

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JOEL C. MICKELSON
Radar Repairman, Army Air Corps, World War II.

2000

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Mickelson, Joel C., (1925-2011). Oral History Interview, 2000.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 57 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 57 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 57 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Joel Mickelson, a Willmar, Minnesota native, discusses his World War II service with the Army Air Corps as a radar repairman in the Pacific theater of operations. Mickelson mentions being drafted and sent to basic training at Lincoln Air Base (Nebraska). He talks about radio school in South Dakota, reassignment to repair school at Truax Field (Wisconsin), and electronics training at Chanute Field (Illinois). After a furlough at home, he portrays the ship ride from California to Leyte (Philippines). Mickelson describes living in tents during the rainy season, taking Atabrine to prevent malaria, and developing tinnitus. He talks about maintaining aircraft radar equipment and being moved from Luzon to Lingayen Air Base to Clark Air Base. Mickelson touches on liberty in Manila and occasional visits from the Red Cross. While he was off duty, he tells of exploring a cave full of Japanese equipment and shooting a huge lizard. Transferred to Naha (Okinawa), he comments on working in the 39th Squadron, 35th Fighter Group office and being promoted to assistant for the director of communications. Mickelson describes taking refuge in a burial cave during a typhoon, corresponding with high school classmates, learning of end of the war, and supervising a Japanese demolition crew. He talks about the nice facilities at Irumagawa Airfield (Sayama, Japan) and celebrating New Years Eve on base. After his discharge at Camp McCoy (Wisconsin), Mickelson talks about returning to Minnesota, using the GI Bill to attend St. Olaf College and the University of Minnesota, and dating his future wife.

Biographical Sketch:

Mickelson (1925-2011) served in the Army Air Corps as a radar repairman from 1943 to 1946. He married Lois in 1951 and they had two sons. Mickelson earned an M.A. and Ph.D. in English from the University of Pennsylvania, taught English at Augsburg College (Minnesota) for two years, and eventually settled in Stevens Point (Wisconsin) where he taught English at the University of Wisconsin until 1990.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000

Transcribed Yasmine Flodin-Ali, 2010

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Interview Transcript:

James: Now it's the 17th of September, the year 2000. Speaking to Joel Mickelson [pronounces it as "Mickelson"] or is it Michelson [pronounces it as "Michaelson"]?

Joel: Mickelson [pronounces it as "Mickelson"].

James: Whew, got it right. And where were you born, sir?

Joel: I was born in Willmar, Minnesota.

James: When was that?

Joel: March 23rd, 1925.

James: Okay. And when did you enter military service?

Joel: August 17th, 1943.

James: Were you drafted, or did you enlist?

Joel: Drafted.

James: Okay. And where did they send you?

Joel: Well, to Fort Snelling, [Minnesota], of course, initially. And, ah, we took I remember some exams, and I was classified for the Air Corps and sent to Lincoln Air Base for basic training.

James: Lincoln, Nebraska?

Joel: Yes.

James: And that lasted, what, about eight—ten weeks?

Joel: I would say probably six or seven weeks.

James: Six or seven, all right. And then where did they send you next? Did they suggest any type of specialty at that time, or did you choose anything, or how did this go?

Joel: Well, I was assigned from there to a radio school in South Dakota, the air base there.

- James: So, you—did you have an opportunity to become a pilot, or was that option never yours?
- Joel: No, I don't think that my eyesight would ever have permitted that. But I was not very long [laughs] at South Dakota, much more than several weeks, and then we were reassigned to Truax Field, here in Madison.
- James: The radio school?
- Joel: Yes.
- James: Yeah. All right.
- Joel: And I remember that Madison was a favorite town of our group, that is, of the way in which the city people reacted, you know, hospitably. And the food was great. I remember there was a general impression [laughs] in this place.
- James: Just hold one second. I'm gonna do some—[Approx. 15 sec. pause in recording]. Much better. Okay. So—and then you finished radio school. How long was that course, sir?
- Joel: Well, that lasted until, I would say, ah, March.
- James: So it was what, six months?
- Joel: Yes.
- James: So you were qualified to be a radio operator and a—
- Joel: No, this was the radio, um, construction and operation technician, but actually it was of course the program that became the electronics program at Chanute Field, Illinois, which is where I went next. That was about six weeks at Chanute.
- James: Okay, and at Chanute did you do something different?
- Joel: Ah, essentially it was classes and exams with the idea of course that if we passed, we would be sent on to Boca Raton Air Base for radar.
- James: In other words Chanute was an advanced school. I mean you went to radio school here. Then at Chanute—
- Joel: Then it was electronics—
- James: Ah, I see.

Joel: A more advanced form of the material, and then finally radar which of course particularly then was regarded as the most complicated and—

James: Pretty hot then. [Laughs].

Joel: Yes.

James: Right, did they teach you code work? I was going to ask you that.

Joel: Ah, no, no. We may have had a week or two of that, as I said, at Sioux Falls.

James: But it wasn't necessary that you understood or could transmit in the—

Joel: No, no, it was not radio operation.

James: So now that you're an expert on this, that, and the other thing, they have to put you to work at one of these places—

Joel: [Laughs]. Well what happened was I got my first furlough just before Christmas 1944 and went back to Willmar, came back to visit. By that time Salt Lake City was the assignment location, if you want to call it that, and then lo and behold I got another leave. I had no more than said farewell to everyone before I headed for the war overseas, and lo and behold I was back again!

James: You were getting boring. [Joel laughs]. They were probably tired of seeing you! [Laughs].

Joel: [Laughs] I wondered if it would be a little anti-climatic.

James: Right! Oh my, that's interesting.

Joel: But back to Salt Lake City, then I was assigned to the South Pacific.

James: You were single?

Joel: Yes, oh yes, see I was just out of high school. I was 18.

James: Oh, that's right. I was just figuring—I'm just a trifle older than you. I guess that's what I was thinking of, what I was doing at the same time.

Joel: Uh-huh. Yeah, I was born in '25. So, that brought us to Camp Stoneman, California, which was east of San Francisco, for more overseas

preparation, I guess you would call it, or “waiting around” would be another—

James: I was going to say, what preparation was left, sir—

Joel: Right. Waiting around [laughs] would maybe be a more descriptive term. So we left from—

James: Excuse me. Had you formed into a unit yet?

Joel: No.

James: You were still loose in the replacement category then?

Joel: Essentially, I think. No, our unit, our group of technicians, was beginning to form because people that I had been through school with, for instance, were walking onto the troop ship ahead of me. So we were together. I never thought about that for years.

James: So you stayed there until you were ready to catch a ship then I assume.

Joel: Right.

James: And you take that, that—

Joel: The *USS Admiral Capps*. We went under the Golden Gate just around dinner time.

James: Right, and so, you're off in—did you know where you were going?

Joel: No, not really. I think—I

James: I mean no one ever said?

Joel: Not very specifically, but I think we had the expectation that it would probably be New Guinea because that's where we did first go. And they hadn't heard anything about us—

James: Right but I recall reading there that you didn't land there.

Joel: Right.

James: You thought you were but you weren't.

Joel: Right, then up to Hollandia in New Guinea and the same story.

- James: There was no room in the inn?
- Joel: Right [both laugh], or in the barracks.
- James: Or in the barracks, right. So they shoved you on up to the Philippines, correct?
- Joel: That's correct, to Leyte. And of course, that was the island that MacArthur had reoccupied.
- James: And you were stationed there on an air base?
- Joel: Well, being again readied for a more specific assignment it seemed. We did various kinds of work, you know, around the base. I was painting, I think. I was a switchboard operator for a while.
- James: Of which you received very little training?
- Joel: Other than to say, "Do it" [laughs].
- James: Right, that's so often the case that you're trained for one thing and then they find that you're more suitable for doing something else—
- Joel: Right, right.
- Joel: Without your permission [laughs]. Oh no, we don't expect to express our opinions [laughs] in the military.
- James: Right, and what was the base in the Philippines like? Was this a tent colony or were you in barracks or what?
- Joel: Leyte, that was a tent arrangement with mosquito nets. Rained out, practically, on various occasions.
- James: How did you protect yourself in the tent? I mean, from sweeping everything out that was on the deck [unintelligible].
- Joel: It wasn't on the deck; it was on the ground. Our—
- James: You didn't put up any boards or have any boards to give you some space between the water and the—
- Joel: No, we didn't. Pretty sure.
- James: And mosquito netting you said.

Joel: Right.

James: Take your malaria pills?

Joel: Oh yes, got sort of yellow faced as a result.

James: Did your ears ring? Ten percent got tinnitus, permanent.

Joel: I have very definitely tinnitus now.

James: See, you're one of the 10 percent.

Joel: Oh, well, you know I had hearing in between then and now.

James: Oh.

Joel: I mean, I've gotten the tinnitus, I suppose, as part of growing old.

James: No, I don't think tinnitus is related to age particularly, though it's annoying.

Joel: Yeah, I've been to several specialists concerning it, and they always ask if I've been subjected to loud noises.

James: Now you should tell them, "I took Atabrine in World War II." That's what you should tell them. See, a lot of those guys don't know that. That was a problem. Okay, and what was your duty there in the Philippines?

Joel: Well, then I should say that we got assigned, our group, to the island of Luzon, specifically Mangaldan was the name of the base. It's in northern or even northeast Luzon. And began our work, our job assignment there, which was checking the radar and radio sets on—

James: By checking, do you mean repairing?

Joel: Ah, checking to see that they were in operation.

James: I see. Did they get out of operation rather quickly or easily?

Joel: Ah, no, no, the equipment seemed to be pretty good.

James: And the rain that you had didn't seem to affect that?

Joel: No, no. But it wasn't very long before we were assigned yet to another place. That was Lingayen Air Base, which was in the south end of Lingayen Gulf, which is a very historical area because of course that's

where the Japanese fleet came down when they originally invaded in 1941. And it was also the route that MacArthur took when he reoccupied in '44.

James: So then you stayed there for a bit?

Joel: Yes, quite a while I think—

James: But you were—was this busy or—

Joel: Well, wait a minute, wait a minute. Lingayen—that was a sort of a Florida type place, a beach and palm trees—a great place for swimming, which I enjoyed, but very soon we were moving from there also because of the air currents off of the bay were doing things to the operation of our planes, causing accidents, and so we quickly had to move south to Clark Air Base.

James: Oh, a bigger base.

Joel: Very much so. In fact the major one in the Far East before the war at least, and probably—

James: Was right up until the time they kicked us out.

Joel: Right, and of course not very far from Subic Bay which is from where we departed from Luzon on our way to Okinawa. And of course Subic Bay has followed that same route of having all of the Americans kicked out, I think.

James: Oh, yes, I know about that. I've interviewed people who were there at the last before they left. It was quite a big adventure leaving there. So many Americans all left at the same time. Okay, but you were still doing the same thing just—

Joel: Oh, yes.

James: Processing the radar equipment. Was it radar only, or radio, too?

Joel: It was radar that we were concentrating on at Luzon.

James: What would you use for objects to test the radar?

Joel: Well, we had a meter that we plugged in.

James: Right, but you couldn't tell how far the range was without something out there that you could focus on?

- Joel: Well, that was the extent of our—
- James: Or did you use the airplanes and the air base to practice on?
- Joel: Well, we checked of course the planes that were in use, that were about to be used to make sure that they were in readiness.
- James: Oh, you went aboard the plane to make sure the equipment on the plane was okay?
- Joel: Ah, right. Yes, of course, the fighter planes, P-51s, you see, were not very large planes.
- James: I was gonna say, how did you get at that?
- Joel: Well, we just clambered around in there [laughs].
- James: Didn't have much room there.
- Joel: No, just—the pilot can do it, so I guess we managed it. I was part of a team. We had three technicians, and all of our evaluations and all of our recommendations and so on was a team project.
- James: In other words the three of you would attack a plane, and each did a different part of this, is that what you're saying?
- Joel: Well, no, essentially checking the same—
- James: So, three of you would take three planes at a time?
- Joel: Well, or perhaps divide up several planes amongst the three of us.
- James: So if you found that the radar wasn't working what could you do about that?
- Joel: Well, we'd make sure that the material was removed from the plane and taken to the machine shop.
- James: So you had to pull the radar part out?
- Joel: Yes.
- James: Boy, you had a lot of small little screwdrivers.
- Joel: Yeah, as I remember. It's quite a while ago now.

- James: Generally could you repair those, or you just toss them in the corner and put a new one in?
- Joel: Well, I think that what the technician in the machine shop did essentially was to check it himself and decide whether it was easily repairable or not.
- James: Did you do radar only or radio, too?
- Joel: It was only radar on Luzon that we were concerned with. Those planes, P-51s, had cameras in the guns, and so after every attack or mission they would review the films back at the squad, and we would see what had happened.
- James: Sounds standard procedure.
- Joel: Yeah, our planes were mainly directed, in fact almost exclusively, to Formosa. They attacked Formosa day after day, which is of course Taiwan now.
- James: So your daily routine would be what? You'd get up after chow at the—
- Joel: It would be to get a ride out to the air base. And Clark Field was of course tremendous.
- James: How far away?
- Joel: Um, not very far.
- James: You were staying in barracks at this time?
- Joel: In barracks, yes. Oh yes, at Clark Field, yeah.
- James: Oh, that was fairly nice.
- Joel: Yeah, that was—well, before the war, you know, pretty palatial in its way [laughs].
- James: Compared to sleeping on the ground, right.
- Joel: It sure was. Yeah, I was very glad to be assigned to Luzon because of course we got to Manila in several weekends, and that of course had been much beaten up by the Japanese.
- James: Destroyed, I understand. Was there liberty in Manila at that time, or you could only visit in the daytime?

- Joel: Well, that's correct. We rented a jeep or took a squadron jeep and—
- James: But there were no facilities for overnights you could, you know, furlough or anything there?
- Joel: No, I don't believe so.
- James: Did they have any USO [United Service Organization] clubs in Manila at that time?
- Joel: Ah, not yet.
- James: Did any of the USO folks visit you at your air base?
- Joel: Oh yes, occasionally there'd be a program. And there was the Red Cross, of course. Air bases are somewhat, I suppose, in that war, they were somewhat more stable or in the same place longer than obviously elsewhere where you know the movement was the key. So we were visited by—
- James: What did the Red Cross do for you?
- Joel: Well, they would serve us coffee and donuts.
- James: Sell it to you or give it to you?
- Joel: Oh no, I think they gave us that. I don't remember any—
- James: Did you see anything of the Salvation Army?
- Joel: Oh no, no.
- James: Okay. And, ah, so if you had any time off where would you go? Anywhere, or was there any place to go at that time?
- Joel: Well, there was one place.
- James: There we go.
- Joel: [Laughs]. My buddy, Sergeant Wampach and I took retreat one afternoon we had some time off.
- James: Should your wife leave now [Joel laughs]? Is it safe that she listens to this?

- Joel: Well, she won't say that she hasn't heard it before because she has heard it before, probably too many times [laughs].
- James: Oh, that's all right. Once more doesn't hurt. So, anyway.
- Joel: We just thought we'd go driving around, explore the countryside. There were mountains off to the west from Clark Field, which is of course is in a valley, and we came upon a cave which had Japanese equipment strewn around: papers, documents, and machinery. So we thought we'd, you know, investigate the cave. We had our carbines with us. I'd learned to shoot it by that time [laughs], and lo and behold, a huge lizard jumped right out at us!
- James: Good lord! An iguana?
- Joel: Oh, no it was way beyond—it was something like a komodo be more—
- James: It chased you then?
- Joel: Well, not very far because of course we fired [Jim laughs]. We had our carbines at the ready, and we fired. The darn thing fell down at our feet.
- James: This is like a movie.
- Joel: Yeah, or who was the "Giant Killer," Saint George?
- James: Right, he did it with a sword, though, not with a carbine.
- Joel: Right. So we know what the length of the lizard was because my buddy had his camera along so he took my picture holding the lizard up by the tail, and it was just as long as I am tall.
- James: Did you bring it back and put him on the barbie [barbeque]?
- Joel: No, we didn't think of that. We hadn't seen *Survivor* so—
- James: Oh, I see, because those lizards are pretty good tasting I understand.
- Joel: Oh, really?
- James: Oh, yeah. Well, another opportunity lost [laughs].
- Joel: So back to the base and we told them our experience—

- James: Now of course everybody wanted to go out there now and hunt for the lizard, I suppose [Joel laughs]. You could get a jeep whenever you wanted like this?
- Joel: Oh yes, we were able to.
- James: What was your rank at that time?
- Joel: Um, I think it was private first-class. I became corporal before too long and was up for and had been recommended for sergeant, but it was just at the time that I was scheduled to leave and come home so they weren't assigning any rank.
- James: You were scheduled to come home? This is—
- Joel: Well, this was sometime later of course. Quite a bit had happened in the meantime.
- James: Oh, I see, okay. So how long were you in the Philippines?
- Joel: In Luzon? Well, up until typhoon season, which, ah, I suppose is around July. And leaving Subic and on our way to Okinawa because—
- James: And that was in July, near the end of the war?
- Joel: Ah, yeah, it was approaching—it was 1945. We were still at Lingayen, that Florida [type] base, when word of President Roosevelt's death came through, which I think was March 29th. I just looked it up.
- James: April 12th he died.
- Joel: Oh, was that it? Okay, then this encyclopedia had it wrong.
- James: Well, you just didn't look at the right date. It was April.
- Joel: Yeah, because we were there at Lingayen and hadn't left for Clark yet.
- James: I see. So when did you get to Okinawa?
- Joel: Well, not before we'd had to ride through one typhoon which required riding into a bay or a harbor along the way and simply riding it out.
- James: You were in what kind of a ship?
- Joel: A LST [landing ship, tank] I think it was.

James: Flat bottom.

Joel: Yeah.

James: That'd give you a good ride in a typhoon.

Joel: Right. So we didn't make the effort [laughs]. So we got to Naha [capitol city of Okinawa, Japan] then, was our next location, which was completely obliterated. Now, when I see pictures on television of—it was almost Tokyo-like.

James: Yeah, I was there in 1950 at Naha.

Joel: Oh, really?

James: I landed on my way to Korea. I stopped there.

Joel: Oh I suppose, yeah.

James: But anyway, so was your purpose of going to Okinawa to go to an air base there?

Joel: Ah, yeah, yeah.

James: How big of a group were you in at this time?

Joel: Well, it was the 35th Fighter Group, and I was in the 39th Squadron of that. Of course it's 5th Air Force. And there were three squadrons. Well, it would be very difficult to estimate very exactly—

James: Well, I mean how many radar technicians, for instance?

Joel: Oh, I think there were five of us.

James: Five for one squadron or for the whole –

Joel: Just for the one, the 39th Squadron, yeah. And then of course I moved up to headquarters.

James: Why was that? They saw your potential as a leader in the fighter wing?

Joel: They needed an assistant for the director of communications.

James: Well, that must have given you a promotion.

- Joel: Well, in effect was, I think, because certainly the work was different [laughs].
- James: Well sure, now you didn't have to fuss with those machines and dig around airplanes.
- Joel: Right. Actually in many ways it was a desk job. I knew how to type and—
- James: Well, that gave you a leg up right there.
- Joel: Yeah, yeah. And then came *the* typhoon which I described in—
- James: Right. So you went through several min-typhoons and then had one big one? Is that the way you would describe it?
- Joel: I would say it was the elephant of a—
- James: Right, and you were on this base at Naha at that time when it came?
- Joel: No, by this time we had landed at Okinawa.
- James: Well, so you're that base at Naha –
- Joel: Yeah, yeah.
- James: Right, okay. And what kind of quarters were you living in then?
- Joel: That was better. There we had a wood flooring and a tent of course on top of that but some furniture in the tent, tables and chairs—
- James: Were you getting mail regularly?
- Joel: Oh yeah.
- James: That was never a problem for you?
- Joel: No, no.
- James: Food was always good?
- Joel: Practically everybody I knew back [laughs] at Willmar in my high school class had promised to write, and lo and behold, they actually did.
- James: Well, I bet everybody was jealous of you [Joel laughs]. Everybody is always jealous of the guy that gets the most mail.

Joel: [Laughs]. I was really surprised, but, you know, they were good letters. Once I was sent a—

James: Did you write them back?

Joel: Oh, yes.

James: Oh, really?

Joel: Oh, yeah. I was busy.

James: Oh well, you're a dutiful correspondent if I must say. Well, you were very nice.

Joel: Yeah, we were good friends of course. One time I was sent a package and at the bottom of the package was a photograph, and it was sort of half covered by some of the wrappings or materials in the package, and I didn't even notice the photograph, and then I eventually got an irate letter saying, "You thank and you thank for the candy and the cookies and so on, but what about the picture?" [Laughs].

James: Was it gone?

Joel: Oh, no, it was there. I still had the package.

James: Oh. Now did you have a girl back home at that time?

Joel: Ah yes, yeah.

James: She wrote you every day, of course.

Joel: Well, I don't know if—

James: Or did she find somebody else while you were out playing in the Philippines?

Joel: No, I don't think so. There weren't any!

James: [Laughs]. They were all gone!

Joel: They were either too young or too old [both laugh].

James: Okay. Very good.

Joel: So that's where the war ended.

- James: And you didn't really tell me what you did as a desk clerk. You were processing discharges?
- Joel: No, doing the officers' correspondence, and also—well, of course that's getting ahead of the chronology, but I had another kind of assignment later in Japan.
- James: Okay well, save it—
- Joel: Okay. **[End of Tape 1, Side A]**
- James: Let's keep everything in order here.
- Joel: But I think we'll soon be getting to Japan.
- James: I would think so. We're getting down to July. That's very little left now.
- Joel: Right, and we know that V-J day was September 2nd.
- James: V-J day, you mean the 14th of August?
- Joel: Well, actually that's when the first inkling of the surrender was—
- James: The surrender—well, September was officially—the official day was in September.
- Joel: The official day, yeah, on the [*USS*] *Missouri*. Yeah.
- James: Okay.
- Joel: But we didn't of course come in right on the very first wave. There was a time, a wait before, at Okinawa of course, before they sent us on. But that Okinawan experience with the typhoon was unique because of course we had to eventually leave our tents and take refuge in the native burial caves on the side of the rice paddies. Our base was in a rice paddy.
- James: And the reason you had to leave your tent was because the wind was too strong? It was going to blow your tent over?
- Joel: Also rain of course. And it was a rice paddy which of course—
- James: Right. It was wet to begin with.
- Joel: Right, right, or had been.
- James: Did you pick up your things and start running for high ground?

- Joel: We tried to. Then of course found that the place where the sleeping bags were being stored was being broken into, and so we just grabbed a mat and made for the—
- James: You borrowed one?
- Joel: Yeah. Made for the caves and were kept company by the—
- James: But you knew about the caves from before where you found the animals—
- Joel: No, no, that was a different—that was on Luzon, and it had been some kind of, I think, a communications unit for the Japanese because—
- James: How did you know about the caves in Okinawa?
- Joel: Well, we of course investigated them ourselves to find out whether we were going to—
- James: Weren't you concerned there might be some Japanese soldiers resting in there?
- Joel: Well, that certainly should have occurred to us, but there weren't any.
- James: I would toss in a grenade or two to say, "Howdy," before I walked in there.
- Joel: Yeah, yeah. There were some centipedes that were already there [laughs].
- James: What are they like?
- Joel: Well, I don't remember it in much detail except that it was a rather large spider.
- James: Well, a centipede is long and has got a thousand legs, right?
- Joel: Well, you may be right.
- James: Centi—centi—the Greek for—
- Joel: The guy who saw it up ahead of us going into the cave—he said "There's a centipede!" [Laughs].
- James: So you never saw it?
- Joel: No, we never actually saw it.

- James: Ah-ha! But enough to scare everybody to chase out of the cave?
- Joel: Well, with the storm going on outside of course, we I guess took the risk.
- James: Made a deal with the centipede.
- Joel: Right. About half a dozen urns in the cave. Tradition was that the daughter of the family whose remains were there, they would leave the bodies there for about three years, I think, and then scrape the remains up and place them in the urns.
- James: But this you learned later?
- Joel: Oh, all later.
- James: You certainly weren't concerned about that when you were scrambling to get out of the typhoon.
- Joel: No, no.
- James: Was the opening end of that cave on the lee side or were you taking in water?
- Joel: No, it was on the lee side, toward the rice paddies.
- James: Oh, well, then you didn't have to worry about it coming into your cave.
- Joel: Right. Oh, it was dry, yeah.
- James: Super. So you stayed there until the blow was over?
- Joel: Right. And then out, but we were of course had been told we were ultimately to be headed for Japan for occupation duty. So the dismantling helped with that.
- James: Did you lose a lot of equipment in the—?
- Joel: I think if I recall we lost all our clothes even and uh—
- James: Everything that was in your tent you didn't bring up to the cave was gone?
- Joel: Gone, yeah.
- James: You never found it?

Joel: Not that I remember. No.

James: Did you keep your possessions in a kind of a footlocker or something like that?

Joel: Ah, yes, we did have footlockers there.

James: You should have been able to run that down.

Joel: Yeah. Well, I don't think even they—because everything was being packed up, you know, because it's combined with the taking off for Japan with cleaning up and sending on and what there was to send on.

James: So you got aboard another ship.

Joel: Right.

James: Another LST or something bigger?

Joel: No, I think it was another LST, and we landed in Yokohoma, and I got assigned guard duty the first night on a few of our semi-trucks that had already been driven off the ship, and—

James: Guarding what?

Joel: The trucks, I guess. And it was raining, I remember that. The Japanese scurrying along nearby on the street.

James: With their black umbrellas.

Joel: Oh, yes.

James: When I was there, there'd be a sea of black umbrellas because you were always taller than the Japanese, and everyone had a black umbrella so you just sort of looked upon a whole field of black. It was interesting.

Joel: Yeah, yeah. So our assignment then, the base in Japan was Irumagawa.

James: Was that your base?

Joel: Yes.

James: How far was that from Yokohoma?

Joel: I would say about a hundred miles. Mount Fuji was very visible.

James: Oh, then it's South then.

Joel: From there.

James: Yeah, Fuji is south in Japan.

Joel: Yeah.

James: Okay. Was that a nice base?

Joel: Oh, was it ever. It was—

James: Japanese base.

Joel: It was a former Kamikaze base [laughs].

James: Right.

Joel: I don't know. Did I mention that in the memoir?

James: I don't recall.

Joel: It was of course intended for guys who were giving up their life, and they got the best. It seems to me that must have been the case because it was certainly one of the finest bases that we'd ever been in.

James: In what regard did you notice this, specifically?

Joel: Well, the barrack buildings—

James: Brick.

Joel: Yes, they were two story, and of course the liquor supplies left by the Japanese were very considerable, the sake.

James: The natives didn't go in and take those?

Joel: No, oh, no. It was all intact.

James: But that was only sake, or did they have beer, too?

Joel: Well, I think there was Japanese beer also, yes.

James: They make good beer in Japan.

Joel: Mm hmm. So New Year's Eve for 1945 was—

- James: You were pretty well juiced with that sake.
- Joel: —easily celebrated [laughs].
- James: I'll bet. Tell me about—where were you—
- Joel: There was also a very good looking movie theater on that base which— and it was very unusual for us. We'd never seen a movie anywhere but out of doors up until that time.
- James: Where were you when you heard the war was over?
- Joel: Oh, that was on Okinawa.
- James: I thought so. And tell me about that experience. I mean, you didn't know that it was something that was happening, or had you been forewarned that things were winding down?
- Joel: No, I don't think we had any warning at all. In the tent next to ours they were listening to the news or whatever, and they heard that the emperor had asked to surrender.
- James: This was a shock then, really.
- Joel: Yeah, yeah, absolutely, and what a shock. Because of course it was easy to figure out what that meant.
- James: Home.
- Joel: Right, right. Back to the good old USA.
- James: Right, so, but that didn't change anything. You still had to do what you were doing.
- Joel: Oh, no, no, not right away. We had to, you know, drive out to the airbase. My officer, the guy I was working for, had his office out on the airstrip. And there was the desk of course and the typewriter and piles and so on, a regular office I guess you could say, still intact. And one of my assignments there was to take my Japanese crew [laughs] and dismantle a building! Some building that had been left on the airstrip that Lieutenant Haines wanted to get rid of, so—
- James: How did you get a Japanese crew?

- Joel: So we communicated with sign language. Of course it wasn't too challenging or difficult a task to tear down that building, but still they had to be told to.
- James: How did you acquire that job? I thought you were—
- Joel: That was part of his field of responsibility out on the airstrip.
- James: I thought you were on guard duty there.
- Joel: Well, that was just a one night matter.
- James: Oh, I see. So you went back to a desk job then?
- Joel: Right, on the air base.
- James: Except for this little adventure with the building.
- Joel: With this flurry, yeah [both laugh]. These twenty-five or thirty jabbering Japanese, you know, all too anxious to be of service and very polite but talking of course frantically the whole time.
- James: Yes. I always found it fascinating how people are subservient for a period of time and then become so fierce at another time. The Japanese are an enigma in this regard.
- Joel: Right. An enigma inside a mystery as somebody said.
- James: Right. I always think of Churchill's statement about the Germans. He said, "They're either at your feet or at your throat."
- Joel: Yeah, yeah.
- James: Same idea.
- Joel: I think he was the one who said the thing about the enigma, too.
- James: Yes, it's within a something. I remember that quote.
- Joel: Yeah, yeah. Good old Churchill. I always cheer when I see him on television [laughs].
- James: Very original—an original he was.
- Joel: Right.

James: So, how long were you at this base?

Joel: Okay, I was discharged from Camp McCoy as we called it then, February 6th, 1946.

James: From Camp McCoy in Sparta?

Joel: Yes.

James: Well, how did you get from Japan to Sparta?

Joel: By ship, going by way of Wake Island. We didn't go to Hawaii. I was hoping, but Wake of course is—

James: Not much there.

Joel: No, no. And then landed at Portland, Oregon. And I remember—

James: And trained it to Wisconsin or to—

Joel: To Camp McCoy.

James: To Camp McCoy in Wisconsin, okay.

Joel: And from there, of course, back to Willmar.

James: Okay, what did you do in Willmar now?

Joel: Well what I had in mind—

James: The returning hero.

Joel: I had this charming idea that I would surprise my mother [laughs], or my parents, both of course—

James: They didn't know you were coming?

Joel: They didn't know any of the details.

James: But they knew you were on your way.

Joel: Well, they would have stopped getting letters of course for one thing. So I surprised them [laughs].

James: Did your mother faint? We had a couple of those.

Joel: No, no. She took it in stride.

James: Did you have brothers in the service at the same time?

Joel: No, no, my only brother died when I was very young. I was only three years old.

James: Oh, so you were the prodigal son, and—

Joel: I was the only child really, in effect.

James: Oh, well. And the girlfriend, was she married to someone else yet?

Joel: Well, she'd gone on her way, I remember that.

James: But she wasn't there?

Joel: She was still around, oh yeah.

James: But her interest in you had waned considerably, is that the nice way of putting it [laughs]?

Joel: She had taken up with this high school hero, Warren Peterson, who knew how to fly a plane—

James: Uh-oh!

Joel: And flew his plane up and down the main street of Willmar the day of V-J day.

James: You never had a chance, Joel [Joel laughs], you never had a chance against a guy like that. Did she marry him?

Joel: Ah, I don't think—no, I don't think she did eventually. I don't remember. I don't remember how that went.

James: So how long were you at home?

Joel: Well, several months. I was—

James: Did you use our GI Bill?

Joel: Oh yes, definitely, that was great. I was able to go to—

James: The greatest piece of social legislation this country has ever passed.

Joel: I think you're right. I think you're right.

James: It developed a whole middle class in this country. So where did you go?

Joel: Well, first of all to St. Olaf College where—

James: A great school!

Joel: Right.

James: Uh-oh, I can tell this is where you met your wife.

Joel: Right.

James: I can tell that by the way you looked at her.

Joel: [Laughs]. We were—

James: She was a student there, too?

Joel: She was a student, and we met in religion class—

James: Oh, my!

Joel: A class that met at 8 a.m. in the morning, and it was a class where the roll was taken by our sounding off with our assigned initial. We were "M, L, H" or whatever. And he didn't call the roll or have any other kind of checking but asked for our—

James: This is a Lutheran school?

Joel: Yes, yes.

James: Of course. Okay.

Joel: But—

James: Did you learn a lot in religion class?

Joel: Well [laughs]—

James: Other than finding a new girlfriend?

Joel: She was not sitting next to me to begin with.

James: Ah ha!

- Joel: She was sitting next to my cousin's housemate, a younger cousin of mine from near Willmar who was also at St. Olaf, and his housemate happened to be sitting next to Lois, and somehow in the way things went I exchanged seats with Earling and sat next to her.
- James: She should have been impressed with a war hero, back home and all this.
- Joel: Well, I walked her down the hall to her next class and—
- James: Excellent. Bravo. Moving right along.
- Joel: There was another fellow, though, who was in her French class with her, and they had met, and he wanted to walk her down the hall too, it turned out. So it became sometimes sort of a little race, to decide who was—
- James: Well, I'm sure she was in no hurry to break this up. She had two of you on the string. That's pretty nice.
- Joel: She in fact went to—do I dare say this Lois [both laugh]? You're not permitting me. She went to the movie *Two Years Before the Mast* with him; he had a letter to do that. [Approx. 20 sec. pause in recording]
- James: [Unintelligible] [both laugh] so—
- Joel: Well, she went to the movie with me also.
- James: Did she tell you she'd just seen it, or not?
- Joel: No, she didn't—I don't recall whether she did or not actually. But anyhow—
- James: It was a test of your diplomacy.
- Joel: Anyhow, I'm on record as having said that she was about the best listener [both laugh] that I had ever taken out on a date. Because I apparently did more talking than the fellow who had dated her the previous evening. And of course from there it was picnics and—
- James: Right.
- Joel: Concerts and—
- James: So you were married shortly thereafter, or not until—?
- Joel: Well, no, several years later actually.

- James: Years?
- Joel: Yes, actually, yeah. She graduated—
- James: I thought you made all these moves, that you were really gonna go here.
- Joel: She was graduating that spring, you see, 'cause I was starting out as a freshman.
- James: Ah ha!
- Joel: And she was dating a freshman. So she got employed in Minneapolis at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church as a parish secretary, and I transferred to the University of Minnesota which is where I got my B.A.
- James: In what was it?
- Joel: In journalism.
- James: Journalism? Is that the direction you're going here? In journalism?
- Joel: Yes.
- James: Okay.
- Joel: And we were married then in June 30th of 1951.
- James: Okay, and then did you find when you graduated, did you find somebody who would employ you?
- Joel: I decided I was going on to graduate school.
- James: Okay.
- Joel: I liked books, and there was still, you know, some G.I. Bill left, for one thing. So we transferred to Philadelphia, moved to Philadelphia, 'cause I was interested in a program at the University of Pennsylvania. Which, when I talked to the professor in charge of it at Minnesota and said that I was very—American Studies—which combines journalism but also has English and history and—
- James: So you're back to the revolutionary era.

- Joel: Yeah, yeah. So that was Tremaine McDowell. He was head of American Studies at Minnesota at that time, and he said, “Well, if you’re so interested in American Studies, well, the place to go is Philadelphia.”
- James: You’re going for a Ph.D. now.
- Joel: Ah, yes. Yeah, and an M.A. also.
- James: Okay. I’m with it. How bad—was that experience worthwhile?
- Joel: Oh, I thought it was tremendous. I really enjoyed it, and the place, the city, you know, was interesting, and the people were—
- James: Did you have a nice apartment there?
- Joel: Well, we had—let me say, we had fuller apartments [laughs].
- James: It was hard to find housing of any kind right after the war for everybody.
- Joel: Yes, and this is certainly true in that area around the university.
- James: Every university, I think, had the same problem.
- Joel: Yeah. Eventually we managed—this of course after we’d been there several years—managed to find the third floor of an Italian lady who had what she called her “villa,” a fairly nice house.
- James: In downtown Philadelphia?
- Joel: In the first suburb going west.
- James: I see.
- Joel: Overbrook. So we spent the rest of the time there. That was more pleasant.
- James: And so after you finished in Philadelphia, then what?
- Joel: Back to Minnesota for work.
- James: Did you have many opportunities?
- Joel: Several. I was interested in a church college, and I knew several people, friends of mine, who’d gone to Augsburg College, and I applied—
- James: Augsburg in—you mean in Germany or in the United States?

- Joel: In Minneapolis, across from the University of Minnesota on the other side of the riverbank is Augsburg College.
- James: Okay. That's a small college.
- Joel: It's—oh, yeah.
- James: You went there?
- Joel: Ah, eventually. I applied, and the president, President Christensen, was coming through Philadelphia some time later, and he stopped by at our apartment and interviewed me, and so—
- James: So now we're teaching.
- Joel: Right. I was teaching English.
- James: Undergraduate—oh, English.
- Joel: English, oh yes.
- James: Undergraduate?
- Joel: But literature, of course, also, and that's, you know, very much a part of American Studies. So I could apply that approach—
- James: Sure.
- Joel: To American Studies.
- James: It's really not a lit course at all then.
- Joel: Well [laughs], it becomes many things. You're right, you're absolutely right.
- James: That's what I thought.
- Joel: Yeah, but I enjoyed the interrelating of various subject areas, and we had guest lecturers. That's a standard part of American Studies technique is that, you know, you have instructors from several fields maybe cooperating on a course.
- James: This is a Lutheran college then?
- Joel: Augsburg is, yes. It was a different branch of Lutheranism from what my wife and I were—

- James: Not from the Missouri Synod?
- Joel: Oh, no, no.
- James: Oh, okay.
- Joel: Free Lutheran.
- James: The what?
- Joel: The Free Lutheran Church. They've since merged with us and with all the other—
- James: "Us?" What's "us?"
- Joel: What's now the Evangelical, the Evangelical Lutheran—
- James: There've been so many changes I just haven't kept up with that.
- Joel: Many mergers, many changes.
- James: Right. The lady I married first was from Milwaukee and a very strong Lutheran—
- Joel: Oh, yeah, Milwaukee would be.
- James: Yeah. Well, there are a lot of Germans down there, and she is one. And I was exposed to religion in the Congregational Church here in Madison, and my attachment to that was minimal. But when I married her I found that if we were gonna raise a family I had to make sure the kids went to church at the Lutheran church. So I ended up spending a lot of time in Lutheran churches without being a member. But, oh well. So—
- Joel: So then we of course had two children, our sons Craig and Bruce. And one of them, Craig, is now at—here in Madison, of course, and the other, Bruce, is in Wausau.
- James: What'd they do?
- Joel: Bruce is the director of the Boy Scout district. He has a very responsible position. I should say the council, excuse me. The Mushkodany Council. And Craig, of course, works here in Madison in the Department of Commerce. He was in the Department of Transportation earlier.
- James: All right. Did you keep track of any of your friends in the Air Force?

- Joel: You know, I've thought about that. Actually I ran into a girl who—and her husband who lived—the girl lived with her family on the same street I lived on in Willmar—when I was in Boca Raton. That was quite a coincidence to encounter them so distant from our origins.
- James: Right, but no organized veterans groups?
- Joel: Ah, no.
- James: No squadron, annual squadron things?
- Joel: No.
- James: You never did any of that?
- Joel: No, no. I have a cousin who was with a hospital unit in Iran, of all places, and even was on the scene with the, oh, the “Big Three” meeting, you know, there and saw them somehow or other. I suppose he was in some unit that was on duty or on guard. And they met every year, they still do, although many of their members of course are dying or have died.
- James: All right. I can't think of anything else. Is there anything you missed?
- Joel: Well, I don't know. Lois, have I missed anything that [laughs]—
- James: Can you think of anything he didn't tell us about?
- Lois: No, I don't think so. Did you [unintelligible] at Stevens Point?
- Joel: Well, yeah. I was two years at Augsburg, '56-'58, and then in '58 to Stevens Point to the English Department.
- James: That's where you finished your career?
- Joel: Right, yeah. Well, I actually developed my own specialty in American Studies. You could almost consider it a sub-department, I suppose. Because I was essentially my own department and I worked very closely with the History Department. There were quite a few members of the History Department who—
- James: So how'd you enjoy living in Stevens Point?
- Joel: Very much.
- James: Nice community.

Joel: Yes, I was struck by it the very first day I came here for an interview with President Hansen who was—Bill Hansen was then the president—by the look of the city and all those trees. In fact I was quoted in an article which the Stevens Point publicists sent back to Willmar, oh, that I was so pleased and happy to see all of these beautiful green trees in Stevens Point which more or less helped me to make my decision for Stevens Point—and then it got published in the local Willmar paper. I wonder what—

James: Right. They were not thrilled with that—

Joel: —what some of my friends thought. “Well, we’ve got trees.” [Laughs].

James: Turncoat, right. Okay. All right.

[End of Interview]