Kurt Pielhner: This begins an interview with Mr. John Conover, joined by his wife, Marjorie Conover, at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, on May 31, 1995. I would like to begin by asking you, Mr. Conover, about your parents. Your father was a native of New Jersey and born in Newark.

John Conover: Yes. Well, actually, I'm not sure he was born in Newark, but I think he was. He lived there all his life, went to Barringer High School and he was proud of that, because he was the first generation in his family to complete or even go to high school. Neither his mother nor his father went to high school.

KP: He did not go to college. Would he have liked to go to college?

JC: I think he would, he would. Well, that wasn't a big thing then, but he was anxious that I did. When I graduated from high school in 1941, I had no plans to go to college. I didn't think he could afford it and, some way or another, he found out that Union College in Schenectady had some scholarship money available and he urged me to go for it. I got a scholarship and I went to Union and while I was there is when I joined the Navy, because they had a V-12 Program [Navy College Training Program] going. My mother was born in Illinois. She grew up in New York City. She went through eighth grade, but she was always interested in words and reading. In fact, my father did a lot of reading, too, that sort of stuff and I grew up in a house that I felt was conducive to asking questions and getting them answered and, if you didn't know the answer, "Look it up," and that kind of stuff.

KP: All of your siblings went to college, which sounds like it was quite an accomplishment, that your family did a lot of sacrificing.

JC: Yes, I expect they did. My oldest sister went to Syracuse, graduated in 1938 from the School of Architecture, five-year program. I expect she had a lot of scholarship help. My brother went to West Point and, of course, that was no financial drain on the family. I had hopes of going to the Naval Academy myself, but I don't know what happened. I didn't make it through the initial screening process or exams or whatever I had to do. I can't remember.

KP: How did the Great Depression affect your family?

JC: Well, okay, in the '20s, my father was a car and truck salesman in Newark.

KP: For a very top-of-the-line company.

JC: Pierce-Arrow, that's right, Pierce Trucks, also, and he had money during the '20s, used to talk about twenty-dollar silk shirts and that kind of thing, which I guess was a lot in those days. On the strength of that and marrying my mother--they were married in 1922--he built a small house on a piece of land in Essex Fells, which is the ritzy-ritz. [If] you look at the ads in the New York Times for property in Essex Fells now, you're talking 650,000 dollars and stuff like that. After the Depression came, he was not able to keep that up. He took a second mortgage and he wasn't able to keep up with all that and, finally, during the war, while I was off in the Navy, he sold it and moved to Montclair. Actually, maybe I lived in Montclair before I
graduated from high school, I can't remember, but I think I did. So, it was affected that way, but I can remember my mother baking donuts and I would go around the neighborhood and peddle them with a little wagon and sell them for thirty cents a dozen or something. That's how it affected us, although we were never hungry.

KP: Your father always had work during the Depression.

JC: He always had work, yes. He worked for--[they] stopped making Pierce-Arrows in 1934, I think, [1938]. He had sold a fleet of trucks--whether it was Pierce then or whether he was selling White Trucks, he also sold White trucks--to Arrow Carrier Corporation, which was a trucking company in Paterson, who had the run from New York City or from [the] Paterson Silk Mills; no, well, anyway, the company was founded originally to travel back and forth from Pennsylvania to Paterson. It was mostly raw silk one way and finished underwear the other way, or something like that, and I don't completely remember. Then, the Arrow Carrier moved to New York City and became a general carrier rather than a specialized carrier. I think they had armored cabs and stuff, back in their first days, but he went to work for them after selling them a fleet of trucks. John Ackerman, who had founded the company, asked him to work for him and he worked for them for thirty years, until he retired. So, yes, he always had work. He commuted on the train from Essex Fells or Montclair into the city.

Tara Liston: Did his hours increase during the Depression?

JC: I honestly don't know; I don't know that. I don't recall that he came home late or went early or any such thing as that. I don't think so.

KP: Did your mother work at all after she was married?

JC: Not while we were young. After my brother and I went off--I went into the service and Roger, Roger was at West Point--and they moved to Montclair, then, she got a job in Montclair Trust Company and she worked, had a very good job there. She became a trust and loan officer for the Montclair Trust Company and she worked there until Dad retired. They both retired about 1961, moved from Montclair to Cape May and spent the rest of their lives there.

KP: It sounds like your mother was also a very bright woman, like your father.

JC: Indeed she was, yes. If she'd had a chance to go on to high school and college, if it was a thing for a woman to do in the first place and if her mother--her father, my mother's father, died when she was very young. He was alcoholic, drank himself to death, I guess, but her mother was a hard-working Swedish woman. Well, my mother was the ninth of nine children and they all became, not "somebody," but the family did well. Yes, my mother came from a strong family and she, I think, passed it on to us.

KP: You characterized your father as a Hoover Republican.

JC: Oh, yes, right until the day he died, I'm sure, yes. [laughter]
KP: He remained loyal even in 1932.

JC: Yes.

KP: A lot of Republicans have said to me that their fathers were Republican, but, in 1932, they were for Roosevelt.

JC: No, my father cursed Roosevelt until the day he died, I say. He blamed, "All the mess in Washington," he used to call it, on FDR. Well, you see what a mess we're in now. I really think you can trace it back to Roosevelt, when government suddenly was all things to all people and it hadn't been before. I think there's a loss of individualism, of, well, you know that term, "rugged individualism," loss of independence and depending on yourself to do things.

TL: Personal responsibility.

JC: Yes, yes, exactly. You don't have to now and, if you screw up, blame it on somebody else and sue them.

KP: You wanted to be a dairy farmer, at least when you went to college. Did you have a long-standing interest from when you were growing up?

JC: No, I didn't, although I have fond memories of going to Henry Becker's farm out in Roseland. He used to deliver milk in Essex Fells with a horse and wagon every morning, come around, and I loved to visit the farm, but, no, I married a woman who grew up on a farm. When I came home from the war, I was anxious to go to school. I think knowing her was part of the influence and another influence, of course, was, when I came home in 1946, there was something called the Volunteer Land Corps, I think it was called, because farm help, of course, had gone off to the war. 1946, how old was I? I was twenty-three years old and a man in Ryegate, Vermont, put in for help from this outfit. Oh, I just fell in love with what he was doing and, of course, I didn't recognize, at that moment, that it was the beginning of the end of small dairy farming in the Northeast, which I have regretted now for a long time, but I went to work for him in 1946. I went back--well, then, I came to Rutgers in the Fall of '46, I guess, yes--then, I went back and worked for him, summers, except the Summer of 1948. I worked on the dairy farm at the Lyons Hospital, up in Lyons, New Jersey, a VA [Veterans Administration] hospital up in Lyons. Then, I got married and it's all downhill from there. [laughter]

KP: Growing up, what career did you envision yourself in? When you were a teenager, what did you want to do as an adult?

JC: Well, I thought about joining the Navy. I'd always wanted to do that and I thought about going to, as I say, Annapolis. However, when I was in high school, my favorite courses were science courses. I did very well in them, and so, when I went to Union, I was a chemistry major, but that got tough. That was real tough going and, when the Navy moved in with their V-12 Program, I transferred to that. I never did go back to take any more chemistry courses after that.
KP: Where did this interest in the Navy come from, from the movies, from reading? Did you ever go sailing growing up?

JC: No, as a matter-of-fact, I had very little boating experience. I went deep-sea fishing with my dad, out of Brielle, a few times and stuff like that, but he was a great deep-sea fisherman, Ship Bottom or Brielle or somewhere down along the coast. No, honestly, I don't know where it came from, whether it was reading--I've always been interested in sailing ships and stuff like that. I had a cousin--actually, he must have been my father's cousin, because sort of a half a step generation down between me and my father, I think he's my father's cousin--Philip Conover, who they used to tell stories about him, how great it was when he joined the Navy. He must've joined the Navy in the '20s or '30s, how, when he came home, what a changed man he was and he folded up his clothes and put them on a chair and he was neat and orderly. I suppose there was something to that that I recall from my youth, but, no, no, I don't know.

TL: [To Mrs. Conover] Does that carry on over with him? I saw the laugh. [laughter]

JC: Far from it, far from it, oh, my, [laughter] very perceptive question.

KP: Montclair High School had a very good reputation, still does.

JC: Yes, very good high school.

KP: How well did it prepare you for college?

JC: Oh, marvelously well. I took the college prep program all the way through, starting at George Inness Junior High. See, I went to Essex Fells School through eighth grade. Essex Fells had no high school, so, we could go either to Grover Cleveland High School in Caldwell or to Montclair High School and the step between eighth grade and Montclair High School was George Inness Junior High. I had spent one year there, ninth grade, and then, across the street to Montclair High. Oh, it was very good preparation. I took all the French there was that I could take, never used it a day since, but what the heck? all the math I could take, all the science I could take, all the good English courses I could take. Yes, it was very good.

KP: Did you play any sports in high school?

JC: No. [laughter] I have to tell this story--am I allowed to tell stories on this thing?

KP: Please do.

TL: That is what we like.

JC: Because my mother used to tell this story about me. Well, when I was in eighth grade or seventh grade or something, in Essex Fells, we always had a field day to end the year and I was in, well, it was a heat for, I don't know, a hundred-yard dash or something, I can't remember, fifty-yard dash, whatever we did. I remember coming home from school and telling my mother that I came in fourth in a race and she said, "Well, how many were in the race?" I said, "Four."
KP: Were you ever a Boy Scout?

JC: Yes, I'm an Eagle Scout, and I think that was good preparation for life. I don't know how it is in Scouts nowadays. My dad was a Scouter. He was an adult in Scouting and encouraged me a lot, had a good troop in Essex Fells and I remember going out to the camporees and stuff, up at [Mortimer L.] Schiff [Scout] Reservation, up near Oakland, up there. Yes, I was an Eagle Scout, I am an Eagle Scout.

TL: Did that help you out when you were in the Navy?

JC: Not consciously. Well, I don't recall that, "Hey, man, this is where my first aid merit badge comes in handy," or anything like that, no, I don't, but I think it's just good, all-around preparation, besides giving you a sense of accomplishing something, working for something, that kind of stuff. It was a proud time for my mother and father when I made Eagle.

KP: How old were you when you made Eagle Scout?

JC: I guess I was eighteen. I think it was just about the time I graduated from high school. I think I was eighteen; I could have been seventeen, but I think I was eighteen.

KP: Were your father and mother active in any organizations, besides Scouting for your father?

JC: No, I don't think so. He didn't belong to Kiwanis or Rotary. Before he was married, he was a very active Mason. He was a Mason, Thirty-Second Degree Mason. He was a Shriner. I have a picture of him, somewhere, of him in his full regalia, with a turban [fez?] and all, on the boardwalk in Atlantic City, at some Shriner convention, but I think after he was married or after we came along, the children came along, that he was not active. I don't recall that he was ever active in Masons. There was a chapter in Caldwell and I don't think he ever went, that I can recall. I think he just, for some reason, gave that all up. Whether, as a single man, he was able to take more part or what, I don't know.

KP: Was your mother active in any organizations?

JC: Yes. She always worked for Community Chest [forerunner of the United Way], even when we were kids. She did that, I think, part-time, and she was a church[goer], St. Peter's Church in Essex Fells, where I was baptized and where Mardee and I were married, and I was confirmed there, and so on. She was always active in that and, in fact, she continued, at the end of her life, being very active in Church of the Advent down in Cape May. In fact, I think she was church treasurer down there, her banking experience helping that.

KP: Your mother had a real flare for finance and banking.
JC: Yes, she did. I wasn't aware of it, but she might well have been sort of the guiding light to get my father through the Depression; I really don't know.

KP: Your family did not talk very much about money at the table.

JC: No. I think my brother and I and my sister and I were probably aware that things weren't good, but I say we never were hungry or complained about it. When Dad was working in the automobile business, he'd come home with a new car once in a while. I remember a beautiful Model A Ford, with a rumble seat and the top down and all, and then, when he worked for Arrow Carrier, I guess, yes, I remember him coming home in a company car. It was a 1935 Ford, nice, little car, but my mother drove, for all the time I can remember, a Pierce-Arrow, which they had bought when he was selling Pierce-Arrows, a 1927 Pierce-Arrow. I learned to drive in that car. I went courting in that car. [laughter] She felt like a queen, she said.

Marjorie Conover: I did, I felt like a queen in that car. It was wonderful.

TL: Did many people have cars or was that just for the lucky? Is that why you felt like a queen?

JC: No, everybody had a car.

MC: It was just the regalness of the car that made me feel that way.

JC: Because, after all, we're talking about, now, 1948. It was a 1927 car and my mother still had that car--it was an antique by then. They'd stopped making Pierce-Arrows in 1934.

TL: Right.

JC: So, I remember, one time, we visited West Point, my brother at West Point, and we had parked the car off somewhere and it was time to go. We were standing on the steps of the Thayer Hotel, the whole family, and somebody's standing behind us, waiting for a car to come around. He heard this car come tickety-ticking around the corner, with this distinctive engine sound. He said, "My god, that's a Pierce-Arrow," yes. [laughter] I regret, of course--this will tell you something about money--the timing chain on the Pierce-Arrow broke and it would have cost my father 125 dollars, which now means nothing, of course, to have it fixed and he couldn't afford to have it fixed. So, we had to sell it and, of course, it's some antique somewhere. Someone wealthy probably has it, if it's still around. I remember, too, at the age of--what did I figure the other day, Mardee? sixty-seven--in 1955, when he was sixty-seven, he had a burst appendix and he almost died. While he was laying in the hospital, he got thinking about, "You can't take it with you." Soon as he got out of the hospital, he went and he bought a 1955 or '56 Thunderbird, which had just come out, [laughter] beautiful, fire engine red, a wonderful car. He figured he was going to spend his money while he could. [laughter]

KP: Your father liked automobiles.

JC: Oh, yes, he had a flare for them. He had a love for them, yes.
KP: When was the first time you owned a car?

JC: Oh, when I was at Rutgers. I bought a Model A Ford from one of my classmates. Who? Cal (Wetstein?).

MC: Probably.

JC: Cal (Wetstein?) was in the Aggie School at the same time I was, yes, paid two hundred dollars for it, something like that. I regret it, of course, as everybody does, that I didn’t hold on to that car, but, oh, yes, that was our first car. We drove that for quite a number of years, until I froze it up one night. I guess I even had it fixed after that.

MC: Sure did.

JC: Yes, we’ve had several cars since. We’re driving a Subaru right now, 155,000 miles, 156,000 miles on it and it’s eight years old.

MC: The brakes weren’t always very good on the Model A.

JC: Oh, God, oh, tell that story.

MC: Going to a wedding, coming down this way to a wedding, we came to a light that turned red. We sailed right into the center of the [intersection]. Everybody’s sitting there laughing at us. [laughter]

JC: That’s right, yes, mechanical brakes.

KP: At first, you did not know that you were going to college. What did you do immediately after graduating from high school in June of 1941?

JC: Well, I’m a little fuzzy about dates, but I got a job in the city. First, I worked for--hey, wait a minute, I do have dates. Can I look?

KP: Please do.

JC: I do have dates, if I can find the right package, because I had to make out some kind of report when I got out of the Navy, had to make out some kind of report about my work record, and I think I have dates on that. [Mr. Conover checks his records.] Yes, okay, I worked at Otis Elevator Company from October 1941 until September ’42, when I went to Union. I think during the Summer of 1941, I worked at Southwestern Publishing Company in the shipping room, packing books. I think that’s right, and my summers in high school before that I spent caddying at Montclair Golf Club. So, that brings me up to going to Union.

KP: What did you do for Otis?
JC: I worked in a mail room. Actually, it was a fun job. I worked in a mail room, but part of my job was traveling all over the city on a subway, going to the [US] Customs House, down at the Battery, going to ships along the piers with international shipping information, because, I remember, there were divisions of Otis in South America and various places around the world. I remember going to the various piers. I remember going to United Fruit. How we doing on time?

KP: We are fine.

JC: Okay. [laughter] I remember going to United Fruit and Grace Line and a lot of those places and, traveling the subways, I used to like to stand at the front of the car and watch the tunnel rushing at me or, in the last car, watching the tunnel rush away from me. It was a fun time. It was a fun age and I had a good time. I had no fear of the city. I wouldn't do it now, I'll tell you, but I can still remember the sights, sounds and smells of Houston Street. You could smell the spices and the coffee when you would get near the docks, and Fulton Fish Market and all that kind of stuff. Yes, I enjoyed that.

KP: Did you ever think you would end up working in the city? Did you like it but not want to stay?

JC: I liked that work, but I didn't like my father's life. I didn't like the commuting, although I always enjoyed riding across on the Lackawanna Ferry. That was always a peaceful time, sitting on the ferry, crossing the river, because the Lackawanna Terminal is in Hoboken, but I never had any desire to follow in my father's footsteps, either in the commuting game or the sales game or any such thing as that.

KP: You went to Union College partly because your father said there was scholarship money available.

JC: He apparently is the one who found it, through I don't know what contact. I couldn't tell you, because, as far as I know, he didn't know Union College existed and the college people at Montclair High School, I'm sure, made suggestions, and so on, but I always put it out of my mind, thinking that my father didn't have enough money and I didn't--you know, there wasn't the push then, fifty years ago, to go to college, the way there is now. Everybody's got to go to college, get that degree. I haven't pushed my children to do that and some of them have and some of them haven't, even though I was in the prep school teaching game for a long time, but I can see what it does to families. Mama and Papa want you to go to this college, they want you to take this sort of course and it isn't you, and it's tough to fight that.

KP: Where were you when the attack on Pearl Harbor took place? Do you remember?

JC: December 1941, well, I must have--yes, I was working at Otis Elevator Company. I remember the hoopla. My response--okay, I have some regrets now, okay. Can I talk about that?

KP: Yes, please.
JC: Probably is going to be half the story, isn't it? [laughter] My response was to stay in the city late and take courses in nautical astronomy and celestial navigation at the Hayden Planetarium, something which has stood me in good stead, not only in the Navy, but ever since. When I moved to St. Johnsbury in Vermont, I lectured at their planetarium up there for ten years. That was my response. I wish my response had been to, say, go join up. I don't know why I didn't and I don't know why I wish so hard that that had been the case--well, I do know some reasons. First, I don't think I was really a very good officer. I wasn't cut out to be officer material, I don't think, although my father insisted I was, my next-door neighbor, whom I respected, told me I was, my teachers told me I was. That was the right thing to do, according to them, but I never was comfortable at it. We spent a whole lot of time in Pre-Midshipmen's School, we spent three or four months in Midshipmen's School, we were commissioned, but we were still awfully wet- behind-the-ears when we got out in the Pacific Theater. I just never felt comfortable in it and I think if I had joined up, enlisted, and learned some kind of special skill, a trade, whatever you want to call it, I would have been happier. I admired the fleetmen I ran across. I liked the work they did.

KP: You really had a lot of respect for the petty officers that had been in the service for twenty years.

JC: Yes, oh, yes. Oh, there's a wonderful old boatswain, he was a warrant officer, Boatswain (Clem Denning?), whom I met at the Navy base in Iwo Jima, where I was stationed after the war was over and we were waiting, racking up points to get out. I was stationed there and, oh, what he didn't know about boats and ships and stuff; it was wonderful. I enjoyed him. Prejudiced, you better believe it--every Navy person that he ran into, or enlisted man he ran into, who had a remotely French or French Canadian name was called Frenchy and that kind of stuff, which is innocent prejudice, I feel. I didn't--talk about prejudice, my father was one of the most prejudiced men I ever knew--but, yes, I had a tremendous respect for them. I remember a signalman who came into our officers' training program and he was, oh, spit-and-polish and just right. He knew what to do and he did it well and I admired that. We got--I shouldn't say we got half-baked training, we didn't--but they were in a hurry to get officers turned out and the schools were jammed up and they did what they could. If I'd been able to go to Annapolis, I think I would have a whole different feeling about that.

KP: Did you try to apply to Annapolis?

JC: I did. My dad took me to see Congressman Kean, who was Congressman for whatever district in North Jersey, and I remember with disgust that he ate cigars instead of smoking them. He'd chew half this huge cigar, he'd chew it halfway down, then, he'd take a big pair of scissors and he'd cut it off. [laughter] Anyway, he was a politician and my dad--I remember meeting him, but I was tongue-tied. I was bashful. I think I could have gotten an appointment, if I had done better in the exams, and I don't know why I didn't do well on the exams. I did really well in high school and I was a good scholar and stuff, but, for some reason or another, I messed up on it. [Editor's Note: Republican Robert Winthrop Kean represented New Jersey's Twelfth District in the US House of Representatives from 1938 to 1958.]

TL: You probably wanted it too badly.
JC: Oh, I might have. That's certainly possible.

KP: You went to Union. Did you go as a civilian or for the Navy training program?

JC: Navy training program wasn't there when I first went.

KP: You went there in September of 1942.

JC: I came there in September of '42. The Navy program moved in, I think, at the end of '42, because I remember the date, I think, as the 13th of December in 1942. I went downtown [in] Schenectady and I enlisted as an apprentice seaman, but in the Navy V-12 Program at Union. I remember all the fun the fleetmen [had] who came to do the work at the officers' training at the V-12 Program, "Apprentice Seaman, AS, Admiral Striker." We were the "hot shots." We were going to be admirals before we got done. [laugher]

TL: Did you feel your training was good? You said you were wet-behind-the-ears, but did you feel that you had enough knowledge to be able to do your part?

JC: Well, I was on the way to gaining the knowledge. I spent most of the time in one school or another. Even after I was commissioned an ensign in January of '45, and you realize how near the war was to being over then, although I don't think we realized it, I was sent out to pick up the Texas [(BB-35)], battleship, because I was assigned to naval gunfire and liaison training. Texas was a shore bombardment ship, softening up for a week before D-day at the various places. So, I was assigned aboard her for three or four months, and then, I came back and, in June of '45, I went to Coronado Beach in California, where the gunfire liaison school was. I was doing that and we were just ready to get out of there in August of '45, okay. Harry [Truman] dropped the bomb and what we had been scared to death about, island stepping and the invasion of Japan, the main islands, that's what we were getting ready for, didn't happen. [Editor's Note: Hiroshima was the target of the first atomic raid on August 6, 1945. Nagasaki was attacked on August 9, 1945. V-J Day was declared on August 14, 1945, in the United States and August 15, 1945, in the Pacific.]

TL: Thank God.

JC: Well, thank God, yes, but I've got to say we were disappointed.

KP: Why, because you had done all this training?

JC: Yes, and we never had a chance, really, to prove ourselves as warriors--I guess the macho thing, I don't know.

TL: Was that the consensus when you found out the bomb was dropped and the war was over, disappointment among everyone?
JC: I wouldn't say everyone, probably not, but I think those of us who had come in at the time I did and gone through the sort of regime I had, yes, I think so. In our class of people at Coronado, I think so, yes, because we hadn't seen enough sea duty or active duty, overseas duty, to earn points to get out. So, what did I do after that? I went to Navy [Base] 3150 at Iwo Jima and there was nothing to do--well, I shouldn't say nothing, but, mostly, it was sinking, getting rid of the stuff, all the material of war that was out there. I remember one man at the base who was killed. He was a demolitions expert and they were getting rid of a boatload of Japanese hand grenades or something and one went off and killed him. I remember that. It had to be done, was work that had to be done, but we didn't feel it was the work we wanted to do or were trained to do.

KP: Going back to Union College, what did you study? What courses did you want to take?

JC: I was a chemistry major, because I had done so well in high school science. It was rigorous. Freshman courses were tough. I had a tough time with math, believe it or not, although, for the past forty years of my life, I've been a math teacher, but I had a tough time with freshman calculus. I think, if I can jump around a little bit, I think that was one reason I turned out to be such a good math teacher, because I'd had to struggle with it myself and I could see what was bugging the kids and I could …

KP: You knew the ways you could run into problems and solve them.

JC: Yes, and I remember--now, this is interesting, because I was a science major, I was gung ho-—my favorite courses, however, were English courses. I took a course, freshman English, with a man named Dan (Weeks?), whom I admired and respected, and the sophomore course that he was teaching--guys do this, they follow their professors through school--it was, I don't know, a survey of British literature or something and I loved it. The Chaucer I learned then, well, just a year ago, I wrote a paper about Chaucer and presented it to a club I belong to in St. Johnsbury, that kind of stuff, but I liked the chemistry courses, too. They got tough, but I enjoyed them.

KP: Many people I have interviewed who started school in 1941 or 1942 recall a lot of uncertainty, that there was always the cloud of the draft, what was going to happen, if you would even be able to finish the semester, much less get a BA. Do you remember any of that at Union?

JC: Well, yes, I'm sure there was, and I have an idea that's why I went and joined the V-12 Program, was to, I don't want to say guarantee that I could continue my college, but I knew I could continue doing academics. I've always been sort of a lifelong student and it's the kind of life I like and, yes, I think that's one reason I joined up, was to continue that, with courses that I would have been interested in doing had I gone to Annapolis, too, though. We had navigation and naval history and all those things that were interesting to me.

KP: At Union, how much of the student body became V-12 and how much remained civilian? Do you have any sense of that? Did the V-12 just take over the school in a sense?

JC: They did pretty much, although not entirely. We had civilians in our classes, too. They did, they took over. For example, they took over fraternity houses for Navy dorms. I lived in the Psi
U house and they used to chuckle when we had to get up at six o'clock in the morning and do calisthenics in the cold and stuff like that, but it was quite a thrill, too, because we would put on a parade every Saturday or Sunday—I can't remember, Saturday, I guess—drill and a band playing and the townspeople would come and watch and that gave me a thrill.

KP: You experienced Union as a civilian and in the V-12, and then, you would later come to Rutgers. How would you compare your experiences at the two schools, taking into account the war?

JC: Yes. Well, Union is a tiny place, very small, self-contained campus, big, iron fence holding out Schenectady, although I didn't live on campus until the Navy came in. As a freshman, I lived in a dentist's house. A dentist rented out rooms to college students. I had to work for that. I had to—I guess it wasn't a rental, I guess I worked for him—had to tend to his children or something. I can't remember now too much about it, but Union was small. It felt, in some ways, I think, elite, had a proud history, 1796—well, Rutgers is 1766—but Dixon Ryan Fox was the President.

---------------------------END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE---------------------------

KP: Continue.

JC: Dixon Ryan Fox was the President. [Editor's Note: Dr. Dixon Ryan Fox served as President of Union College from 1934 until his death in 1945.] He was a big, imposing man, but he loved Union College and I can recall his talks, "You are well-come," "well-come," not, "welcome," "well-come to Union College," and he made us believe in the place and, if it hadn't been wartime and if I hadn't been transferred somewhere else, I probably would have stayed there. I didn't think about going back because, after the war, as I said, I gained this interest in going to Aggie School and they had nothing like that, of course. Well, when I came here, this place was huge. Well, it's "huger" now than it was then—Downtown Campus, Aggie Campus, NJC [New Jersey College for Women] Campus, what they now call Douglass, I guess. My sister went to NJC, my younger sister, who is no longer alive. It was big, impersonal, and that's why I felt the sense of community when all us married veterans got together and lived together and had this little community life at the trailer camp. I couldn't even find my way to where it is, though. I don't know where we lived. [laughter]

MC: I don't either.

KP: Busch Campus has changed. Maybe you and Marjorie could drive over the river and see. There are a few old barracks there and the golf course; that is probably all you will recognize.

TL: Good old Busch. [laughter] At Rutgers, you said it was huge. Did you have a problem with transportation or feeling that you were not thought of as an individual here?

JC: I don't think that feeling pervaded the individual schools or the individual campuses. I think if you were in the Downtown Campus, I'm sure you had a feeling of community, probably lived in one of the buildings or in a rented room out in the town, the city, and Old Queens was your center or whatever. Out there, four of us lived together in a short-course building. Pretty much
everything was in walking distance, although some of the guys owned cars. You'd walk out to
the dairy barns or whatever. No, I just sensed the whole notion—that was the time when Rutgers
was becoming the State University of New Jersey. I don't think it had been called that before,
approximately at that time, and that gave it a feeling of hugeness and they were talking about the
Newark Campus and beginning to reach out in those ways. No, I don't feel that, within the
Aggie School, things were impersonal. I think that Rutgers as a huge University somehow felt
impersonal to me. Does that get at what you were [asking]?

TL: Exactly.

JC: Yes.

KP: Your V-12 Program—you mentioned the marching and curriculum—was patterned after
Annapolis, but in a shortened length.

JC: Yes, right.

KP: How many did not make it in the V-12? What kind of success and failure rate did you
have? Did you notice classmates dropping out or did pretty much everyone in the group make
it?

JC: I think most of us [did]. Some dropped out, I think, because they were anxious to get on
with the war. Some dropped out and went out and enlisted—they were enlisted, but they went
out then to fleet duty as enlisted men or to some other school or something like that. Some did
that through choice, some did that because they couldn't hack the academics, I'm sure, but I don't
think there were very many, because, after all, most of us were college men already, so-to-speak.

It wasn't as if we came fresh out of high school and tried to do this thing. So, I think the success
rate or completion rate was pretty high, although I have an idea that, when we left there, the
midshipmen's schools were jammed up and we spent—I wish I knew these dates, I don't, because
my records don't show it. My records show only active duty dates, but we went to, I spent some
time at, the old Army base at Plattsburgh, which has since become an airbase and is now being
phased out. Can I tell a story here?

KP: Please do.

JC: I remember that place, an old Army barracks that I stayed. Can I be indelicate?

TL: Go ahead, do not even worry about a thing.

JC: I remember the wonderful food there, to tell you the truth, but, every Sunday night, it was
"horse cock and beans," pardon the expression, sliced meat, deli meat, bologna, salami, stuff like
that, which was extremely good. We ate well there, but I particularly remember the head, the
bathroom. Okay, I walk in this room, twenty toilets all in a row, no divisions, nothing like that.
Well, I'd been a sheltered boy in Essex Fells, New Jersey, [laughter] and so, that wasn't easy, but
anyhow, and then, I remember a scene from No Time for Sergeants, a musical show later, which
was made into a movie, where the guy is waiting for an inspection on an Army base and the
General's coming in. When the General comes in and he salutes, he presses a foot lever and all the toilet seats stand up like this and salute the General. I thought of that, this earlier experience later, when I saw that, and, when I went to teach at the Mountain School, which was the last place I taught, Mardee and I lived in a dorm and we had nine girls living upstairs. Okay, so, the bathroom upstairs had two toilets in it, no stall, john, no privacy between the toilets. So, I told them this story about Plattsburgh, and then, the follow-up with No Time for Sergeants. So, I was called Sarge my first couple of years at the Mountain School because of that, but they managed to find in the dump a curtain or something, which they put up between the toilets, oh, my. Okay, so, Plattsburgh, I was there for three or four months, waiting for an opening in Midshipmen's School. It was called Pre-Midshipmen's School. What'd they do? They kept us busy with more navigation courses, more drill, and then, I went to Atlantic City. There was one in Atlantic City. We stayed in a big hotel as a Pre-Midshipmen's School down there and I remember that experience. There was a hurricane while we were there and we little boys were called out to do patrol duty on the beach and keep people where they were supposed to be, while the hurricane was howling and the damage afterwards. I remember that. I may have been to Pre-Midshipmen's School one other place, can't remember if I was.

KP: You knew at the time that you were basically being kept busy.

JC: Oh, we knew that, oh, sure, we knew that, yes.

TL: Did that cause a lot of resentment?

JC: Well, we were itchy and, actually, I think I started to tell you this, because I have an idea that some people dropped out at that stage. See, we were still apprentice seamen. We hadn't made midshipmen yet. We were still apprentice seamen and I have an idea that people dropped out in frustration and went off to join the fleet as enlisted men. I'm sure of that; I couldn't name any right now, but I'm pretty sure.

TL: Did that ever cross your mind?

JC: I guess it did, but I also thought that I was in the game and my father wanted me to become an ensign.

TL: And your neighbor.

JC: And my neighbor, yes, but I was in the game. I guess I was frustrated about not seeing any active duty.

KP: You finally did get into Midshipmen's School in Chicago, at the Great Lakes facility.

JC: No, it wasn't at Great Lakes, excuse me, it was Northwestern, Downtown Chicago. What they did, Northwestern in Evanston, [Illinois], had a Midshipmen's School and they opened a branch of it. See, I say they were crowded and they were looking for facilities and people to train, teachers to train, all us "ninety-day wonders." They took over what was called the Illinois Women's Athletic Club on Michigan Avenue in Downtown Chicago. That was a wonderful
building. It was eight floors high. There was a swimming pool on the eighth floor, which we used for an athletic facility. We had classes there and they rented classroom space elsewhere, within marching distance--I was going to say walking distance, within marching distance [laughter]--but I was there, yes, from October '44 to January of '45, yes, finally made it to Midshipmen's School. I finally made it to commission.

KP: January of 1945.

TL: When you received your commission, how did you feel about that?

JC: It's an interesting thing. I had a girlfriend in Chicago. In fact, I was engaged to her one time. I told her, I remember, that I was more excited somehow at having attained midshipman status than I was to finally get my commission. Now, I don't know why that is, unless it was because of this long-standing Annapolis dream, which sort of was an end in itself, not looking beyond Annapolis. Well, it's an interesting thing. That girl also was--her father was a farmer in Illinois, he raised onions outside in South Holland, outside the city. That's all suburbs now.

KP: How did you meet?

JC: Well, she was a student nurse at St. Luke's Hospital. What'd I do? I went to a USO, that sort of stuff. Well, my wife was also in nurse's training and she had lived on a farm. I don't know, maybe I was seeing too much of one in the other, I don't know, [laughter] but we've had a forty-seven-year very good marriage, so, there couldn't have been too much in that. I remember some things that happened at Midshipmen's School. I remember, one time, I was officer of the deck and, here, I got a feeling about whether I should've been an officer or not. They tried to put us in stressful officer-type situations and I remember, one time, I was OOD and it was my job to shuffle the watch around and make sure they had--I dogged the watch, a few people at a time, for chow and stuff like that. I remember failing to relieve a man for chow and when it came up--at the end of a watch, you had your self-evaluation that you gave to the officer in charge--I remember giving myself a mark of 2.5, which is barely passing, out of a 4.0, which is perfect. At Annapolis, there's an idol or a statue or something [a statue of Tecumseh], it's called, "The God of 2.5," which is a just passing grade. Anyway, he asked me why I had marked myself down so terribly and that it wasn't the right thing to do, because I hadn't done that badly, but I told him, "Well, I failed to relieve this man for chow and I didn't really stay on top of things the way I should have." I didn't panic, but I was not good in a stressful situation and I have an idea that that maybe affected me some later, when I felt that I wasn't really quite the officer I should have been, although my duties after Harry dropped the bomb, out at Navy 3150 or in Iwo Jima, were not onerous in any way, didn't have much to do.

KP: How rigorous was Midshipmen's School?

JC: Quite, quite. They were strict about drilling. Oh, God, I remember, my company, we were pretty good at drill. We had a martinet for a company officer, but I remember one drill competition we had, in wherever we drilled; I can't even remember now. It was some courtyard, big, cement-paved courtyard in the middle of the city somewhere. We were having a drill and the student officer who was in charge of the company gave a wrong command. Well, the first,
what you're supposed to do, if you know it's a wrong command, is holler out the word, "Command," so that he's aware that he's done something dumb. Well, none of us did. We all were chicken, like me. So, what do we do? Well, half the company interpreted the command one way and half the company interpreted it another. So, of course, we screwed up and we lost the competition, and we got our asses chewed out over that by this martinet of a company officer, "All you had to do was say, 'Command!'" blah, blah, blah. He says to us, "There's two kinds of men in the Navy--there's those guys who have their head up their ass and those guys who have their head up their ass deeper! Don't be a deeper." [laughter] Do your other interviewees talk like this?

KP: Yes.

JC: Okay. Oh, yes, well, those were the fun days, oh, my word. [laughter]

KP: You had had a lot of nautical training in the V-12. What did you learn in Midshipmen's School that you had not learned at the V-12, besides an extra layer of discipline, it sounds like?

JC: Yes, but we had some experiences. Now, you mentioned Great Lakes--part of our training was to go out there, fire antiaircraft weapons, go out there, learn to fire a rifle, small arms. We were issued--when we became ensigns--we were issued a forty-five, which they used to tell us was useless. "You'd have to get so close to them, you might as well throw it at them as shoot them with it." I remembered the antiaircraft fire and we went out on Lake Michigan in "yippee boats," YP [Yard Patrol] patrol boats, and we had whale boat training. We rowed on Lake Michigan and I remember, with embarrassment, this--it was an officer who was teaching us how to maneuver a ship by imagining that our rowboat was a ship. There were eight of us rowing it, I think, or six anyway, three on each side, four on each side--a whale boat's a big, beamy thing--and my first experience when I was supposed to be commanding this thing, pulling up alongside the dock, I had them weigh all and back down twenty yards from the dock, and so, we never got there. Well, okay, next time, I was going to be better, but it turned out I did exactly the same thing, and the officer said, "Didn't you just do this the other day?" and chewed me out for that, and I remember those things. So, I don't know, if I ever had command of a ship, whether I could ever have docked it or not, [laughter] but that was fun. It was fun and it was an extra layer of sort of hands-on experience that we hadn't been able to have at other places. So, it was a good facility, good location, to do those things.

KP: You were actually training on ships.

JC: Well, on the YP boats, yes, well, which is a small ship.

KP: Yes, real nautical training.

JC: Yes, yes.

TL: Were you ever able to dock the whale boat?
JC: He didn't give me a chance after that, that I remember, [laughter] either that or--I don't think that he gave me a chance to be in command of that boat again. I think that's what happened.

KP: What type of ship did you hope to be placed on after midshipmen's training?

JC: That's all in my records. When I was commissioned, well, as you get near the end of Midshipmen's School, they ask you, "What's your preference?" and I wanted to be, romantic as hell, minesweeper in the North Atlantic or a destroyer or something like that. Well, of course, everybody did, and so, I didn't get it, but I put down as my second or third choice this, which was interesting, gunfire liaison school, because I knew I would be right in the thick of it. I knew I would be--actually, those people were landed before the first troops, to direct shore bombardment from the ships off the coast, off the shore. That was good, interesting training. We had amphibious training out there at Coronado.

KP: If there had been an invasion of Japan, you were trained to be one of the first on the beach.

JC: That's right, exactly right. See, that's why I was disappointed--I'd probably be dead now.

KP: Did you realize how risky this was?

JC: Yes, I was twenty-something years old, I didn't care. It wasn't "devil may care," I don't think, and I may be hurting Mardee's feelings, because she lost a brother in the war. I don't know, I didn't know you then, but maybe I wanted to be like him. He was a paratrooper, so, he too wanted to be in the thick of it.

KP: Paratrooper in which theater?

MC: He was over in the Battle of the Bulge.

TL: Did he enlist?

MC: Yes, he did, yes, much to my parents' disappointment.

TL: You too? I am sure.

MC: I think I was too young to really realize what it all entailed at that point.

TL: How old were you?

MC: I don't remember.

TL: You were very young.

MC: Not that young, but, yes, I was still early [in] high school.

JC: Well, he, too, was the only boy in a family of, what?
MC: Four girls.

JC: Four girls. So, that was pretty tough on them, on the folks.

KP: You got to see a good part of the country in your Navy training.

JC: I did, that's true.

KP: You went up to Chicago, and then, you were sent out to California. What did you think of the country that you got to see?

JC: I enjoyed seeing it, I enjoyed it all.

KP: Had you traveled much before?

JC: No, no, hardly outside of Metropolitan New Jersey and New York, but, when I went to San Francisco to await transportation, I took a train from Chicago, cross-country. That was a wonderful ride. It was sit up all the way in a day coach, of course, but it wasn't a troop train, it had passengers on the train, and I remember talking with a fascinating young woman. Mind you, I was engaged at this time--there was no hanky-panky--we struck up a conversation and it was very good companionship this whole way. I don't remember where she was going or why, but, anyway, she was on this cross-country train trip, but I realized later, from what she had told me, that she was working in Oak Ridge, [Tennessee], on the Manhattan Project. That was the work she was doing.

KP: How did you later figure that out?

JC: Just some hints. Of course, I didn't even know about the Manhattan Project then.

KP: In retrospect …

JC: In retrospect, yes, I do.

KP: What did she say that she was doing?

JC: Honestly, I can't even remember the conversation, but I knew, after that, that's exactly what she had been doing. I don't think she was an atomic physicist or any such thing as that. She was someone who worked in a plant, but I'm damn sure that's the work she was doing, but I enjoyed that. When I got to, I don't know, Salt Lake City or somewhere, where the Rockies rise, whoa, I had never seen anything like it, just wonderful. San Francisco, I loved San Francisco. I spent quite a bit of time there in a BOQ [bachelor officer's quarters], just waiting for transportation to wherever I was supposed to be, to Hawaii, probably. We finally did get off. I remember my first sea voyage on, what was it? well, it was a troopship, I guess, or, no, it was a Navy ship. We were all onboard being transported out to the Pacific and it was a nice life, first time I'd seen the
Pacific Ocean. It was really nice. Hawaii was wonderful. I wouldn't want to go back to Hawaii now, I don't think, but Hawaii was wonderful.

KP: After you got to Hawaii, how long until you were assigned to a vessel?

JC: Probably, I can find that in there, but couldn't have been too long because I met the Texas at Ulithi on March 10th or 12th in 1945. Now, see, I was commissioned in January, I had seven days leave before I had to get on the train to go to this assignment, so, I've got crossing the Pacific Ocean in a ship and I've got crossing the country in a train, and so, we had a fair amount of time. I remember feeling fortunate that one of my high school friends was in the Army, stationed in Hawaii. So, he and I got together when we could. We used to climb the Pali Pass and eat pineapples and talk about life.

TL: What was it like on leave, when you had your leave over there?

JC: When I had my leave over there?

TL: In Hawaii.

JC: In Hawaii?

TL: Yes.

JC: Well, actually, I wasn't on leave, I was living in a BOQ awaiting orders, but all I had to do was check in to the CINCPAC [Commander-in-Chief Pacific] office once a day or something to find out if my orders had come. Oh, it was idyllic, really. I remember riding the little red bus that went down to Kaneohe Air Force Base [Naval Air Station Kaneohe Bay]. We used to go over there, down the side of this mountain at sixty miles an hour, little tiny bus, "Whoo." [laughter] It was a lot of fun, but I had buddies there who were going the same place I was. Yes, that was fun, I liked it. My son, who joined the Navy after he got out of high school, 1970, was stationed in Hawaii. He was on a nuclear submarine, but he spent three months on the boat, and then, three months on the shore in Hawaii. Of course, it had changed some by the time he got there. He liked it and he and I compared notes when he got back.

KP: Were you glad your son joined the Navy?

JC: Yes, I was. It seemed the right thing for him to do and I felt good that he was, in some sense, following my footsteps, although it wasn't wartime--it was Cold War time, but not hot war time.

KP: A battleship is a big ship.

JC: Well, the Texas isn't as big as a modern battleship.

KP: Yes, but compared to, say, a destroyer.
JC: Oh, yes.

KP: What were your responsibilities on the Texas?

JC: I was under instruction. My battle station was main battery plot. I did whatever the gunnery officer told me to do, but my purpose was to see the shipboard end of what I was seeing on the shore end, so that when I called in fire, I knew what was happening. We'd go up in spot one, which was a crow's-nest type deal for spotting where the gunfire went. I remember being up there and having to call down and tell them to swing ship, because the smokestacks were blowing the fumes right in our face up there, but battle station was main battery plot, where they had a rudimentary computer, used to call it a "coffee grinder," made the worst squeaks and rattles and whistles and bumps, but I guess it ground out the right information, because [it worked], and they were only twelve-inch guns, rather than sixteen-inch guns. A modern battleship has sixteen-inch guns, but these were twelve-inch guns, and I spent some training time in a turret, some training time with the antiaircraft defenses, and then, there is, I suppose, the closest I came to any real danger, was during the Okinawa invasion. D-Day was April 1st, April 1st, Easter Sunday, 1945. I guess six AM was H-Hour, whatever, and we had been offshore there. See, I picked up the Texas in, what'd I say? 12th of March, or something like that, in Ulithi and we sailed almost immediately for Okinawa and we went up and down the long stretch of the southern end of the island, firing at whatever we could see that we thought was dangerous. Up in spot one, I remember--well, now, I can't remember his name--one of the officers in charge of spot one asked me to take the binoculars one day and he said, "Does that look like a gun emplacement over there?" Well, I saw what he was looking at; it could have been a gun emplacement, it could have been a tree that had fallen down or it could have been almost anything, but, so, we fired a few rounds at that. One day, I was on my way, I guess from my bunk or the ward room or somewhere, to a turret. That was where I was going to be assigned for the day. All of a sudden, there's this kamikaze coming in, right at the water level, firing his guns, firing his guns, and we were shooting antiaircraft guns at him, forty-millimeter, and they were so--maybe even some five-inch or three-inch, I don't know--and they were so depressed, he was coming in so low, we began to think he was going to hit us, because, well, they hadn't hit him. He was still firing, coming in, or he was going to drop a torpedo or whatever, or just crash his plane into it and blow everything up. There I was, standing out in the middle of the deck, watching this, "Oh, boy, isn't this great?" without realizing that, "You damn fool, you could have got your fanny shot off," or blown up or whatever, but, well, that was one of the more exciting moments of my life.

TL: How did they take care of the kamikaze?

JC: They finally shot him down, only fifty yards from the ship. He hit the water and I remember, then, they put out a boat to bring in the pilot and we all goggle-eyed from up on the wherever we were, up in the gun tubs or someplace.

KP: The pilot survived.

JC: Yes. Looking at this Japanese prisoner, it's the first one we'd seen up close, of course.
KP: You had not really seen any Japanese at all before.

JC: No.

KP: What did you think of the image you had of him versus this water-logged pilot now being pulled out?

JC: Well, I don't know that I thought of him at that moment as particularly a human being or a vulnerable human being or one for whom I should have compassion or any such thing; I don't recall those feelings. I think I would have those feelings now, but we were in it to do what we had to do and a "Jap" was a bad word and I guess that's how it was.

KP: What happened to the prisoner?

JC: Honestly, I don't know. I suppose what they did was to--well, they must have had a brig. We had a few Marines onboard the Texas battleship. In fact, I guess we had a rear admiral onboard or some such thing. I stayed away. I remember being embarrassed--look, the Texas had a complement of something like thirteen hundred men, of which 110 were officers, of which forty were ensigns. I was the newest ensign on the ship--I was nobody.

KP: You were the "junior-est of all officers."

JC: I was, and my bunk was way up in the bow, third one high in a rack of bunks and stuff like that. You think of an officer's life, but it wasn't at that time, but I remember stumbling onto the quarter deck one day and not knowing my way around or the protocol or anything, even though they filled us full of all this stuff in Midshipmen's School. Somebody says, "Attention on deck." I hardly understood what he was saying and I kept on talking to the guy I was talking to and I suddenly realized I was doing wrong, because there was the Admiral. Anyway, I didn't get chewed out for it, but I looked around more circumspectly thereafter. [laughter]

KP: It sounds like you had very cramped living aboard the Texas, as the "junior-est of all officers."

JC: Oh, we did.

KP: How many were in your compartment?

JC: Well, I don't remember how many were in that particular bunking area, but there must have been ten or a dozen of us all.

KP: You were all junior officers.

JC: Yes, yes, and I remember being at general quarters, being at battle stations a whole lot, of course, when there was activity going on, and we used to sleep on the deck in the main battery plot, then, throw a sleeping bag or a rug or something on the deck and sleep there. I remember that, but there were good times on there, too. I remember one fellow had a concertina, used to
play that. I can still hear the strains of *Charmaine* while he played that, but it was good camaraderie. Even though I was "junior-est of juniors," I was accepted and eating in the ward room and I felt like somebody.

TL: Were there any initiation rites that you had to go through, unwillingly? [laughter]

JC: No, there weren't. I think everybody was too busy.

KP: Did you have a ceremony upon crossing the Equator?

JC: No, we didn't and I think I was disappointed, but, when I got aboard, immediately, she was going off to begin the bombardment of Okinawa, soften them up for D-Day. So, I don't think there's any time for that kind of foolishness, even though we had a good time.

KP: What kind of contact did you have with the crew?

JC: Well, here's an interesting thing, because this was a foreshadowing, which I, of course, didn't know. I remember being onboard the *Texas*, I remember--I couldn't tell you his rating now, but it's a machinist's mate or some such thing as that, who was taking correspondence courses or studying up for his next level in his rating--and I remember him asking me for help doing algebra. Now, there's a foreshadowing if ever there was one, because I became a high school teacher, math teacher, after many years later, but I remember that. I got along real well with him. When I was stationed at Iwo Jima, at the Navy base there, I used to seek out the enlisted men who had skills that I admired and wanted to acquire myself. I remember, well, if it was a boatswain's mate or what, I don't remember, but he taught me to splice wire rope and splice hemp rope and that sort of stuff. Those are skills that I've used occasionally around the farm. Mardee and I live on a little farm now, and I say I sought out those guys, not recognizing too much difference between us, even though I had a stripe and he didn't. Well, I didn't make it obvious hobnobbing, because that was frowned upon.

KP: In fact, the Navy often emphasized, I have been told, the difference between officers and enlisted men. There was supposed to be a real chasm.

JC: Oh, yes, that's true, I know that, and I think that's too bad, because I think that unless it became a case of drinking together and getting to be real good buddy-buddy, we had a lot to teach each other and tell each other and respect in each other. It shouldn't have all been dictated by the hierarchy, but that's how it was.

KP: You felt that, especially within a battleship, there was a real hierarchy.

JC: Oh, yes. The Marine detachment onboard was spit-and-polish, oh, mister, razor-sharp creases in their trousers, shiny shoes. Even though we were in a war zone, that stuff went on, because they were a detachment to be there for the Admiral.

KP: Having an admiral aboard ship--was he a fleet admiral?
JC: No, no, he was some little squadron or …

KP: Task force?

JC: Some kind of [smaller unit].

KP: He was not the commander of the vessel.

JC: Oh, no, no.

KP: The Captain, then, the Admiral.

JC: Oh, yes, the Captain of the ship was somebody entirely different. He had his things to do and the Admiral was, by radio, in contact with radar pickets, destroyers and all the stuff that was going on in this group, of which we were the biggest ship.

KP: Having an admiral adds an extra layer of tension.

JC: I'm sure that's true, yes. I know it was true that day I ran into him on the quarter deck. [laughter]

KP: Did you ever have any contact with any of the stewards onboard who served you?

JC: Yes, and that was definitely frowned upon, was any kind of fraternization, camaraderie between the stewards and the officers, but I always treated them pleasantly. I mentioned the fact that my father was a prejudiced man. After Mardee and I were married and I was working on a farm in Brewster, New York, we had colored men working there, African-Americans, colored, Negroes--all the vocabulary's changed over my lifetime--but, one time, we had become friendly with Everett, and so, we invited him home for dinner, to my father's house for dinner. He didn't say a word, but, oh, I knew he was miffed, I tell you. He really was put out, but I got along all right with them and with the stewards, yes, steward's mates.

[TAPE PAUSED]

KP: How much contact did you have with other officers? You mentioned that you reported to a gunnery officer, but it sounds like you had a very precise assignment; except for the people you bunked with and this gunnery officer, you did not have much interaction with other officers.

JC: I guess that's true.

KP: Was there more there that I do not know about?

JC: Well, of course, if I were assigned to learn something about the twelve-inchers in a turret, I would have to work with that turret officer, and the officer in spot one, I worked with him. The one I had the most contact with was, well, he was an Annapolis man, I guess he was probably a full lieutenant by then, maybe only a JG [junior grade]--no, I think he was a full lieutenant--Billy
(Betzer?). I had the most contact with him, but I liked some of the other guys. I talk about Paul (Morigy?), who played the concertina, and (Southworth?). I remember, we had a shore leave one time in Tacloban in the Philippines and some of the guys went ashore, of course, big beer drinking and stuff. They set up a place called--they called it (Southworth’s?) Greasy Spoon, where they had a big barbecue pit and all stuff like that.

KP: Did you go on shore leave in the Philippines?

JC: Yes, yes. I remember, I did a damn fool thing. I was always a pretty fair swimmer and, I remember, we had swimming privileges off the ship. So, I got up on the side of the ship and I dove off and I almost broke my neck. It was so high up, I didn't realize I should have jumped off; I didn't. [laughter]

KP: How long were you in the Philippines? Did you get to see any of the Philippines beyond the shore?

JC: No, no, I didn't. No, we just went ashore a few times, at a place like that, for a few days' R&R or something, but we didn't, no. I didn't spend any time in the Philippines, really, didn't get to Manila or anyplace like that.

KP: Did you meet any Filipinos while you were on shore leave?

JC: Oh, probably saw some in the village, but I don't recall any face-to-face contact.

TL: They pretty much did their own thing, away from what the US was doing on their islands.

JC: Well, that could be the impression I got in that little corner, but I have no idea overall. I couldn't tell you.

KP: You were rotated back to go to NGLO [Naval Gunfire and Liaison Office] School.

JC: Yes.

KP: When did you leave the Texas?

JC: [laughter] Want to know, you really want to know? [Mr. Conover skims through his records.] See, look at that, all those endorsements, don't they look official, and fifty years old? All right, "USS Texas, temporary duty completed;" the date is 24th of May.

--------------------------------END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO---------------------------------------

KP: This continues an interview with Mr. John Conover on May 31, 1995, at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with his wife, Marjorie Conover, also present, interviewed by Kurt Piehler and …

TL: … Tara Liston.
KP: You were sent back from Pearl Harbor almost fifty years to the day, May 29, 1945.

JC: Yes, that's right.

KP: You were to report to Coronado in California in June.

JC: June 10th, I think it was, I don't know. That's in there, too, something like that.

KP: What was your training at Coronado Beach like?

JC: That was, I felt, the most interesting training I'd had, because we'd go out in the field with radios and I don't remember how they did it, but they would fire rounds that would land such-and-such a place. We would have to estimate how far it was from the target and radio back corrections, and we learned to use radios and we also, I guess, had some amphibious training there, probably landing craft of some kind, I don't remember, and we also did it on scale models. Somehow, they must have arranged a scale model so that it looked enough like real terrain, at a distance, so that we could estimate distances in yards on the scale models. When I think back on that, that was--I don't know how they did that--but we also had it actually in the field. Coronado is on a long spear of land or beaches, almost offshore, and so, there's a lot of emptiness on the naval station there and we did that, but I can remember, you'd call them back. The first salvo was short, so, you'd say, "Up fifty," so on, and so on, until you got them centered on it, and then, you'd say, "Fire for effect," or whatever. I don't remember all the things now, but that was the kind of thing we did. I remember having a good time with the radio. It was a fairly large backpack radio that we had to have and we felt we were getting ready for something. It was highly specialized training. It was going to be, well, might be, what would win the war for us at the last or whatever.

KP: Who did the training at the facility?

JC: They were, I would think, mostly, chiefs. They were enlisted men, but they were chief rank, anyway, maybe warrant officers.

KP: Had any of them participated in earlier invasions?

JC: Oh, I'm sure they had. I couldn't tell you which ones.

KP: Did they ever talk about their experiences?

JC: [laughter] If I can get crude again.

TL: Go right ahead.

JC: I remember one old chief, he must have been in the Navy for forty years at that time, and he was talking about Chinese women. He says, "You think it goes crossways? It doesn't, they're all
alike." [laughter] I was a young, impressionable guy, oh, lordy, but, yes, they were experienced in what they did. It wasn't a school in theory, it was a school in practice--it was very good.

KP: Did you think that you could adequately do this in an invasion? How confident were you?

JC: I think I would have been okay. I'm not predicting about survival rate or any such thing as that, but I think I would have known my job and done it well. In fact, since I've lived in the country, did farming stuff, my estimates of distances, acreage and stuff like that, are really pretty good. So, yes, I think I would have been okay at it. [laughter]

KP: You were at Coronado when you heard that the bomb was dropped.

JC: That's right. Yes, I was, what was the date? August 6th, and I think we graduated from that school on August 15th or something.

KP: Literally, you were all ready to go.

JC: We were, we were ready to go, no question about it.

KP: In terms of your training, how long would you have this job in an invasion? Did you get into that kind of detail?

JC: I don't think so. It was all secret, hush-hush, which islands we'd have to creep up. Okinawa was getting pretty close. I'm sure you've got a map somewhere, so, you know these things, but Okinawa was getting pretty close to the Home Islands and Honshu, I guess, is the southernmost. We probably would have been there next; I don't know.

KP: Were you glad you served in the Pacific or would you have rather served in the Atlantic? You mentioned earlier the romanticism of the minesweepers.

JC: Yes, and I still love to read Nicholas Monsarrat's The Cruel Sea and stories like that and I still like to read The Caine Mutiny, Herman Wouk. That is a marvelous book and that's Pacific, of course, but same idea, small ship.

KP: Do you ever wish you had been on a small ship?

JC: Yes, I do, I do. I think the thing I regret about not being in the Atlantic or European Theater was that I have never been to Europe. I would love to go and visit Chartres Cathedral or Coventry or England, places like that, but that's really my regret, not that I--no, I was happy to serve where I served.

KP: You, in fact, stayed in the Naval Reserve.

JC: I did, until 1956? '55 or '56. I was at Kent School [in Kent, Connecticut], teaching, when I finally let it all go.
TL: What rank did you get up to?

JC: I was ensign all the time. I had a chance--in fact, I have it here--I had a chance to make JG. If I had planned to stay in, I could have been appointed a junior grade lieutenant.

KP: Were you concerned at all that you might be called up for the Korean War, staying in the Reserve?

JC: I don't think I was, for some reason. I don't know why it didn't concern me. I finally wrote them a letter and said that I couldn't make drills in New York City. I was living up in Putnam County, I couldn't make drills in New York City, "Let me go."

KP: You had been active in the Reserve. You had gone to drills.

JC: I had, for a little while, and only once or twice, actually, but I took correspondence courses, and then, had asked to be transferred to the Inactive Reserve. Yes, here it is, "I finally;" oh, that's the wrong one. No, sorry, I'm sorry, I'm not so well organized as I thought I was.

TL: Looked good.

JC: Yes, it did, it looked good. Oh, here's all that stuff, here's all that stuff. There's some interesting stuff here--they sort of, maybe I shouldn't use the word propaganda--we got, when we were discharged or when we were discharged from active duty, letters here about employment. Here's a note from the Secretary of the Interior talking about homesteading, that kind of stuff, getting a job and all that, but I finally--oh, here's that card that says I refused JG rank, or, if I didn't accept JG rank by such and such a date, 1953, July 1, 1953, I think it was, that I would never have a chance to [advance]. Yes, I finally wrote to them, 26th of April, 1954, asking to be relieved of everything and I finally got, "Acceptance of resignation from the US Naval Reserve," and this is dated 25th of April, 1955. We were at Kent then and here's an honorable discharge and all that jazz. So, I was in until '55 and, as you say, that was during the Korean Conflict, but, for some reason, I don't recall ever being worried about that.

KP: You were never called up or even warned.

JC: No. I do remember, during that time, the Cold War and all that stuff and dreaming about atom bombs and Russians and stuff like that. No, I don't think I ever was thinking about being recalled back to be in the service. Did I talk about it ever?

MC: I don't think so. I think we realized, at that time, you were married, with a job and children, so that your likelihood would not have been great.

JC: Yes, that's probably the way we looked at it.

KP: After you finished at Coronado, you did not have enough points to be discharged.
JC: There's a thing in here, a one-liner, it says, "Discharge, no--insufficient points," exactly those words. [laughter]

KP: You were unlucky, because, sometimes, people who happened to be in the United States got discharged because it was easy. When did you know that you would be going out to Iwo Jima?

JC: Well, probably very quickly.

TL: What kind of odd jobs did you have to do to rack up those points?

JC: I helped a warrant officer--no, he was a mustang. He had been an enlisted man, a warrant officer, and he finally was commissioned. I helped him. He was in charge of boats. There's no way to get on and off Iwo Jima except by landing craft. A ship had to anchor off shore and small boats come ashore. I learned to drive a bulldozer, pushing those landing craft around and dragging a (jaheemy?). Well, what's a (jaheemy?)? None of your other people have told you. [laughter] (jaheemy's?) a big, big rack with wheels that has chain hoist block-and-tackle. Now, a landing craft would come in and beach itself and this thing would back down over it and they'd hook on to it, lift it up and pull it ashore and it was always pulled by a big Caterpillar D12 [D8?] tractor. I learned to drive those just for fun. Then, I helped out on the Army base on Iwo Jima. They had a hydroponics garden and we grew vegetables for the Navy base and the Army base using hydroponics. That was an interesting point of reference when I came here to Rutgers, because [Dean and Professor Frank G.] "Pop" Helyar--that's a revered name out at the Aggie School--he was getting near retirement at that time, but I spoke to him and I mentioned the hydroponics thing, and a lot of it was developed right here at Rutgers. So, that was a point of contact and he always thought, in his befuddlement and old age, that I had come to take the hydroponics courses here because I had the experience, but I didn't. I came for the dairy husbandry. So, I did that. I guess those were pretty much my duties.

KP: During the break, you mentioned that you attended a service on the anniversary of the flag raising at Mount Suribachi.

JC: Well, actually, it wasn't an anniversary of that. It was Easter Day, sunrise service, on Mount Suribachi in 1946. I don't remember the date of Easter that year, but we regularly climbed Suribachi anyway, but it was impressive to be up there. While we were on Iwo, and this was a year later, there were still one or two live Japanese coming out of the caves, starving, surrendering. There was no armed resistance, no shots fired or anything like that, but there were still a few of them in the caves a year later.

KP: Did you ever see any of them?

JC: I remember seeing one and I remember seeing a lot of mummified corpses, because the atmosphere in the caves was very dry and, when the Marines sealed up the caves, of course, they just died in there and desiccated, dried up their [remains], mummies, lots and lots of them, all in curled up positions, and so on. I remember going through the caves and seeing them there. I have no idea whether by now they've cleared them all out and buried them. I presume they have, but Iwo, once it was conquered, was then set up as a staging area for B-29s to fly to Japan and
that was going on while I was there. They finished the airstrip and B-29s were coming in and going out. Yes, that was--no, wait, I'm sorry, I've got my years wrong, because the airstrip was still there. Well, actually, I wouldn't be surprised if they still had some B-29s there, though, because the war hadn't been over that long and we were occupying Japan. I think I'm right--they weren't raiding Japan at the time, but they were still flying some kind of mission, yes.

KP: Had you thought of making the Navy a career at all?

JC: I did, I did, and, once in a great while, I have regrets that I didn't, because that would have been a natural extension of that desire to go to the Naval Academy when I was a boy, I think. More often, I'm glad I didn't, but I don't know whether--as I said, I'm not sure I was that great an officer anyway. [laughter] I did think of it and I have thought of it since, but my life has developed pretty well. I've been a good teacher, well-received and well-liked by my students and colleagues, over forty years. So, I guess I did something of the right thing.

KP: When did you know that you were leaving Iwo Jima? When did you get the orders?

JC: 22nd of April, 1946.

TL: He does not have to look that one up.

JC: That's in here, too. That was an interesting story there. Can I tell that?

KP: Please do.

JC: Okay. When I finally got home, I don't remember how I came back--yes, I do--came back on a passenger, came back from California to New York, on a passenger ship. It was some famous one, Manhattan? I don't know, I don't remember, that had been converted to a troopship; anyway, a lot of us all coming home. We came home through the Panama Canal. Well, we came into New York and I remember looking at the Statue of Liberty. Everybody ran over to the same side of the ship and the ship teetered over like this, [laughter] everybody looking at the Statue of Liberty. I was finally processed out at 33 Church Street, New York City, and I remember coming up with a bunch of papers that I had to present to all the millions of yeomen and secretaries and chiefs and what-all was going on. One of the key papers, was my orders home, had not been signed by the captain of the Navy base at Iwo Jima, Captain Tyler. He was a stern, old son-of-a-gun. I used to go skeet shooting with him, though, out there and I was pretty good at that. Anyway, the personnel officer at the Navy base had forgotten to have my orders signed properly. Anyway, so, I came up to this old chief who was helping discharges all get through the process. I said, "Oh, my god, Chief, what am I going to do? These orders aren't signed." So, he said, "You know what I'd do?" So, I forged the Captain's name on the orders. I look back on that and I have real bad feelings about it. What I should have done was somehow try to get them, through channels, to be done right, but, anyway, I did this and some other chief, when I got to him, he looked at that signature and he recognized, I think, that it wasn't genuine. He never said anything to me. He passed me through, but, in here, I have some papers that I recognize now I could have referred to for a good forgery, because I do have Captain Tyler's true signature here, on another piece of paper. It's simply a thing saying that I brought home, as a
souvenir, a Japanese shotgun and it was legal for me to carry it when I came home and stuff like that. There's his true signature, but I must have recognized a little bit about it, because I'll show you my forgery. You'd better not put this on the Internet. [laughter] 22nd of April, here we go, here's what I forged. This is the original of my orders and he should have signed them, R. F. Tyler, and here's his true signature on that shotgun release. I remembered a little bit, but I didn't actually copy it or anything. I realized just …

TL: You are lucky they were not good friends.

JC: Well, he wasn't good friends with anybody. [laughter]

TL: Do you still have that gun?

JC: I do.

KP: It sounds like Captain Tyler was a colorful character. What do you remember about him? What kind of contact did you have?

JC: Very little contact with him, outside of the fact that he would ask his exec to find some junior officer to go skeet shooting with him and I was the one for a few weeks. Then, he got tired of me being his shooting companion and he got somebody else. No, I had very little contact with him. We were, all of us, living in BOQs, playing cards. Oh, here, you see that says, "(Epps?), John, Fitz." Okay, on various copies of my orders, on this long list of people, there was Chuck (Fitzgivens?) and (Epps Harris?), on his orders, it's Andrew E. (Harris?), but, anyway, we used to play cards. We had a lot of time to kill. Our duty just wasn't that onerous. We were just sitting there gathering points, like money draws interest in a bank.

KP: During the war, you were engaged to someone else. When did that engagement break off?

JC: [laughter] While I was in Iwo Jima, because I was a very bad letter writer. So, while she was waiting for letters from me, she married somebody else, which is okay.

KP: How did you find out?

JC: How did I hear about it? I suppose she wrote me a letter and told me, I don't know. Either that or I wrote her a letter and her mother told me, I don't remember.

TL: I am more interested in how you two actually met.

MC: We met in church.

TL: In church?

JC: In Essex Fells.
MC: I served him breakfast one time, and then, he called and I guess talked to our priest's wife. She gave me a call and she said, "There's somebody that wants to meet you," and I thought, "Oh, no, not another committee or another group," [laughter] but that's how it started.

JC: When I was on Iwo, though, I had a chance to have a five-day leave in Japan and, of course, Japan was occupied, because it was only six months after the war was over. That was extremely interesting, because, there, I did have a chance to meet honest-to-God people-people and I stayed at a small Japanese inn, near Mount Fuji. It was called Hotel Fujiya in Miyanoshita, Japan, and stayed there a couple of nights. It was in February of 1946. I woke up to beautiful snowfall on the fir trees, spruce trees, evergreen trees, just absolutely gorgeous, and we slept on the floor, on a pile of quilts with quilts over us. I remember one embarrassing thing--the hot baths in Japan and being an American, thinking cleanliness is next to godliness and stuff, I took a cake of soap into the hot bath, to soap up and all that. That wasn't done in Japanese culture. A hot bath was for--you soaped and rinsed off somewhere else, and then, you soaked in a hot bath after. Anyway, outside that little gaffe, I enjoyed meeting the people in this little village.

KP: Japan was really built up into a sinister enemy during the war. What did you think of Japan as a tourist, basically?

JC: I was happy to see regular Japanese people. I had not seen, outside of this kamikaze pilot who was shot down, I had not seen any enemy face-to-face. That's another good reason for being in the Navy instead of the Army, I suppose, although, of course, if I'd followed through on this NGLO stuff, I certainly would have seen them close up, but I was happy to meet them. Of course, it was a time of strained relations and sort of obsequious relations on their part, because we were the occupying power. I went ashore with probably a thousand cigarettes, for barter, for black market, for whatever. I bought some things. I bought a kimono, an obi [sash], a pair of sandals and socks and stuff like that, little souvenirs. I remember being Downtown Tokyo, walking along the Ginza, just appreciating the sights and sounds of a foreign city, which it isn't now. It's probably a Western city, more than a lot of others, but I talked to small townspeople, I talked to some of the farmers who were doing their thing outside the village, and it was kind of nice.

KP: How did you communicate? Did you speak any Japanese?

JC: Most of them--no, I didn't speak any Japanese--most of them had a few words of English. We didn't carry on any great, deep conversations anyway.

KP: Do you ever wish you could go back to Japan?

JC: I have often, often. Did you ever read A Thousand Summers by Garson Kanin? Well, it's a wonderful love story in the first place, but this old guy has a love affair with things Japanese and he wants to go to Japan and he never makes it, but I feel the way he did about that. I read a wonderful book about some inn in Japan, over the course of centuries, the different kinds of people who came there over the course of centuries and how Japan changed, its culture changed. Yes, I've been fascinated with that and I regret the homogenization of the world, I regret Commodore [Matthew] Perry's going there in 1853, or whatever it was, and forcing Japan to
open up and I regret this. I regret the attempts to Christianize the world, too, because I think that's so alien to their cultures. Those people are those people and I love to know about them and it's nice that we can meet face-to-face, but why must I force my American whatever on you? Yes, I'd like to go back there.

KP: When was the last time you were back in Japan?

JC: Oh, just in this five-day leave in February 1946; I haven't been back since. I sometimes thought I'd like to go back to Iwo Jima and I watched with interest the news broadcasts of the fiftieth anniversary, and, well, just recently it must have been.

TL: When you were watching them, did you see any familiar places or was everything redone?

JC: No, I didn't see anything familiar. Well, what was there to see, volcanic ash? That's the only kind of soil there was. That's why we had hydroponics, because you couldn't grow anything there, or just about nothing, rocky, Suribachi, caves, very little grows naturally there and it'd all been blasted off anyway by the battles.

KP: A lot of the people I have interviewed, even those who were not in the service in the Pacific, are very hostile towards Japan.

JC: Still?

KP: Still; what do you make of that? Have you ever reflected on that?

JC: I have. In fact, this group I mentioned to you in St. Johnsbury that I belong to, a man gave a paper, and there have been several books published, too, [on] how what Japan was unable to accomplish in conquering America during the war they've been accomplishing since, economically. I think there's some truth in that, but I think that we've got to stop crying about it, just get on our horse and do something about it ourselves, rather than--try and beat them on their own terms. I don't see, I don't like, this idea that Clinton's going to Japan to force them to back off on their economic policies and stuff. Somehow, we've got to be strong enough to meet that, rather than just let it happen or cry about it or ask for appeasement or whatever. I'm not an economics person, so, I may be all wet, [laughter] but I don't see them as the enemy still.

KP: Given your experience of seeing Japan in 1946, when it was still a devastated country, has it surprised you how well Japan has done economically?

JC: Yes, oh, sure, but, well, we did it, in part, by making conditions right, Marshall Plan, investments and all that stuff, about which I know very little, but I'm sure we helped it to happen. I used to think, or I used to hear my father say, as the war started, "We sold them the Third Avenue El and, now, they're shooting it back at us." There's a parallel there.

KP: You came to Rutgers …

JC: "On the Banks of the [Old Raritan]," yes.
KP: Had you thought of any other schools?

JC: Yes, I had thought maybe of Cornell. I was looking for agriculture, though. My experience on the farm in Vermont …

KP: This was right after you got back from the service.

JC: Yes. So, I was looking for something in agriculture. I knew I didn't want to follow in my dad's footsteps. Cornell, I thought about, but, being a New Jersey citizen, so-to-speak, resident, GI Bill was good, oh. I'm happy I came to Rutgers, did what I did, but I say I thought maybe of Cornell, but no other schools seriously.

KP: You mentioned earlier that Rutgers was a much bigger place than Union, which I have also been told by a lot of alumni. What did you think of this college, which was now full of returning soldiers trying to get on with their lives?

JC: I thought that the veterans probably added a whole lot--a sense of purpose, a desire to be in school and know why they were in school, work hard. I'm sure they set standards for other undergraduates to follow, although, well, we were mixed in the classes, of course, but I don't guess there was too much social interchange, as I've talked about life in the trailer park or in the group of us who lived in the short-course building before I was married. Being on the Aggie Campus anyway is sort of a separating thing anyhow.

KP: Did you have much contact with those who we might call traditional students, who were eighteen, nineteen, twenty, outside of the classroom? It sounds like you were very much a world apart from them.

JC: Yes, we were.

KP: From interviewing people in the Class of 1942, being on this main campus was really where the action was and the Aggie School was very distant then, much more so than I think today.

JC: I have no idea what it's like today, but I think that's probably true, even in 1946, '47, '48, '49. Yes, I think so.

KP: Did you have a car down here at that time?

JC: No. In fact, did I, my first semester, commute from Montclair? I may have, which would have meant change at--no, I'd come out--how the heck did I get here on a train? I don't remember anymore. I'd have to go into …

TL: There is a line right there.

JC: Yes, I know, I remember that.
MC: You'd have to go into Newark.

JC: Have to go into Newark and change trains, probably.

MC: Yes, and get onto the train there.

JC: I guess that's what I did.

MC: Because, when we were first married, I was traveling back and forth to Newark.

JC: I think I did that for a semester; I'm not really sure, but I think I did. Then, I got this berth in the short-course building, with three other guys, and then, after we were married, in 1948, the last year, we spent in the trailer park, yes.

TL: How was living in the trailer park? What was an average day like? A day in the life …

JC: [laughter] A day in the life of …

TL: From your side and from her side.

JC: Well, we'd all have to go to classes or work in the dairy barns or what-have-you. The wives had the life in the trailer park. When we came home at night, it was homework, I guess.

KP: The trailer park was very spartan, at least from reading about it.

TL: What was it like over there? Were the ladies all nice and bonded together to work?

MC: Not completely, no, but I think the thing that stands out mostly is a fashion show that we put on, pregnant. [laughter]

JC: "Mrs. Puffer-Belly" everywhere. [laughter]

MC: Yes. Well, not everybody, and just the fact that I was very thankful that we lived right near where the toilets and the washing machines were. [laughter] Our trailer was right there, but going to sports events and things, I enjoyed very much.

JC: Yes, one of my classmates in the short-course building, before I was married, played on the lacrosse team. We used to go watch lacrosse a lot, and I rowed. I rowed--I never made even third boat on the varsity or anything--but I used to workout with Chuck Logg and the boys and I enjoyed that, but, yes, we used to go to crew races, we used to go to lacrosse games.

KP: What about football? Did you ever watch a football game?

JC: I've never been a football fan. The Scarlet Knights, I couldn't care less; better erase that. [laughter]
MC: But, there was, like, a community building and we would get together and have--usually just the ladies--I think we had a certain night that we got together. I can remember not only the fashion show, but we had a hypnotist and had different things, but, yes, we sort of mom-ed it. [laughter]

KP: Have you stayed in touch with anyone from the trailers?

JC: No, we regret it. They called me up and asked me for information for the big directory and asked me if I wanted to buy one. Well, for eighty-nine bucks or whatever it was, I wasn't about to buy one, because I would only know about ten people in it and only be interested in talking to about three of those, but there are some I wish I had kept in touch with or could get in touch with again.

KP: They actually have the directory at the library, in Special Collections.

JC: I'll have to go over there and write down some addresses.

MC: The only ones would be the Kincaids, which were …

JC: Jim Kincaid, right.

MC: At the trailer park, and I was trying to think, that most of them--well, what's his name, in Florida?

JC: Dick Gladwin? He's in South Carolina now.

MC: South Carolina now, yes, and he wasn't there at first, but I thought they had moved in.

JC: No, no, after he married Annie? I don't think so.

MC: But, he was down there a lot. [laughter]

JC: I think he was still in the short-course building after we were married.

MC: Yes, I think you're right.

JC: And (Clay Decker?), too.

MC: All of them are, yes.

JC: And (Cal Wetstein?), too. Well, I'd love to see some of those guys again or know what became of them.

KP: Did you ever feel isolated at the trailer park from the rest of the University? Were you treated well in the trailer? Did the University do good by you?
JC: As far as I know. I didn't know what to expect. I mean, I don't think I expected anything more than we did or got, or whatever, but we just went about our daily Aggie School business. No, I didn't feel neglected; maybe by the VA for sending me only ninety dollars a month or whatever it was, [laughter] but that was fun, too. Tell them about the potatoes, Mardee.

MC: Well, we'd been on a trip up to Vermont and the people had given us some potatoes. Towards the end of the month or whenever, just before the checks were coming--it seemed like forever--I made potato everything that I could think of and that's what we ate. You just didn't have anything else and my mother-in-law used to--we'd go up to stay with her on weekends and I'd come back with a basket full of groceries that she would get for me.

JC: Yes, she was living in Montclair then. In fact, our first child was born in the same hospital I was, in Mountainside Hospital in Montclair. I think our marriage probably has been stronger because of that, that sense of community and having to get through the month on a meager check and that kind of stuff, and the fact that I stayed with it and finished my degree, all those things.

KP: Had you been tempted at all to drop out?

JC: No, that never was an option, that I can recall.

KP: You stayed with dairy, at least for a time.

JC: I did, until, well, what was the date I was talking in here, 1954, 1955? I was a herdsman on a pure-bred Brown Swiss farm up in Millbrook, New York. That's fancy country in Putnam County, I think, [Dutchess County], and we belonged to a church in Millbrook and I was on the vestry. I was sent one time to visit a stained glass man over in Kent, Connecticut, because we had a design for a window and someone gave the money and we were going to put this stained glass window in the church. So, I went and visited his studio to talk to him. This was in Kent, which is just across the line. They're not too far apart; you cross the border between Connecticut and New York. I had not had a day off at the farm in ten months or a year, something like that, and Mardee didn't particularly like the apartment we lived in, which was up over the barns, and she worried about the place burning down.

MC: No, it was right over the garage.

JC: Right over the place where we worked on the tractors and trucks and stuff, and she had little children, had to go up and down stairs. So, anyway, we were maybe looking for a way out of that, although I had good responsibility, I was using everything I'd learned at Rutgers in the program, and so on. So, I stopped at Kent School. They had a big Holstein farm, supplied milk for three hundred boys and sixty faculty, whatever, to see if they had a farm job, so that I could go learn to do stained glass with this guy. Well, it turned out they didn't have a farm job, but one of their--this was in October, I guess--one of their new teachers had quit after a month and they needed …

----------------------------------END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE----------------------------------
KP: You were offered math and physics and you had had a lot of math.

JC: And I'd had a lot of math and science in my aggie prep and my chemistry prep at Union, and so on. So, would I consider being a teacher? Well, I had never seriously thought about it, but, now, we hark back to this guy on the Texas who wanted me to teach him algebra and my mother mentioned to me that, well, I might make a teacher.

MC: His father wanted it.

JC: I don't remember that.

MC: Oh, yes.

JC: Oh, you knew my father better than I did.

MC: He did not like you in farming.

JC: Well, that I know. That was one of his prejudices.

MC: I know.

KP: Farming was not big with the family.

MC: Oh, no.

JC: Not with Dad. If you got your hands dirty, there was something wrong with that. It's unfortunate [laughter] that he felt that way. Anyway, the upshot was that I was offered a teaching job and I did well at it and I stayed at it for forty years.

KP: In many ways, it was an accident that you ended up in teaching. If you had not approached that school, you may not have gone for that.

JC: That's true, that's true.

MC: Well, it was interesting, because, when he went over for the farming job, they said, no, they didn't have [one], and it was a week or two later, they showed up in the barn, where he was working.

JC: That's right.

MC: Said, "We noticed you had a Phi Beta Kappa key on," and that's …

KP: Wearing that key was really what did it. [laughter]

JC: That's right. We'd better send a copy of this to Phi Beta Kappa. [laughter]
MC: But, it's what--his father really was so pleased, that he changed from farming into it.

KP: Do you have any regrets about leaving farming?

JC: I do. I sometimes think back. They were difficult days, but idyllic days, in a way. When we were first married, we had a small child and we were working on a small farm in Vermont, the same one I had worked on for a couple of summers, and it was too small a farm to support two people. In the summertime, there was plenty of work, but, in the wintertime, there was work only for the man and his wife, really, and she worked in the barn. So, suddenly, I was looking around for other work to do. Oh, well, the farmer down the road needed--he was building a barn. It was December, it was icy cold. We had to pour concrete with calcium chloride in the water, so [that] it wouldn't freeze, and stuff like that. So, I helped him build a barn, but even that work ran out. I got desperate and I wish now, looking back fifty, forty-five years, that I had just toughed it out, little Model A Ford, little tiny cabin alongside the road [that] we lived in, but, if I had toughed it out and tried, somehow managed to buy a little farm up in that country, my life would have been a whole lot different. I would know a lot about farming, I would have learned things from those self-reliant people that I wish I had learned. I learned a lot from them, but not as if I had become one of them and joined the grange and all that stuff. So, yes, I do have regrets sometimes, but my teaching life was always good. I taught at Kent for thirteen years and, when I left there, they praised me up and down. I didn't leave under any kind of a cloud. I left there because I wanted to go back to Vermont and I got a teaching at St. Johnsbury Academy and we bought this place where we still are.

MC: But, they also said, when he left Kent, that if it didn't work out where we were going, we were welcome back.

JC: Yes.

TL: I understand that you are living on a farm now, a small farm; only a hundred acres, was it?

JC: A hundred acres. Well, we're not farming it intensively as a hundred acres. All I have right now is ten sheep, but, yes, I try to keep the place open. I see the farms disappearing and it makes me tired. Now, you know Max Spahn? Do you know the name Max Spahn? Max Spahn was in my class at the Aggie School and his father owned a pure-bred Jersey herd. It was the pride of Middle Jersey. A few years after we graduated, we would get the Alumni News or something, Max Spahn making millions of bucks in real estate, selling farmland for building lots. I always felt that was a betrayal somehow. What the hell? if the guy wants to make a buck, I suppose I should let him, but it chilled me, it chills me.

KP: Rutgers, at one point, wanted to develop part of the Aggie Campus, the land, across Route 1. Did you follow that controversy?

JC: No, I didn't. I just have fond memories. Oh, here's something you can help me with. What is the piece of virgin or old woodland that Rutgers owns?

KP: I know what you are talking about, but I do not know the name.
JC: Okay, because the friend of mine from the Mountain School, where we stayed last night, he's an environmental science teacher and I got into a little clash of remembrances, because he calls it Hutcheson Woods and I thought it was Mettler's Woods. [Editor's Note: The land known as Mettler's Woods became the William L. Hutcheson Memorial Forest, which is preserved by Rutgers and The Nature Conservancy.]

KP: Yes, I know what you are referring to.

JC: He's talking about bringing his Lawrenceville students up to visit and have a workshop out in the woods.

TL: Maybe the archives could help with that.

JC: Oh, yes, could be.

KP: What did you most enjoy about teaching?

JC: I think the excitement of having some kid get it, understand it, and the excitement of my being able to make for him connections with other things. I've always felt that I was fortunate that I got to teach, into teaching the way I did, this sort of accident you speak of, because I didn't go to school and take all the ed. courses--methods courses, philosophy of ed. courses--I had none of that. I only had my experience. Now, don't get me wrong, when I was at Kent, they sent me to summer school for several years. I went to Columbia Teachers College, but I took content courses, I didn't take the methods courses and, since I've been teaching in Vermont, I haven't needed a public school certificate or any such thing, because I went and taught in private schools. I think that the breadth of my experience, Navy or not, Aggie or not, but the fact that I had lived a life outside of that and done lots of different kinds of things, I think it was a strong point for me. It was the kind of thing I liked to impart to them, unconsciously, unconsciously. I remember, when I was at the Mountain School, I did it consciously. The history teacher was--they get up to World War II along about the first week in May or something, before the end of the term--and so, I went in and I told them some of my Pacific experiences and drew a map and showed them where I'd been, all that kind of stuff. It was a point of contact with them, for a previous generation. Yes, so, I think that was it. It was not the math per se, although I appreciated the beauty of that and, when we proved a difficult theorem and my eyes would light up and their eyes would light up and that kind of stuff, but I think it was just the kids themselves and being able to make some difference in their lives. I know I did, because I've had a lot of people tell me that.

MC: Had a lot of students tell me that he was such a good teacher because, if they didn't get it one way, he had another way for them to go to get it.

JC: Yes, and I was willing to stay after school with them, work with them and stuff.

TL: That is what this country needs more of.
JC: Well, you’ve got that right, because they're screaming about teacher's hours and budgets now for too many years. Even in Vermont, the teachers are right up there where they need to be and they're still screaming for more. In that way, I'm not proud to be a member of the profession, but, otherwise, I am.

KP: What did you least like about teaching?

JC: Least like? paperwork, paperwork, although I've got to say that, even that, when I was teaching at the Mountain School, which was my last teaching job--I had only three teaching jobs over the course of thirty-nine years. I taught eighteen years at St. Johnsbury Academy. Then, I taught the last eight years of my career at the Mountain School, which is--it's one of those old alternative schools in the hills of Vermont that was started in the early '60s, but, by the mid-80s, they had run into trouble. They'd have a fire, they had difficulty getting students, and so on, and so on. It was time to phase that out, but two teachers from Milton, in Milton, Mass., heard about the place, made a proposal to the Milton trustees about turning around the Mountain School in a new way. We had a program, was just one semester long, mostly for juniors--we did take a few seniors, but we didn't like that so much--they would take one semester out of their junior year, at whatever school they were, either fall or spring, and come to us for close community living. Everybody lived in dorms. We had a huge organic garden and farm. We raised all our own meat and vegetables. The kids worked on the farm. We cut all our own wood; we burned wood to heat the place. It was just a wonderful experience and I, as a teacher, didn't meet them only in the classroom. Mardee and I were dorm parents, which we'd never done before, and I taught them stained glass activity or wood log activity or worked with them in the garden or what-have-you. We were part of their lives for twenty-four hours a day and it was just a wonderful little community. There, I think even the paperwork, I was talking about paperwork, we had to write a descriptive paragraph on every student twice a year and it had to be well done. There wasn't any bologna, it had to be well done, and I appreciated that paperwork, even though it was onerous, because we had very few days to get it done after the kids left. I liked that. That was a real good experience.

KP: Why had you left St. Johnsbury? Had you wanted a change of experience?

JC: I did. I liked life at St. Johnsbury Academy. It was pretty good. I was appreciated there. You know the "Peter Principle?" You rise to your level of incompetence. Okay, I was such a hell of a good teacher that they made me department head, took away half my classes, made me an administrator. I should have said no. I had some people who urged me, "Oh, you'd be good at it. Think of all the other people in the department--do you want them to be department head? No, you'd better be." Well, anyway, so, I was. I didn't like it. I didn't do well at it, or at least I don't think so--I would've given myself a 2.5 again. [laughter] When I heard that--the librarian at St. Johnsbury Academy lived in West Fairlee, which is right near Vershire, where the Mountain School is--had heard that the school was about to enter a new phase and that this new program was coming in, she got hold of a brochure for me and showed it to me. So, she helped me write a resume and I sent it down and I got the job.
TL: Where do you think you got that sense of being so honest with yourself? Most people do not like to say that they do things badly, like you did with the 2.5 in docking the boat. Where do you think you got that?

JC: Oh, my mother and father, I suppose. I suppose that's where it came from, I don't know. I don't think it's anything recent in my life; well, I'm talking about forty, fifty years ago anyway. So, I guess I've had it all my life. It must have been my mother and father or Essex Fells Grammar School or what-have-you.

TL: Something along the line.

JC: Yes. Now, here's a thing--my mother, I like to say I was an Episcopalian before I was born and I probably was because of my mother--I went to church all those years in Essex Fells and I'm sure I got a right sense about that there. In recent years, I've fallen away from the church absolutely. I have--it happens to freshmen in college--but I have huge reservations about all the mythology and all that stuff, but, anyway, it could have come from there, though, too. I regret that I have, in some way, lost my faith. I don't know if that's the right phrase or term, because, now, I don't insist on passing along to my children and grandchildren what was passed along to me, which has stood me in good stead, but which I've rejected. It's kind of a paradoxical, strange thing.

KP: You do not attend services regularly anymore.

JC: No. Mardee is a very good churchgoer and, once in a while, she'll drag me along and I go along with interest, but there are too many things. Well, you're talking about conscience and I tell the Rector, "I cannot stand up and repeat the Creed in good conscience. My conscience takes precedence over the things I'm supposed to be believing. I can't do that," and so, it upsets me to go to church. That's far from the track. [laughter]

KP: No, not completely.

MC: It's something I understand, but …

TL: It is just hard to.

MC: We all say our prayers for him. [laughter]

KP: You never joined any veterans' organizations.

JC: No. I'll tell you, when I was at St. J, Jerry (Plumber?), who was--I don't know what service he was in, Navy, maybe, I don't know--he was chairman of the history department, he tried to get me to join the American Legion. I'm proud to be a veteran, don't misunderstand me--all you guys on the Internet, don't misunderstand me [laughter]--I'm proud to be a veteran, I'm proud to have done my job, but I feel that I did my job. I made use of the GI Bill for supporting a home mortgage, I made use of the GI Bill for tuition at Rutgers and support while I was here, but I
have never paraded my veteran stuff. I had my uniform converted to a civilian suit very shortly after I got out. It doesn't quite fit me anymore, but almost.

MC: Looks good in it.

JC: And I enjoy a Memorial Day service, but these guys who are professional veterans, I have very little patience for them. I really do. Always, okay, wave the flag, I appreciate the flag, don't misunderstand me, but the poor veteran--Bernie Sanders, Vermont's Congressman in Washington, always beating a drum for the veterans and the old folks. [Editor's Note: Bernard "Bernie" Sanders represented Vermont in the US House of Representatives from 1991 to 2007, when he was elected to the US Senate.]

KP: Yes. What do you think of Bernie Sanders, since you brought up his name?

MC: You'd better turn it off. [laughter]

JC: I'll tell you, I voted for him, because I don't like either the Democratic or the Republican alternative. I felt that Bernie, being, quote, "an Independent" and refusing to join up along party lines is maybe Vermont's chance to have an Independent voice in Washington, but I don't really like the way he's doing things. I've got to say that, but he has his own beliefs and he has the guts to stand up for them and I admire that. I admire that, but I think that since Franklin Roosevelt, this country has tread too close to a Socialist path, really, too much government doing everything for you and I don't think that's right, but Bernie's for more of that.

KP: However, you like the fact that he is really independent.

JC: Yes, I do. I respect that. I voted for him. I don't know if I will again, but I did last time. [laughter]

KP: You have a different view of Bernie Sanders now.

MC: Well, yes. [laughter]

JC: Well, I don't know if you saw this, some magazine had a cartoon, right after he went down there. It was a typical Washington cocktail party where everybody was starched up and dressed in their best clothes and here's this guy in a rumpled tweed jacket and his hair all up and his collar open and all this. Somebody asked who it was, well, accused him of being some hippie or something, "Oh, no, that's just the Congressman from Vermont." [laughter]

KP: New Hampshire and Vermont strike me as very different states, although they are geographically very similar, but they have developed in very different ways. Have you ever thought of that?

JC: I have. New Hampshire reminds me, geographically and in other ways, like one of those big, fat toys that's got a big, fat, round bottom, and then, a clown's head on top and you tip it over and it stands up again, because the center of gravity is low. New Hampshire's like that because
all the population is concentrated from Concord south, toward Massachusetts. I think that a lot of what happens in New Hampshire is governed by the fact that the population is strong there. The people in the northern part of New Hampshire are independent. They have been able to maintain a lot of that. I don't know too much about New Hampshire politics, although [the] St. Johnsbury paper is full of it a lot times. The government in New Hampshire, however, even though it is controlled to a large extent by this southern section and their interests, pretty much leaves people alone. Vermont has, suddenly, a legislature which is as government, big government, oriented as Washington and it's becoming more so and it frightens me.

KP: It is hard to imagine a Bernie Sanders getting elected in New Hampshire.

JC: Yes, it is.

KP: I have often wondered why those two states developed so differently.

JC: I don't know. Well, I can tell you some history of it and you being a history person, you would know. First, I think that "one man, one vote" is a mistake. I don't think that's what democracy really is all about. Vermont was--being a rural state and having representation, equal representation, from all the towns in Montpelier, rather than on the basis of districts based on population--was able to keep itself rural, keeping the small person in mind, but since "one man, one vote," you've got Burlington, Rutland, even Montpelier itself, though to a much lesser extent, because Montpelier really is still a small town, Bennington, Brattleboro to some extent, their interests are now what run the state. Welfare, people move to Vermont because the welfare system is so generous and so undiscriminating in a lot of ways and I think that's going to be the ruination of--well, we live in the Northeast Kingdom, of which you've heard, I'm sure, near St. Johnsbury. That's sort of the last bastion of independence or whatever and that's being eroded. Planning, gosh, everything is planned for you--district commissions for waste disposal, district commissions for recycling, district commissions--and your town has got to go along. You've got to do it. We've been to every town meeting for twenty-eight years. I love the town meeting form of government, but it's getting to mean less and less. In fact, I was moderator in our town for ten or twelve years. I don't know if that explains what's happening in the two states, but you're right, they certainly have developed along different lines. In spite of the southern New Hampshire interests in some way controlling the state, they have left the north, where the little guys are, a lot of them, although there's a lot of--tourism's, in both states, become such a huge business. I think that hurt them to some extent, because it dictates how we develop.

KP: You have seen more tourists over the years since when you first moved there.

JC: Oh, yes.

KP: Your son was in the Navy during the Vietnam War, but on a nuclear submarine.

JC: Yes.

KP: Were you glad he was not in Vietnam at the time?
JC: I think I'm such a non-political animal that I wasn't aware enough to be glad or not glad that he was or was not there, to tell you the truth. It's only since the Vietnam War is over that I've read a whole lot. My heart goes out to those guys and I think the government is culpable in many, many ways, but, at the time it was happening, no, I was not. I was appalled at the Kent State stuff, I was appalled at Bobby Kennedy being murdered, that sort of stuff, but I didn't--as I say, I'm non-political enough not to know what that was about, really. I didn't think it was right for flag burners, I didn't think it was right for draft evaders, I didn't think it was right for all of those things, but, now, when I see how horrible it really was, whether I excuse what they did or not, I can certainly understand what they did, but, at the time, no. I just knew it was interesting duty for him, yes.

KP: You mentioned earlier that, during the Cold War, in the 1950s, you had nightmares.

JC: I did, I did. When I was teaching at Kent School, I could wake up in the night and see a glow in the sky and think, "Oh, my god, they're here," really. That was a pretty frightening time.

KP: Did you ever find it ironic that your son served on a nuclear-armed vessel?

JC: I suppose I did, I suppose I did. I never dwelled on it very much. [laughter]

KP: When did you get over this fear of an attack? When did that bad dream stop? Do you have any sense of that?

JC: Yes, I do, I think when I came to St. Johnsbury and I fell in with a man named Fred (Mold?), who was director of the Fairbanks Museum up there. Fairbanks Museum is a hundred and something years old, natural history museum type thing, reaches out to the community for teaching, teaches all the kids, school kids, different courses, but, anyway, Fred was the first environmentalist I ran into. I got so concerned about not having any more of October's bright blue weather kind of days, because of pollution and all that stuff, that my concern shifted. I think, over time, that intense feeling about atomic warfare fades, unless there's something to keep it fed, and we gave up nuclear testing, or presumably we did, [laughter] that kind of stuff.

KP: You became much more interested in environmental issues.

JC: Yes, that's one reason I went to the Mountain School. I was fascinated with the--in fact, I sat in on the environmental issues course as a student, when I was teaching there. It was extremely interesting. This man now who is at Lawrenceville, now, developed the, well, a lot of the curriculum at the Mountain School. It's changed over the years, it's evolved, but it started out that way.

KP: Is there anything else that we have not asked you about?

JC: Well, let's see.

TL: This has been a great interview.
JC: Well, I hope so. [laughter] Well, I can't think of anything in particular. I'm sure, when I get home, I'll think of something, "Oh, gee, I should have told them that or should have told them that."

TL: When you think of something good, let us know. [laughter]

KP: If you are ever back down this way, please stop in. Hopefully, my wife and I will come through Vermont sometime.

JC: I'd love it, yes, just stop by. I say, I have a few photographs at home that you might be interested in, I don't know, and you can shuffle through these papers today if you want to and see if there's anything that interests you. I can't imagine that the routine sort--well, maybe it does--the routine sort of orders that a person gets as he works through, maybe that does interest you, I don't know, or maybe you've got archives full of that junk and you don't want any more. [laughter]

TL: You definitely should check out the archives.

JC: Yes, we'll do that.

-----------------------------------END OF INTERVIEW-----------------------------------

Reviewed by Eve Snyder 4/17/98
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 9/11/14
Reviewed by Marjorie Conover 10/1/14