RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH EDWARD A. LAFFEY

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH
and
CHRISTOPHER DELUCA
and
RORY MCCLOSKEY

NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY
DECEMBER 2, 2011

TRANSCRIPT BY

ZACHARY ARBEITEL
and
MARK BITTNER
and
DOMINGO DUARTE

Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Mr. Edward A. Laffey on December 2, 2011, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth and …

Christopher DeLuca: … Christopher DeLuca.

SI: We will also be joined shortly by Rory McCloskey. Thank you very much, Mr. Laffey, for coming in today.

Edward A. Laffey: It's my pleasure to be here.

SI: Great. To begin, could you tell us where and when you were born?

EL: I was born June 26, 1922, in Jersey City, New Jersey. That makes me eighty-nine years old. [laughter]

SI: You look younger than eighty-nine years old. [laughter]

EL: Thank you.

SI: Can you tell us your parents' names for the record?

EL: My father was Thomas J. Laffey, my mother Margaret F. Flynn, who became Laffey after she married.

SI: Beginning with your father's side of the family, do you know anything about where they came from, if there was any immigration history on that side of the family?

EL: I know very little of my father's history. He was rather closemouthed. I know his father was born in Ireland and they'd come over in the early 1880s. My father was born in 1885 in Jersey City. So, I know very little about my grandfather. I know he had a brother and a sister, my Uncle John, my Aunt (Mame?). My mother's family I know much more about than I know about his family. He was very, very closemouthed. My grandfather, his father, died before I was born. So, I knew nothing of him, but my mother's father was born in Elizabethport, New Jersey, in 1860, before the Civil War started, and I lived with him, summers, when I was seven, eight, nine years old, because they lived in Newark. They had a private house with a huge backyard and I'd go there every summer and live with him, and to say you lived with somebody and knew somebody who was born before the Civil War, I think, is quite an accomplishment. [laughter]

SI: Yes. With both your parents being from that area, did they ever tell you any stories about what it was like to grow up there at that time?

EL: Well, my father was very proud of Jersey City. He said it was probably one of the safest cities in the world. You never had to worry about walking around town, any hour of the day or night, because Mayor Hague was the "big cheese" in Hudson County and, eventually, the State of New Jersey, and he said that he protected that city. Now, there's scandals about Mayor Hague--some are true, some are not true, though most politicians have a history that is not the

most pristine--but he [his father] loved being in Jersey City. He thought the world of it. [Editor's Note: Democratic politician Frank Hague served as the mayor of Jersey City, New Jersey, from 1917 to 1947 and as Vice-Chairman of the Democratic National Committee from 1924 to 1949. His political machine dominated Hudson County and played a major role in shaping the state and national political scene in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s.]

SI: Did your mother feel the same way?

EL: My mother, well, … she moved to Jersey City after they got married. She grew up in Elizabeth and Newark. So, her homeport was Elizabeth and I don't know too much about Elizabeth. I never visited any places where she had lived in Elizabeth, although she had cousins living there. … At one time, I went down and visited cousins and I didn't know too much of her cousins. I knew of her sisters and her nieces and nephews, but not too much of her cousins.

SI: Do you know how your parents met?

EL: Yes. My father was working in--well, the name of the place was Beardsley's. They made shredded codfish; well, they didn't make it. They took the codfish and they shredded it and they put it in packages and sold it. My mother worked there and that's where they met. That was in, I think, Frelinghuysen Avenue in Newark, almost at the Elizabeth border. They met while they were working there in Beardsley's.

SI: You wrote on your survey that your father was a meat inspector. Is that what he was doing there?

EL: No. At that time, he was working … in the factory. From there, he became a meat inspector. He took the Civil Service test and passed it and, somewhere around the start of World War I, I don't know the exact year, probably around '16, '17, '18, he became a meat inspector and he stayed there until he retired in--I think it was in the '50s [that] he retired. … He was a lay inspector. They had veterinarians who were in charge. He was not a veterinarian. He was a lay inspector. They would check for sanitary conditions, wholesomeness of the meat, and they would check the meat for odor and color and texture and things like that. He did not grade them, but he inspected them for wholesomeness.

CD: That must have been a pretty significant job. After Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Roosevelt's reforms, the whole industry changed. Is that how he got his job during this time?

EL: Well, are you talking about Theodore Roosevelt, maybe? …

CD: Yes.

EL: Well, I don't know. Yes, I know the period you're talking about, because there was all kinds of controversies about the unsanitary conditions in whatever. … About that time is when the Department of Agriculture expanded and that's probably why he got that job, because of the expansion. [Editor's Note: In 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt signed into law the Federal Meat Inspection Act and the Food and Drug Act. These laws were prompted by exposés by

"muckraking" journalists and, in particular, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, which detailed the poor sanitary conditions in America's meatpacking industry. The Federal Meat Inspection Act authorized the Department of Agriculture to inspect and condemn meat products and monitor and inspect slaughter and processing plants.]

SI: Did he have a particular territory that he covered?

EL: Yes. He was primarily in Jersey City. Jersey City had two packinghouses. Swift's was one of them and Armour's was the other. They were about, oh, ten blocks apart and, to prevent any familiarity, … every six months, he would transfer from Swift's, next six months in Armour's, back in Swift's again. This way, they'd try to not allow anybody to influence the inspectors at all, and that's what he did and there were times [he went elsewhere]. Secaucus, at the time, was a great place--they called it "The Pig Farms." All the pigs were up there. They were stored in the yard. They slaughtered them fresh and sold the meat to … the restaurants in New York. He would have to go up there from time to time. Now, after the war, I would pick him up. He never had a driver's license. I would have to go pick him up and I could smell Secaucus long before I approached it. [laughter] It was quite an odor and went quite a distance.

SI: Did your parents ever talk about what World War I was like?

EL: My mother mentioned one time about the flu epidemic and she told me that the bodies were stacked up outside the entrance to the cemetery because the people were dying faster than they could dig the graves and bury them, but, other than that, they told me nothing about World War I, nothing. She just mentioned that. [Editor's Note: Between twenty and forty million people perished in the influenza pandemic (also known as "Spanish Flu") that swept the globe from 1918 to 1919, following the end of World War I, including an estimated 675,000 in the United States.]

SI: Did your mother ever work outside the home?

EL: Yes. During the Depression, around 1930, she got a job as a waitress in Jersey City. That was to help out, with my father. My father worked all during the Depression. … He was never laid off, but they did lay off some of the employees, and what these employees did, my father included, they agreed that they would work four days a week. That way, they could keep one more employee out of every five. So, by doing that, they didn't lay off nearly as many in his department as they could have, because they were all working four days a week. … It was voluntary on their part.

SI: Tell us a little about your family. You are one of how many children?

EL: Four. I have an older brother who died. I have an older sister who is still alive. She's ninety-one. I have a younger brother who died. So, of the four, there's only two of us left. The youngest and the oldest died, the middle two are still alive.

SI: All right. You were third in line.

EL: Yes.

SI: What was your neighborhood like growing up? What are your earliest memories of growing up in Jersey City?

EL: Let me see. Well, you see, I only stayed in Jersey City until I was ten years old. When I was ten years old, we moved out and went to Newark. My recollection of my growing up in Newark is much better than it is in Jersey City, because I don't remember too much. I do remember some of the things. I went to St. Michael's Grammar School, to the fourth grade, and, when we moved to Newark, I went to St. Bridget's Grammar School and I graduated from there in the eighth grade. … I don't have a huge recollection of Jersey City. I do remember going around, walking the neighborhood. There was a park across the street. It's called Hamilton Park. It was a city block square and we used to go there. They had playgrounds there and we played there, but, other than that, I don't have a huge recollection of Jersey City.

SI: Okay. Did you live in an apartment there or a house?

EL: They called it a tenement at the time. There were ten families living there. It was five stories high, two families on either side of the same floor. So, it was a ten-family tenement house and they were railroad rooms. You had the bathroom, the kitchen, the dining room, the living room, the bedroom and you'd just walk right through a hall, with no doors, just openings, and you walked through the bedrooms to get into the dining room, the kitchen or whatever. We did have gas. We did have electricity, but … the house was built before they had electricity and the gas jets were still in all the bedrooms. They never removed the gas jets. They were still there and they were operable. You could turn it on and light it. They never shut the gas off and they were still there, but it was electrified. We did have electricity, but only one outlet in the room. The whole room had only one outlet each.

SI: Did you grow up with a lot of family around, any extended family?

EL: Not an awful lot, no. In Jersey City, my father's brother lived a few blocks away and he had a son, John, and I used to pal out with him once in a while, but not very often. He was much older than I was. My Uncle John was older than my father. I don't know how old he was, but he was older than my father, and he had, probably, his son very soon after he was married. I don't know. … I haven't seen him--oh, it must be twenty-five, thirty years since I've seen him. I don't know anything about him anymore.

SI: It was about 1932 when your family moved to Newark.

EL: Yes. We moved to Newark. We moved into my grandfather's house. My grandfather was retired and he had three sisters. They all became nuns and the Diocese of Newark had a home … for the elderly in Paramus, New Jersey. His sister was the nun in charge of running the whole place. It was a huge, huge estate. They had farms there, they had cattle there, they had chickens and it was self-sustaining. What happened [was], his brother John was the maintenance supervisor; he died. So, my grandfather moved there and took over as maintenance supervisor. His house was empty. My father rented the house and we kept it up and paid him rent and we

lived there until just before--well, in 1939, we moved out. We went to North Arlington and we lived there, but I graduated from high school in Newark in 1940. My grandfather moved back and I lived with him for the last year of my high school, so [that] I could continue in East Side High School in Newark, from where I graduated in 1940.

SI: Was it just for economic reasons that you moved into that house or were there other reasons?

EL: Well, that was the main reason. Well, first of all, this was a house. It was … a freestanding house. It was no longer a tenement apartment. Tenement apartments are not the greatest places to live, because, if you have vermin on one floor, you're going to have them on another floor, and that includes bedbugs and cockroaches and mice. … Whatever gets into these tenement houses, it's almost impossible to rid them of it, because, if you clean one floor, they just go to another floor. It's almost impossible to [get] rid them. So, that was one reason why I moved there, and it was to help my grandfather out, because my father was paying him rent and that just supplemented his pension. He retired from the Pennsylvania Railroad. He was a blacksmith and he did all the maintenance work there and, at one time, with the Pennsylvania Railroad, he did all the ironwork that they needed to be done, nuts, rods, the support brackets, and [would] build brackets and things like that.

SI: What was that area of Newark like?

EL: Newark, at that time, was a very nice place, very, very nice. We lived not too far from school. It was, oh, maybe about twelve, fifteen blocks I had to walk to school every day, but … we all walked together, because we all lived in the same neighborhood. … East Side High School had probably three, four thousand students in there and most of them walked. There was no public transportation. If you lived out of the district, as my brother and sister did, because they went to a parochial school, they used to get bus tickets and the bus tickets were half price. You would present the ticket to the bus driver. You would buy them at half price and present it to the bus driver and he would take them to school. We were close enough where we had to walk and it was a pleasant walk. We didn't mind it.

SI: You went to Catholic school for the first eight years of grade school.

EL: Eight years, yes, and then, I went to public school, because the courses I wanted [were offered there]. I wanted to take technical courses and, in the technical courses, we learned carpentry, metalwork, machine shop, all things like that. I had two years of machine shop work in high school, I had one year of carpentry, a half a year of metalsmith and mechanical engineering. What we would learn in physics, we would apply in the mechanical engineering shop. We would study combustion engines. They had an old automobile there--we would work on the engine there in the mechanical engineering shop.

CD: Was there anything in particular that got you interested in machinery?

EL: I've always been handy mechanically. In fact, I used to annoy my father. He'd be trying to do something. I said, "Dad, you're doing it wrong." He'd [say], "What's a ten-year-old kid know

about doing something wrong?" [laughter] I used to know because I've always been very adept mechanically, always, even to this day.

SI: Growing up in the Depression years in Newark, did you see how it was affecting your local area, your neighbors?

EL: Yes. At the time, they called it "going on relief," and people were embarrassed. Nobody admitted being on relief--not today. Today, people are proud that they're getting "the dole." In those days, it was an embarrassment. They hid it. They would go and they'd get whatever their sustenance was, a few dollars a week, to help pay for the rent and buy groceries and whatever, and they hid it. Nobody in their neighborhood knew it, unless you were very, very intimate with those people. Then, they would say, "Well, I went and got my relief check today," and that's the way people were then. They didn't want to be on it and they were embarrassed because they were on it. My father, no, he worked and, as I say, he worked in these packinghouses. In packinghouses, they had retail stores. So, my father would be able to buy--at wholesale prices, as any employee of the Armour's or Swift Corporation could--meats that they had there. They had packaged meats. They had the bolognas, the sausages, the hot dogs, the hams, the roasts and things like that. He would be able to buy them at wholesale prices. So, we ate quite well during the Depression.

RM: You did not have to go out and get a job to help support your family.

EL: Well, when I was twelve years old, I started selling newspapers on Broad Street in Newark, in front of the Woolworth's five-and-ten. Broad and Market were the main intersections in Newark and I would stand there from after school until suppertime, which was maybe three until six o'clock, and sell newspapers. I would go and buy *The Newark Evening News* or *The Newark Star-Ledger* for two cents apiece, sell them for three cents apiece. Now, it doesn't seem like a lot, but you do a little arithmetic, I was making fifty percent profit on my product. [laughter] … I would stand there, and I did that for about three years and I kept the money. My mother said, "Keep it," because I was making about thirty, forty cents, fifty cents a week. I wasn't making a lot, because I wasn't selling hundreds of papers. I was selling maybe a dozen papers or so.

SI: Would people just buy the papers from you or would you have to hawk them, yell out, "Extra, extra?"

EL: No, no. … Well, we didn't have extras to speak of. Well, I never sold extras, but, yes, we used to hawk them and stand there, right in front of the main entrance to the Woolworth's store.

SI: What would hawking consist of?

EL: "Buy your paper here. Get your paper here. Here you are, *Newark News*." *The Newark News* was the premier paper in Newark at the time and people would buy them at three cents apiece.

SI: Were there other things you and your family would do to stretch things out and make things last? Did you raise any fruits or vegetables in a garden, or something similar?

EL: Not really. My father had some vegetables growing in the back, but we never had much luck with them. My mother took it over and she had more flowers there than vegetables. We grew potatoes one time and they were extremely small. They weren't worthwhile even peeling and eating, they were so small. I don't know whether the ground wasn't rich enough for it or what, but my mother took it over and she had a flower garden, rather than a vegetable garden. At one time, we had a few chickens, but they were not worth the effort. I think my father had, maybe, about six, ten chickens at one time, and we roasted them, ate them, but they weren't worth the effort. … You had to go and buy feed for them. You had to buy supplements, because, at one time, they were laying eggs with practically no shell on them. Well, we found out that they weren't getting enough calcium. So, he had to go out and buy supplements and he said, "It's not worth the effort," and we abandoned it, because we were eating quite well.

CD: Living in the city, did you see a lot of people in your community that were worse off than others? Did you see people doing better or people trying to help others out, looking after one another?

EL: Yes, they did, they did. The people in the neighborhood that my mother was close to, if they looked like they needed a little extra, my mother would give them some of the stuff that we had, mostly the meat, because, as I say, my father could buy it at a wholesale price. So, she would give them some food occasionally. We didn't have an awful lot to share, but the little we had, we did share.

SI: Were there ever people coming through town, hobos, searching for meals? Did they ever knock on your back door?

EL: Not where we lived. We lived in downtown Newark. Well, I didn't live too far from the city hall, so, you know, that's the center of the town. So, the hobos would probably be more on the extreme edge of the town, maybe down towards where the airport is now, because that's where the railroad yards used to be. … I lived, maybe, five, six miles from where Newark Airport is today. … I lived within three blocks of the city hall. So, we were in the heart of downtown Newark.

SI: Tell us a little about St. Bridget's and your education there. Did nuns teach you?

EL: Yes. It was a small school. We had four classrooms. Each classroom had two grades, first and second in one, all the way up to the seventh and eighth in the last, one teacher for each classroom. The principal was a teacher and they used to teach. … The way they did it, if you were in the fifth grade, you sat on one side of the room, if you're in the sixth grade, you sat on the other side of the room and, while she was teaching one grade, you were studying whatever subjects you had to study. … If you knew that, you would listen, because, if you were in the fifth grade, you would listen to what the sixth grade was being taught. So, you'd get a little edge. When you moved over to sixth grade, you knew some of the subjects without having to do extra work.

CD: How many people would you typically have in these courses?

EL: There were about a hundred kids altogether in the school. So, there was twenty-five to a classroom and, maybe, about ten or twelve in each grade. It was a very small school. It was almost one-on-one teaching. [laughter] … I had excellent teachers and, to this day, I still remember Sister Gertrude Anita. She was my favorite teacher there. She was strict, she was very strict, but she was fair and she taught us well.

SI: Would they use the ruler?

EL: I got whacked with a ruler all right, yes. [laughter] It was more than a ruler, too. You know these folding chairs with the slats in them? They used to take those things out and rap you across the knuckles. It was more than just a ruler and, if you flinched, you got an extra one. … You never came home and told your parents that the nun did something to you, because your parents would say, "Well, if you did get punished, it was your own fault that you got punished. You did it." They always stuck up for the nuns, always. They were always right. [laughter]

CD: What types of infractions would cause you to get hit by a nun?

EL: Speaking when you're not supposed to. As I said, there were two classrooms. So, you're supposed to be studying, but, if you're over there speaking to your neighbor and you were told to shut up, … if you didn't shut up, that was an infraction. That was probably the most common one. Others, I don't remember any of the others, but that, I do remember.

RM: Did you come from a religious family? Is that why you went to a Catholic school?

EL: Yes, yes, very. My mother's oldest sister was a nun. Her three cousins were nuns. Her three aunts were nuns. One cousin was a priest. One of my cousins was a nun. So, yes, it was quite a religious family.

CD: Did your parents ever try to push you down that path? Was there ever a time in your life when you thought you might take a vocation?

EL: No, no, never, never. They didn't try to influence any of us. They wanted us to go to church. They insisted we go to church every Sunday, go to confession on Saturday and go to Communion on Sunday. They did that, but as far directing us in any one way of life, no, they never did that, never.

SI: Were there a lot of activities, social activities, centered on the church?

EL: Well, they had the bingos, of course. [laughter] That was back in the '30s. They still had bingos then and they didn't have the things that they have today. Today, we have bazaars in our church and we have picnics and we have all those. We didn't have those in those days, but bingo, yes, they did have.

SI: In Newark at that time, was it the case that all the Irish went to one church, all the Italians went to another church, that sort of thing?

EL: More or less, more or less. Downneck Newark, you had the Polish church, St. Casimir's. Polish students went to the St. Casimir's School. They were all Polish and they learned Polish in their school. They were taught Polish grammar and they would speak Polish and they spoke Polish very fluently. When I went to high school, some of my classmates would teach me words in Polish--now, not necessarily bad words, good words--and, to this day, I still remember some of them. Well, I have a Polish neighbor across the street and she'll say something to me and I'll say an answer in Polish. … She says, "Where'd you learn that?" … She'll sneeze and I'll say, "*Nostrovia*." "*Nostrovia*," means, "For your health," and she'll say, "Thank you," and I'll say in Polish, "(*Nemazazu*?)," means, "Think nothing of it." You know, I still remember some of those things and that's what they did. Now, in the other section, the west side of Newark, you had mostly Italians. Barringer High School was mostly Italian. Weequahic High School was in the south side; that was mostly Jewish. Now, they had the great basketball teams, Barringer had the great football teams, East Side had the great baseball teams, and that's the way they were. They were more or less congregated like that and they were ethnic in there. Then, you had Arts High … and these were artists, that they would draw and sketch and do whatever they did in Arts High School. That was a totally different school. They had no athletics, no nothing up there, but … all the other schools, they all had great teams of one sport or another.

RM: Would East Side have been considered an Irish school?

EL: There were a lot of Irish there and there was a mixture of the Polish, there was a mixture of some Italians, there were some Chinese and it was more of a conglomerate of nations, East Side, mostly. The others were, as I said, Barringer was almost entirely Italian, almost entirely. Weequahic was almost entirely Jewish, but East Side was a mixture of most of them, but I'd say Irish did predominate in the East Side High School.

SI: In your neighborhood, on your street, was it mostly Irish or was it more of a melting pot?

EL: Mostly Irish in our neighborhood, mostly, almost entirely, not entirely, but most entirely. There were some Germans there. The people across the street, their name was Boehm. They were German.

RM: Did all of these groups get together? Were they pretty civil? Was there any animosity?

EL: Cordial, no, they're just cordial. There was not an awful lot of socializing in those days, not by our family, anyhow, but they were all cordial. You'd always say hello to them, polite, but you didn't really socialize with them.

RM: They pretty much stuck with their own groups.

EL: [Yes].

SI: You said your family was not very social. Were they involved in any sort of clubs?

EL: No, my father was not a joiner. He was not. … Well, he did belong to the Elks at one time, but that was the only organization I ever remember him belonging to, but he didn't attend the meetings. He just belonged to it; he just didn't attend the meetings.

SI: Coming from a primarily Irish background, were there any Irish traditions passed down in your family?

EL: Not really, no. I'd say we're more American than Irish. [laughter]

CD: You mentioned earlier that East Side High School was known for its baseball team. Did you play baseball or any sports while growing up?

EL: Well, I didn't play on the [team]. I did play baseball, but I didn't play on a team. I never had the talent to play on a team. We played independent. … There was a sporting goods store called Devega. Devega put a league together and we played in the Devega League and these were all teenagers. Most of them were, like, fourteen to sixteen, seventeen years old. … We played all around the whole City of Newark. I remember, one time, they had--they called it the Catholic Protectory. It was in Kearney and these were children who were abandoned by their parents or put up for adoption by their parents or whatever, and they lived in this home. They were all boys. We had a makeup game with them and we were, like, sixteen, seventeen years old and we were supposed to play their senior team, which was sixteen, seventeen years old. We went there. They were scheduled to play another game, so, we had to play the juniors. The juniors were, like, twelve, thirteen, fourteen. They whomped us. Those kids, they played baseball all day long. We played it once or twice a week. These kids, three years younger than us, they really beat the heck out of us, embarrassed us. [laughter]

SI: Growing up, did you have the freedom to go around Newark and engage in different activities or entertainment?

EL: Yes, right. My parents never knew where I was. When we'd leave the house, we'd just go out. That was it. We'd come home--we knew when suppertime was--we'd come home in time for supper. We were obedient children, but we were not structured. We could do as we pleased without any restraints, as long as we didn't abuse it, but, yes, we used to roam all around. … I'd go to Weequahic Park, which was quite a distance. I'd say it was a good two to three miles from our house. We'd go there and we'd play ball. We'd walk there and play ball and come back. No, we had a lot of freedom, an awful lot of freedom.

SI: Would you go to movie houses?

EL: Yes. Well, you see, they had the first-run theaters. At that time, most of the movie companies owned their own theaters. Paramount had its own theater, RKO had its own theater, Lowes had its own theater, and then, you had the neighborhood theaters. The neighborhood theaters used to have three movies a week. They'd have a movie Sunday, Monday, then, it would change; Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, they'd have another one, Friday, Saturday. So, we used to go, sometimes, as much as three times a week, because it only cost a dime to get in. So, we'd go in there and see three movies a week. [laughter]

SI: Did you belong to any clubs, such as the Boy Scouts?

EL: No, no. I did not, no.

SI: You mentioned these different ethnic groups, including Germans. In the 1930s, with Hitler coming to power, was that discussed in the neighborhood, what was happening in Europe?

EL: No, no. … I don't ever remember hearing anybody say anything about being German or Italian because of the impending war. I don't remember ever hearing [anything].

RM: Hitler would not have really been seen in that bad of a light as a result of not being at war with the Germans yet. He was just another guy. Is that correct?

EL: Yes, right.

SI: What about later on in the 1930s? Were you aware of, say, the German-American *Bund*?

EL: Oh, yes, I was well aware of that. They were in South Jersey and I guess it was the biggest German organization, military organization, in the country, right there in New Jersey, and I remember seeing them. You'd go to the movies and you see the Movietone News and that's where you'd get it, because television was not invented as yet. You'd hear it on the radio, you'd see pictures in the newspaper and you'd go to the movies. … When the Movietone News come on, you would see them down there, but they were--well, South Jersey, that was quite a distance from [us]. I forgot how far down they were. They were towards Salem County, down that way. [Editor's Note: The German-American *Bund*, a pro-Nazi group based on the earlier Friends of New Germany, operated from 1936 until December 1941, when it was outlawed. One of the largest *Bund* followings developed in New Jersey, based in Camp Nordland in Sussex County.]

SI: Did you ever have the opportunity to go beyond Newark, such as to New York City or anywhere else?

EL: When I was in high school, we'd go there, from time to time. See, Newark was very close to New York. They had--what's now the PATH train was the Hudson Tubes. You could go there, and I think it was only about ten or fifteen cents, you could buy your ticket and go into downtown Manhattan. … We'd go there and we'd roam around. In the summertime, my father used to take us to Coney Island. Every single summer, we'd go there for one day. That was our picnic. My mother would put a basket of food together, we'd get on the train, we'd go over to Coney Island, spend the whole day there, and then, come back home. One day, every summer, we did that.

SI: Were there any family trips to the Shore or was it mainly Coney Island?

EL: Just to Coney Island. When I went to the Shore, it was when I got to high school; I used to go with my buddies. Somebody a little older than us would have a driver's license and we'd pile in his or his father's car and we'd go to the Shore and spend a day down the Shore. … To us,

Keansburg was the Shore, [laughter] because, at that time, you didn't have the highways you have today. We had to drive through Perth Amboy, South Amboy and go down there. "Where you going?" "Down the Shore." "Where?" "Keansburg--where else?" [laughter]

SI: You mentioned one job where you were hawking newspapers. Did you have any other jobs?

EL: Well, yes. When I was in high school, I guess I was probably about sixteen years old, one of the fellows I played baseball with, his father had the franchise, if you will, of selling New York newspapers at night. They'd come out at night. *The New York News*, *The New York Mirror*, they'd come out at night and what he did [was], he hired me. … For six nights a week, I would stand on the corner of Broad and South Street, way down [in] south Newark, and sell newspapers. I would stand at the corner and, as the cars would come by, I would sell them to them, and I think they were a nickel apiece at the time. A bus'd come, the driver would open the door--I'd walk the length of the aisle, while the light was red, and sell whatever newspapers I could. … I did that for close to two years and he'd pay me a dollar a night for each night I worked. So, I got six dollars a week, which is not bad, and I only worked three hours. So, that wasn't bad pay at that time. [laughter]

CD: Did the six dollars a week enable you to go to the city more often and see films?

EL: Yes. … My mother, I'd ask her, from time to time, if she needed anything, … if I had a few extra dollars, and I always had a few extra dollars. I've been very conservative with my money, even to today. I don't think I'm cheap, but I'm not a spendthrift, either. I just know I worked hard for my money all my life and I'm not foolish with it. So, if she needed a few dollars, she's welcome to it.

RM: Do you think that growing up in the Depression played a part in your conservative spending?

EL: Yes, oh, yes. You became very conservative.

RM: Yes.

EL: Almost everybody did, because you didn't have anything extra, really, and, to this day, I'm like that.

RM: Stuck with you.

EL: Yes, all my life, yes.

SI: Were your siblings also going out to work and contributing money to the household?

EL: Well, it was my older brother who set me up with that job selling newspapers.

SI: Okay.

EL: And he was a go-getter. He was always a go-getter. He had all ways of making money that anybody could think of. He used to sell Christmas cards at Christmastime, mail order. He would send the order in. He'd take orders from the family, send the order in. It came in, [he] made a profit on that, and then, they were selling silk stockings. So, he started selling silk stockings. It was all through the mail. He would order the stuff through the mail. He was a real go-getter. All his life, he was like that, always.

SI: You mentioned that, in your senior year in East Side, you were living with your grandfather and you were in this technical course.

EL: Yes.

SI: What did you see for yourself in the future at that time? War had broken out overseas, but, at home, we were still at peace. What did you see yourself doing?

EL: Well, I wanted to get into something mechanical. When I graduated from high school, I applied to different places for mechanical jobs. Well, I had three years of drafting when I was in high school. So, I went to Western Electric in Kearney and I applied for a job as a draftsman, apprentice draftsman. They were not hiring. This was 1940. There were not too many people hiring in 1940. They started hiring later. At the end of '40, '41, that's when they were really hiring, but, before that, there were not too many people hiring. I spent the whole summer looking for work after I graduated from high school and I got a job in September of 1940. That was my first real solid employment, in September 1940, and that's what I did there. The people living next door to us, the woman was a secretary in this shop in Jersey City. Now, what the shop did, it was an instrument repair shop. They would repair any and all instruments in the engine rooms of ships, boiler rooms, onboard, in factories and things like that, temperature gauges, pressure gauges, anything of that nature that was used to measure and monitor the parameters on the boilers. She said that they're looking for an apprentice there. So, I went there and got the job. … The first thing they did, they put you in the receiving department and you recorded everything that came in and that got you familiar with all the pieces that were coming in. … After you learned to do that, then, they taught you how to test them, to find out what parts were needed, and you'd fill out a list of parts that were needed. So, when the mechanic got it, he would take your list and get the parts from the stockroom and repair them. Now, we could repair almost everything that they needed aboard ship and have it back within twenty-four hours, because, at that time, it was all breakdown cargo on these ships. The ships were always in port for at least twenty-four hours and what we would do [was], we would go there and we'd pick up the instruments to be repaired, repair them and return them before the ship sailed, because they didn't want to carry spare parts aboard the ship, and we had plenty of time to do that. … These ships, they were all ocean-going vessels. You had the United Fruit Line going down into the Caribbean, picking up fruit, you had the Grace Lines going down into the Caribbean, and then, you had the French Line. I worked on the *Normandie,* by the way. [laughter] [Editor's Note: The SS *Normandie*, a French ocean liner seized by the US government in World War II, caught fire and sank in New York Harbor in February 1942 while being converted into a troopship. She was salvaged and scrapped in 1946.]

SI: Really?

EL: Yes. Well, see, as I said, we did the engine room instruments. They were all in metric and our Merchant Marine was going to take over and they were more familiar with the English system, rather than the metric system. So, we had all the pressure gauges and thermometers from the *Normandie*. We would put them in the shop and we would convert all the metric dials into the American style, of pounds per square inch, rather than kilograms per square centimeter, and that's what we were doing. We were converting all that and we were practically finished when she capsized. We were nearly all done when she capsized, and my grandson, to this day, says, "Grand-Pop, too bad you couldn't keep one of those dials that said *Normandie* on it." [laughter]

SI: That was big news when that fire happened.

EL: Oh, yes, yes, very big, very big.

SI: When they would go over to get these instruments, they were going over to New York.

EL: The pier, where she was tied up.

SI: Okay.

EL: They'd go to the pier … where she was tied up. See, the salesmen, most of the time, went there. Once, I went with one to help take some off, only once, but he would go there many times and, lots of times, they had their own people taking them off. … They'd put them in crates, and then, he'd take the crates and bring them back to the shop and what we did, we just used the same dials. We turned them on their back, enameled the face, the back face, of the dial, and then, put new numbers in on there, and then, recalibrate, and have to make minor adjustments, because a pound and a [kilogram] are not exactly equal. So, you have to make new graduations on there.

SI: How long did you work there?

EL: I worked there until I went into the Navy and, when I come back, I worked there for two years after I come back from the Navy. Then, I went to Koppers Coke in Kearney, doing a similar thing, … only this time, instead of just repairing them, I was installing them on-site, and then, from there, I went to Chevron Oil in Perth Amboy and worked there for sixteen, seventeen years.

SI: In this first period, before the war, could you see things picking up as economic activity in general picked up just before the war?

EL: Yes. When I started in 1940, we were working--well, at that time, the labor laws allowed you to work forty-four hours a week without overtime. So, we were working forty-four hours a week. Later on, we were working ten hours a day and we would come in on Saturday and work maybe a half a day on Saturday. So, we were working fifty hours, forty, fifty hours, every week. They were picking up, because we went to all the shipyards. We went to Federal Shipyard in Kearney--they were building destroyers there--and we'd go to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, we'd go

to the Philadelphia Navy Yard, we'd go to Bethlehem Steel, had a place in Brooklyn. … We would go--I personally wouldn't go there, somebody from the company would go there--pick up the instruments, bring them back to the shop and we'd repair them and return them to them.

RM: Seeing this, did you get the feeling that the United States was going to wind up in the war?

EL: I personally didn't. December the 7th, [1941], and the seventieth anniversary is coming up next week, by the way, … I was home with my parents, on a Sunday afternoon, and heard the announcement over the radio. … "What is a Pearl Harbor? Where is a Pearl Harbor?" We knew nothing--I personally knew nothing--about Pearl Harbor. I didn't know what Pearl Harbor was--didn't take long to find out--and that was the first inkling I had, "Uh-oh, this is it. We're on our way."

RM: It really was a surprise.

EL: To me, it was, yes, yes, especially from the Japanese, because they were negotiating in Washington and they had come out that week to say, "Oh, we have a potential agreement with the Japanese." We were going to agree. In the meantime, the Japanese were already underway, coming towards Pearl Harbor, and we were led to believe that the settlement was not far away.

RM: Were there any Japanese-Americans in your community?

EL: No. We had some Chinese, but, no, I don't recall any Japanese at all. I do remember Chinese, but not Japanese.

RM: Was there a feeling of racism or animosity towards the Japanese after the attack? Did you feel anything yourself, such as anger towards the Japanese?

EL: Not especially, but we were not polite with them. We never called them Japanese. They were always "Japs," always Japs, "lousy Japs," "rotten Japs," or whatever, you know. Today, they're Japanese, but, then, you know, they were our enemy.

SI: You lived in your grandfather's house senior year. Did you move back in with your parents?

EL: Yes, and they bought a house in North Arlington, [New Jersey], and then, I lived with them until I was married. Then, we got married, I moved out. Housing was very difficult right after the war. So, what we did, we found a furnished room and we lived in a furnished room in Jersey City. This was an old converted mansion, if you will. The room we were living in was about twenty-two feet by twenty-two feet. It was a huge room and … there was no bathroom. The bathroom was down the hall and the refrigerator was downstairs in the entrance hall. … What they did, it was a big commercial refrigerator with various shelves on it and each tenant had their own shelf in this community refrigerator, so that you put your stuff on that shelf, your neighbor'd put their stuff on their shelf and that was it--and nobody stole from anybody. If you were a little short, you would borrow and tell them you borrowed. Then, you replaced it for them, but that's where we lived in the beginning. … We found a place in Hopelawn around the outskirts of Perth

Amboy. It's part of Woodbridge Township. It was a house. We rented the first floor. There was a tenant on the second floor and we were on the first floor.

SI: That was all after you came back from the service.

EL: That was after we were married, already had our three children. We had three sons and, while we were living there, I saw an ad in the paper for houses in Sayreville that were being built. We went and bought our house.

SI: You enlisted in the Navy relatively quickly, within eight months of Pearl Harbor.

EL: I was twenty years old in June of 1942. I had to register for the draft. I knew I was going to go in the Army. I was physically fit and, as I said earlier, I didn't want any part of the Army. I didn't want to live out of my backpack; I didn't want to carry everything I owned on my back. So, I went. There were three of us from the shop. We went to the Navy recruiting station and the four of us all signed up at the same time. Three of us went to the same boot camp at the same time, the fourth one went to a different boot camp, but, after boot camp, we split up. We were no longer associated. I was in boot camp for maybe six weeks, I say. I went in in August and, in September, I was out of boot camp.

SI: Did your employer try to keep you in your position through a deferment?

EL: Yes, he did. He wrote a letter to the draft board, trying to get us exempt, because we were doing an awful lot of marine military work and, he said, it was a small shop, and it was a small shop. I think there was about twelve of us working there and four of us are all enlisting at the same time and this was a big blow to him. … He wrote a letter, trying to get us exempt, and I said, "Save your energy. I'm going. I'm not going to stay out. I'm going," and I went.

SI: Was there, even at that time, a stigma associated with those not yet in uniform?

EL: Yes, some, somewhat.

SI: A lot of pressure to enlist?

EL: It was individualized. It wasn't so much generalized, it was individualized. Some people had animosity to those who were 4-F [found to be physically unfit for military service] and other people, myself included, [felt that], "Look, you don't want to go, you don't want to go. You have your choice, I have my choice. I want to go; here I am."

SI: Tell us a little bit about the process of getting into the Navy.

EL: Well, I went to the Navy recruiting station, signed up and I had to go back to my local draft board, because each draft board had a quota and they wanted them to meet that quota. So, I had to get released from my local draft board. They had already met their quota, so, they signed the release and, that way, I could go into the Navy. If they didn't sign the release, I would have been subject to the draft and possibly wound up in the Navy, because everybody that was drafted did

not wind up in the Army. The greatest majority did, but, if the Navy had openings, some were drafted right into the Navy. … Then, we went to New York, boarded a train, went to Newport, Rhode Island, and that's where I went through boot camp. When I got finished with boot camp, I was assigned to aviation machinist mate's school in Jacksonville, Florida. Now, the way it worked there, every thirteenth class that went to Jacksonville, Florida, had to do mess cooking duties. Now, a mess cook does not cook in the Navy--a mess cook serves. You cleaned the galley, you cleaned the mess halls, you served--you put the food out, you serve it--and it was that for thirteen weeks. So, from the beginning of October until January, I was a mess cook, and then, I started service school in January. That was twenty-one weeks in the service school.

RM: Did you apply for the specialized training?

EL: I wanted aviation.

CD: For what reason?

EL: I wanted aviation. I asked for aviation and you were given a written test. My written test was so good that they wanted …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: We were just talking about aviation machinist mate's school.

EL: Oh, right. You're given a written test and, according to the grade you get on the written test, … they will send you to your desired school, if it's open. They said that my mathematics were high enough where I would make a good fire controlman. Now a fire controlman aboard ship is the guy who computes the distance and range and things like that. That's fire--it's gunfire, it's not arson fire, it's gunfire--and they said, "You could do that." I said, "No, I want to go to aviation machinist's school." So, they sent me to aviation machinist's school and, there, what you did, the school was in two sections--they had a day session and an afternoon session. If you had the day session, you went from roughly seven until two and, if you had the afternoon session, you went from maybe two-thirty to ten o clock.

RM: What was a typical day like there?

EL: Well, you had your regular military things. You would drill, you would close-order drill, you would have calisthenics. All this was done when you were not in the classroom. When you were in the classroom, you studied all things connected with aviation. We had courses on identification, friend or foe, where they would put pictures up on a wall, flash them, in maybe a twenty-fifth of second, and you had to identify whether that was a friendly ship or a friendly plane. Now, in the beginning, they would put them up there, it was just a big blur, but, after a while, you'd learn that you could see and get the vision in your mind. After the picture was off the screen, you could still pick them out, because it was in your mind's eye, and we had to identify German ships, airships, Japanese airships and as many surface craft as you could. That was one of the subjects. Another subject, we had fleet instructors--these guys had all been out in the fleet and they were coming back and they were instructing--and we had one there and the

course was fabric repair. The manuals we had were printed in the 1930s and they told you how to repair fabric on an airplane and, while in the 1930s, they had fabric on an airplane, but, in the 1940s, they had aluminum. … The instructors would say, "Now, this is what is in the manual. You have to learn it, because it's on the test." He says, "Once you learn that, forget it, because, now, I'm going to tell you what you're going to experience when you go out into the fleet--you're not going to see any fabric whatsoever." [laughter] So, we had that, and then, we had firing guns. You had to fire small arms and machine guns and target practice. You had all of that.

RM: Were the people going through this training all going to be in the engineering side or were some going to end up in combat?

EL: Well, … you could wind up in a combat squadron.

RM: You could still end up in combat.

EL: … Oh, yes, you could, yes, you could. Now, in Jacksonville, it was … not only aviation machinists--you had metalsmiths there, you had radiomen there, you had ordnancemen there--and that's what they were--aviation ordnance school, aviation metalsmith's school, aviation machinist's school--and each class had its own subjects. … We had to learn Morse code. I only had to do--the maximum, I think, is five words a minute, which is very, very slow, strictly for emergency. We were given semaphore, with the flags, you know, "A," "B," "C," positioning of the flags. You had all those subjects. I don't remember them now, but, at the time, … you remembered them until you passed it.

SI: Going back to basic training, how intense was it?

EL: Oh, they got you up early in the morning and you were out. You were doing your calisthenics. You were doing your roadwork. You were running around. Then, you'd go eat. You had the calisthenics even before you had breakfast. Then, you go in, you have breakfast. Now, the barracks I was in was an annex to a permanent barracks across the road. … They had hammocks in there. Those recruits slept in hammocks. We were in the annex, which was a wooden building, and we had double-decker bunks, which was much, much better. … I was issued all the gear that you need for a hammock. I was issued a hammock and a mattress and a sea bag and, all that, you carried with you when you were transferred from one place to another. Eventually, when I got transferred to Virginia, to go aboard a ship to take me to Panama, they told us at the dock, "Take your hammock and all your bedding and get rid of it. If you've got sheets in there, keep that. … You will never need a hammock again as long as you're in the Navy," because from the 1940s on, all ships were built with bunks and that's what they had, but I had to leave my sleeping gear right there on the dock and they disposed of it.

SI: How well did you adapt to going from the freedoms of civilian life to the discipline and rigors of the Navy?

EL: I did quite well, … because I told you, my father, we were disciplined. We were not wild children. We learned to be obedient and I knew that if I did what I was told to do, I would not get in trouble. If you didn't, then, you had to pay the consequences. … Well, I got the Good

Conduct Medal when I got finished with the Navy; I don't know that it tells you anything or not. [laughter] …

SI: Did you see others in your training company who were not as obedient or had trouble fitting in?

EL: Yes, you'd find a slacker here and there and he paid for it. Some of them, I think they may have done it deliberately, because they were looking for some kind of a discharge, but most of them, they were just rowdy, I guess'd be the word you'd use for them.

CD: When you were in Jacksonville, was there any time for R&R? Did you receive any leave at all?

EL: Well, when we were mess cooking, we had three nights [off]. … There were four mess halls, Section One, Two, Three and Four. All right, Section One would have the duty. After the mess halls were all cleaned up by each of the sections individually, Section One would stand by as the officer of the day would come through and inspect for cleanliness. The other three sections were given overnight liberty. You could go as long as you were back one hour before reveille. … If I was in Section [One]--and I was in Section One--then, the next night, Section Two would have it. I would have liberty, after the mess hall was secured, and we did that. So, we had liberty three nights out of four when we were in Jacksonville, but I was making fifty dollars a month. We got paid twice a month. You never had much money, because, well, fifty dollars doesn't go very far and, well, [when] you'd go to town, all you needed was money for the bus fare and back. You'd go to town and maybe [there were] twenty thousand sailors in the town, [laughter] because it was a big, big Navy base. In addition to the service school, they had an operational base, too, in Jacksonville.

RM: What types of activities would you guys get into when you got out there?

EL: In town?

CD: Yes.

EL: Well, look for the nearest bar, if you had any money. [laughter] If you didn't, you'd sit in the park and, you know, just to get away from the base more than anything else.

SI: Did they have USOs there?

EL: Yes, they did, they did, and the Salvation Army. If you had an overnight liberty, you could sleep in the Salvation Army--they had bunks there. Now, I think they charged you, I don't know, like, twenty-five cents. You could rent a bunk and sleep there overnight, because you would get a weekend off. Every once in a while, … once a month, I think we got a weekend off. So, we would go to town. We'd go to the Salvation Army very early in town, get a bunk for the night, then, go out and do what we wanted to do and come back and sleep in the bunk. We didn't have to go back to the base.

SI: Did you ever get to interact with the local townspeople?

EL: Not so much, a little, but not so much. What we had in our particular one, we had the fighting French. Now, when the war in Europe broke out, a lot of the French separated from the French regime and they came over and they called them the Free French and they were in our service school with us. [Editor's Note: In 1940, Charles de Gaulle founded the Free French Forces in London, consisting of individuals and military units that had fled France after the armistice of June 1940 and wished to fight with the Allies against the Vichy French forces of Maréchal Philippe Pétain and the Axis Powers.] So, we used to associate with them. There was, I think, ten of them in our class and that's what we were doing. We would associate with them.

SI: Yes. What would that entail, just being friendly with them?

EL: Oh, yes, yes, drinking their drink. They used to drink anisette. They loved anisette and, well, anisette's a good drink, but it's a sweet drink and, well, we'd drink that. … We'd teach them American ways, they would teach us French ways and they wore their French uniforms, we wore our American uniforms.

CD: Did they ever talk about if any of them ever encountered the Germans? Did they ever talk about what it was like fighting them?

EL: No, no. Most of them were young, like me, you know. … I don't think they were veterans as such. I think they were more of my generation, and I don't know if they even saw any combat or anything over there.

SI: They were just refugees who joined this force.

EL: Yes.

SI: Were they going to be flight engineers on French aircraft?

EL: Whatever, yes, yes. No, not everybody who went there became a flight engineer.

SI: Okay.

EL: Not everybody. I did because that was the type of plane I was in. There were others. On a carrier, they have the AMMs [aviation machinist mates] that do the repair work on it and they're carrier planes. There's no flight engineer on those planes. You have a gunner, a bombardier, a pilot, but you don't have a flight engineer. You only have flight engineers on multi-engine planes. The Mariner, the PBM Mariner, that had a flight engineer. The PBY, which was the proto, which prelude-ed that, that had a flight engineer. I was a flight engineer on a PBY as well. [Editor's Note: The Consolidated PBY Catalina and Martin PBM Mariner were flying boats used by the US Navy in the Second World War.]

SI: At a certain point in the school, were there tracks you could go down? Did you choose multi-engine, as opposed to carrier?

EL: No, no. Everybody was taught the same thing. Everybody was taught the same. When you got to the squadron, that's when you … became whatever specialist you were. Now, when I first got out of the service school, I was sent to Panama. I was in Headquarters Three Squadron. We were servicing squadrons. I was not in a flight squadron; I was in a headquarters squadron. We had scout planes, that we were servicing. We would gas them up, we would put the munitions in there, we would spot them on it, guide them in when they were coming in and took care of that. You were called a plane captain. A plane captain was in charge of the plane, the maintenance of the plane, and that's what we did. There were two squadrons there, VS-59, VS-60. I was assigned to the Squadron VS-59 from Headquarters. I was not in the squadron--I was just assigned to that squadron, doing their maintenance work for them. … Then, when VPB-1 came to Panama with their flying boats, I transferred from Headquarters Three over to VPB-1. I now became a squadron member, on the flying boats.

SI: Before the flying boats, you were servicing these scout planes.

EL: [Yes].

SI: What kind of planes were they?

EL: OS2Us [Vought OS2U Kingfisher, a floatplane]. Now, the OS2U was capable of floats or wheels, fixed. You could take the plane, lift it up and put wheels on it, or you could drop the wheels and put floats on it, and there were three. There was a float right under the body of the plane and two wingtip floats. In the early, very early, part of the war, the OS2Us were scout planes. They were on the stern of the battleships and the heavy cruisers and, when they had artillery fire, this OS2U would be catapulted off and go out and [find] the range and tell them [if] they were short, they were long, they were left or right. They used them as their rangefinders, because they had no radar and that was what they were doing. In Panama, what they were doing, they were flying in-shore patrols, looking for any unidentified surface craft or submarines or whatever. They were doing the in-shore work, because they had a shorter range.

SI: Before you went to Panama, did you ever get a chance to go back home?

EL: Well, when I left service school--boot camp--I had a ten-day delay in orders, or leave, to get down to Jacksonville, [Florida], and that was the only time. I did not come home for over two years after that. The next time I come home was in 1944.

RM: What was the involvement of your siblings at this time? Were your brothers going through basic training?

EL: Yes, my older brother, right after war broke out, in January [1942], he went and he volunteered, but he had a perforated eardrum. So, they declared him 4-F--they would not accept him for military duty. When he was a young, young kid, I remember this, he had mastoiditis, [an infection within the skull behind the ear], and that's what perforated his eardrum. He had that all [his life]. He was always deaf in his right ear all his life, so that they would not take him for military duty. My younger brother worked with me for a while, and then, he joined when he was

eighteen. The day he was eighteen, he went in on what they called "kiddy cruises." You stayed there from your eighteenth birthday to your twenty-first birthday. When you were twenty-one, you automatically got a discharge, unless you reenlisted, voluntarily reenlisted. When I enlisted, I enlisted in the Naval Reserve for two years, but, during the war, everybody's enlistment was extended for the duration of the war. There was no way you could get out, unless it was through a hardship. … It was automatically extended, but I only originally had a two-year enlistment.

SI: You said you worked with him. You worked with him in the shop.

EL: Yes, in Manning, Maxwell & Moore, in Jersey City, doing the same work I was doing. He wound up as a torpedoman on a submarine and he used to say to me, he says, "You know, I think you've got a lot of guts flying in those planes." I says, "I think you've got ten times the guts I have, going sixty feet under the water and swimming around down there in a coffin. That's what the hell you were in." He told me [that] they were out in the Pacific; they were west of Japan. They were in Vladivostok, the Russian port, which is west of Japan, and they were coming towards Japan from the west. Everybody else was coming the other way, [from the east]. That's what they were doing. … He had, I think he told me, something like a twelve-hour attack, where they sat on the bottom with the Japanese ashcans--[Mr. Laffey makes exploding sounds, imitating the depth charges]. For twelve hours, he sat there. …

RM: He was in combat then.

EL: Oh, yes, yes. He was a torpedoman. His bunk was on top of a torpedo. He was in the forward torpedo room and, when they left port, all the torpedo tubes were filled. I think they had six torpedoes in the bow and four aft, and then, they had extra torpedoes where their bunks should be. So, they filled the torpedo tubes, put the extra two torpedoes there, and he said he used to put his mattress on top of that and that was his bunk. [laughter]

RM: He probably did not sleep too well. [laughter]

SI: Do you remember the name of the boat?

EL: Yes, the [USS] *Squalus*, *Squalus*, yes. [Editor's Note: The USS *Squalus* sank during test dives in May 1939 and was salvaged and re-commissioned as the USS *Sailfish* (SS-192). Mr. Laffey later recalled that his brother served aboard the USS *Spikefish* (SS-404).]

SI: Were you able to correspond with him while you were in the service?

EL: Yes, yes. I would write to him and he would write to me. Now, I was on land. Our mail was quite regular. We had no delays. He was at sea, so, when I would write to him, it may be weeks later before he got it, because they would have to wait for a mail boat to come out, but, you know, submarines, they had to be refurbished. … They came to a mother ship and the mother ship would send them supplies and fuel and whatever they needed there. … That's when he got his mail, because the mail would go to the mother ship, and then, they'd throw it over when they were putting all the supplies in.

SI: What was your voyage down to Panama like?

EL: We were in Norfolk, Virginia, awaiting transportation. I was there for thirty days, waiting for transportation. I was assigned to … a squadron, but I had no transportation. The USS *Yorktown* [(CV-10)] had just finished its commissioning cruises and was going to the Pacific. It pulled into Hampton Roads, Virginia. On July 4, [1943], we got on the USS *Yorktown* as passengers--transit, in transit--and we went to Panama. Now, it took us about ten days to get there, because, every day, we would launch planes. Now, when a carrier launches planes, it has to head into the wind, because it goes at maximum speed and picks up the airspeed of the prevailing winds to give better lift to the plane. So, sometimes, we would be going south and we'd have to turn around and go north, because that's the way the prevailing winds were, and we were out every single day. We would launch planes. I would not--I was just an observer on this whole thing--and then, they'd land the planes and we'd go back down there. It took us ten days. When we got to Panama, we got off. My buddy, Norm, and I were the only two from our whole school [that] got off. We were together and we were shipped out to Coco Solo. Coco Solo was the naval air station in Panama on the Atlantic side of the Canal.

SI: How did you feel about being assigned to Panama? Were you looking forward to that assignment?

EL: Well, it was really nice. The weather was nice, except in the rainy season. In the rainy season, it's truly named the rainy season, because there are periods of time there where it never stops raining. It changes intensity, but it doesn't stop completely, and you're [facing] rain maybe twenty-four, forty-eight hours at a clip. We used to walk around in bathing trunks because there's no sense wearing a uniform or dungarees or whatever. So, we used to walk around in our trunks. It was always warm there. I don't ever remember a cool day. … The barracks had no radiators in them, not a one. There was no way of heating the … barracks. They had screens all around.

SI: What was the state of the base when you got there? Was it a pretty well established base?

EL: Oh, yes, yes. I don't know when they established that base. It was well established when we got there. Everything--the building we were in--it was stone and concrete and it was three stories high. You had the mess halls down on the lower floors and the bunks were above, on the decks above.

SI: You told us you were initially assigned, through headquarters, to this scout squadron. What were your daily activities there? What would you do?

EL: Well, … they would launch the planes there. The squadron would come out, the pilots, and … their observer was a radioman. He manned a thirty-caliber gun in the back. He was the radioman and he was the gunner. Well, they would come out and get in the planes. It was up to us to get the [para]chutes for the pilots, not the crewmen--the crewmen get their own--get the chutes, put them in the seats. Now, these seats were designed to hold parachutes. They were called bucket seats and the parachute would go in there and we'd have the straps all out. The pilot would get in and put it on and climb in there. Some of them would go get their own and

they'd walk out, but we would go get them for them. We would make sure that all his ammo canisters were full. We would make sure that the engine had all the oil and gas needed. Now, most of the time, they flew with a fairly full tank of fuel and we'd check the oil. We would make sure that it was ready for flight. We would probably start the engine and, if it was running smoothly, then, we'd shut the engine off and let him get in. He'd come out at his appointed time and, when he came in for a landing, they would land and they'd taxi over. We were not at the landing strip; we were at the hangars. They would come over and we'd spot them in front of the hangar and, at the end of the day, we would hand push them into the hangar and leave them in there.

SI: How many planes were you servicing?

EL: I only had one, but, in this squadron, I'd say that there was probably no more than ten in each squadron, no more than ten.

RM: What types of missions were these guys flying?

EL: They were flying in-shore patrols for unidentified surface craft and possibly any submarines, possibly. They were in-shore because they were short-range planes. They would go to Salinas, Ecuador, which was south of the Canal. It was a fair distance down there, but they'd fly there, and I was never in Salinas, so, I don't know what they were doing. I'm sure that they were flying patrols out of there as well, because they might be gone for days at a time. So, I'm sure that that's what they were doing.

SI: Do you know if they ever reported seeing submarines?

EL: Not when I was there. All the while we flew--and I flew many missions on antisubmarine patrol--I never did see any evidence of a submarine, never. They were in the area. When I first got there, I remember seeing flashes of fire off on the horizon when I first got there, but, later on, they stayed more in the North Atlantic. They were up there getting the big convoys going over to Europe. They were not bothering the convoys going over to Asia as much as they were going after the ones going to Europe.

RM: You would have been encountering Nazis.

EL: We could have been, yes.

RM: It was not the Japanese so much.

EL: Well, no, because we were very, very far from Japan and [Admiral Marc Andrew "Pete"] Mitscher and what's his name? [General Douglas] MacArthur, kept them pretty damn busy over there. So, they didn't have the manpower to come over to the Pacific side, but we were looking for them. If they were there, we probably might have seen them.

SI: They sent patrols out on both sides.

EL: Yes. In the beginning, I only flew out of Coco Solo over the Caribbean. We would fly as far north as Jamaica and out to the … east, and then, back down to South America. We'd fly down towards Colombia and patrol that area there, looking for submarines and surface ships, but one of the main duties we had was convoy coverage. We would pick up convoys en route from the States going through the [Panama] Canal and fly coverage around that convoy twenty-four hours a day, one of our planes, and even blimps. They had blimps coming from Trinidad that would come up and offer convoy coverage for them, and that's what we were doing. We were patrolling those … ships all the way down. I have a little side story there.

SI: Go ahead.

EL: In 1992, my wife and I were on a cruise out of San Diego, [California], going down the west coast of Mexico. We were going to Acapulco, with several port stops in-between. Our dinner companions were a man about my age and his wife, and he asked what we did during the war and I told him, just as I described to you. He stood up and he shook my hand. He says, "I've been waiting to find you for the last fifty years." I says, "What do you mean?" He says, "I was in the Merchant Marine," and he says, "It was guys like you that gave me the courage to stay in the Merchant Marine, because I'd see [you]. I knew you guys were up there, looking out for me." I felt about ten feet tall. [laughter]

RM: It must feel good to be appreciated like that.

EL: Yes.

SI: Did you request the transfer into the PB2Y Coronado unit?

EL: No, no, they did it. I think I was only in Headquarters Squadron temporarily, because VPB-1 had not been in Panama yet. We were there before the squadron was and I think it was only a temporary assignment.

SI: Roughly how long were you there before you were transferred over?

EL: Well, we got there in July of 1942. …

SI: 1943?

EL: '43, I'm sorry, '43, and I'd say that I was transferred over probably in October of '43, probably October.

SI: We are looking at your aviator's flight log.

EL: Yes, because I want to see--my first flight was in November. I didn't fly the first several weeks I was there, because I had to get acclimated with the planes.

SI: Okay. What was that like, joining a crew and getting used to the plane?

EL: Well, the crew came down from San Diego. That's where the squadron was formed, in San Diego, and they were all experienced people that came with the planes and they were training us on what to do in the plane. Every time I flew, I flew with somebody who had much more experience. A lot of these guys were regular Navy guys. They were in [the Navy] before the war, most of them. Some of them weren't, but most of them were. Of course, they were Navy chiefs, first class, second class [petty officers]. I was a third class petty officer. They were up as high as chiefs, and they were training us on what to do, how to launch the plane, how to prepare for launch. Now, when you launch a flying boat, a flying boat has no wheels, but it's up on land. What they do [is], they have tractors and these tractors would pull the plane out by rope. They had buoys out in the bay, and then, it had wheels on there and they would pull us down a ramp, and, when you get down the ramp, the plane would float. Once it was buoyant, you would take the side gear off one side. There was a crew doing that and there was a crew doing this [side] and there was another crew in the back, taking the tail wheel off, releasing it. They would put it in there and pin it--they would pull the pin and drop it down--and they had beaching boys. These beaching boys used to take the gear, beaching gear, and float it back on to the ramp, and then, they'd put it up on the ramp, waiting for a plane to land, and then, they would float it out and attach it. Now, when we're all disengaged, we would cast off at the bow. We had a snubbing post up at the bow and, on that, we would tie a line down to a buoy in the water. When it was time, we would release the buoy and the pilot would gun the engines and taxi out into the bay and prepare for takeoff. … When you're prepared for takeoff, you had an observer up in the top, because the pilot couldn't see behind him. … The observer up in the back had a headset on and he would warn the pilot of any dangers or possible dangers behind him. Then, we'd turn, go around and takeoff. Most of the time, the takeoffs were towards the Caribbean Sea, because that's the way the prevailing winds were. We'd take off that way, almost all the time, and Pan American had a seaplane base, a base there. You know, Pan American had these big flying boats and they had one there in the Canal Zone, not by the Navy base, further away, and I used to see them coming in from time to time.

SI: Were you always with the same crew?

EL: No, no. We were mixed crews and I had no specific plane. Whatever plane was available, that was the one we were assigned to and we would use that plane to fly. I flew on just about every plane we had in the squadron. We had fifteen planes in the squadron. I think I flew in every one of them.

SI: How many missions would you say you flew? Just glancing at your log, it looks like you did a decent number every month.

EL: I don't know about the total [number of] missions. I really truly don't know, I don't, but I can tell you how many hours [of flight] I had. … I crossed the Equator twenty-six times [laughter] and it looks like I had about 1,060 hours in the PB2Ys [Consolidated PB2Y Coronado, a flying boat]. Now, these flights, [which were] training flights, they may take an hour-and-a-half, two hours. What you'd do [was], you'd go out and the pilot would practice takeoffs and landings, and what they would do [was], they'd just fly, they'd touch, kiss the water and take right off. They wouldn't come to a dead stop. They'd "touch and go," was what they called it. They'd do that. Sometimes, they'd make a dead stop, turn around and start all over again. They

would take anywhere from an hour-and-a-half to two-and-a-half hours. You'd go out on patrol, depending upon where you were and what your duties were that day. … The longest I flew was 14.6 hours in the air, from takeoff to landing.

RM: Where did you go?

EL: We would be out. We would patrol, as I described before, from areas towards Jamaica out towards the eastern edge of the Caribbean, down and around, looking for German submarines. Now, when you're looking for submarines, you're on submarine patrol, you were flying at a very low altitude, maybe eight hundred feet, because what you're looking for is the wake of a periscope. Now, the periscope sticks out of the water a short distance and, as it's going through, there's a little wake behind it. So, you have to be extremely low to pick up that wake and that's what you're looking for. … In the daytime, you would never see a submarine on the surface. You'd only see them on the surface at night, because, at night, they were running their diesels [engines], charging their batteries, and, in daytime, they were running on batteries. They didn't have snorkels at that time. The Germans came out with the snorkels late in the war, where they could run under the water on their diesels, but they had a snorkel that would be above, sucking fresh air in and taking the exhaust fumes out. They didn't have them at that time.

RM: A lot of your missions would have been at night then.

EL: Night and day, both. We were looking for the wake as well, and then, when we were on coverage, the coverage was twenty-four hours a day, until the convoy got through the Canal. Maybe you would fly one night--the same coverage, you might pick up two days later, because they took a couple days to get down from the States. They were traveling at a slow speed, most of those convoys.

SI: Was one of those missions preferable to the other or did it not really matter?

EL: Made no difference. [When] you're flying, you're flying. In this plane, we had ten bunks. When we were on this fourteen-plus hour flight, … we flew with a double crew. You had two of everything up there and the ones that were off duty would lie in the bunk and … catch a few winks. We also had a galley. This galley had two hotplates. We had a freshwater tank that would hold about forty gallons of water. We'd fill that with fresh water. It was up high in the galley, with a hose coming down over the sink and the sink had a drain going over the side. All your waste went right over the side and, with these hotplates, we had coffee. The coffeepot was on twenty-four hours a day when we were flying. It was there and we had food. We could cook. We would go down to the commissary and get food. You had so much per person per flight. … I don't know what the exact number [was]--let's take a number like twenty-five cents--each person was allowed twenty-five cents and your flight was for sixteen hours, so, you got two meals. So, that means each person, … fifty cents. So, if you had ten people, you had five dollars. You'd go down to the commissary and you could buy five dollars' worth of groceries. You could buy steak, you could buy canned goods, whatever you wanted, that they had in cans, and it was just a regular store and you would take it out. … We'd get ice. We had a little icebox there. We'd put the steak in with the ice and we cooked that halfway through the long flight. We had food, we had drink.

SI: Describe what it was like being in the plane, which was not really built for comfort--the noise, the vibration, that sort of thing. What was it physically like in the plane?

EL: Well, you've got to be careful where you're walking, because a plane like that has watertight bulkheads, just as they have aboard ship, and what you have [is], you have a door with the opening maybe eighteen inches off the deck. So, when you're walking from one compartment to the other, you have to bend down, so [that] you don't hit your head, and you have to lift [yourself] up, so [that] you don't bark your shins. You're going from one compartment to the other. The doors were always open, by the way, unless you were going to make an emergency landing. Then, you'd close the watertight doors, because what you wanted to do [was], as they do aboard ship, you want to compartmentalize any water that gets in there. That gives you a little better chance of exiting the plane, but, other than that, it's a routine after a while. You know, your first flight's a thrill, there it is, and then, you come in, you land. … If you landed too hard--and, sometimes, you'd land awful hard--somebody would go down and check all the rivets in the bilges, to make sure there was no water leaking around the rivets, because, if you landed too hard, you can actually bust rivets out of the hole. … If you did that, you could be in trouble, but most of the time was just routine.

SI: As a flight engineer, would you have to work on making sure you had enough fuel to do these long patrols, to make sure that enough was conserved?

EL: Well, yes. That's not the duty of a flight engineer. A crewmember does that, but the flight engineer sits at the flight panel. The flight panel is all engine instruments. That's all it is. The pilot up there has all the flight control instruments. He has his altimeter and all of the things that he needs, air speed. We had engine temperature, oil pressure, oil temperature and fuel consumption. That was all in front of us, one for each engine. Now, remember, you have four of everything up there and we had the mixture control. Aboard an airplane like that, you could control the air/fuel ratio going to the carburetor. When you take off, you took off on "full rich." That means you had the maximum amount of fuel per amount of air going in, but, after you were flying, you would lean them [the controls] back. You'd cut back on the fuel. That way, you would change the ratio. In the meantime, you're conserving the fuel. Now, you would take off, maybe you were sixty, sixty-five gallons per hour on the engine for takeoff, which only took three, four, five, eight minutes, but, when you're flying, you could pull it back maybe to about thirty-nine or forty gallons per hour, which gave you plenty of extra mileage per gallon of gas, and that's what we were doing. We would monitor all the instruments to make sure that they were within the accepted parameters.

SI: Since you were on antisubmarine patrol, would you have a lot of depth charges on the plane or bombs? [Editor's Note: A depth charge is an antisubmarine warfare weapon intended to destroy or cripple a submarine through the shockwave created when it explodes nearby.]

EL: We carried Torpex depth charges and I think they were something like 450 pounds each and we carried four in each wing. … If you did see a submarine, the strategy was to drop before, above and ahead of where you last saw that submarine, hoping you'd get it. Now, these depth charges were set to go off at a depth of sixty feet [underwater]. They didn't go off on contact,

because, when a submarine was at periscope depth, the hull was sixty feet below the surface and what you wanted to do [was] rupture the shell by concussion. So, if they went off at sixty feet, the concussion of the water, hydraulically, would theoretically crush the hull. That's what you were trying to do. You were not trying to directly hit the submarine. You wanted to get within sixty feet of it, so [that] it would crush the hull.

RM: Even though you never encountered a submarine, did you guys ever come across something that you thought might have been a submarine at first?

EL: At one time, we did, yes. We didn't drop the depth charges, but we thought we did. We thought we saw something, but all it was was a little reef, just barely above the water, above the surface of the water, and you see this little stream behind it, the little wake, and we went down. We went down probably under a hundred feet [altitude] before we could identify what it was, because it was fixed, and we said, "Well, it's not a submarine. It's fixed, because, if it was a submarine and was moving, the wake wouldn't be there," but that was the only false alarm we ever had. We did drop depth charges because there's a finite life to these [munitions]. They are dangerous after they get old, so, as the bombs got old, they had to dispose of them and the best way to dispose of them [was] put them in a plane, go out to sea. … We'd drop a fluorescein dye, [which] made the ocean green, and we would dive-bomb that and dived onto--our boat--the fluorescein dye as a target, using the depth charges.

SI: How much turnover was there in the unit?

EL: None.

SI: Once you were in the unit, you were there for good.

EL: … Once we geared up--in the beginning, yes, it started off incrementally. It was only several of us transferred over, and then, more and more and more came, because, at the time, they didn't have the whole fifteen planes down there. They didn't need them. They only had--I don't know how many come down there the first time. It was probably no more than half a dozen that come down in the first wave, and then, they would add. As more planes came, they would get more crew and most of these crews came from the States, fresh out of service school, the great majority of them.

RM: We often hear from veterans that the friendships they made in the military were different and special. Did you make friends where you would consider your relationship different, stronger than with friends back home, because you were serving together?

EL: Well, when I was in boot camp, there was a fellow in a different company than me that I met when we went to Jacksonville and we were pals there and we were in the service school together. When he got married, he had a child--I was the godfather to his child. When I got married, he was the best man at my wedding and he was also the godfather to our first child. I was friends with him all his life, until he died about ten years ago--ever since then, always. In fact, it was because of him I moved to Hopelawn. He and his wife saw this apartment empty, the house was empty, and he says, "Hey, Ed, come on down here and look at it." So, I went down,

looked at it and we moved in. It was because of him that I moved there, but we've always been friends. We took vacations together. We've gone to Hawai'i together, we went to Florida and we went all over together, for years and years and years. He was my best friend ever.

RM: That friendship started during the war.

EL: During the war, yes. Now, my wife's brother, he was in the … same section as Norm, [his best friend]. He went to Virginia with us, awaiting transportation, and he was in a blimp squadron assigned to Trinidad. I was in this squadron, HEDRON Squadron, assigned to Panama. He says, "Let's keep in touch. … I'll give you my sister's name and address. So, when we get settled, you write to her. She will give you my address and you can send it to her and I'll get your address." I said, "Fine." So, we started writing … back and forth, start exchanging pictures. She was a very attractive lady. So, first thing you know, I come home on leave two years later, I go up and meet her and we've been pals ever since. … In September of 1946, I married that girl. Last September, we celebrated our sixty-fifth wedding anniversary.

SI: Congratulations.

RM: Wow.

EL: Thank you, all because of her brother. [laughter]

SI: People that you probably would have never known otherwise.

EL: No, no.

SI: You mentioned that you had good mail service in Panama.

EL: Yes.

SI: Was it important for you to get mail?

EL: Only if you didn't get it, you know. [laughter] I used to get mail from my family. I told you, my mother had a sister who became a nun and she was teaching in a school in Albany. So, the students in her school, she had them send me letters. So, I used to get letters from the students in her school in Albany and I got letters from my family. My aunts would write to me, … all my family, my parents, my brothers, my sisters. I never really wanted for mail. I always had a sufficient amount, always.

SI: What would you do on days when you were not flying? What were your duties then?

EL: Well, more times than not--in Panama, it's always warm--we'd be out sunbathing on a lawn somewhere, reading books, magazines. You did have certain things to do. You had to do calisthenics. We played an awful lot of volleyball. In the hanger, we'd set the net up in the hangar and we played an awful lot of volleyball. The Navy--I guess, all the military--is great for calisthenics. First of all, it keeps you in shape, and we were all in pretty good shape, all of us.

We did that and, … sometimes, we had to go to classes. They would teach us Navy protocol and things, you know, discipline and things of that kind. … If you were standing by, you had a ready room, you had to be in that ready room, because, when it's ready to fly, "Okay, you're up. Board your plane," but, most of the time, our free time was literally our free time. We didn't have an awful lot of duties when we weren't flying. Now, when we were in Panama, these planes were built for worldwide service. They had de-icing boots along the leading edges of the wings and all air surfaces. They were heavy. The Navy said, "We don't need them in Panama. There's no ice there. Take the de-icing boots off, which will lighten the plane." We also had a top turret. The top turret was used for aircraft and other planes coming around, but there were no enemy planes down there [in Panama]. We took out the top turret. The pilot and copilot had huge plates of armor built around them to protect their body. There was no enemy firing at us, so, we took all the armor out. We lightened that plane considerably, which increased the range of the plane without adding any more fuel. We could increase the range of the plane.

SI: Are there other examples of things you modified in the field as circumstances demanded?

EL: Other than that, no, and these were not squadron directives; they were from the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

SI: Okay.

EL: They came right from the Bureau to do that. We did it. I helped remove the de-icing boots. We had to build scaffolding up, because that plane was, like, fifty, sixty feet from the ground. So, we're up there and the screws were, like, every inch-and-a-half apart. So, you're up there with a Yankee screwdriver, taking them out, take the plate off, put it down, and then, you have to put slugs in there to keep [it covered], because there were holes. You had to fill in the hole. They'd give you little rivets to put in there.

SI: Did you ever have trouble getting supplies, not enough parts or fuel?

EL: Never, never, and food, the food in Panama was excellent. We used to get most of our meat from South America. The Argentinians had these big beef farms there and we used to get a lot of Argentine beef and, mostly, all the food that we got was grown locally, either in [and] around Panama or from South America itself. We … took no supplies from the United States food-wise, left it up there for those people, who were in short supply.

SI: Did you ever have interactions with the locals, the Panamanians?

EL: When you went to town, … yes, there were merchants. Now, remember, this was the Canal Zone. This was US property. … We were not in the … Republic of Panama. We were in the Panama Canal Zone, which was [United States' territory] until, what? December '99, I think it was, when it reverted back to the Isthmus again, but, yes. [Editor's Note: Under the Torrijos-Carter Treaties of 1977, control of the Panama Canal Zone was scheduled to pass from the United States to the Republic of Panama in December 1999.] When you were there, you would go into town, you'd go to restaurants, you'd go to merchants, you'd buy things. … More times than not, you were buying from Americans, because it was the Canal Zone. You saw a lot of

Panamanians there and, as they had here in the United States, they had segregation there. They had "gold" drinking fountains, they had "silver" drinking fountains, and we drank from the gold fountains, the Panamanians drank from the silver. They had segregation in the Canal Zone. I don't know about the Isthmus itself, but I know, in the Canal Zone, they did have segregation there. [Editor's Note: Employees in the Panama Canal were assigned to either the "gold" or "silver" payroll. This system, initiated under the French, took on racial meanings under the American administration, with "gold" representing the white workforce and "silver" representing the non-white workforce. Separate towns, living areas, schools, public facilities, restrooms and drinking fountains were set up for the "gold" and "silver" populations.]

RM: That was brought in by the United States.

EL: Yes.

RM: There was no segregation amongst the Panamanians.

EL: Because, you remember, the Americans got that. Teddy Roosevelt negotiated that and that was in perpetuity. We were supposed to have that [the Canal] forever and that was American territory.

SI: Were there any African-Americans serving in the area, that you knew of?

EL: Well, the Panamanians were all mixed. They were nearly white and they were very dark. … There were some Indians … from the San Blas Indians. They were there and they were usually short people. They were usually close to five foot tall, very short people, the San Blas. [Editor's Note: Mr. Laffey is referring to the Kuna Indians who live on Panama's San Blas Islands.]

SI: What about African-American sailors in the Navy?

EL: None in our squadron, none in our squadron at all. They were much segregated during the war, very much segregated. … The first black servicemen I ever saw was a ship coming through the Canal where it was loaded with Marines and they let the Marines off and here was this black regiment of Marines. They were the first black servicemen I ever saw, outside of cooks. Now, they had cooks aboard ships. The cooks aboard ship were invariably black. They had a special rating. They had a cook's rating. They were special. [Editor's Note: Mr. Laffey later recalled that these men served as officers' mess stewards, not cooks.]

RM: How were the cooks usually treated by the other servicemen?

EL: I never experienced it. I don't know.

RM: Never?

EL: No. I told you, I never saw a black serviceman until I saw these Marines. They were the first ones, and I was never aboard ship for any length of time. The most time I spent in the Navy

[on a ship] was going to Panama on a ship and we returned from Panama on a British *Patroller*, HMS *Patroller*, which is also a carrier. We come back to San Diego when the squadron broke up. Other than that, I have very, very [little] sea life. Mine was almost all land.

SI: Were you always in the Canal Zone or did you ever leave the Zone?

EL: Well, no, one of our bases was [in] the Galapagos Islands. Now, if you're not familiar with it, the Galapagos straddled … the Equator six hundred miles off the coast of Ecuador. That's where Darwin was there for two or three years, sketching all the [wild]life there, and that was our advanced base. We used to fly patrols, two patrols every day, from the Galapagos Islands to Corinto, Nicaragua, two up and two down every day. It was about a seven, eight-hour patrol, because you would fly a "Z" track up and a "Z" track back and they'd overlap [in a zigzag pattern], and we'd stay overnight in Corinto, and then, we'd fly back again the next day. Usually, you had a day or two off, and then, you'd do it again. … That was our advanced base. You didn't stay there for any extended period whatsoever. You'd stay there for two, three days, a week, ten days; then, you'd come back to Panama.

SI: How often would you do that?

EL: Well, maybe you'd do it once a month, maybe you do it eight or nine times a month. It varied; there was no set schedule at all.

SI: That was all antisubmarine work, no convoy coverage.

EL: And surface. See, remember, this is over the Pacific. We're looking for mostly unidentified ships and we used to find them. … They'd go down and the radioman would use his blinker light and talk to them with the blinker light and get an identification from them, because that was important. … If they were unidentified, they could possibly be enemy.

SI: Were there ever any close calls, in terms of the aircraft having a mechanical failure or weather affecting it?

EL: Well, I experienced one. We were flying from Panama to San Diego, because the squadron was breaking up, and one of our stops was [in] Corpus Christi, Texas. We landed in Corpus Christi. They towed us to the seaplane ramp, but [we] can't get the tail beaching gear on correctly. It got jammed in there and we couldn't get it off. They said, "All right, leave it there. We'll pick you up tomorrow." A hurricane came. Now, we're inside the breakwater and here's this hurricane. We have the whole crew, but only one pilot, and we're in there and all we have is this snubbing post. We're tied to a buoy and somebody had to keep an eye on that snubbing post, to make sure that the line didn't come off. Everybody got seasick. I was next to the last to get seasick. My buddy, Norm, was the only one who didn't get seasick, so, he spent the greatest time watching that. Well, the next day, things calmed down, and we got the beaching gear squared away and they pulled us up on the beach. Now, that was close, because, [when] you're in a hurricane, you've got to watch, because the winds are pounding one side or the other. … [If] they pound too hard, they can break the wingtip float off and damage the [aircraft] and you might possibly capsize. Now, another time--I was in Galapagos when this happened, but I didn't

witness it--a plane flew in. Now, at that time of the year, in Galapagos, you have the Tradewinds that are in constant turmoil. Sometimes, they're blowing from the north, sometimes, they're blowing from the west, and they change. Today, they call that "wind shear," because it's sudden shifts of wind. This plane come in for a landing and the wind shifted. He nosed over and that was it. Five people were killed in that plane, five were rescued. Several days later, I was on the crew that flew the injured people back to Panama where they could get better treatment, because the facilities in Galapagos were, well, primitive. We had doctors. We had no nurses, just doctors, corpsmen and dentists, but they were very primitive. So, a day or two later, we flew them back to Panama for treatment and I don't know what happened to them. I never saw them again after we took them to the hospital, never saw them again.

RM: Were there any other major accidents or incidents?

EL: Not in my time. I have a list here of planes that were damaged, that preceded me in that squadron, because, remember, that squadron started in San Diego before it come down [to Panama] and they have a list of planes that were damaged [or] destroyed. Some, on their way down from San Diego were lost. They lost them in, I forget [where], … in the Caribbean somewhere. They tied [the planes] them up down there because of a storm. … I was not in the squadron at that time.

SI: How did the officers and enlisted men get along?

EL: Very, very good, very good. Our officers were regular guys. They used to come to our barracks and play cards with us. [laughter] Yes, they'd sit there, and, remember, these guys, they were anywhere from an ensign up to a full lieutenant, and the commanding officer was a lieutenant commander. You rarely ever saw him. I flew with him a few times, but you very rarely saw him. He didn't do much flying, because he had a lot of squadron duties to do, but he did have to fly from time to time. He would check out other pilots from time to time, too. I flew with him on a check flight one time, flying a navigation flight, checking the navigation training of the officers. In the Navy, you don't have a navigator. Everybody's a pilot. You're a navigator-pilot. You do both, you don't do one or the other. The Air Force has separate rankings for them.

SI: Yes, correct.

EL: Not in the Navy. So, he would check them out from time to time, too, but they were regular guys. In fact, one of them, I didn't know him personally, but my buddy, Norm, knew him. His parents owned a lumberyard in Islen, [New Jersey]. His name was Lieutenant Ten Eyck and the Ten Eyck Lumberyard was up there for years. He said he used to go up there to buy lumber when he was doing work. So, he was familiar with that family.

SI: Before we leave Panama, is there anything we should ask about? Do you guys have any questions?

RM: How isolated did you feel from news of what was going on in the world? Were you able to keep up with the day-to-day events of what was happening on the battlefield or the home front?

EL: Not too much, no, not too much. We were not well-informed.

RM: Yes.

EL: No. I can't recall ever hearing much about the war itself. …

RM: They would not show you newsreels, like you would see in the movies.

EL: Well, yes, but, … when we went to the movies in the service, most of the time, it was a movie. You saw the movie and you left and that was it, whereas if you went to the theaters, as I said, as a child, you used to see a feature, a co-feature, the news, the cartoons. We didn't have that. We just had the movie and that was it, and they were fairly modern movies, too. They were no more than a year old. Some of them were only this year's issue, the same year's issue. You saw decent movies.

SI: What other entertainment did they have available for you?

EL: None. I told you, Bob Hope, on his tour of all the bases, came there and he entertained everybody at the base, and that was in March of 1944. He brought his whole troop with him.

SI: What was that show like?

EL: [laughter] Well, you've got people up on the stage and you've got about twenty thousand people all around you, so, you can draw your own conclusions. [laughter] Depending upon how close you got to the stage, you didn't see an awful lot. [laughter] You could hear it, though, because it's on loudspeakers.

RM: How was morale in your squadron overall?

EL: I'd say it was good, I'd say it was good. Well, you had the typical gripes, you know. When you're in the Navy, there's only one good base and that was the one you left. The one you're on stinks and the one you're going to is worse. So, you know, everything else, I'd say we had good morale, was good. We all got along, everybody in the squadron got along, because you never knew who you're going to fly with. We were not an isolated crew. We would fly with different people most of the time we flew. So, you had to stay friends with them. You didn't want any animosity at all.

SI: What were the holidays like overseas, like Christmas?

EL: Well, Christmas and Thanksgiving, you were fed better than you were at home. Thanksgiving dinner, you had all the stuff you had at home. You had the turkey with the stuffing and the mashed potatoes and ham and pumpkin pie, whipped cream. We ate well. I could never say the food was lousy. It might have been mishandled in the cooking, but the food itself was good, [laughter] depends upon … the chef that you had at the time, you know, but I was satisfied with the food.

SI: It was not a particularly difficult period when the holidays would come.

EL: Well, you got a little lonely. That was it, because, you know, you wanted to be home with the family, but you learned to accept it. As I said, … it was two years between trips home, which is quite a long time. You learned to accept it. If you're going to sit there and moan about it and groan about it, the first thing you know, you're going to wind up in a psycho ward. So, I learned to accept that you roll with the punches.

SI: After Panama, you were assigned to Naval Air Station Banana River.

EL: Yes.

SI: In Florida.

EL: Yes, that was an air bombing training unit. They were the PBYs. They were two-engine flying boats, but they had amphibians. The amphibians had landing gear that stayed with the plane. You could … retract it or return it at will. It was hydraulically operated and what we were doing, we would take these bombardier trainees and they would be in a compartment away from the flight deck. We would fly over Lake Okeechobee in Florida. They had a huge metal caisson down there, maybe about a hundred to 150 feet in diameter, above the water, and, when we would fly over that, the bombardier, training bombardier, would take control of the plane. He would actually do the flying by radar. By that time, radar was a little more advanced than it was when I first went into the Navy and he would try to drop a miniature bomb within the confines of that caisson and they had a photographer in the back who would take pictures, because, when it hit, a puff of smoke would come up. … He would take pictures to see how well they were doing, and then, they rated them on that. They were all trainees and we would fly from the Atlantic, across Florida, into the Gulf of Mexico, where you had different elevations because of the thermal effect of the Sun on the Earth and the water, and he had to compensate for all of that. We rarely ever flew north and south, we almost always flew east and west, because of the changes in air currents. I did that for months and, I don't know, from I guess it was March of '45 until December of '45, when I got discharged.

SI: What was your reaction to the end of the war in Europe, for example?

EL: Oh, we were happy, we were happy. It was joyful. The end of the War in Europe, we were glad it came. The end of the war in Japan, I was with one of the aviation ordnancemen and they said they had an atom bomb they dropped on Japan and I said to this ordnanceman, "What's an atom bomb?" He says, "Beats me. I never heard of an atom bomb." [laughter] We didn't know what the heck an atom bomb was. It was unheard of at the time. [Editor's Note: V-J Day was declared on August 14, 1945, in the United States and August 15, 1945, in the Pacific, following the atomic raids on Hiroshima on August 6th and Nagasaki on August 9th.]

RM: Did you have an understanding of what it did?

EL: Oh, yes, we knew the damage it caused, but we knew nothing about it. I'd say it was probably after I got discharged before I knew anything about atom bombs and only because of what I read in the paper or heard on the radio.

SI: Was that a surprise, that the Japanese surrendered? Did you expect the war to go on longer?

EL: Yes. My brother-in-law, my wife's older brother, was in the Philippines, getting ready to go over to Japan and that's what they did. They sat there and waited, and, because of the atom bomb and the surrender of Japan, they didn't have to go. Otherwise, they were poised and ready to go and, as they say today, there probably would have been a million casualties if we ever did invade Japan.

SI: What were the living conditions like at Banana River?

EL: Oh, they were quite good. We had several liberty towns we could go to. We had Melbourne, Florida, and we had Cocoa, Florida. Cocoa, Florida, you know, today, Banana River has been taken over by the Kennedy Space Center. That's what it is, where the Banana River, the Indian River all come together, and, now, that is the Kennedy Space Center, down there, and we were there and we used to go to Cocoa, Florida. That was our liberty town. We had a causeway, about a mile long, across from the beach onto there and we'd go there, [to] movies, taverns or whatever. Our biggest entertainment was hanging out in bars. [laughter]

SI: Is there anything else from your time at Banana River that stands out that you would like to share?

EL: Oh, yes. There was a TBF [Grumman TBF/TBM Avenger] Squadron, PBM-5. They were torpedo bombers. They were the same kind of plane that George Bush flew during the war, torpedo bomber. [Editor's Note: President George Herbert Walker Bush was assigned to Torpedo Squadron VT-51 during the Second World War.] They were in Florida and they were training. … I think there was eight planes, they got lost and they couldn't find their way back. They were going across. They were in radio contact with the people on the shore and they got totally confused. Their radio signals were wrong, they didn't believe them and … the entire squadron was lost. They've never found evidence, to this day, … of that squadron. We went out searching for them the day after--I forget what day it was now. The day after, we went out looking for them and we couldn't find any trace of them and, as I said, to this day--that was on December 5, 1945. [Editor's Note: On December 5, 1945, five TBM Avengers, containing fourteen airmen, designated Flight 19, disappeared during a training flight out of Naval Air Station Fort Lauderdale. A PBM Mariner flying boat, PBM-5 (BuNo 59225), searching for Flight 19 out of Naval Air Station Banana River was also lost and assumed to have exploded in mid-air. The loss of Flight 19 has become part of the Bermuda Triangle legend.]

SI: You were also there when President Roosevelt died. What was your reaction? [Editor's Note: President Franklin D. Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945.]

EL: Yes. Well, actually, I was in Jacksonville, Florida, the day he died. When we were transferred, I was sent to a receiving ship. Remember, [in the] Navy, you're always sent to a

receiving ship for further transportation. I was in Jacksonville, Florida, and we were going to the movies that night, on the base, and we get to the movies. Before the movie started, one of the officers came out and he announced that President Roosevelt had just died, and then, [Mr. Laffey imitates gasping]. You know, we were heartbroken. He was our President. He was literally the only President I ever knew. I was alive when Coolidge was President, but I don't remember him. I do remember Herbert Hoover, though, and he was the only President we ever knew. So, you know, we were kind of heartbroken, "He died. That's a shame." "And Harry Truman's taking over." "Who's Harry Truman?" [laughter] You know, he was a nobody at the time.

SI: Do you have other questions about the war period?

CD: Did you have any regret that you did not go to a combat theater?

EL: No, no, none. I did feel as if I was not doing the most I could do when I was flying these patrols out of Panama. "You know, there's no enemy, there's no nothing, and what am I doing? This, anybody can do this." You could train monkeys to do what I was doing, you know. "Why waste my time doing this?" and that was the only real regret I might have had, that I just seemed that I was not doing enough for the war effort, until I met that Merchant Mariner. Then, well, he changed my outlook on things, when I met him.

SI: Tell us about getting discharged. You had the two-year commitment that was extended for the duration.

EL: Yes.

SI: Did you have to get points to get discharged?

EL: Yes. Everybody was assigned points, and I can't remember the exact number, but it was something on this order--for every month of service, you got a half a point. For every month of duty outside of the States, you got another half a point. If you were married, you got points. If you had children, you got points, and you had to have a minimum number of points to be discharged. As I said, my buddy, Norm, he was married, he had a child, so, he had more points than I did. He got out, I think, in October of '45. I had to wait until December until I accumulated [enough], and I think you needed something like fifty points, but these are all numbers that may not be accurate, but they're close. So, when I had enough points, I was sent up to Lido Beach in Long Island, got my discharge from there and took the subway home, into North Arlington.

RM: What was your official rank?

EL: Aviation machinist's mate, flight engineer, second class, AMMF2C.

SI: Did you ever consider staying in the service or staying in the Reserves?

EL: Yes, yes. When I was in Banana River, I thought about signing up. … I inquired and they told me, if I signed up, I would probably [be] kept in the same naval command and I just didn't

like the Florida Navy Command. I figured, "Well, [if] I'm going to stay here, I'm not going to. I'll go home," and I went home. … Many, many months after the war, I said to Norm, I say, "Hey, Norm, let's sign up in the Naval Reserve. They have a station down in Lakehurst. We could probably be based there." He said, "Ed, stay out, stay out." [laughter] So, I listened to him and I stayed out, but I did think about going into the Reserves.

RM: Can you describe what that feeling was like when you were on the subway home, after being gone for two years?

EL: "I'm going home, I'm going home. Yes, that's it. I'm finished, no more."

RM: Were you excited to see your family?

EL: Oh, yes, yes.

RM: Did they all know that you were being discharged?

EL: Oh, yes, I wrote them a letter, because, … when I was being transported, I knew that. I wrote them a letter and I told them I'd be home about that date, because, you know, when you get to a Navy base, nothing is carved in stone. You know, they can change rapidly. I said, "I'll be home around the 22nd, almost positively before Christmas Day," and I was.

RM: You walking in still must have surprised them.

EL: Well, joy, they were very, very joyful. They weren't too surprised, because, you know, they're more or less expecting me. They didn't know what hour I was going to be there. See, what I did, I took the subway into New York, then, I took the bus into Journal Square, Jersey City, and then, I took that bus into North Arlington. I had to walk home from the bus stop, about five city blocks.

RM: Did you encounter people that were there to greet you, anybody in uniform?

EL: My parents; … no, nobody in uniform, at home, no.

RM: Were you in uniform as you entered?

EL: Yes, yes. During the war, you were required to wear your uniform at all times off the base. You could not be in civilian clothes, it was a requirement. So, the war was already over, but that's the only clothes I had. I had no civilian clothes with me, didn't have any, because all I had was either my fatigues, well, dungarees, and my naval uniform. So, I come home in my dress blues. The dress blues has the white ribs on the collar and the white stripes on the cuffs.

RM: Did anyone thank you? Did you encounter anyone that wanted to hear your stories?

EL: Not until many, many years later. We visited the *Yorktown.* It's in Charleston Harbor right now. It's open to the public, as is the Battleship *New Jersey* in Camden. You can tour that. I

went there and one of the souvenirs I bought said, "USS *Yorktown*," and I wear that when we go on vacation. … One time, I was on vacation, I had the hat on and a person unknown to me come up to me and he says, "Were you in the war?" I says, "Yes, I was." He shook my hand, he says, "Thank you very much," and this was many years after the war, maybe twenty, thirty years after the war, but, until then, nobody ever thanked me. I don't know if I deserved any thanks at the time, and the same thing happened, fleet week, three years ago, in Manhattan. We were there to see a play, my two sons, their wives, and we were walking along, probably Broadway, and there's a Marine and his girlfriend. … I said to the Marine, "Are you on the [USS] *Iwo Jima* [(LHD-7)]?" Now, the *Iwo Jima* is an aircraft carrier for Marines. He says, "Yes, I am." I says, "Thank you for serving." I said, "I was on the *Yorktown*." He says, "Well, thank you for serving." So, he shook my hand.

SI: Did you have an idea of what you wanted to do with your life once you came back from the service?

EL: I don't know if I had any goals or not. … You know, I just wanted to make good.

SI: Did you want to get back to work right away?

EL: Oh, yes, yes. When you were discharged, they had what they called "The 52/20 Club." The 52/20 Club means that the State of New Jersey would pay you twenty dollars a week for fifty-two weeks while you're unemployed. [Editor's Note: A provision of the GI Bill that provided unemployed veterans with twenty dollars per week for up to fifty-two weeks.] Well, I got out in the end of December, I started to work the end of January, because I didn't want twenty dollars a week. I could make more than that over … at my former employment. I went right back to where I was and, by law, they were required to rehire me. So, I went back there and I stayed there for two years, and then, I advanced on to other jobs.

RM: Did you consider using the GI Bill to go to school?

EL: I'd thought about it, but I never really had the time. I was busy working, earning a living. I'd thought about it, but I never did use any of it.

SI: You told us how you came to know your wife. Was it not until after you got out of the service that you met her for the first time?

EL: No, I was still in service. I'd come home on leave. I think it was in 1944, I came home on leave, and, at that time, what I did, I had to take a bus to Newark, get on the Lehigh Valley Railroad, go into Easton, PA. Her father met me at the station, drove me up to their house. They lived on a farm on the top of the hill on the outskirts of Easton. … Her father had a fifteen-acre farm up there. He worked for Ingersoll Rand. He was a machinist in Ingersoll Rand, but he had all this property. That property was left to him by his father. His father bought the property many, many years ago--I don't know when he bought it--and they lived in a stone house. The house had fourteen-inch thick stone walls and was built in 1830. It was on a stagecoach route from Easton to Philadelphia. No toilet, no bath, they had an outhouse. Her two brothers and I

put the bathroom in after the war. We put in a full bathroom, a sink, a tub and a toilet in the bathroom. They had water, but they didn't have a toilet.

RM: What did you do the first time you went on leave and got to see her? Did you go out?

EL: Yes, yes. … I don't know what we actually did. I know we wound up at a bar. She didn't drink. She was only, what was she? nineteen years old, I guess. She didn't drink and I went into the bar and, for every drink I ordered, she drank a Coke. She must have had about five or six glasses of Coke while I was drinking shots, [laughter] and I was drinking bourbon at the time.

SI: When you were discharged, were you planning on getting married?

EL: Yes. We got engaged Christmas of 1945. Christmas Day, we got engaged and we were married in September of '46. … She wore the same gown my sister wore when she got married in 1941. My sister got married in September 1941 and she asked Vivian, she said, "Would you like to … borrow my gown to get married in?" It was a beautiful gown and she said, "Sure, I don't have one yet." So, she borrowed it and, at our sixty-fifth wedding anniversary, my sister took it out of storage and she and Vivian are standing there, holding the gown, and they took pictures of the two brides, married in the same gown, five years apart.

SI: That is great. You told us before a bit about how it was difficult to find housing, because so many GIs were coming back home. Did your job change at all? Was it the same work?

EL: Well, it became a lot more specialized. When I first started, I did everything that had to be done to repair the instruments. After a while, it was more or less compartmentalized. … It wasn't really a true assembly line, but one person would do this and somebody else would do something else. … When I worked in the shop, as I say, there must have been about a dozen of us in there, but, after the war, there must have been twenty-five or thirty. It was much, much bigger, much bigger. They expanded considerably during the war.

RM: Do you think your training and experience during the war helped you in your career?

EL: Yes, yes, it did, it did. It gave me a better sense of discipline for one thing and, also, it gave me a sense of, "Hey, don't fight it, accept it." [laughter]

SI: Why did you decide to go from that shop to Koppers Coke?

EL: More money, and it was in the field. It was applying the instruments, not only repairing, applying them. Now, in a coke plant, what they do, they take coal and they put it in an oven and they bake it for twenty-four hours and recover the gasses and the residue goes out and it's almost pure carbon. … That has a lot of instrumentation, mostly temperature, because they have to maintain temperature. If the temperature's too high, … the coal being coked could fuse. If it fuses in the oven, they've got a serious problem, and, if it isn't hot enough, they're not going to get all the impurities out. So, temperature, to them, was quite important. Pressure was important, because, now, we are taking the gasses off, but these pressures were low. They were, like, ten inches of water, twenty inches of water. They were low pressures, and then, … coming

off the oven, then, the turbines would pick it up and send the gasses, the manufactured gas, over to Public Service that put it in the mains that distributed it to the homeowners. … Then, I found out that Chevron had just built a huge refinery in Perth Amboy. They bought out the old Barber Asphalt Plant and they started to build this up. They put a cracking plant in, two fractionating crude oil towers and all different accessories that go with it, except for lube oil. We did no lube oil, and they were looking for instrument men. So, I went there, I applied for the job and I got it. … There, it was a little more sophisticated, because, now, everything here now is pneumatic. There were some electronic, but it was very early in the electronic field. It was almost all pneumatics, because, then, I became quite adept at repairing and maintaining pneumatic instrumentation.

SI: You stayed there for quite a while.

EL: I was there fifteen, sixteen years, somewhere in that neighborhood. Then, we went on strike. We went on strike in January and I was not going to stay unemployed. So, I got odd jobs and I wound up with this one company, it was an employment agency, and they sent me out to different places and one of the places they sent me was to Rhodia, in New Brunswick. That was a chemical plant, fine chemical plant, and I worked there for maybe two, three months and the chief engineer liked me. He liked me better than the foreman he had in his shop, because the foreman in his shop was--well, he wasn't the brightest guy around. He would tell me to do things that I knew were wrong and I would correct them and I'd tell the chief engineer, I says, "This is what he wants--this is the way it's supposed to be." So, they asked me if I would go with them permanently. So, after the strike was over, I went back to Chevron and, before I left there, I went to the plant engineer and explained to him what was happening and I said, "What are my chances of advancement here in Chevron?" He says, "Not very much." He says, "We're pretty well fixed where we are." He says, "If somebody dies, then, we'll have an opening. Right now, there are no openings and you may stay where you are for many, many years before there's any advancement." I said, "I have a good chance for advancement now." He says, "Well, I'm glad you told me," and he says, "I wish you a lot of luck." So, I left and went with Rhodia and stayed with them until I retired, and I retired in 1985.

SI: Were you involved in unions?

EL: Yes. When I was in Chevron, I was a shop steward in the union. Shop steward doesn't have much to do. He just, you know, takes gripes, and then, they go see the chief shop steward, and then, they have grievance meetings. Sometimes, you'd go to the grievance meetings, sometimes, you wouldn't. It all depended.

SI: Was it an outside union?

EL: Yes, it was the Operating Engineers [International Union of Operating Engineers]. They were Operating Engineers and we went on strike. We left the Operating Engineers and became a local of the Teamsters Union. While we were on strike, we changed locals.

RM: Do you have a family? Where did you and Vivian decide to settle down?

EL: We bought a house in Sayreville. They had an ad in the Sunday paper explaining this development that's going on and we went and we looked at the model house and we signed up and we bought the house. Now, this house is a Cape Cod. It had four rooms downstairs, plus the bath. Upstairs was unfinished. When I signed up for it, they said that, "We will finish the upstairs, put sheetrock up there, put linoleum on the floor, put doors in all the closets, for an extra five hundred dollars." Now, they wanted 9,990 dollars for the house; no, it was 250 to fix it. I said, "Okay, for 250, go ahead." So, for 10,250 dollars, I bought a house. Today, that house is probably worth in the neighborhood of 250 to 300,000 dollars, probably, but I've added on to it. That was our starter house. We were going to live there for a while and sell it and buy something bigger. Well, it got bigger because I made it bigger. I added on to it. [laughter]

RM: You got your money's worth.

EL: Yes, yes.

SI: You have three boys.

EL: Three sons, five grandsons. One is married, one is a corrections officer in the Department of Corrections in the … Trenton Prison in New Jersey, and I said to him, "Why did you take that job?" He said, "I wanted a secure job. I took the Civil Service test and I checked off everything, policeman, fireman, prison guard." He says, "I checked off everything. This is the first one to come up." He said, "I took it." Now, this kid--he's not a kid anymore, he's thirty years old--he has been a physical ed. nut all his life. He is bulked up and he is strong, powerful, and he had to go through training in Sea Girt, the same training that they give to the State Troopers. He's in the same place, but different courses. He was there for four months, in training, and then, he was assigned to the state prison in Trenton. … Now, this is his fifth year he's been … a guard in the state prison and I tell him, I say, "I think you're nuts. I think you're safer being a cop than being there." [laughter]

RM: How about your grandson, Andrew? You said that he served in Iraq.

EL: Yes, he was over there for thirteen months. He went over there in January of, what was it, '04? … to February. He was over there for thirteen months, I know.

RM: You wrote January 2004 to February 2005.

EL: Yes. Incidentally, when he came home--well, before he came home, his father, Dennis, was in contact with his platoon sergeant and the sergeant's wife. They would email each other back and forth and she told him, the sergeant's wife told Dennis, that they're coming back. He was stationed in … Hawaii. "They're coming back and this is the date they're due back." So, what we did, his mother and father, my wife and I, we got airplane tickets and we flew to Hawaii, … in total secrecy. He knew nothing about this. On the day he was discharged--not discharged, the day he came back--they had a parade in the hangar. … He comes in there, he parades, he doesn't see us, but we see him. We know where he is. So, when the General said to him, "Well done, congratulations," and he applauded and he says, "Discharged," he [his grandson] turned and walked away. His father was running, trying to get his attention. He's hollering, "Andrew,

Andrew." Nobody answers to their first name when you're in the service. You don't have a first name in the service--you have a last name. I was in the service. I run behind him, I holler, "Hey, Laffey." He turned around, he says, "Holy shit, Grand-Pop." [laughter] He was totally surprised, totally.

RM: How did he earn his--it says here--a Bronze Star?

EL: Yes. I don't know all the details. He was in a Humvee. Now, at that time, the Humvee didn't have the armor protection it has today. He was the top gunner in the Humvee. You have a driver and an observer, and then, you have the guy in the top and he's up there and that was his job. I'm not sure what town he was in, but his platoon was pinned down and these guys were in mortal danger. So, he stood there with his machine gun, firing at everybody and anything at all, until his men could take cover and go back into a safe space. Well, his lieutenant put him in for the Bronze Star and he was awarded the Bronze Star for exceptional duty.

RM: Do you feel like you have a special connection with him because of the service?

EL: Yes, yes. Last Christmas, … well, he was in the 25th Infantry, so, what I did for Christmas, one of his Christmas presents, I bought him a baseball hat with the 25th Infantry insignia on the cap. This year, I have a catalog and I got him a beer mug and, on the beer mug, … it's engraved, the 25th Infantry insignia and it says, "SPC Andrew A. D. Laffey," and that's going to be another one of his Christmas presents.

RM: I am sure he will put it to use.

EL: Yes, yes. Believe me, he was not when he went in, but he is now. I think he's a bit of an alcoholic, not a great alcoholic, but he does love his beer. [laughter]

SI: Is there anything else you would like to add about your postwar life or any part of your life that we have not covered?

EL: Probably not. I think we've covered a lot of subjects today.

SI: You probably talked for more than you thought you were going to talk.

EL: I said to my wife, I says, "You know, I'll probably be home about twelve o'clock." It's almost twelve-thirty now and I'm still here. [laughter]

RM: Do you ever have reunions? Do you see these guys that you served with?

EL: No, no, never. The only pal I ever had, as I said before, was my buddy, Norm. Well, until he died, he was the best friend I ever had, the longest friend I ever had, and, if it wasn't for the military or the Navy, I probably would have never met him.

SI: What is your most vivid memory of your time in the service?

EL: Probably a landing where the pilot didn't do a good job and started taking on water. He came down and he landed awful hard. I was the flight engineer on the flight panel, the engine panel, and I says, "Take over," I said to one of the other guys. "I'm going down, check the bilge," and I check it and there's water coming in and I said to him, "We're taking on water." So, he called emergency and … took us right over to the ramp and they pulled us out almost immediately, because you don't know how long you have until these things start filling up, but, other than that, I didn't have any real scary moments, not really scary.

SI: Did you always think that the pilots were competent and doing a good job?

EL: Very, very. Well, one thing I do remember, in Galapagos, they have iguanas. Now, these are marine iguanas. They are on the rocks and we're there in our bathing suits, watching these iguanas going down into the water, coming up. Now, you've got to be careful of marine iguanas, because, when they come up, being down there, they ingest a lot of salt and the salt is poisonous to them. So, if you're within several feet of them, they are expelling that salt and you're going to be sprayed with it and you're going to get that salt spray. … Incidentally, about seven, eight years ago, we took a trip to Galapagos. My daughter-in-law and my son, my wife and I went to Galapagos and we got on a boat and this boat took you from island to island to island. We did not go to the island that I was stationed on, because it was beyond their range, and he said--he knew the island, the guide we had knew the island--he says, "There's nothing there. It's just the volcanic rock," and that's what it was when we were there, just the volcanic rock, with some cactus and tumbleweed. That was about all they had and he told us, he says, "You know, you are the only person who was in the service who ever come back that I conducted a tour around these islands, the only one, the first one," and then, from there, we went to Ecuador. I straddled the Equator at the monument. I got one foot in North America, one foot in South America. Then, we went down to Machu Picchu, in Peru, and we toured that.

RM: That must be incredible.

EL: You land there, the altitude is thirteen thousand feet. You walk into the terminal, they have oxygen stations all around, in case you need them, because the air is rarified up there at thirteen thousand feet. Well, that's not at Machu Picchu. That's in, I think it's Cuzco, is the city you go to, and then, you go [on]. You take the train and the train is, like, an all-day ride down, because it's a switchback. You go here, you go there, you go there, and that takes you down to Machu Picchu.

CD: It seems like you have done a lot of traveling.

EL: I've been on every continent, every one.

CD: Did your time in the service influence that?

EL: No, my wife did. [laughter] My wife loves cruising. We've been on, I think it's thirty-five different cruises. This summer, we were in Norway. … We went up for the aurora borealis, but you don't see it where there's too much light. It's better in the … darkness, that is, at night. We went up to the northernmost city in Europe. … It's north of Norway. I mailed a postcard back

from there. Years ago, we took a trip around South America. I was in the southernmost city in the universe, Ushuaia, Chile. So, I've been from the most northern to the most southern cities in the universe, occupied cities.

RM: What was your favorite place to visit?

EL: I liked Hawaii. … Alaska is fascinating, I liked Alaska. Yes, yes, it's very fascinating. I have pictures of the Sun at 12:01 AM in the sky, from Norway. It never sets up there for certain periods of the year. … One side of the ship is the Sun, the other side is the Moon, the same day. [laughter]

SI: That is really remarkable. Growing up, you were isolated in Newark and, now, you have been all over the world.

EL: All over, been to China, walked the Great Wall of China. I saw the terracotta soldiers. Are you familiar with those?

SI: Yes.

RM: I am quite jealous. [laughter]

EL: Yes. I spent eight days on the Yangtze River, before they built the dam. We got on and we went down the Yangtze River, making stops overnight, went through the gorges. Now, was it the Seven Gorges, I think it is?

CD: Three Gorges Dam.

EL: Three Gorges, yes, and then, we went down--they were building the dam and we went through around it. It was still being built.

SI: Thank you very much. We appreciate all your time and your stories, and thank you for your service.

EL: You're quite welcome. …

SI: Thank you.

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

Reviewed by Zachary Arbeitel 5/1/12
Reviewed by Mark Bittner 5/1/12
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 7/10/12
Reviewed by Edward Laffey 7/26/12