, I don't. I'm sorry.

EM: There were so many of them.

JC: I have no idea but I'm sure somewhere along the line there's --

EM: Did that destroyer sink or was it just damaged?

JC: No, it didn't sink. But it got burned up pretty bad. (pause) And I'm sure (exhales) a lot of the sailors on it got killed.

EM: Didn't make it.

JC: Yeah. Guys were jumping in the water. I don't know what happened to them. But --

EM: So how many days --

JC: -- that was the worst thing I know and then another one happened where it was interesting in that the Japanese had a (pause) seaplane. (pause) I don't know. I don't know what happened but anyway, this seaplane was overnight right

close to where we were. We didn't know it was there but it got there somehow. Whether it flew in out there and came in by itself, I don't know. But just before sunrise, we couldn't see -- it took off and let a torpedo go and it hit a merchant ship right -- right off our bow. Blew a hole in it. You could -- we went over there and looked at it later on and you could actually go -- with that boat we were in, we could go right inside that ship. That's how big the hole was.

EM: That could've been your ship.

JC: Yeah, it could've been our ship.

EM: This is an eye-opener for an 18-year-old cadet, I would think.

JC: Yeah. Oh, absolutely. (laughs) Yeah. (pause) And I, we had one situation that I remember where the kamikaze came in and hit something. Now, there was a Navy ship. There were Navy ships all around us at times.

EM: Now, you were just offshore from Okinawa, right?

JC: Yeah. Right. Right. So this kamikaze's coming in. He's getting lower, and lower, and lower, and we're firing, boom! We're firing our three-inch at this guy. I'm looking over here at the Navy and they're firing their 20-millimeter guns, their 40-millimeter guns, and those guns are getting lower, and lower, and lower, and they're going

right over us, and I'm standing there with a -- with a
three-inch --

EM: Shell.

JC: -- shell in my hand that I pulled out there and I see this
thing. And I look around and the whole gun crew (laughs)
is on the deck!

EM: They're ducking but you're not! (laughs)

JC: They're ducking and I'm standing up with this thing in my
hand and what am I going to do? And I took that thing and
I threw it overboard, and I hit the deck. That scared the
hell out of me.

EM: So the old adrenaline is pumping at this point.

JC: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. That was another situation I had.

EM: Do you ever think about these -- what you and I are talking
about now in the middle of the night --

JC: No, no.

EM: -- after the war was over? It never bothered you after the
war?

JC: No, but I think about it at time to time, you know. But
no, it's -- I'm not in that situation. I've had some
pretty tough situations later on when I we-- I went to the
Air Force and flew fighters in Vietnam.

EM: That's a whole other story, I bet.

JC: That's a whole other thing and that is really something there. (laughs)

EM: Hmm. Well, somebody should get that story too. Not us, but whoever gets Vietnam stories. Texas Tech University has an oral history focus on the Vietnam era War.

JC: Oh, they do?

EM: We should talk about that after this is over.

JC: All right. OK.

EM: OK, so --

JC: Well, let me tell you. So let me digress here and then talk about what -- something I did as we got on. One of the things that -- I mean, this was tense. We were there for -- we ended up being there, I think, for a little -- almost two months, a month and a half or so forth.

EM: For that long!

JC: In the harbor, and every night was tense. Every night was tense. You know, at night we'd hear these putt-putt boats. These Okinawans would go on these boats and they'd go out at night and they -- they'd put a bomb in the side of a ship and blow it up! So I was forever looking over the side at night and we'd hear this -- you could hear these boats putt-putting around, not particularly theirs. We had our own!

EM: Yeah. You didn't know whether it was enemy or a friend.

JC: We didn't know it was enemy or friend. It was pretty dic--
very dicey. Every night, every night was tough. Every
night was tough. So, and it got to the point where these
kamikaze were coming in and we never saw our airplanes
(laughs) coming after them. The only thing we had to do
was we had to fight against them with our destroyers or our
(inaudible) flaring our guns at these kamikaze coming in.
That was the main thing, main problem we had. So as it
came along, I got -- I heard stories about how guys, Navy
guys were going aboard -- or going ashore and picking up
(pause) things to bring back home, souvenirs. They were
getting knives and --

EM: Swords and --

JC: -- swords and all that.

EM: -- flags and the whole bit.

JC: So when that third engineer, he and I got together and
said, "Why don't we get in one of our putt-putt boats that
go around and go ashore and get some (pause) stuff to take
home?" So that's what we did. We climbed down, got in one
of these putt-putt boats that was carrying 50-gallon drums
ashore of this fog oil. And we went ashore, and we go, and
we start walking. We had no weapons, no nothing. And we
start walking and all of a sudden, we see all these people
walking along with their goods over their heads and so

forth. They were Okinawans that were being transferred to another part by our troops, to another part of Okinawa. They were bringing them south.

EM: So it's kind of a civilian transfer activity.

JC: Right, right. So we said, "Well that's -- let's just go along with them." So we start walking with (laughs) these people. I don't know. It was really stupid but we didn't care. And we're walking along, and we see this village over there, and we say, "Hey, that looks like a place we might pick up some souvenirs." So we go over to this village. And we're walking in there, and to these houses, and we had brought some pillowcases with us to put some stuff in. So we're putting stuff, you know, little trinkets that we were finding, putting in these (laughs) pillowcases, and the next thing you know, the Marines show up. And the Marines said, "What in the hell are you doing here?" We said, "We're getting souvenirs!" (laughs) That's exactly what I said! "Oh, we're getting souvenirs," (laughs) and they said, "Souvenirs? Hell, get out! Where are you from?" And we said, "We're from that ship out there," and they said, "You're going back on that ship." So (laughs) they took us. They said, "You put all that stuff back." (laughs) So we had to put it all back and then we're walking along the road, and the next thing you

know, he said, "Snipers! Snipers!" The snipers were firing at us (laughs) so they said, "Get down." So we're all laying in the side of the road there (laughs) on the -- snipers firing at these guys. So they took care of those snipers or whatever they were and off we go, and we go back on the ship, got nothing. That was stupid.

EM: (laughter) Well, I'll defer to your judgment there but I think you're right! (laughter) Wow.

JC: The things you do.

EM: Well, things you do when you're 18 (laughs) and out there in the middle of a battle and, I don't know. It was a different time, wasn't it?

JC: Yeah. Different time, and that -- and it finally subsided. Didn't see any more kamikaze and (inaudible). So we left Okinawa and we left there by ourselves and wen-- and we went all the way back to Hawaii.

EM: That's a long way back.

JC: And we got to Hawaii, the war was over. That day. That day.

EM: VJ Day.

JC: I went ashore and I figured, "I'm going to go ashore and celebrate!" So I get ashore and there's guys on the street firing weapons, and drunk, and I mean --

EM: Climbing on cars and --

JC: I mean, it was so wild you couldn't believe it, and I said,
"I'm getting out of here."

EM: I've seen home movies of what went on in Honolulu.

JC: Really? I got scared.

EM: It's crazy.

JC: Yeah. So I went back to the ship.

EM: (laughter) You're back aboard ship where you're safe.

JC: Right. Oh, yeah. Boy, I remember that day. That was
terrible. Guys jumping off trucks, hanging on trucks,
hanging on, shooting guns, I mean. So --

EM: So after the war was over, what -- where did the ship go?
Did she go back --

JC: Well, then we went from there to Seattle.

EM: So you went back to the States.

JC: Right, and we had to change. I think we had a change of
crew then. (pause) I was fortunate to be there in Seattle
because we had family friends that were there and I got to
see them. The [DeSimones?], the Italians that own the
marketplace, and they treated me so well. They were fans
of the local baseball team. In those days, Seattle had a
team in the Pacific Coast League.

EM: Yeah, AAA.

JC: Yeah. So they showed me around, gave me a good time. We
were there a short while then went down to San Francisco,

back to San Francisco. (pause) And docked there for a while, and I had to go -- I had a note that I was supposed to report to the local Merchant Marine Academy representative there in San Francisco. I'll just tell you that while I was there in San Francisco, somehow, I don't know what happened, but I was mentioning about the boilers? The chief, the engineer on duty, really screwed up and burnt the boiler out. I mean, just -- there was no water. He was heating --

EM: But no water.

JC: -- waterless lines and just melted them, and that was the end of that. I mean, that ship wasn't going anywhere.

EM: Wow!

JC: So I reported aboard, reported to this guy, and brought my -- I thought he wanted to really look at this, so I brought that along, and he said, "I'm not interested in that." He says, "You're going back to the academy," and I said, "Well, I've got -- I only have four and a half months on board. I've got a month and a half to go." He says, "That's all right. You're going back. You're going to play football." So they sent me back to the academy to -- and who was the football coach? Earl Brown, the guy that was at -- when I told you, the one at Alameda? He was there. He was the head coach. He was going to be the head

coach of the Merchant Marine Academy. Chet Gladchuk was there. (Ed laughs) Ken Strong, do you remember Ken Strong?

EM: I don't know him.

JC: Ken Strong played for the Giants. Ken Strong was a kicker; kicked field goals, kicked punts, and all that. I remember him very much, and he was our -- anyway, he was one of the coaches. So we had a real good coaching staff and they were handpicking all these guys like myself that had played football. It's interesting that Dick Kempthorn, who they -- I mentioned to you before, they didn't even -- I don't know. They lost track of him or something. He told me, I talked to him, that he just -- he never went to the academy, back to the academy. He just went home when the war was over. He just went home.

EM: Well did you -- how long did you stay at the academy after the war was over?

JC: Well, I left the academy in January of 1946.

EM: OK. So you had about another year plus.

JC: And I --

EM: And you played football.

JC: Yep.

EM: But you left the academy before you graduated. Is that right?

JC: Right, right. I would've stayed and finished it, but one of the problems with the academy at that time was it was not an accredited institution. All right? In other words, there's no --

EM: You don't get credits from there.

JC: -- there was no degree.

EM: You didn't go out and get a job because you had that degree.

JC: Right.

EM: So what did you do?

JC: Well, the first thing I did was contact Notre Dame.

EM: Well, I noticed you have a Notre Dame ring on.

JC: That's a monogram ring.

EM: Oh, OK.

JC: Yeah. That's a letterman ring. I don't even know if I can get it off.

EM: Well, oh you still can. That's a hunk of a ring.

JC: Yeah. (pause)

EM: Damn.

JC: You have to have won a letter at Notre Dame to get that.

EM: Well, let me go back (pause) because I don't want to spend too much time post-war, although this is a fascinating story. I want to go back to your experience on the Pacific and ask you a couple of questions. One, how did the other

guys in the engine room -- fireman one, two, and three --
how did they treat you as a cadet? Did they treat you more
like an officer, more like a gopher, just a kid on the
block?

JC: No --

EM: How did they interact with and relate to you?

JC: I had no problem with anybody. I always got treated very
well by anybody on board that ship.

EM: You have good vibes about that whole shipboard community.

JC: Right. Right. I would say that I was treated as an
officer, you know, if you come right down to it.

EM: How was the food?

JC: As I remember, the food was outstanding.

EM: Officer-grade, huh?

JC: Yeah. It's interesting in that -- let's see. How many
officers were there? There was a captain, a first mate,
second, third, four, and four down below, eight. I think
that was about it and I was the ninth, and we sat according
to rank (Ed laughs) in the boardroom. So we had kind of an
L-shape thing, and the captain sat here.

EM: Yeah, the head, kind of at the head of the L, huh?

JC: Yeah, and the first mate, and I don't know. I can't
remember whether all the mates -- as it turned out, you
know, I thought to myself, you know, it wasn't too smart to

become a chief, an engineer, chief engineer. The captain was the important guy, and I thought later on I should've been on as a deck man. But anyway, he sat there and I was here.

EM: Down at the tail end.

JC: Right. (laughs)

EM: But at least you were at the table! (laughs)

JC: Right. I was at the table but the captain never spoke to me. In fact, I'll tell you a (laughs) little thing. I'm trying to think. I was talking to the first mate or someone up there, first mate or second mate, whatever. And he said, "Come on. Would you like to see what's up there on the -- where we work," where the -- so where the captain is and all that.

EM: The bridge.

JC: The bridge. And I said, "Yeah! I'd like to go up there." (laughs) So I go up there with this guy and about -- and the captain was up there and he calls this guy over and says, "Tell that cadet to get the hell off this bridge."

EM: No kidding.

JC: Yeah.

EM: So you were distinctly second class as far as the --

JC: Oh, absolutely.

EM: -- captain was concerned.

JC: I was, you know, I was down there in that engine room. I had no business being on that bridge, according to the captain.

EM: Well --

JC: And that's about the only words I ever heard from him. He didn't give me the time -- well, he might have been one of these guys that, you know, he made it by himself and didn't -- maybe didn't go to school and all that, and here --

EM: A self-made captain.

JC: -- here comes this guy from the academy, you know.

EM: Young whippersnapper. (laughter)

JC: Yeah, right.

EM: Yeah. What do you think about the Japanese? Now, you've seen kamikazes in action and after all these years, how do you feel about the Japanese?

JC: (pause) Well, I mean the Japanese now are our friends. I mean --

EM: What about back then? How did you feel?

JC: (pause) Oh, I was quite angry but angry and scared. I felt like I didn't have the power to do much. Being on that three-inch gun was about the closest, taking the -- taking the weapon out of the box that it was in and handing it to someone to shove in the three-inch gun.

EM: But you were in the line of fire and somebody had to do it.

JC: Yeah. But I was scared. I was really scared, no doubt about that.

EM: Interesting stories, John.

JC: (pause) I don't know.

EM: What else do you want to tell me about the World War II experience?

JC: (pause) I wish -- as it turns out, I didn't go back to Notre Dame. And I wish that, I mean I missed it. I missed -- the University of Notre Dame was something in my life that just was, it just was so impressive. The university and the way in th-- and everything, everything associated with that place out there. Of course, I'm a Catholic myself. And --

EM: Well, it was top of the pops back then in football and then you're saying, and in a lot of ways, not just football.

JC: Right, right.

EM: It was just a first-class operation. And I really think it still is.

JC: Yeah. And I surprised myself. And you know, the war, in one way the Merchant Marine Academy -- I didn't finish the Merchant Marine Academy so that's kind of a lost cause in a way. I didn't finish. Those are two things I didn't finish in my life that I wish I had. I wish I'd finished

the Merchant Marine Academy. I wish I had gone back and finished Notre Dame. But --

EM: Well, you can't have everything I guess.

JC: No. No. And the reason I didn't go back there was I was told that I couldn't go back when I wanted to. I wanted to go back right away. They said they had too many guys back from World War II. They were there before I was, that had scholarships and all that. They had no room for me.

EM: Yeah. There was a backlog.

JC: Right. So they said, "You know, you might have to wait a year or two," and I said, "I'm sorry. I'm not -- I want to get on with my life."

EM: Absolutely.

JC: I'm not going to --

EM: I could see why you'd feel that way.

JC: Yeah.

EM: Well look, we've been going for an hour and 20 minutes.

It's been a fascinating -- don't get to talk to many Merchant Mariners, Mariners, and in particular don't get to talk to cadets who were in a special position aboard ship. I think this is probably the first interview like this that we've got to add our archives, and we've got over four thousand interviews. So I thank you for looking us up,

searching me out, and coming up and spending the time today.

JC: Well, I appreciate it and I wish I was able to remember more detail but --

EM: Well, I'm thinking you got some real details you've already shared with us, so.

JC: You know, I want to make a comment that the Merchant Marine was the only academy that went to war and we lost -- we lost well over 300 -- 300 cadets that did not make it through World War II.

EM: And we're talking cadets. We're talking students.

JC: We're talking cadets like me.

EM: Yeah. We're not talking about graduates who were going out and doing their job.

JC: No. Guys that were on Liberty ships that they went on the [Merrimack's?] run and stuff like that.

EM: I've interviewed a guy that was on the [Merrimack's?] run.

JC: And got torpedoed and -- you know, there was a movie made and it wa-- the cadet in the movie played a big part about the Merchant Marine -- it was a Merchant Marine movie and it had a cadet aboard the ship at the time, and I guess he -- I think he died in that movie. And it was one of these that got torpedoed and all that stuff.

EM: Yeah, yeah.

JC: So.

EM: OK. I want to end the interview by thanking you for what you did for our country during World War II. Your generation saved our bacon and we appreciate it. And thank you for spending the time today to share your experiences.

JC: Oh.

EM I appreciate it.

JC: It's a pleasure for me, Ed. Thank you.

END OF AUDIO FILE