

2001 Oral History Project
Parents of the Baby Boomers 1941-2001
Interviewee: Lawrence Schipper
(Also includes Jean Schipper)
Interviewer: Geoffrey Reynolds
July 5, 2001

GR: Lawrence, let's start out by talking about where you were when you heard that the war had started.

LS: This was on a Sunday evening; I was at home, I was listening to the radio, and the news came over that the Japs had bombed Pearl Harbor. I already had my orders to report to Fort Custer, but that kind of hurried it along.

GR: How old were you then?

LS: Twenty-four.

GR: So you had graduated from high school probably already?

LS: I hadn't finished high school.

GR: What were you involved in when you were called up?

LS: Type of work?

GR: Yeah.

LS: I was working at General Motors in Grand Rapids. So this was the seventh of December, and the sixth of January I reported for duty at Fort Custer. I was there a day and a half, I guess, and was shipped out to Fort Dix, New Jersey. I was there for nine months and then moved to Drewfield, Florida, which was near Tampa. I was there about three months and got moved into a replacement group. We were a signal corps outfit, information. Guys from various units, no one knew each other. Sent to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, and from there went overseas. Spent eleven days on a boat going across. At

that time, they would zigzag to confuse the Germans, who were traveling with these U-boat packs at that time—I don't know how many submarines in a pack. They suspected that they had sighted some of these packs, but we made it.

GR: What boat were you on?

LS: It was the Argentina. It was a converted luxury liner. We had a stateroom originally meant for four people, but we were in there with thirty-two of us. We slept six high. Had about “yay” much room between you the one above, if one turned over, everyone had to turn around.

GR: How many men do you think were on the Argentina when you made the trip?

LS: They said seven thousand.

GR: Where did you load?

LS: In New York.

GR: Where did you end up landing?

LS: At Casablanca, Africa. There we went across North Africa, ended up on the...well, we were on the edge of the desert most of the time following Rommel. Ended up at a place, Sousse, in North Africa. From there we went to Sicily, landed near Palermo. From there to Italy, landed at Salerno, and went on up. Went as far as I think, Leverno, which we would say Leghorn, Italy. From there we went into France, Southern France to Marseilles. Went up as far as Nancy, France. And then went into Germany, and got as far as Mannheim when the war was ended—that is, the European war.

GR: So you served in two theatres, North Africa and Europe?

LS: Ended up with seven battle stars.

GR: Along the way, did anything...or does it still stick in your mind? I know there was a lot of fighting but...

LS: No, we were not a combat unit, per se. Weren't meant to be. We had some loss, I think they estimated fifteen percent loss. We were not attached to any army really, we were 562nd signal battalion separate, and basically undetached service most of the way across.

GR: What would your day involve in the signal corps?

LS: I was a lineman, stringing wires for communications. Quite a bit of it was from radar to information centers.

GR: Constantly fixing what you had just done?

LS: Yeah, and in Italy it seems you had these people that were pro-Nazi or whatever, and at night they'd chop chunks out of your wire and lines and you'd have to go back and repair them the next day.

GR: Did you see any fighting of brutal nature while you were there?

LS: Not really, although, some fellows standing near us all of a sudden dropped down from a shot. Don't really know if it was snipers or what.

GR: As you went through these countries, did you see the effects of war on the civilians that struck you?

LS: Terrible poverty—just unbelievable. In 1985, we went back on a tour through Germany and part of France and so on, and I was just surprised that they rebuilt that soon.

GR: Had you run into any of the Holocaust camps or anything?

LS: No, strangely enough, the German prisoners that I had encountered, none of them, you could make them believe that the Eastern section of the United States had not been

bombed. They were all convinced that New York was in ashes and ruin, and Philadelphia and all the eastern cities.

GR: Propaganda had been successful?

LS: Oh, sure, oh yeah.

GR: Those men that you encountered, what ended up happening to them for the most part?

LS: Some of them had become lost, and they were rounded up; some were wounded.

GR: Were their ages surprising to you at all?

LS: Not really.

GR: General military age?

LS: Yes.

GR: You said you went into Mannheim, so you weren't really part of the last push over the Rhine?

LS: No.

GR: So what was it like to be a young man when the war ended? What were your goals after that?

LS: Your objective was to get home and forget about it.

GR: It was still that pretty bad for you?

LS: Yeah.

GR: How long were you in Europe, waiting for that to happen?

LS: Thirty-four and a half months.

GR: Had you really become part of the military at that point—had you thought about staying in?

LS: No way.

GR: Did you know anybody that did—that really had thought about staying in?

LS: I didn't see him, but I understand one of the fellows that had a terrible time of it when he first came in just had terrible homesickness—laid on his bunk and cried. But, I understand he re-upped.

GR: So it was a maturing process for him. How about for you as a twenty-four year old—did you learn anything more about life than when you left Grand Rapids at twenty-four?

LS: Well, you learn of man's inhumanity to man. And you also learn that the grace of God is very real.

GR: So was that something that you were able to keep a pretty positive attitude about, not having a regular Sunday service and not maybe having Reformed Church or Christian Reformed Church people around you all the time? Were there services on Sunday, or when they were available?

LS: Oh yeah, we had a chaplain. They would conduct a service wherever—not necessarily in any building or anything.

GR: So there was some outlets there for the Christian soldier. Once you returned home—you mentioned that you had been at GM—did you return to GM?

LS: I did for a short time.

GR: What happened after that?

LS: I worked for a contractor for a while, then for a manufacturing place in Holland, and finally at Parke-Davis. I retired from Parke-Davis.

GR: Now had you met your present wife before the war?

LS: Oh yes.

GR: Were you married when you left for service?

LS: No, we were not. We became engaged.

GR: Did the war cause the engagement to take place more quickly than you would have figured before?

LS: No, I think it probably held us off. I didn't think it was prudent to get married going to the Army and not knowing whether you'd come back or what condition you'd be in when you came back.

GR: Was that a feeling both you and your wife shared?

LS: I don't know, I didn't discuss it with her. (laughs)

GR: Did you write regularly?

LS: Oh yes.

GR: How much would you write to your fiancée at that point?

LS: Well, of course everything was...they read your letters, you know. You couldn't say where you were.

GR: Had you worked out a code with your fiancée before you left?

LS: No, later on we did. (laughs)

GR: Later in the war, you mean?

LS: Yes. She wrote a letter suggesting that we do a certain thing. That way I could tell her where I was.

GR: Would they look at her letters coming in?

LS: No. I don't know, they may have spot checked, I don't know about that. But none of here letters were opened. Of course we had the V-Mail.

GR: Were there lots of other soldiers writing as regularly as you were?

LS: Oh, yes.

GR: Were some of them receiving letters from, for instance church groups, or volunteers that had agreed to write letters to keep them in touch with American...?

LS: I suppose. I don't think that I did.

GR: Did you keep all the letters while overseas?

LS: No.

GR: Did your wife keep yours that came home?

LS: Yeah, she had most of them, I finally convinced her to burn.

GR: And did she?

LS: Yes.

GR: Did you send photographs home periodically to keep her aware of what you look like?

LS: No, I don't think we could. We have quite a few photographs...the company photographer took pictures, and he was good enough to give me some of them.

GR: So you got home, you're at GM for a short time, how long before you and your wife were married?

LS: October to June, I guess.

GR: At that point had your wife been working during the war?

LS: Oh yes. She worked at the shoe factory in Holland—paymaster or whatever. Payroll department.

GR: You return home, you're working again, did your wife continue to work?

LS: Yes, until she became pregnant with our first child.

GR: Then did your wife continue to work at any point after the children had started...?

LS: Yeah, after they were through school, she worked at Life Savers.

GR: You mean, through high school?

LS: Yeah.

GR: So she was home during most of their grade school years?

LS: Yes.

GR: Did you find yourself working a lot of extra hours, more than forty, after the war?

LS: Not really. Of course we lived on a farm at that time, and I tried to do a little farming along with it.

GR: Did the GI Bill come up at all? Did you think about maybe returning to college, or going to college?

LS: No, I really didn't because by that time we had a family and...

GR: You were probably twenty-nine when you got home?

LS: Well, I guess I was twenty-eight.

GR: How many children did you end up having?

LS: Four.

GR: Were they in pretty rapid succession with each other?

LS: Yeah, the youngest ones were twins, and...four years apart.

GR: Did you find your family life a little hectic at some point?

LS: No, I don't think so.

GR: So it was a mutual decision on your wife and your part that she would stay home during the child rearing years?

LS: Yes.

GR: Was that based on your ability to make enough money so that everybody was happy?

LS: I don't know how happy they were, but we managed.

GR: Did she ever mention some of the stresses she had undergone during the day, when you got home that night?

LS: Probably.

GR: Did anything come up?

LS: Nothing major.

GR: On the weekends, what sort of things did you and the family do?

LS: I don't know, I can't remember that we did anything.

GR: Did you take vacations?

LS: Yeah, we tried to, but at that time it was only a week at a time. We'd quite often go to a cottage at a lake for a week.

GR: The source of leisure that you and your wife enjoyed by yourselves—can you remember any of those things? Did you go on picnics or movie dates?

LS: Picnics, I guess, some.

GR: Were the children were left at home?

LS: No, we usually included them in most everything we did.

GR: Was it hard to carve out time for you and wife just to go maybe out to dinner while the kids were still small?

LS: I don't know if we did much of that.

GR: Individually, did you and your wife have hobbies or things that you like to do, like golf?

LS: No, we were not golfers. Did a little bowling, not a whole lot.

GR: Did you have your own set of friends that you would touch base with once a week?

LS: Oh yes.

GR: Did you and your wife share friendships with couples?

LS: Yes. Still do.

GR: Would you periodically do things with them, with the kids or without the kids?

LS: I guess both. At summer barbecues and so on, you'd have the children. In the winter time not so much.

GR: Did you ever receive any advice on child rearing from friends, siblings, or your parents?

LS: I suppose like everybody we got a lot of advice, didn't pay attention to any of it. (laughs)

GR: Being older, you anyway, when you first starting having children, do you think that that maybe gave you a little bit more perspective on patience and how to raise kids? And did the war have anything to do with that?

LS: I don't think so.

GR: You talked a little bit about the poverty you saw in Europe, did that reflect on how you saw yourself as a provider after the war?

LS: Well, probably. I hated to see food wasted because the people there were so hungry.

GR: So that played a part in probably some of the ways you relate to your sons and daughters?

LS: Could very well be.

GR: Did they ever mention that when they got older that that was something they appreciated you teaching them? Any mention of that?

LS: Not really, no.

GR: Here's a question that you can reflect on too. I'm assuming they've had children of their own and they're married, is there anything that you've noticed in their lifestyles that you think might have gotten transferred from the way you and your wife raised them?

LS: Oh, I'm sure. Church attendance...

GR: Do they all live locally?

LS: Yes, within six, seven miles.

GR: So contact is still pretty good then with the family? Did they go into occupations that you thought were okay?

LS: Oh yeah, they all have very good occupations.

GR: Did they go to college?

LS: Let's see. Our children?

GR: Yes.

LS: One of them ended up as an R.N. One did not go to college. The twins went to a business school. We lost one of the twins however when she was thirty-five.

GR: The occupations that they chose, was that something that they kind of came across naturally, or was it something that the times—for instance, they grew up during the 60s and 70s—was there something about what was going on in America that kind of directed them towards what they do today for a living?

LS: I don't know.

GR: Were they caught up at all in the activities of the time? Long hair and...

LS: No, we did not go through that.

GR: Did they come across that just from the way in which they were brought up, or did they know that it wasn't really something that was acceptable? Or was it Holland in general that guided that?

LS: I think they just didn't get caught up in it, they just didn't care about it.

GR: Did they go to Christian schools?

LS: Yes.

GR: Holland Christian?

LS: Yes.

GR: After the children left, how did you and your wife react to that absence of people in the home?

LS: It was empty at first. (laughs)

GR: Did you have any chance to do something different that you didn't have a lot of chance to do before? Or extra money?

LS: Probably. Nothing dramatic.

GR: You didn't buy a camper and head off to Arizona?

LS: No. We do go to Florida for the winter now, done that for twenty years.

GR: So there wasn't really any great change in the way you got along?

LS: No, I don't think so. Try to replace your cars as they wore out. (laughs)

GR: Has your experience with parenting your own children changed the way you treat your grandchildren?

LS: Try not to correct them.

GR: You do find yourself wanting to do that though probably?

LS: Well, not anymore—they're all full grown. There probably were times when you might have said I'd have done it differently, but they turned out okay.

GR: With the war in mind and the experiences that you've had in the last forty, fifty years, what changes have you made on the community...have you joined some civic organizations or anything else that you now have time to do, number one, but also you're willing to offer a little bit of your lifetime experience to the community?

LS: No, I don't. I'm kind of restricted in my activities. I have arthritis and don't get around that well.

GR: Do you participate in any of the veteran's organizations?

LS: No.

GR: Is there a reason for that?

LS: I guess I've seen enough of it that I didn't really care to get involved. I'm sure that they do some good things.

GR: For instance, yesterday being the national holiday, does that bring up any good or bad memories for you when you reflect on the part you played in that?

LS: Not really. Well, yeah, it does. Nobody, unless you've been there, can understand it. It was a terrible price that was paid. Of course our independence goes back to the Revolutionary War, but even then there was a lot of suffering at that time too.

GR: When you came home after the war it was relatively late after the armistice had been signed, even in Japan. Had you kind of missed some of the fanfare that America was willing to show its veterans?

LS: No, not really.

GR: Were you still well-greeted when you got home?

LS: Yeah. Of course, the fiancée was glad to see you and you were glad to see her, and that was the main thing.

GR: Had you not seen her since you left?

LS: I had two furloughs while I was in the States.

GR: How did that go, knowing that you had to go back? Was it harder to leave?

LS: You came home with the realization that you had seven days, and after that you had to go back.

GR: Was that healthy for you, or did you think doing a full-stint at the war would have been better for you? Did you appreciate the furloughs?

LS: Oh yes, very much.

GR: And it kind of rejuvenated you to come back?

LS: I'm sure it did.

GR: Were you ever tempted to tie the knot during any of the times on the furloughs?

LS: No, because you really didn't have time enough. I just didn't feel it was the thing for us to do.

JS: May I enter something else here for a second? There's one thing that entered in here. He was the only child, and his parents were elderly.

[End of side one]

GR: Lawrence, tell me a little bit about what it was like to be in the camps for basic training. What was some of the emotions you saw there among the men?

LS: Being twenty-four years old and having had your own car for years, coming and going as you pleased, the hardest part was realizing that you had to ask for a pass for an evening to...at Fort Dix we would go to Trenton, which was the capital of New Jersey. Just to get away from camp, there wasn't that much to do in town. Or even to go the service club, you had to sign out, and I guess that took a little doing to get used to have to do that. And probably ask an officer who's younger than you are if you may please go to the service club for a cup of coffee and a donut.

GR: Were there lots of people that just were withdrawn in general, just dealing with their own issues?

LS: No, most of them adjusted. Of course there was a lot of complaining going on.

GR: Why is that?

LS: Chow was no good and the marches were too long.

GR: What was a typical day like, when did you start?

LS: Usually about six o'clock, get up for roll call then go for chow. Then after that you get out and you stand inspection, and then you either go on a hike or you go for a close order drill, which was marching. And your general training. At that time, when we first got in, we trained with WWI equipment—helmets, leggings, and even our rifles were the Springfield 03s, which was a 1903 Springfield, supposed to have been a good rifle. But later on we got the Thompson sub-machine guns. And after that we got the thirty caliber carbines. They were all for close combat.

GR: After nine months of that you were ready to go overseas?

LS: Yeah, we were kind of wondering what that was going to be like. You kind of realize it wasn't go to be a day at the beach, but...

GR: Was it relatively early in your tour of North Africa that you saw battle?

LS: Yeah, I guess the first or second night out there we had an air raid. The Germans would do it differently for their raids. They would make a run across whatever target they had, and they would drop these chandelier flares to light up the area. Then they'd make their bomb run. Well after they did that, you had your akak, or your anti-aircraft artillery, shooting up there, and every fifth one was a...

GR: Tracer?

LS: Tracer, yes. You'd think there wasn't room for any other ones besides the tracers up there. They were effective, these German ships, a lot of them made it out but a lot of

them got hit too. But they wouldn't land right near us. They would float down somewhere, hit the mountains or some whatever.

GR: Did you ever run into General Rommel's division?

LS: No. We were usually just a little bit behind them.

GR: How long before the letters from home started coming?

LS: Oh, I don't know. It would take sometimes a couple weeks as a rule.

GR: Did they kind of keep you in high spirits?

LS: Oh yeah, that helped.

GR: Were the first letters harder to read than the last letters that you got before you left for home? You know, was the urgency...?

LS: I don't think any of us had any idea that we were going to have to be there that long. Just figured well, six months or so and we'd have it over with.

GR: The war itself?

LS: Yeah.

GR: I guess when the war in Europe was over, and then Japan later, you must have been thinking, "When am I going to go home?"

LS: Yeah.

GR: Why were you there so long after the fighting had stopped?

LS: Well, see the fighting stopped in May. There were a tremendous amount of people there that they had to get back. Jean's brother had been in Germany, and he was shipped back with the intention of going on to Japan. But before that happened, the war ended, and of course he was discharged before I was. One of our officers told me that we weren't slated to go home. We were going to Japan through the Suez Canal and come around

India. He said, "I had my mind made up. I was going to take my forty-five and blow my head off. No way was I going to try to lead a bunch of men who had been here three, nearly four years, and then go to another theater." But fortunately he didn't have to do that.

GR: You talked a little bit about the fact that in May the war was over in Europe. Was there some anxiety about now moving on to Japan and possibly a worse fight than you had imagined?

LS: No, you kind of took it in stride.

GR: Was there news traveling among the men about what was really going on during the war?

LS: We had the Stars and Stripes, which was written by Ernie Pyle. And of course, the...have you ever seen the Bill Malden's cartoons?

GR: Oh yeah.

LS: Italy was really the roughest place for me, as far as I was concerned. The winter was bad, lots of rain and snow, rain mixed with snow; no dry shoes or socks all winter long.

GR: So you saw some hardship just living?

LS: Yeah, but never a cold. I guess I was so full of shots that there wasn't room for a cold.

GR: So the military made sure that you were immunized?

LS: Oh yes.

GR: When did that take place?

LS: You got shots periodically—every six months, I guess, or every three months, I've forgotten.

GR: So medical attention was there?

LS: Oh yeah.

GR: Did you ever see anybody famous among the ranks?

LS: At Fort Dix, Joe Louis was there. Of course, he stayed in the sports arena. We were in tents.

GR: You never came across Eisenhower or Marshall or any of the dignitaries of America?

LS: Not that I met.

GR: But they did circulate?

LS: Yes, supposedly, under QT.

GR: Did you ever run into anybody from West Michigan while you were over there?

LS: Never. Never ran into anybody from a Reformed or Christian Reformed church either.

GR: Is there anything you wanted to add?

JS: You did, you met Gary Faassen over there in Italy.

LS: Oh that's right, he's a friend of mine.

GR: So you did find someone you knew?

LS: Yeah, that was in Italy.

GR: Was that kind of a surprise for you?

LS: Well, yeah.

GR: Had you both changed quite a bit?

LS: I don't think so.

GR: Obviously you recognized each other?

LS: Oh yes—hadn't changed that much.

JS: You were right here in the same church.

GR: So he was a fellow church member then?

LS: Yes. He's still living I understand, but not doing too well.

GR: Did you come out of the war with any ailments that you can attribute to the war?

LS: No, I don't think so.

GR: The rough living didn't get to you at all?

LS: No, I don't think so. I have arthritis, but people that haven't been to war have arthritis too.

GR: That's true, very true. Is there anything you wanted to add?

LS: I don't think so.

GR: Okay. Well, thank you.

[End of interview]