

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with

JOHN SKINNER

Signal Corps/ U.S. Army, Military Policeman/U.S. Air Force, World War II

2012

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Skinner, John., (b.1924). Oral History Interview, 2012.

Approximate length: 1 hour 20 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

John Skinner discusses his service during World War II, first with the Army and then the Air Force as well as his life before and after the war. Skinner details his early life and interest in poultry. He mentions how he was drafted into the Army in 1942 and outlines basic training in St. Petersburg, Florida where he was first classified as a pigeon trainer and then a member of the Signal Corps. He describes transferring to the Air Force while stationed at Fort Monmouth (New Jersey) and then attending Union University in Jackson, Tennessee for cadet training. Skinner explains why he was transferred from pilot to a military policeman with the security detachment. He discusses his time deployed overseas to Iwo Jima with the 347th Air Service Group, including his job, kamikaze raids and the active volcanoes. Skinner recalls how he felt hearing about Pearl Harbor and experiencing VJ Day (Victory over Japan Day) while stationed at Iwo Jima. He also describes his life after the war including his profession as a poultry expert, his marriage and children, and overseas travel with his wife.

Biographical Sketch:

John Skinner (b.1924) was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1942; he was trained as a pigeon trainer and then served as a member of the Signal Corps before transferring to the Air Force. He deployed to Iwo Jima with the 347th Air Service Group until the end of World War II.

Interviewed by Molly Graham, 2012.

Transcribed by Joe Fitzgibbon, 2014.

Reviewed by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Abstract written by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Interview Transcript

Graham: So this is an interview with John Louis Skinner who served with the Air Force in World War II. This interview is being conducted at Oak Park Place at the following address: 702 Jupiter Dr. in Madison, Wisconsin on the following date: March 9th, 2012. The interviewer is me, Molly Graham. And John I'll just have you start by introducing yourself, and sometimes I like to ask people to describe themselves.

Skinner: Okay. I'll tell you that I had one experience with that. When I was about the 10th grade in high school, I created some mischief and I don't know now, remember what it was but the punishment was to write 500 words on any living American. And I thought, "Well now wait a minute, the simplest thing for me to do would be to write about myself."

Graham: You're a living American that makes sense.

Skinner: Yeah. And so I wrote for the--thirty hundred and words one on my life story from day one to the present time which was about probably fourteen degree, or years.

Graham: And so what did you say?

Skinner: Well I told what my interests were, what I had done in 4-H [a youth organization administered by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), with the mission of "engaging youth to reach their fullest potential while advancing the field of youth development." The name represents four personal development areas of focus for the organization: head, heart, hands, and health] and before [clock chimes in the background] 4-H, and some of my school experiences. And I didn't participate in any sports, I was going to a real small high school and they didn't have much sports, but I was often in declamatory contests and public speaking.

Graham: Oh. So if you could sum up that report, what would it say?

Skinner: Well it was a life story dedicated towards public speaking and animal life.

Graham: Okay. If you had to add to that report today, or do that report over again, what would it say?

Skinner: The same thing.

Graham: Even this many years later?

Skinner: Yes.

Graham: Okay.

Skinner: I followed my life [laughing] interests all my life [Graham laughs].

Graham: And what were some of those interests, besides public speaking?

Skinner: Poultry science.

Graham: Huh.

Skinner: I was considered quite an expert in poultry.

Graham: And for someone who doesn't know what entails, what it is that?

Skinner: All form of avian life, but mostly domestic form of avian life.

Graham: Was there any connection with your studying in that with your experience in the Air Force?

Skinner: A little bit. I had the only flock of chickens on Iwo Jima [island to the southeast of Japan, north of the Mariana Islands in the Pacific Ocean] at one time.

Graham: Tell me about that.

Skinner: There was a few wild chickens that had been on the sugar plantations on Iwo before the war. And I was an MP [military police] guard in the security detachment, and I could go out and commandeer what was running loose on the island. And so, another fella and I built a pen out of Navy camouflage netting and had the chickens behind our tent on Iwo. I've always been interested in chickens. My dad gave me a pair of Buff Cochin Bantams when I was five years old. And I started showing chickens then, and my goal in life was to become a licensed poultry judge.

Graham: And did that ever happen?

Skinner: Yes. In 1952.

Graham: Tell me about that.

Skinner: Well I had become a member of the American Poultry Association, my dad was a poultry breeder and he had the *Standard of Perfection* [the most widely used handbook on poultry breed standards] and several books that I read as a youngster. And I became obsessed with getting a poultry judge's license. And I worked in the poultry [laughing] industry all my life.

Graham: What do you think it is about poultry that you're drawn to?

Skinner: I was fascinated with the fact that they had a different life cycle than most; the egg being encased in a hard covering to protect the embryo.

Graham: And what don't people know about poultry that you do?

Skinner: Oh I don't do very many jokes on poultry, but I usually get 'em pulled on me [Graham laughs]. They want to know, which come first--the egg or the bird.

Graham: And what do you think?

Skinner: I think it depends on how you view life. If you view creationism of life, you think poultry come first. If you view the egg is life, you think evolution come first.

Graham: So what does John Skinner think?

Skinner: It has to be an egg preceding the chicken, because you never saw a chicken that didn't come from an egg.

Graham: Well we got off track a little [laughing] bit, so let's back up and, tell me about when and where you were born.

Skinner: I was born on a farm about a mile and three quarters northwest of Herman, Nebraska. And I never stayed overnight in a hospital 'til I was 77 years old.

Graham: What happened when you were 77?

Skinner: I broke a blood vessel in my stomach and was bleeding internally, and they had to put a camera down my throat and take pictures of it to get it cauterized.

Graham: Oof. That's no fun. Well tell me about your childhood years and your family, things like that.

Skinner: Okay I'm an only child. And interestingly enough, my wife was an only child too.

Graham: How do you think that makes you different?

Skinner: It makes me more independent and satisfied with living with myself. I learned to entertain myself at an early age.

Graham: Were those chickens kind of like siblings for you?

Skinner: They were, because I had made pets [laughing] out of 'em, and I constructed equipment for 'em.

Graham: What do you remember about that time in your life, what are some memories that kind of stand out?

Skinner: Well I was unique in that I rode a school bus painted black.

Graham: Huh.

Skinner: In 1930, the district I was in in Herman--or rural Nebraska, transferred to the Herman school. And they hired a van from the farm to run the kids into town in morning and bring 'em back at night, because there was only eight of us in the district. And he bought a used bread truck from Omaha Bakery in Omaha, Nebraska. And they put benches in the sides of it, and he didn't bother to paint it, didn't have any lights on it.

Graham: How many other kids rode the bus with you?

Skinner: Well there was--Ruby Teefold [sp??] was the furthest west [Graham laughs], and then Benny Heart and my uncle was the third one on the bus on that road. And then they turned left and went up the road there where they got in touch with the Chamberlain kids and the Raisley [sp??] kids and then turned and come down my--past my place and picked me up and took me into town. I was the last one on the bus before they crossed the county line [Graham laughs].

Graham: That's kinda nice. And did you like school, and things like that?

Skinner: I loved it. I didn't want to go outside to recess, I wanted to stay [laughing] and talk with the teachers, 'cause I loved to be with older people.

Graham: And has that stayed with you?

Skinner: Pretty much. I was interested in talking to my aunt, or my cousin about--say it was about ten years ago, she was in her nineties, and she had been helping my mother with housework in the spring every year when I was a little kid. And she looked at me and she said, "You know John L., you didn't become a kid [laughing] until you started school." [Graham laughs]

Graham: What were your parents like?

Skinner: My mother was a little older, and my dad was somewhat older, and we had an uncle--my mother's brother--who made his home with us. He was a carpenter and he worked in the neighborhood and made his home with us. So I had three parents.

Graham: And how do you think that affected you?

Skinner: Well it give me [laughing] a broader background because my dad was a livestock man, and my uncle was a carpenter, and it give me both sides of the picture for

arrangements of barns and sheds, and layout of the farm buildings and that sort of thing.

Graham: This was a real small town you were from?

Skinner: 310 people.

Graham: And what's it like being from a real small town?

Skinner: Well it was interesting to me because there was three districts combined and it only resulted in fifteen high school kids, or graduating kids from the year I graduated. And there were ten of 'em girls, and five of 'em boys.

Graham: [laughs] Those are good odds.

Skinner: Yeah. Each was a trio. [Graham laughs]

Graham: Well let's fast forward a little bit and talk about high school and then what happened after high school.

Skinner: Okay. In high school, as I mentioned previously, I was in declamatory contests and public speaking contests, and got a lot of attention for that. And I spent time in contests among schools for citizenship awards. And--wasn't a heck of a lot to tell about it, I went to the contests in different little schools around, but my mother and dad were very conscientious about attending school functions. And my dad was on the school board in Burt County, Nebraska when they transferred into the town school. And I might say that my dad spent 32 years on the Burt Country board in Burt County, Nebraska. And my mother never voted for him.

Graham: [laughs] Well who did she vote for?

Skinner: She voted for his opponent, she was a Republican!

Graham: Oh wow.

Skinner: And he was a Democrat.

Graham: Must have kept things interesting.

Skinner: They didn't argue. They told--I heard 'em say to each other, "Your vote's secret."

Graham: [laughs] What year did you graduate high school?

Skinner: '42.

Graham: Okay so what was going on in the world when you graduated high school?

Skinner: The war had been going on in the Pacific for about a year and a half, and been going on in Europe since '39, so it was about four years old then.

Graham: So did you feel like it was just a matter of time--.

Skinner: Yes.

Graham: And how did that make you feel?

Skinner: Well, I [laughing] thought my fate was predetermined. I was drafted right out of high school. About six months from the time I graduated I was in the Army.

Graham: And what does that do to someone? You know, I think it's something we kind of take for granted at this time where your fate is sealed, like you said.

Skinner: Yeah, I knew I was going, and there was no point in trying to fight it. I wasn't particularly unhappy because I'd been used to being by myself a lot. But you know at the time I went into service, they'd taken the middle ground out of the draft allotments and they were taking down from eighteen to nineteen--and I was eighteen--and they were going up from 36s to 37s to 38 was the top I believe. And that created a quite a bit of tension in the barracks to start with because those darn noisy kids were keeping the adults awake.

Graham: And you were one of those darn noisy kids?

Skinner: Well I was to an extent, but I was classified with 'em [Graham laughs]. I was really fairly quiet as boys go, I guess, but I was classified with 'em because of my age. And I was in the strange circumstance when I went into the service, I was classified as a pigeon trainer, they were still using homing pigeons in the Army at that time. And I was classified in St. Petersburg, Florida as a pigeon trainer, but they had a rule in that camp that they wouldn't ship anybody by individual shipments 'cause of the cost, and so I got sent into basic training twice, and started a third time before they got me out of there, and they finally looked at my records and said, "You've got to get out. You don't have to be a pigeon trainer."

Graham: Were you a pigeon trainer because of your experience--.

Skinner: Yeah.

Graham: Okay and how do you train a carrier pigeon?

Skinner: It's one of the most--by learning the routes and learning the identification to the loft.

Graham: Okay. Backing up a little bit, before basic training, what is your memory of finding out about Pearl Harbor?

Skinner: I remember my dad coming up the hill from the house to the granary [??] where we and Uncle Lou and one of my others, Jim was sitting in the driveway and my dad looked at me and he said [laughing], "You're gonna have to go!"

Graham: And what did you think?

Skinner: Well, I thought it was determined, what was the use of fighting it?

Graham: Yeah.

Skinner: Yeah. [laughing] At that time, the military service was considered pretty honorable.

Graham: Yeah, it still is.

Skinner: I know it is.

Graham: Well let's--we'll fast forward to basic training, and tell me about the steps that led to that.

Skinner: Well I was sent to a resort centered in St. Petersburg, Florida and I stayed in the barracks, or what was turned into a barracks, of a luxury hotel, and there were six privates to a room.

Graham: Was this your first time kind of out of Nebraska and traveling?

Skinner: No, I had gone to Chicago with 4-H tours a couple of times and I'd gone with my dad at Iowa State Fair and Nebraska State Fair, and Kansas State Fair and like that, because he always showed sheep.

Graham: So what were your impressions when you arrived?

Skinner: I was amazed at how roughly they were treating these gorgeous hotels.

Graham: So tell me about how basic training works, and then what happened next.

Skinner: Well we were sent there in Florida in February, in Florida, and we were from the North, and we sunburned terribly right to start with, and so it was something other than pleasant, but it wasn't really too bad. We would have physical training every morning, and we'd have to march quite a ways out to the beach and then back to the resort hotel. And there was a lot of servicemen in St. Petersburg because it was completely taken over as a resort town to house military, and one thing I

remember about it, the food was pretty minimal. There was enough quantity, but it wasn't very palatable.

Graham: Right. What was relationship with the other guys like during basic training?

Skinner: I got along with 'em all right, I didn't have any trouble with 'em, and because I didn't smoke or drink, there was no bone of contention there.

Graham: Why would there have been?

Skinner: Well a lot of times if they were short of cigarettes, or they didn't bring matches to bed with 'em at night to smoke in bed and things like that, it'd be a bone of contention.

Graham: So now let's talk about your entry into military service, and what branch you got into and things like that.

Skinner: Well I didn't go to the pigeon unit as I had hoped to, but I finally got in the Signal Corps [develops, tests, provides, and manages communications and information systems support for the command and control of combined arms forces] and I was in wire line school and radio school and I didn't particularly care for it, and I'd had a very good general classification tour to start with. I was just out of high school and I knocked that one flat [laughs]. They said I could qualify for intelligence, but I didn't really think that was much either--just a bunch of paper pushers [laughs].

Graham: Right.

Skinner: I wasn't particularly enthused about it, so I was in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, and I saw an ad in the Sunday paper from Trenton, New Jersey that said that they were taking applications to the Air Force and certain military personnel that didn't have a rank could transfer if they wanted to. And so I got a pass and went to Jersey City into the Army recruiting office--or the Air Force recruiting office, and made application to the Air Force. [unidentified voice in background]

Graham: So you're in Jersey City--.

Skinner: And I got a transfer to the Air Force, and I was assigned a moving date and moved to North Carolina. And one of the things that might be kind of interest, in 1942 the Burt County State Fair--or 1940, rather, I was still in high school--I met my wife Jean and we never lived in the same town together 'til we got married, but we managed to keep track of each other in service. And we went to some funny places. One day we wound up in Coney Island [a peninsula in southwestern Brooklyn, well-known during the mid-20th century as a resort town with amusement parks] and she was in Detroit, and I was in New Jersey, and she could

come on a weekend pass to Coney Island. And one time I went from Fort Monmouth, New Jersey to Detroit, Michigan on a two day pass, and I should only go 300 miles out of New York City, but I took a chance and I was in Detroit for six hours.

Graham: Was it worth it?

Skinner: Yeah!

Graham: [laughs] And what'd you guys do for those six hours?

Skinner: Just talked [laughs]. Because we had to keep our eye on the clock, and we felt we hadn't better get out of the train station.

Graham: Yeah. That's very romantic. Tell me about meeting Jean.

Skinner: We met at a county fair in Burt County in Oakland, Nebraska and she was just recovering from an automobile accident that she'd been in with her cousin. And she was kinda recuperating and we started corresponding, and I managed to get from where she was living in Sioux City from my home in Herman, Nebraska—which was seventy miles--and neither one of us had any money, we were poor as church mice. And so we didn't do very much of anything except just visit. And then my mother used to--I'd come up on Saturday morning and my mother, or her mother'd feed us, and then we'd spend the night, or the afternoon in the library. Then I'd have to head back home because it was seventy miles [laughing] and I was only sixteen.

Graham: And what was it about Jean that made you travel all this way just to find [??] the library?

Skinner: Well she wasn't like a kid; she was not giddy and riled up all the time. And it was comforting to be with her.

Graham: And when did you know you were going to marry her?

Skinner: On her nineteenth birthday.

Graham: What about her nineteenth birthday?

Skinner: I was going to school in Fort Wayne, Indiana, just a little short piece of college before I went into service, and she come down on her birthday, the nineteenth—of October.

Graham: Mhmm.

Skinner: And I gave her a ring that I had gotten from selling my last car before I went into-[laughing] college.

Graham: And so were you engaged during your service, or did you get married?

Skinner: We got married on the 1st of December of '42 before I went overseas.

Graham: And tell me about that.

Skinner: Well that was a hectic day.

Graham: How old were you when you got married, John?

Skinner: Twenty.

Graham: Okay. So was this after basic training but before your service started?

Skinner: Yeah. No--I was in service for almost two years.

Graham: Okay. And so what happened after your wedding?

Skinner: Well the wedding was on a snowy December 1st day, and the best man and my folks were coming in one car, and they were two hours late [Graham laughs]. It was nine o'clock when we got married, and the priest was unhappy because he was interrupting chorus practice [Graham laughs]. And he went through it just so fast that I didn't know what was happening, and [laughing] I can remember saying after he left, he said, "Turn out the light when you leave." And I looked at her and I said, "What did we do?" [both laugh] And my best man then took us to Omaha, or the lady that Jean lived with when she was in high school, because she had a real strange childhood. Her parents were divorced, and her dad was jail, and her mother put her in an Indian orphanage because she was part Indian.

Graham: Jean?

Skinner: Yeah. And her mother paid, I think it was fifty cents a week to not have her adopted out, but she couldn't keep her either, and so she stayed in the orphanage for about five years 'til her grandparents figured out where she was at, and then took her out of the orphanage [laughs].

Graham: Wow.

Skinner: So, and in high school, she lived with her--librarian and registrar for Central High School in Sioux City provided a home for her and employed her in the office of the school principal, and so she had a little income. And when she got out of school, her father, or I mean her step-father had married her mother and they were living in Detroit 'cause he was in the Navy on a boat stationed out of Detroit in the

river. And so Jean moved back with him and her--that is, her mother--and we used to commute by bus from Toledo, Ohio via from--I can't remember the name of the town, [inaudible] it was--that's where the car factory is in Auburn--it isn't Indianapolis, it's north.

Graham: Yeah, I'm not sure. It's okay.

Skinner: I'm not sure which town it was, but it was about an hour and half west of Toledo.

Graham: Okay.

Skinner: And we used to ride the bus about once a month between the two places. And then when I got into service, she came to see me a few times, but not very many. We, one time in Jackson, Tennessee when I was in cadet training--I should say that after I was approved for the Air Force, I was approved for cadet training--and I was in Jackson University at Jackson, Tennessee--*Union* University, Jackson, Tennessee. And she come down to see me when her vacation come in the summertime, and we couldn't get any time off. I could have thirty minutes a day with her. And, well let's see, where were we now—.

Graham: You were talking about--.

Skinner: Union University, Jackson, Tennessee.

Graham: Yep!

Skinner: Well I had college training detachment there and started my [clock chimes in background]--what flying I did out of Jackson, Tennessee and then from there--well I should tell you while she was at Jackson, Tennessee, I got myself assigned to the corporal of the guard at night for three nights in a row. And I could trade with other guys, and so I didn't get any sleep for three nights in a row, and [laughs] the guys--playing football, and sports the next day, just beat me up something terrible!

Graham: I bet!

Skinner: And they'd laugh about it. [Graham laughs] But we survived it all right and then I went to San Antonio, Texas, and they finally washed me out for unstable stomach. I could fly the plane all right when I was doing it myself, but when the instructor'd take over I'd get sick [laughs].

Graham: So how'd you deal with that?

Skinner: Well they finally washed me out. So I wound up in the Air Force, but I wound up as a member of the security detachment and I was the nearest thing you could come to a present-day police desk sergeant.

Graham: And how'd you feel about that?

Skinner: Well it was all right with me [laughs]. I was gonna get out!

Graham: And what appealed to you about the Air Force?

Skinner: Well it was a lot more informal, and they had better uniforms [laughs].

Graham: And so how did--how else--what did Jean do while you were in service, but you--

Skinner: She was a telephone operator.

Graham: Okay. So you were stateside for a while--.

Skinner: Yeah I was stateside for about--four months before--three, four months.

Graham: Okay. And what kind of memories stand out to you from that time period?

Skinner: Well we lived in a trailer house part of the time, in the winter time, and that's kinda cold.

Graham: Yeah.

Skinner: And--all the MP's [military police] in my detachment would come at night and rock the trailer house [Graham laughs].

Graham: And who was staying in the trailer house?

Skinner: Jean and I.

Graham: Okay.

Skinner: And we--sometimes, well I [laughing] was lucky everywhere I went. The Provost Marshal [office in charge of military police] turned out to be a personal friend of mine [laughing] after a time. And he even come to see me when I was in graduate school.

Graham: So what happened next?

Skinner: Well I was sent overseas, but I could arrange my transportation so she [Jean] could stay with me until the day before I left, because another fella and I arranged to get our travel to pick up a prisoner, and we could do that on the day before we

left for overseas. And then she could ride with me as far as Omaha, 'cause she was going on the bus to Sioux City.

Graham: And how did you prepare to go overseas?

Skinner: Well we had the preparation we needed to do within the organization, but I didn't do any personal preparations for overseas.

Graham: What did you kind of anticipate was going to happen?

Skinner: Well they told us that we were going to the eastern coast of China. And attack Japan from the back side. Only that got changed when we were in the middle of the ocean, and we had kinda--in preparation for that we had stockpiled a lot of trade goods for the civilian population and that didn't happen because there was hardly any civilians on Iwo. And we--the 347th Air Service Group was my outfit, and they were put in charge of the number two airfield on Iwo Jima. And they kinda reorganized after we got over there, because--fighting on Iwo had somewhat subsided. They were just coming out at night and we put a lot of trip wires out at night to catch the wandering enemy that were trying to get on to the airstrip to damage planes. And as a result of having the trip wires about that high off the ground, there was a problem with a few feral cats that were on the island, and they'd run along at night with their tail in the air, and trip the trip wires [laughing] and you'd hear a machine go off--*bang, bang* in the middle of night. It'd wake you up, "Oh there's another cat that hit--" And one thing that was funny for me at least, was the first night on Iwo, I had just got settled in, I thought was gonna be a fairly quiet night, and I looked out with my field glasses out of the foxhole, and I could see a wreck of a Japanese truck sitting pretty close by. And I could spot that there was U.S. Royal tires on that Japanese truck [laughing] that was blown to pieces there.

Graham: And for someone who might not understand, what's the significance of that?

Skinner: Well it was American tires that were on the Japanese truck that was fighting against us!

Graham: Yeah. Can you describe the trip going over?

Skinner: Yes, I was sick constantly. Because of the unstable stomach I lost every meal going overseas. I'd keep some of it, but I'd throw some of it up too.

Graham: What were you told about the enemy?

Skinner: They told us how we should react to 'em, and we shouldn't be upset if they insisted on being shot.

Graham: And how do you wrap your head around something like that?

Skinner: It's hard for me to put something ahead of life. And I told my wife as I was leaving for overseas, [laughing] "If I don't come back, it's because I can't shoot somebody."

Graham: Did you get to stay in touch with Jean while you were overseas?

Skinner: Yeah, it was funny; she wrote me that she was ill after we had been on Iwo for a couple weeks. The letter caught up with me, and she said, "You better sit down to read this." And so I read it, and then I had to stuff it in my pocket because something come up. And when I got back to it, she said, "I had my appendix operated on while you were gone. And incidentally they told me I was pregnant." [laughs]

Graham: And what happened?

Skinner: Well my son was born while I was on Iwo, and he was three months old, or four-- about three and a half months old. And he was scared to death of me.

Graham: Did that change over time [laughs]?

Skinner: Yeah. He's [laughing] here every day almost now.

Graham: And so what was that like to hear that you were going to have a son, you're as far away as possible?

Skinner: Well it was a shock! But I didn't regret it.

Graham: Did it sort of make coming home that much more important?

Skinner: Yes. You don't take chances as much after--with that much responsibility, because I didn't--was always thinking of the fact that Jean might have to do it herself.

Graham: Yeah.

Skinner: We were kinda funny I guess [laughs] because we were kids that were lonesome together. And so we got married and grew up together.

Graham: Yeah. And how do you think that's different from other partnerships?

Skinner: Well I think some of the other partnerships, at least as far as I envisioned it, were attracted to each other physically, but they didn't stop to get attracted to each other mentally.

Graham: Yeah.

Skinner: And we were attracted mentally [both laugh]. We didn't know what else to do [laughs].

Graham: For someone who doesn't know, or someone who might listen to this in the future, can you just explain the significance of Iwo Jima?

Skinner: Yes. Iwo Jima was set up as a refueling station for empty bombers going back to Guam and Saipan [large island in the Northern Mariana Islands, a Japanese possession until late in World War II--Now a commonwealth of the United States]. And it made the load of fuel just about 25 percent less to have to carry over the bomb runs. And that made quite a difference, 'cause the crews could be saved a lot of times if the plane couldn't be saved, they could crash the plane on the shoals of Iwo Jima and [laughs] get out and make it back alive. And one thing that happened, the B-29s [Superfortress; a four-engine propeller-driven heavy bomber], and that's what we were flying over there, had--a real good eight-day clock in the dashboard of 'em. And almost every one of my MP group had an eight-day clock cut into their footlockers when the war was over [both laugh]

Graham: For someone who's listening to this, can you just talk a little bit more about that, and what that means?

Skinner: Well they got to making quite a deal out of it, because there was too many clocks disappearing.

Graham: What else about your experience overseas do you want to walk us through?

Skinner: Well a very shocking thing happened to me. One of our senior officers was shot standing right beside me the first night on Iwo.

Graham: And what does that do to somebody?

Skinner: It makes you think twice about the fact [laughing] that you had--was not affected by this physically.

Graham: Yeah. What were some of your duties during the war?

Skinner: What?

Graham: What were some of your duties? The things you did kind of on a day to day basis.

Skinner: Oh the day to day--my job, eventually as the war progressed--was that I got put in charge of the duty roster for 650 men. And I had to know where everybody was at all times. And [laughing] mostly because my friend the Provost Marshal thought I

oughta stay busy and he wanted--didn't want to do a lot of stuff. So he give me the authority of an officer, and published a notice on the bulletin board that I was to be respected for all duty assignments because I was in charge of the duty roster. And they--some of the guys--well you should bear in mind that we had a lot of fellas in my outfit that were long-term servicemen, they had eight, ten years of service.

Graham: Yeah.

Skinner: And they didn't take too kindly to a young buck sergeant telling 'em what to do.

Graham: Right.

Skinner: And so he had to make it clear that I was to be respected and not if agreed with [laughs].

Graham: So can you just sort of lead us through the next stages, and the how you got home?

Skinner: Yeah. The thing that I remember was that as we got ready to leave Iwo, there was about every three weeks or so, a boat would leave, and they'd be going back home because they added up the points you had overseas and the points you had in service, and the points you had for dependents, and all like that, and they pulled up a numerical score. And that's where the phrase "kinda missed the boat" come from.

Graham: So did you miss the boat?

Skinner: No I knew where mine was, my score was, because I was keeping track of the records.

Graham: And what was your awareness of what was going on in the rest of the world, and the rest of World War II?

Skinner: Well I was glad it was over with. I should tell you that the day the war was over in Japan, August 25th, 1945--no, '46. [Initial announcement of Japanese surrender was August 15th, 1945. The signing of the surrender document that officially ended the war took place on September 2nd, 1945] That was the scariest day I put in overseas.

Graham: Why?

Skinner: They were blowing up everything they could. They broke the PX [Post Exchange, a sort of retail store on US military installations] open and took the beer out, and

the guys really celebrated. And they'd [laughing] shoot off anything that would blow!

Graham: How were you told the war was over?

Skinner: Radio.

Graham: Do you remember how you felt?

Skinner: I was tickled to death that it was over with [laughing] because I thought that'd put an end to dying.

Graham: Yeah. And where were you when you found out?

Skinner: I was in the orderly room of the 347th Air Service Group; it was about ten o'clock in the morning. And MacArthur [General Douglas A., was Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in the Pacific by the end of World War II] had sailed into Tokyo Harbor.

Graham: What sort of sounds, and smells, and things like that were unique to that time period? I'm just trying to get a sense of what life felt like while you were there.

Skinner: Yeah. One thing that was common on Iwo was the smell of sulfur. And that would permeate the atmosphere just about all the time. And there was always a wind blowing, because they told us if the wind ever stopped completely, we had twenty minutes to get off the island.

Graham: Why?

Skinner: It would heat--because there were three active volcanoes on it. We had an active volcano that served as our garbage dump. We backed the truck up 'til the tires hit the log on the edge of the crater, and dump our garbage over into the--it'd blow up every once in a while, but it wouldn't go very high.

Graham: Right. That works [laughs]. What kind of kept you going throughout your experience over there?

Skinner: We didn't really have a choice. You could be unhappy if you wanted to, but it didn't do you any good.

Graham: Yeah, well before we talk about kind of, the war ending, and coming home, is there anything we missed so far?

Skinner: Well, I don't know if it were missed or not. When my son was born, my friend that was the inspector for the security group got a promotion. And he put a stack of cigars, or a box of cigars that he had got from someplace, I don't know where.

But on the desk in the orderly room, and it had a sign "help yourself to one."
[Graham laughs] And [laughing] some of the guys come into the orderly room,
and said, "Where's Andy?" "Well he's gone." "Well can I have one of these?" and
I said, "Sure." So they passed the word out on the grounds that I was giving away
cigars away for my baby [both laugh] and it got to be a joke in the outfit.
"Skinners, you're a top guy when you need to be." We had a lot of fun over there.

Graham: Good. What other memories or events stand out to you?

Skinner: Well quite a few times when we were first on Iwo, there was kamikaze [a group
of Japanese pilots who deliberately crashed their aircraft into their intended
targets] raids come in and crash landed on the airport. And we'd have to get the
garbage picked up and dragged out of the way before the planes come back from
Japan that day.

Graham: For someone who doesn't know can you describe what a kamikaze attack is?

Skinner: Well that's where they conduct their funeral before they get on the plane; 'cause
they know they're gonna die.

Graham: What else should we talk about?

Skinner: I didn't get into Japan itself, I got into some of the surrounding islands around
Iwo, but they weren't very important, and there weren't any military installations
on 'em, but there was people capturing--being captured on those islands long after
the war was over.

Graham: Oh yeah? What did you do while you were on leave?

Skinner: The only leave I had was the delay en route from Fresno, California to Fairmont,
Nebraska before I left for overseas.

Graham: Mhmm.

Skinner: It was December--about the middle of November to the 10th of December I think.

Graham: Mhmm.

Skinner: And I was on that--I was loose then, and I hitchhiked my way mostly from
Fresno, California, thought I could hook home, but I didn't make a success of it.
In some place in Wyoming, I decided I had to take a bus to get home. I had been
home on leave in the first part of June that year, so I was pretty good for leave
that year, but it was a long time coming. And the one--I went to Nebraska in June,
Jean was then living in Detroit again, or in Sioux City again, and I took a train to

Detroit, and she decided that she could get loose to come with me, and so we went home and she met my folks for that day [Graham laughs].

Graham: Let's talk about--we'll move back to the end of war, and coming home, and those things.

Skinner: Well it was pretty routine from the time the war was over with. I was busy as could be because I had so many men to be responsible for the location of. And so I didn't get much else done but just keep track of that. And one thing I learned was that there was more religious holidays on the calendar than I had ever heard about because every time I put somebody on assignment duty, they'd have to plead that there was no religious holiday for that day.

Graham: So what was homecoming like?

Skinner: I was discharged from in the service in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas at about ten o'clock in the morning. And I got on a bus and rode from Leavenworth to Omaha, and then from Omaha to Sioux City, and I got into Sioux City about eleven thirty at night. And I thought, "Before I go home to her I better shave [laughs]." So I went in the bus station to shave, and I just got started shaving and the guard come in and said, "We're locking up now."

Graham: Did you get to finish shaving?

Skinner: [laughs] I had to wipe it off and go. And I had never seen the house she was living in, and she had a nice apartment on the third floor, and I remember standing on the porch, and wondering, "What would she think of me now?" And there wasn't time for that; she opened the door [coughs].

Graham: You want some water John?

Skinner: I don't know why I'm having so much trouble containing it.

Graham: It's okay. I think it's tough to revisit some of these things, and it's getting me a little emotional too. It's very tough stuff. So what was it like to see Jean for the first time?

Skinner: Well she had been confined for 21 days in the hospital when John Jr. was born. And she had one leg almost twice as big as the other one.

Graham: Ooh.

Skinner: She'd had what they called at that time "milk leg," but it was actually an embolism.

Graham: Oh no.

Skinner: And it took her probably five years to ever get anywhere near normal, but she was worried about the fact that I would reject her because of that leg. So we had quite a--settle that pretty much.

Graham: Did you reassure her?

Skinner: Yeah. She didn't have any wonders [Graham laughs]. But it was quite a deal to start with.

Graham: Yeah.

Skinner: And it was sure funny to walk down the street pushing the baby carriage.

Graham: What was it like being a new father?

Skinner: Well I was disappointed that he was so scared of me [Graham laughs]. There was a different voice in the apartment, and he could tell right away.

Graham: Yeah.

Skinner: And then I should say that my mother and father thought that I would stop at their place before I went to Sioux City. But I [laughing] didn't have any idea of doing that.

Graham: Yeah [laughs]. And then what kind of adjustment did you have to make in coming home? How were you different?

Skinner: Oh, I was older I guess. I don't really know what to say, I didn't have many adjustments--I didn't have any established pattern before that.

Graham: Right.

Skinner: So it was all new. I hadn't been head of a household; I hadn't had a mailbox [laughs] and all these things.

Graham: Were you aware of being changed at all by your experience?

Skinner: Well I thought I would have a whole new reaction to it, and everything would have more lasting consequences than it did now, or did previously.

Graham: Mhmm.

Skinner: But I don't know that there was any other thing that I worried about. One thing that I was scared of, I guess it just frightened me--was air raid sirens when I first came home. That's the only thing that I had trouble handling.

Graham: Are there things today that bring you back?

Skinner: Yeah. Throw a camera over the board of a ship going up and down [laughs].

Graham: Yeah. Anything else? Any sounds or smells, or other triggers?

Skinner: I don't think so, not really now.

Graham: So then how did life continue from there?

Skinner: Well I went to school immediately when--I got out in February and I worked that summer, but I went to school in fall on the GI Bill, and I managed to get [laughing] two and half degrees out of one bill.

Graham: Good for you!

Skinner: I got--I completed my bachelor's degree in 33 months with distinction, then I completed [laughing] a master's degree in twelve months with distinction. And then I started on the PhD still on government subsidy.

Graham: And this is in aviation studies?

Skinner: No. It was poultry.

Graham: Poultry science.

Skinner: Yeah. I carry--I should show you the book that I carried for--overseas with me. Poultry book [Graham laughs].

Graham: Is it here?

Skinner: Yeah.

Graham: Want me to go get it?

Skinner: No, I think I--well, you can it's on the shelf, about the middle shelf, it's a tan book.

Graham: Over here?

Skinner: Yeah.

Graham: In the bedroom?

Skinner: Yes.

Graham: *Principles in Practice?*

Skinner: That's it [Graham laughs].

Graham: So does this bring you back?

Skinner: It kinda does.

Graham: Oh wow.

Skinner: I put that in there so my kids would have it.

Graham: [Quoting writing in book] "I carried this book with me overseas when I was in service in World War II." Were there particular times when you would refer to it, or--

Skinner: Yeah, every once in a while I would just open it to see the pictures.

Graham: Yeah.

Skinner: 'Cause it kinda reminded me of it.

Graham: Yeah. I see that in your house today you've got lots of pictures of birds.

Skinner: My wife has--look at that wall hanging that my daughter-in-law made.

Graham: Oh it's beautiful.

Skinner: And my wife had a large collection of poultry jewelry.

Graham: So she got around your passion.

Skinner: Yeah. Oh yeah. She was as much [laughing] of it as me. I took a rooster pin home, a jewelry about that big one time when I was gone traveling, and she saw that, and she said, "You know I believe I'd like to collect those." And [laughing] we had 1130 of 'em when she left home.

Graham: That's quite a collection.

Skinner: We had a lot of collections of stuff. For instance, I had 6120 cars.

Graham: Wow!

Skinner: I give that all to my son, and he's merchandized most of 'em. He's still got a few.

Graham: Yeah.

Skinner: And I got a collection of modes boxes [clock chimes in background] over there on the shelf--chicken boxes.

Graham: Oh yeah?

Skinner: And we had just about everything that we could, towels, dishes, coffee mugs. We took 'em to her memorial service. We took 430 mugs over there and passed out coffee mugs with coffee in it, you know.

Graham: Yeah. When was that?

Skinner: About the 14th of August.

Graham: Just last year?

Skinner: Yeah.

Graham: Oof. Well, let's talk about some nice memories you had during your marriage and the rest of your life.

Skinner: You know, on our 5th--25th anniversary in 1969, Jean would have been working a part-time job and she says, "I'm putting every penny of that away and we're going to Europe [laughing] for our 25th." And I said, "No, we can't, there's too much that needs to be done here and that's cost too much money." She said, "I'm going alone [laughing] if you don't go with me." And so, she succeeded in getting me to go with her, and I got the bug and we went overseas 36 times before we quit.

Graham: Since 1969?

Skinner: Yeah.

Graham: Wow.

Skinner: We even went over twice, twice some years [Graham laughs].

Graham: And what was it about travelling that you guys loved?

Skinner: We loved it because she was a genealogist, a professional genealogist working for other people, and she could do some work overseas. And I did some printing, or some writing overseas for a couple of British publishers. So we would take part of it off our income tax, and--

Graham: Perfect.

Skinner: I had the fortune of having an appointment between USDA and University of Wisconsin, so I could participate in both systems.

Graham: Well good.

Skinner: And they--it just worked out as excellent for us. And I got my house paid off, in fact, I sold my house just this past November 30th, and you can believe this, and

I'm bragging but it's the truth. [Graham laughs] I bought that house for \$31,000 in 1970, and I sold it this past year in 2011, for \$210,000 worth.

Graham: Wow.

Skinner: [laughing] That's some appreciation.

Graham: Yep [laughs]. Well congratulations. What has it been like now, I guess the transition *here*? You know, to live somewhere and with someone for so long, and-

Skinner: Well it's--this is home.

Graham: Yeah.

Skinner: And I'm glad she was here for a couple years, or a couple of months before--

Graham: Yeah. How did you end up in Wisconsin?

Skinner: I was here by invitation. I had conducted the first agricultural seminar on animal waste disposal that had been held in the United States--

Graham: Wow.

Skinner: --when I was with the University of Nebraska, and it got a lot of attention, and the first thing I knew I had an invitation to come here with a big increase in salary.

Graham: That's great. A nice change?

Skinner: Yeah. I was very fortunate. I had four employers over my career and I never applied for a one of 'em. It was always by invitation.

Graham: That's great, makes it easy.

Skinner: I was lucky.

Graham: Was John Jr. an only child as well?

Skinner: No, he has a sister.

Graham: Oh yeah? When was she born?

Skinner: Five years after him, so she's 61 now.

Graham: Okay.

Skinner: You know it makes you feel old when your kids are on Social Security.

Graham: [laughs] I think I'm getting towards the end of my questions. What would you tell someone who doesn't know anything about war?

Skinner: War is hell. And you gotta be prepared to give everything up. You can't regret giving it up, because you'll be unhappy all the time. And above all, when you get an education, pick something you like. I--I never regretted giving seven days a week because I was writing a lot for 4-H club publications and manuals, and leader's guides, and that kind of stuff. And I was handling the commercial side of the industry with educational seminars and I wrote newsletters for the pigeon people, for the hatchery people, and for the general flock owners. And, well I was doing four newsletters a month and I did a newsletter four times a year for the American Poultry Historical Society. And I wound up being honored with Hall of Fame in Washington, D.C [laughs].

Graham: Wow. What has been your impression of wars since World War II?

Skinner: I think it's terrible that we have gone for better than 2000 so-called civilization, and we still haven't been able to settle our quarrels without tearing each other up.

Graham: Why do you think there is war?

Skinner: Because people are egotistical.

Graham: You think that will ever change?

Skinner: No. I think the nature of human beings is to be grasping, and if they happen to get started on money, the grasp money, and if they get started on power, they crave power.

Graham: John, what year were you born in?

Skinner: What?

Graham: What year were you born?

Skinner: '24.

Graham: How have you seen the world change since 1924?

Skinner: The cars are a lot more streamlined [both laugh].

Graham: True [laughs]. How else?

Skinner: Well the world has changed because they're making greater effort to appear like they can change, but they really haven't changed that much. They're just concealing it better.

Graham: Hmm.

Skinner: And I think it's terrible that religious groups oppose each other.

Graham: Yeah. How is your life different because you participated in World War II?

Skinner: Well I had the GI Bill. I didn't have it [laughing] before [Graham laughs].

Graham: That's one way. But how are *you* different?

Skinner: Well I'm different because I got an education [laughing] and I got to associate with a different group of people.

Graham: Yeah. Did you stay in touch with those people after the war?

Skinner: Not very many of the ones I was in service with, but the people that I met since service and been associated with I've stayed in touch with them.

Graham: Are you involved in veteran's groups?

Skinner: Not very much. I'm an American Legion member, but I don't participate very actively in it because when I was working I was going seven days a week. Because I liked it so well I just kept going.

Graham: Yeah. Do you have any grandkids?

Skinner: No. We've lost three.

Graham: Oh gosh. I'm sorry.

Skinner: My son lost a daughter when she was six weeks old for anaphylactic shock.

Graham: Oh.

Skinner: And my daughter lost two daughters, one with--the palsy.

Graham: Yeah.

Skinner: Cerebral palsy, and one with cancer.

Graham: I can't even imagine.

Skinner: It's pretty rough.

Graham: Yeah.

Skinner: My daughter's had a hard time keepin' going, but she does a good job of covering it.

Graham: Yeah.

Skinner: She's involved in so many fundraising activities for handicapped.

Graham: Good, good.

Skinner: And I retired an hour--a year early to be spending more time with our granddaughter that had cerebral palsy.

Graham: Good.

Skinner: Because we were going to Minnesota once a month for a week to stay with their home and take care of it and they could go and do--because she was a buyer for Donaldson's stores out of Sioux City. And she was going to both coasts all the time, and you know, it was funny that as a result of it, she had a lot of airline miles built up that she couldn't use, didn't have time to use, so she give 'em to us and we traded 'em for two tickets to three weeks in China.

Graham: Oh yeah?

Skinner: And we had one vacation in Hong Kong and Macau [Special Administrative Region in southeastern China, similar to Hong Kong. Was a former Portuguese colony], and shorter one to China too.

Graham: Wow.

Skinner: We went to Russia, we went to North Africa, [laughing] we've been every darn place.

Graham: What have you told your own kids about your war experience?

Skinner: Not a heck of a lot. They didn't appear interested, and I didn't appear to bore 'em with it

Graham: What would you want people who are listening to this interview to know about?

Skinner: Well, I'm happy for the experience I had in service, but I consider that I am lucky to have it.

Graham: So one of the things I love about oral history is that it gives someone--you can hear about someone's life in their own voice, and they can kind of tell you their perspective in a way no one else could.

Skinner: Yeah.

Graham: So I'm wondering, what you can share about your own life that no one else could share?

Skinner: Well everything was timed right for my life because of the opportunities were a lot greater in '42 than they are now.

Graham: Yeah.

Skinner: There's more restrictions on it, and you don't have the freedom to operate your own thing. I was fortunate in that I could follow my interest area all the time.

Graham: Yeah.

Skinner: And it's interesting to me to have young people come up to me in the stores and out in the streets and so forth, and say, "Your [inaudible] educated me." I had a girl in a store just probably a year ago, a little more--that looked over me at the checkout counter, and she said, "You were my 4-H club leader, weren't you?" [laughs]

Graham: How does it make you feel to have made such an impact on other people's lives?

Skinner: Well the fact that she [laughing] remembered it was important.

Graham: I mean that was a pretty special connection.

Skinner: Yeah. I had a little boy that served as my helper for the Middleton [northwestern suburb of Madison, Wisconsin] Historical Society for thirteen years. He was in the third grade when he started working for me as a volunteer at the Middleton Museum. And he was my shadow until he went into service in November of last year, and I got a letter from him just the other day [laughs]. I've always had some young man or woman that was trailing my shadow for what I could offer 'em.

Graham: Was there someone like that for you in your life?

Skinner: My uncle was.

Graham: The carpenter?

Skinner: Yeah. He filled a gap. And I've tried to keep somebody going all the time. I got a man now that's in his sixties that was coming to me for advice on the museum in Middleton, and I was president of the historical society in Middleton for several years, I think seven years. And I was a member of the board of directors for about 29 years, and my wife was member of the directors from '73 to 2011.

Graham: Wow. Well, is there anything I'm missing?

Skinner: I don't what there is I could say. If we kept talking we'd run on to something, but I was involved in the production of eighteen books; one in Japan, one in Italian, three in Netherlands, and several in England as well as in the United States.

Graham: And what were those books about?

Skinner: Poultry. I got a book in there that's got 497 color plates in it.

Graham: Wow. So you left quite a legacy.

Skinner: Yeah. I was--inducted into the hall of fame, Fellow of Poultry Science, Scientific Fellow, and I had a USDA appointment and could sometimes represent the USDA on overseas conferences on animals.

Graham: Wow.

Skinner: One time, Jean went to a genealogy conference in London and I flew separately to London by way of Rome--no, Amsterdam by way of Rome, and then out to the island of Malta, and I had a meeting in Malta that was for the European Poultry Conference. And I didn't stop to think of the fact that travel schedules won't be the same in Europe after September 1st. And so I got out to Malta, she was going to meet me in Malta and did, and after her meeting was over with we stuck around Malta for a couple days and I went down to the airplane office to get tickets and found that there was only two flights a month from Malta to the mainland so I thought, "Well there has to be way out of this," so I went to the steamship office and I could book a steamship out of north Africa [Graham laughs] to Sicily.

Graham: Uh huh.

Skinner: And then I could connect up our rail passes from Sicily on to Italy, and so that's what we did. And I got on the boat, and a steward took my passport and he stuck it in a cheese box on an open table on the deck of the boat. And gosh we were the only two on board that couldn't speak anything but English I think, [Graham laughs], and so one of us sat where we could see the passports all the time until [laughing] we got to Sicily. And then we could activate our rail passes, but we stayed one night in Sicily because I had an appointment with the Purina feed dealer in Italy that I was supposed to contact him, and so we went to the state fair of Italy in Forli [northern Italy, capital of Romagna], and it was quite a thing for a state fair because they had to close the fairgrounds down at twelve o'clock until two 'cause--break period. And I couldn't figure out what the heck you do in two hours sat in a fairgrounds and you couldn't see anything 'cause they had all the buildings shut. [coughs] But we run into a lot of things like that that we adjusted to.

Graham: Yeah sounded like you had a lot of adventures.

Skinner: We did. And we didn't hesitate to take it on ourselves to start with. Did it for the first--when we started traveling in the sixties, '69, and I think the second time we went was '72--but we always arranged our own itinerary and so we didn't see a lot of things we would have seen, and as Jean said, you always slept in a fleabag. [Graham laughs]. But I swear I got into a hotel in Brussels one time that I wouldn't have seen it in daylight, I wouldn't have trusted it. But it was good!

Graham: Yeah.

Skinner: Had to walk up to a fifth floor of a building, and down a long hallway, and then get all your stuff back out of there. She used to sit in a train station when we'd decide where we were going to stop for the night, and she'd take the suitcases and get a coffee on a table in the train station, and I'd go out scouting for bed and breakfasts [Graham laughs] and then come back and get her.

Graham: A good plan.

Skinner: It worked out. And I traded with book dealers in England, and Scotland.

Graham: Wow. You're all over the place.

Skinner: We did a lot of things. And I don't regret a single one of 'em.

Graham: Good, good. Why did you want to do this interview with me?

Skinner: Well I thought I might open it up for somebody to try more things.

Graham: Yeah.

Skinner: Because I hated the fact that my daughter-in-law and son had accompanied us overseas on our 40th wedding anniversary and their 20th, so we were going to take three weeks in Europe, and I'd pay for everything. We'd sat out around the table and we stacked four piles out in front of us, everybody had exactly the same amount. And she got over there, and she couldn't tolerate the adjustment to foreign cuisine and trying new things. And I think that's half of your fun of travelling is trying new things.

Graham: Yeah.

Skinner: But she'd go to McDonalds or some fast food joint and I couldn't see that at all. One time I got the best of her, and [laughing] we laugh about it now, but she ordered steak and kidney pie in England, and she thought it was kidney beans.

Graham: Oh! [Skinner laughs] A little bit different [laughs]. Well is there anything else before I turn off the recorder?

Skinner: I don't think so. I can't think of--it'll come to me later, but not now.

Graham: All right, well I can always come back and we can always turn this back on. So this has been just a real treat talking to you.

Skinner: Well, thank you.

Graham: Thank you for your service and for your time today.

Skinner: Well I was well-paid for it.

[End of Interview]