

Joseph L. Benson Oral History

World War II in Carver County Oral History Project

November 12, 1999

Interviewer: Stacy Helmbrecht-Wilson

Interview with Joseph L. Benson

Interviewed by Stacy Helmbrecht-Wilson

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Stacy Helmbrecht-Wilson SHW
Joseph L. Benson JLB

SHW: This is the World War II Era in Carver County Oral History Project. The date is November 12, 1999. I am the interviewer. My name is Stacy Helmbrecht-Wilson and I am a staff member at the Historical Society. Today I'm going to be interviewing you. Why don't you tell us your full name in case it does get separated from the rest of the materials.

JLB: My full name is Joseph Louis Benson, spelled just the way it sounds.

SHW: Where were you born and when were you born?

JLB: I was born on a farm in Parnell Township, Traverse County, Graceville, Minnesota.

SHW: Where is that located?

JLB: Way in the western part of Minnesota. Can you stop this?

SHW: Sure. Did you grow up there?

JLB: Grew up in the same place.

SHW: Did you grow up on a farm?

JLB: Grew up on a farm.

SHW: What did you raise?

JLB: We had a variety of crops—all the grains plus corn and wheat and oats and barley. We raised hogs and chickens. Our farm was a half section. I can remember in the twenties we did it all with horses and got the first tractor about 1928. From there on in, it was getting a little bit more modernized all the time, but that was about the way it went.

SHW: That's pretty early. I've been talking to some other people who didn't get tractors until the forties or fifties. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

JLB: I had two half sisters and one half brother, and I had two real brothers and two real sisters.

SHW: Where do you fall into the lineup?

JLB: I'm next to the tail end. I was born April 4, 1918.

SHW: We'll get to what happened to your brothers and sisters during the war as well. Big family.

JLB: The one I'll be talking to is one of my real brothers and sisters because the others had left pretty early in life. My oldest brother died the year I was born with a big flu epidemic that they had during World War I, so he died during that time, so I never did know him anyway. That's about it.

SHW: What were you doing in 1941? Were you going to school?

JLB: It depends upon . . . I graduated from college in 1941 from Gustavus Adolphus College, and that summer I went up to play pro ball at Crookston, Minnesota, and I played ball all summer there. Then in the fall I was back in college again, but as a teacher. I was teaching physical education at Gustavus Adolphus College in the fall of 1941.

SHW: Was Physical Education your major?

JLB: Physical Education was my major, yes, one of my majors.

SHW: What position did you play?

JLB: I was a catcher.

SHW: Did you play ever after the war?

JLB: I played a lot of baseball, but never any pro baseball. I played a lot of independent baseball in the state of Minnesota, yes.

SHW: My father played semi-pro ball when he was in college.

JLB: Where did he play?

SHW: Pennsylvania. He was a pitcher—never really got his curve ball down. All right, were you aware about what was going on in Europe and Asia?

JLB: I would say all through my college years I think we had newspapers and we could read, and I think I was well aware of it. Then in 1940 I was playing baseball at a small town in Plummer, Minnesota, and I happened to room with a fellow who was . . . they gave me a job so that I'd play ball in the summer time, and then they gave me another job as a drag line oiler working for this fellow. When they asked me if I'd like to work on a drag line, be a drag line oiler, I said, "Well, what's a drag line?" Anyway, he turned out to be selling . . . he and his brother sold scrap iron. They were from Fertile, Minnesota, and he talked in his sleep, so I

always knew what the price of scrap iron, what they were selling it for a ton, and I knew where it was going—the people who were buying it were the people who were at war. I knew there was things going on. I was very aware of it.

SHW: Did you think the U.S. was going to get involved directly?

JLB: Perhaps. At one time I think there was a draft that we all had to register for and so forth. I think I was somewhat aware of the fact. But being young and footloose and fancy free, I didn't think too much about it, I'm sure.

SHW: What were you doing in December of 1941 when Pearl Harbor happened?

JLB: That's kind of an interesting story because that day I was teaching down at Gustavus, and it was in the fall. I knew I had a draft number, but one of my friends had a car. He was going to St. Olaf College just to visit there that day. In fact, there were two of them. One of them had the car, but my friend and I went with—I'll put it that way. We knew people at St. Olaf College. In fact, I knew a young lady there that I had met up north that I thought was pretty nice, and maybe I'd see her or something. So we took off for St. Olaf College unaware—this was on December 7. We got there sometime, I think, after dinner. We went into the boys' dormitory and there sat a couple of brothers of this girl I knew, and they were listening to the broadcast. I said, "What are you listening to?" They said, "Japan attacked Pearl Harbor." That's the first I knew in 1941. All I can remember then is listening there for a while. It was a beautiful day on December 7, very nice day here—sunshiny, and I did see the girl that I knew—it's the same one now that's here. Anyway, we went back then, and that's about all I can remember of December 7. But it was an interesting day. I don't know if it was the war that made it more interesting or going to St. Olaf. I can't remember which one it was.

SHW: That's interesting, though. Did the Americans' involvement in the war impact your life?

JLB: Well, no, I don't think. I imagine we thought about it, and it was a sneak attack and so forth. We spent a lot of time listening to the radio and trying to keep up with the news. I remember that. Right away I started thinking, well, if there is war, I was right at the right age, although I was a little older than most people that maybe went in at the time. I had graduated from college. Right afterwards, I think I signed up. Being that I was a physical education teacher, I joined the navy. I was going to be a physical education instructor in the navy. So I was in the navy then a short time afterwards. Then one day I got a card saying that if I was eligible to be a naval cadet that I'd have to go and take a physical. If I was eligible, I think that was the first part of the war and there weren't enough pilots at that time. So, if I could pass that exam, I would have to be a naval cadet instead of going in as a physical education instructor. So I went up and took a physical exam and passed it, and that's how come I was in the naval air corps.

SHW: Where did you go for basic training?

JLB: That didn't happen until . . . I got deferred until the end of school. So my induction date was July 2, 1942. That was my date of . . . when you get a commission and so forth, that's your date of whatever it was—July 2, 1942 when I went into the service.

SHW: You went in as an officer?

JLB: No, I went in as a cadet. In fact, I went in as a seaman second class. The basic training was at Minneapolis, Minnesota. When I first went into the naval air corps, you had to have two years of college to get in. When I went down there then, I found out . . . I think it was the first class where they accepted high school graduates, so I was maybe one of the oldest ones. I think I was the only college graduate in the class. I have the list of it someplace back here. I think there were thirty-some people in my class. We took basic training at Wold Chamberlain.

SHW: Was basic training tough?

JLB: No, it wasn't too tough. It was interesting learning to fly. The first month we didn't learn to fly. I was restricted to the base the first month because I had never been good at math, so I was restricted to the base. That means that the rest of the cadets could go weekends. I had to stay there because of math and so forth. But I managed to make it anyway. By the way, I had a very good friend who was a year behind me in college. In fact, he and I were the battery at Gustavus. My senior year he was a junior. Then I coached baseball down there when he was a senior. We were in the same class together. He was the only fellow that I knew when we came in. His name was Clarence Light, a man who happens to be from Watertown. I'd never been to Watertown before that, but he was from this town.

SHW: That's neat. Were you at Fort Snelling for basic training?

JLB: No, Wold Chamberlain.

SHW: I don't think I know where that is.

JLB: Wold Chamberlain is a big airport there. Humphrey they call it now, or whatever it is.

SHW: What did you train in when you were there?

JLB: As seamen second class, we went to ground school for a month. That's how come I was restricted to the base because I didn't pass my math tests. I can remember one fellow, he was a high school graduate, and he told me that he didn't see much sense in ever going to college because he didn't have any trouble with passing his math tests. We learned to be pretty good friends later on. He was a very good fellow. In fact, I and the veterinarian in this town attended his funeral last year. He happened to die a little younger than he should have. He wasn't much younger than I was. I imagine basic training was . . . maybe one of the hardest parts was learning your left foot from your right foot.

SHW: They made you learn how to do all the marching and stuff?

JLB: I got into my very first little skirmish down there because being this friend of mine was living in Watertown, he said one day, "Why don't we fly over Watertown and buzz the town?" By the way, we became cadets after the first month. When we started flying, we were naval

cadets. So we rendezvoused over the flying red horse station, and we started across Minnetonka. He knew where Watertown was; I didn't, so I was following. Pretty soon one of the higher up officers who was sort of looking over the whole training field saw these two planes going across Lake Minnetonka. He came there and flew beside the second one and motioned him back. By that time I was back. He followed him right down, but when I got back down my name was on the board, too. So we got to polish a little brass for a few hours while we were at Wold Chamberlain.

SHW: What kind of planes did you train in?

JLB: They were biplanes, which is a two-winged plane called the Stearman. I forget the designated number on them. But they were Stearman biplanes, open cockpits where the instructor sat in front and the student was in back. We communicated through a little ear thing from the front to the back.

SHW: Had you ever thought of flying before?

JLB: Not really. I'd had one flight before. Another fellow and I had gone up. We didn't tell our parents we were going, but at a county fair once we had enough money so we had a quick fly. We went up for about fifteen minutes or ten minutes, whatever it took. That's the only time I'd ever up in the air before.

SHW: Did you like it?

JLB: Yes, flying was good. I wish I could see some of the friends back there. I still remember some of the names. I have seen a couple of them that I flew with, and I had seen a few of them who aren't living anymore, but it was an interesting time being at Wold Chamberlain with this group. It was the first group that had high school, so I was quite a bit older than the rest of them. As a result of that, when we moved for continuation for our training, we went down to Corpus Christi. We went by a train, and I suppose because I was the oldest and a college graduate, I was in charge of the group. I'll never forget that trip as long as I live. It was quite a trip. I won't go into detail, but I remember we were supposed to change trains in Houston, Texas. They sidetracked our two Pullman cars because the train had already left. We were late getting down to the train for Corpus, so we couldn't leave until I think it was maybe nine or ten o'clock the next morning. What are we going to do? We got in there about seven o'clock, and ten minutes after the train stopped, they were all gone downtown Houston. I got home I think it was three o'clock in the morning, and I was the first one back except for a couple that didn't leave at all. I really swept that time, but they all got back in time to take off, and we made it to Corpus Christi.

SHW: Trying to keep track of a bunch of eighteen-year-olds is very stressful. I taught high school for a little while.

JLB: If I had it to do over again, I don't think I'd worry about it like I did then, but when you're in charge of about thirty; we didn't all graduate or make it out of Wold Chamberlain, but about thirty of us did, I think. We took the next training down at Corpus Christi.

SHW: What was Corpus Christi like? What did you train for down there?

JLB: That was a step beyond our basic training. Primary flight training was in Minneapolis, and the next one was, I think they called it basic down at Corpus Christi. You could train for fighters; you could train for . . . the squadron I went into was OS2U's, made by Vought Sikorsky, and they were planes that were catapulted off battleships and cruisers. That was my final squadron down in Corpus Christi. I have at least one interesting thing that happened down there. It was all interesting, very interesting. When you think of your roommates and their troubles . . . I had one roommate who quit because his instructor was such a terrible guy, he couldn't get along with him. He didn't ever get any praise, just things he did wrong and so forth. They happened to both be Polish, and it didn't work out. But there were many, many interesting things. One of the most interesting things that happened to me was, I mentioned the demerits that I got when I was caught going across the lake. I always tried to do what was kind of right and so forth, but I sure piled up a lot of demerits. One of them, a couple of these half sisters I told you about, they were very good cooks and they sent me a bunch of real good stuff that they had baked. Down there you couldn't have anything in the south in your dresser drawers because of the cockroaches. I got them right at noon, and I had to go someplace, so I couldn't pass them around and get rid of them, so I stuck them in my bureau. That afternoon they inspected, and I came back and boy did I have a bunch of demerits there. When one time when I was walking, some of these things for the demerits, you had to walk with a rifle on your shoulder and march back and forth. I got in trouble because I was standing watching, and a group of Phy Ed people came, and in the beginning they were quite a ways away from me, then they came closer and closer, and finally I had to jump back. The fellow that was the head of it, what I could have been at one time—I was in that Phy Ed outfit, but I was changed to a cadet; I was glad afterwards that I made the change—he came back and he let me have it. He gave me a bunch of demerits. Then my very last flight that I had in my squadron, we had been flying for . . . we went down in September, and this was I think in March sometime was the very last one I had, we were night flying and we were coming down landing in the water, and on my last landing I stayed in the water and you taxied around and you waited to be drawn up on land by tractors and a whole group of enlisted men that worked over the plane. It so happened that after it was all over, they changed their usual procedure, but I came up there and I can remember, I suppose he was chief petty officer or somebody, and he yelled, "Somebody turn off the (such-and-such) light." He yelled it so many times, finally I just put my hand across all the toggle buttons. The same toggle button was on the one that started it. I just put my hand over it, and holy smokes! I should have mentioned, in order to start these planes, you had to put a shotgun shell—it didn't have bullets in it—and a little muzzle, and close it, and then you'd press this thing down here. But you had to lift up. That had sort of a safety valve on it. You had to lift that up and then press it, and she'd go "Boom!" and the propeller would go around. Well, this plane that I had, that safety valve wasn't there, but I didn't know it. This was at night; you couldn't see. It was dark, so when he kept yelling at me (some of the words weren't that pleasant), I just put my hand over it—Boom! I tell you, I didn't sleep that night. If you could imagine the number of people that were around that airplane getting everything hooked on and ready to pull it out, and the propeller is the most dangerous part of the airplane, when that went around, my heart just sank. Luckily, no one was hurt, not even touched. But it could have been a couple guys killed. So, what did I get? I said, I didn't sleep that night. I went down to the squadron the next day. I was all through flying—my last flight. I went down to the squadron the next day, and my name was on the board. I was supposed to see the chief flight

instructor two days from then. So there I sat for two days wondering what was going to happen. I was still kind of taken back, but I was happy that nothing more serious had happened. They had a rule in the navy that if you had seventy-five demerits, you had to go in front of a big board. I think it was over a hundred, you were automatically out. I think my demerits at that time had piled up to over a hundred. I can honestly say that I always tried to kind of do what was right. I was brought up that way, I guess. Finally I went down to him. I wish I could remember his name. I maybe did at one time. I lost my flight book somehow. I think they took it from me and never gave it back when I turned in some flight gear after the war. I maybe could remember some of these names. But I can remember he was a lieutenant commander, and a real nice fellow. We talked. He'd been out fighting the war in the Pacific already and had come back. He had happened to be in this same squadron that was catapulted off ships and so forth. He said, "I'm going to have to give you a first class offense." He understood that it wasn't all my fault. I said, "Sir, I can't stand a first class offense." He said, "Why?" I said, "I'm demerit embarrassed." He said, "Why?" So I had to explain all the demerits I'd gotten. I can still remember him sitting there kind of smiling. He said, "I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll change that. We won't make it any offense at all. Are you ready to graduate?" I told him it was my last flight. He must have looked it up, and everything had gone fairly decently. I must have had a pretty good record. He said, "Are you ready to graduate?" The only thing between me and my being an officer—an ensign—and graduating would be I hadn't passed Morse Code. He said, "How long will you be here?" I said, "I don't know. I'm going in for an exam in a few days." He said, "Until you pass that, I'm going to ask that you spend every night down with the crew down here that work on airplanes during the nights. It be a good learning experience, and you'll learn an awful lot." That's how I got out of that one. It so happened that I went down there and spent that first night with them. The next day I passed my Code and I graduated and was headed for home. That's the first furlough I had been on. So that was just kind of an interesting part.

SHW: That's very interesting. Did you get to choose what kind of plane you wanted to be on or did they just stick you?

JLB: Did I get to choose what I was going to do? No, I didn't. At that time, I knew my orders were from there to go to New Orleans. It was sort of a coordination school where they sent all people who were going to be instructors. I was sent there for a month to this coordination school. Then from there I was sent to Hutchinson, Kansas, where I was an instructor. So I taught cadets how to fly for the next thirteen months.

SHW: Were you keeping in touch with your wife at all those points?

JLB: I wasn't married at that time.

SHW: But you had met each other.

JLB: Oh, we met each other back in 1938. But it was off and on here and there.

SHW: So you weren't writing back and forth?

JLB: Nope.

SHW: Did you see her on your furlough?

JLB: Nope. Wait a minute. I hadn't seen her for about a year, I don't think, or written or anything. On my furlough I went back to Parnell Township where I was born, stayed with my folks for about three weeks. Then I took a bus back from Wheaton to Minneapolis, and when I was home my sisters came. One of them had a couple of kids, and they had mumps when I was home. So they didn't stay too long, but they stayed long enough so that my other sister who was unmarried at the time hadn't had mumps, either, and I had never had mumps. I'd been exposed to them many times but never had them. Anyway, that night I got in to the bus depot on Seventh Street in Minneapolis. I had been thinking, Well, I think I want to give this girl I knew from St. Olaf a ring. So I did, and I got her. I was just lucky I suppose. I hadn't even seen her for over a year. I hadn't written her. She said something about, "I'd like to see you." So I took the next bus right out there. That was kind of the beginning of our relationship again. It ended up, last week we just celebrated our 56th wedding anniversary, so it's been a long time.

SHW: Congratulations.

JLB: Then I went from there down to this coordination school in New Orleans. I had quite an experience down there, too. When I was about ready to leave, I had never ever missed a flight or a muster as they call it in the navy; I'd never missed one. For some reason I had been out with a group of young girls who were having a party. Men were always vacant, so they had called up our base and asked if we'd send some young people down there. They were having a dance at one of the hotels downtown. So we went down there. Taking somebody home that night, we were going to get in a taxi. Bob Hope and Bing Crosby were down there on a golf tournament. They had played a golf tournament to raise war bonds and so forth. We were going to take the cab, and here they got out of it. They started walking down the street. We walked right behind them. The lady wasn't going to let us in, but we put our foot in the door, so we did make it in. As a result, if I'd look around here, I'd have Bob Hope's autograph. Bing Crosby wasn't with him, but his friend was with him. He had had too much to drink. He couldn't hold a pencil, so I didn't get his autograph. That was just something that occurred. Then I got mumps when I was there. So I was only in the hospital a week, though. I lucked out. Some people had been in three weeks. I was really swelled up and so forth, but in a way it was . . . I had interesting experiences down there. It was real fun. So I stayed an extra two weeks. It's usually a month. Then I went to Hutchinson, Kansas.

SHW: Was it weird dealing with people from all over the country when you're coming from a small town in Minnesota and going to the deep South?

JLB: I didn't really find anything very difficult. I can remember getting in a bus one time, and going to the back of the bus, and I didn't realize that that's where all the black people had to go. There were black people, and they looked at me kind of curiously and so forth, but I had never ever had any trouble with that kind of stuff. But it was interesting. It was different. I had never traveled outside of . . . When I was in college I went to maybe Wisconsin and Iowa. I had been in South Dakota, but that was maybe the extent of my . . . Oh, in high school a little portion in North Dakota we played high schools there. Other than that, that was as far as I had ever been.

So it was interesting. I found the navy being very interesting that way. I can't say I was lonesome or had any emotional problems or one thing or another. I was never lonesome; I was over that stage. It was kind of interesting.

SHW: It sounds like it. What was Hutchinson like?

JLB: That was a big naval station they had built in the wheat fields out in Kansas. I came there in June 1943, and I instructed there until March of 1944. It was wide-open spaces out in the wheat fields, a naval air station out in the wheat fields. It was interesting, too. When I left New Orleans and came home for another visit, this girl I talked about before came to Graceville, Minnesota, and we decided there that we were going to be engaged and so forth. She came down to Hutchinson while I was there. In fact, it was August 23, 1943. Then a little later we decided we were going to be married on November 4, which, as I said, we just had our 56th. I got what they called an emergency leave. I don't know why they called it that, but that's what I got to get married. I didn't have any trouble because the fellow that was the executive officer down there, I happened to get to know him, and I don't know how this happened, but he was from Fertile, Minnesota. I asked him if he knew the person who sold the scrap iron up I was telling you about. There's another story I could put in about him, but this could get too long, so I didn't do that. He knew him, but not only that, I had a cousin who graduated from Gustavus the year before I did, and she taught up in Fertile. She is a very nice person—one of my favorites. She was a nice looking lady. He had gone with her a little bit. So I had no trouble. We came back, and we had our first home in Hutchinson, Kansas. It was a cute little apartment downstairs. It so happened that one of her brothers was a cadet down there when I came down. He was through flying. I didn't teach him to fly, but one time I asked this fellow, the flight instructor, and he and I had a flight together, which was very nice. Later on, not too long after I'd been there, he went down and took his further training at Pensacola. When we were still in Hutchinson, Kansas, I think it was in February, not knowing why, he contracted spinal meningitis and he died while he was in Pensacola. That was a sad experience. So we went home for that time. Right after that I was sent to Glenview, Illinois, where I was an instructor, too. It wasn't too long, and my wife was home because she had stayed home a little while with her parents after they lost their son, then she came down there. Then we had a home in Glenview, Illinois. It asks a question in here, "What was one of the bad parts about it?" Maybe it was moving. You had to move. The nice part was that somebody would come in and do it for you, but then you always had to look for a place to live, and so forth. But we were lucky and found a nice place to live in Glenview. About a year after we were married—maybe it wasn't quite a year—our first child was born. By the way, we met some real good friends. That's the thing that's the positive part about my being in the service is all the good friends we met. Some were very . . . we became close. I wish now I could contact about two people that were very good friends I haven't seen since. I'd just love to know what's happened to them because we had some good times together.

SHW: I wonder if you could get a hold of them through the Veteran's Service Administration.

JLB: I'm sure I could, maybe. I'm going to try that. It costs a little money, I know, but I would like to know about that. Anyway, I wasn't an instructor there. When I went to Glenview, I was a check pilot. That's all I did, was just check people who were going to fly ups or downs. I liked that part. From there we went to . . . I remember we drove down there. It was an interesting trip. I

think there were four of us in a car that left Chicago, or Northbrook. We lived in a little town called Northbrook, a suburb of Chicago that was close to Glenview, Illinois, where we were stationed. We went to Atlanta for four months of training. Then we went from Atlanta to the American Airlines Training School in Fort Worth, Texas. We were there for a month, where we took instrument training and so forth. Then from there we went to . . . I have lots of stories in between, but things get too . . . We met more new people, different people. Coming home for my son's baptism, and so forth, and driving back again was an interesting occasion. From there I got my overseas. First of all I was sent to a naval station in California to wait overseas duty. I got into VR-11. VR-11 was a transportation group that was supposed to have thirty airplanes in the air at all times. They traveled mostly over the pacific area. I went out to the naval air station in San Francisco, but I can't think of the name of it. There it was an interesting stay, too, because I ran into people from out in Parnell, and I remember I spent a Christmas with them. Right after Christmas, right after January, I headed for the Hawaiian Islands. That's the only ship ride I'd ever had. We were supposed to fly out, but a bunch of officers took our place, so they sent us out in a ship. That was an interesting deal. I could go into lots of detail.

SHW: Feel free to talk about some of that stuff.

JLB: No, I think it gets too long. Everybody got sick. It was the first ride. We had spaghetti and meatballs for supper, and the deck got so slippery you could hardly walk on it because there was spaghetti and meatballs all over after everybody had thrown up. It was just a mess, I tell you. I think we were aboard ship for about five days. I can remember one fellow after five days he'd been seasick every day, and he looked like death before we got to the Hawaiian Islands, Honolulu. We were stationed in Honolulu then. We flew out to all the islands. If I had my book I could tell, but I know it was hundreds of thousands of miles we flew over the Pacific in this VR-11.

SHW: Do you know if you saw Wake Island and . . .

JLB: Oh, Eniwetok and Johnston and Guam and Midway and Guadalcanal, and there were so many other islands that we hit out there. I never saw any action because if there were islands that were Japanese held, we doglegged around them, because they usually had shells that there that someone had been shot at when they went over. So we doglegged around those. Guadalcanal was secure when we got there, but it had been for quite a while. I had a very interesting time. [end of side 1]

JLB: . . . and pumped a lot of oil through it and so forth. Then finally we feathered it and landed, I forget where that was. I can remember one time the other experience outside of that one I told when I was so frightened as a cadet down at my last flight in Corpus Christi, one time I did lose an engine. And this was a single engine. I was up on a check flight, and there was a low ceiling that day. You usually had to go up so high before you could check them out on a spin. We were going up to clearer air for that, we looked up and the engine was dead. I can remember telling the cadet, "What do you do?" Boy, he knew what to do. You put the stick forward and I almost flew out. If I wouldn't have been tied in, I'd have flown out the back seat. Anyway, after he got it under control, I told him I had it and we went down and landed in a field. After a while we waited and I think the carburetor had frozen because we started it up and XXX. But, the Pacific

was an interesting time and on the first flight out, we were stationed in Honolulu. I think we were going as far as Guam that time. When we landed on Kwajalein, I knew a fellow that I had gone to grade school with out in Parnell Township, a little country school. So I walked in where I knew he was. When we'd gotten out there, I'd heard that there were some Japanese prisoners on the island and some burial grounds. So I'd been out looking over the island. We got there real early in the morning. Instead of going to bed I took a little trip around and found the graves with big mounds where they had just buried a whole bunch. I'd seen the prisoners—they looked pretty bad. There were only a couple of them, and it was kind of sad. Anyway, I came out and went in to see where this guy worked. He was in some medical building. I looked an awful lot like an older brother that was out in the Pacific. He took a look at me; he was reading the paper. All of a sudden he dropped the paper—he could use a little bad language; he used a burst right then—he said, "I just left your brother this morning." My brother and I had been on the same island at the same time and didn't know it. He had just seen my brother off and he was heading for . . . he'd been out for two years and they had a name for the type of bombing they did. He was with a B-24 outfit. They had been heading for Hawaiian Islands to a rest camp. Then he and I visited for quite some time, for the while day, in fact, until we had to take off again. By the way, we'd fly out, like we stopped at Kwajalein overnight, 24-hour stayover. Somebody took our plane and went, and then we'd wait for one to come in. Then we'd take it and go. That's why there were supposed to be thirty airplanes in the air at all times.

SHW: How many people were on the planes?

JLB: Usually in the navy there were three pilots. In the army they usually had a couple pilots and then they had an engineer, which was maybe more sensible, in a way. But the navy had good luck, too. You could tell our planes were kept very nice. There were always at least three pilots on the plane. Then sometimes we were called to a hospital ship. We'd be taking wounded back from the fighting areas. Sometimes we had stretchers and people in wheelchairs, and just people that had been wounded but could walk around. Sometimes we'd have a whole planeload of those. I remember another time we went out we had a . . . and that was going out into the Pacific . . . I don't know where we were going or anything, but there was a whole load of white mice on it. The whole plane, the back part, and it was huge. The C-54s were big planes. The navy called them R5Ds. It was full of white mice. I never did figure out what that was for, but I'm sure it was for something. One time I had come back—my wife had another brother who was an executive officer on a destroyer, and we hadn't heard from him in quite some time, but we knew the ship he was on was the *Evans*. When it came to my time to sleep—we had a place to sleep back there, but it was two pilots and then the third one could go to sleep—

SHW: How long did these flights take?

JLB: Sometimes seven or eight hours, sometimes ten. I went back to sleeping, but some general had my sleeping spot, and you don't dare wake a general, so I went back and sat with the rest of the crew. I sat down by a fellow who was a commodore. That's was a rank you very seldom heard about. I asked him about what he did. He said he was a head of a flotilla of destroyers. So I asked him if he knew about the *Evans*. "I know exactly where the *Evans* is," he said. "Right now it's on picket duty in Okinawa." And it was. They got hit by I don't know how many kamikaze planes. I happened to go through that ship afterwards when my brother-in-law was

decommissioned in San Francisco. I think they lost twenty-some or thirty-some men out of their company. I don't know how many there were, but there were hundred, I know, on the ship. One time one of our passengers, they had fished the guy out of the ocean who didn't die, a Japanese on one of these kamikaze flights, you know. They were bringing him back to the United States to see what made him tick that way. We had one of those aboard ship one time going back. That was kind of interesting, too. Lots of interesting things happened. I can remember some of these hospital ships going back. There were always a few nurses along. You hated to go back there because it smelled of vomit so bad. The flights some time weren't the steadiest in the world. But there were so many interesting things that happened like that. One time when we were out in the Pacific, I traded flights with a guy so he could go home. His wife was having a baby and she was living out in the West Coast, so I traded flights with him and I went the other way—down under, we called it. He came this way, and while I was down, he came back; he got my flight that went in to take wounded out of Okinawa, so I missed that one, which was maybe good and maybe bad. He made it, so I'm sure it would have been interesting. Anyway, one time I went back and I met my wife out there. She had come out, so that was kind of interesting. We got to stay there about three or four days maybe, something like that. We went to Joe DiMaggios on the waterfront in San Francisco that has a special name where Joe DiMaggio had his restaurant. It was very interesting. I came back in June because my brother, Ted . . . By the way, I met him when I got back from Kwajalein that time when we were both on the island. Well, he was at the rest camp so I saw him often until I left for home. I guess I left for home before he did. I'd hitchhike across the island of Oahu and visit him and his outfit at Kahuku rest camp. I met a few other fellows from home out in the Hawaiian Islands. When we came back I was sent to Florida. My wife went along with me. We were down there just a month. I only had one real flight that amounted to anything down there. We flew every day, but I had one where we stopped in Puerto Rico on the way, and our destination was Trinidad, which is in South America, you know. On the way back we stopped at the American base in Cuba at that time. We were there for a month; this while I was taking training to become the first pilot, who was called the command pilot. Then we went from there to Branson, Missouri. I can remember being an instructor in Hutchinson. Three or four of us flew to Branson, Missouri, on our days off, and we could call them cross-country training. We flew and landed in an alfalfa field I think outside of Branson, Missouri, and spent a night there. We had an interesting evening. Then my wife and I went there, we drove from Miami. We were going to be stationed in Oletha, Kansas. We stopped and spent three days at Branson, Missouri. I'd been there before. It was an interesting time. I happened to be stationed in Oletha, Kansas, and was flying between there and Oakland, California. I don't know how many flights before the war ended. I was there when the war ended, anyway. There were a lot of little things in between. I had nothing but interesting . . . Oh, there were times, I suppose, when I missed people, but it was very interesting, and I certainly didn't have any time where I was in danger, at least more than . . . you never know when you're flying, I guess.

SHW: You said you had two engines going up.

JLB: I can remember one time I had a close experience with flying. Another spin and we would have gone in, but I took over. It was a cadet. I had a check flight, and was checking him out, and he got in to what they called a spin. Then he started spinning the other way. What do they call it? It was some kind of a double spin. I forget the name now. So maybe I was kind of lucky in some ways. I'd have to say that my experience in the war was certainly one of making a lot of friends

and I saw a lot of places that I'd maybe never see. I've been to the Hawaiian Islands a few times since, but I've never been any farther than that. I don't know if I'll ever go to Guadalcanal again. There are places down there that would be kind of fun to go, but time is getting shorter. I read the other day where there were . . . I don't know, I've forgotten . . . it has to be wrong . . . There were only 3,000, but that must have been in a certain place, World War II veterans left. I know there are thousands upon thousands still left because we're not that old yet.

SHW: I think a minimum of 74 years old to be a World War II vet. Well, some people enlisted under eighteen.

JLB: Some of them did. I was twenty-four and I'm eighty-one now. I'm sure there are still a lot of people.

SHW: Oh, yes.

JLB: The papers have been kind of interesting lately. Channel 11 has had some interesting things. They've interviewed people that had real war experiences. War is terrible, really it is. If there would never be another one I'd be happy. But I was one of the fortunate ones. I can't say that everything was a good time, but the naval air corps was a good place. We ate well and we slept well, and usually had a good place to stay, and visited interesting places. So I don't know if there are any other questions you'd like to ask.

SHW: Sure, I've got a couple more. When the war ended in Europe, what was the feeling in the navy, because the navy was doing fighting in the Pacific? The naval part of the war wasn't over, but everyone in the army was pretty much calling it quits.

JLB: There's a question in here, do you remember the dates when these wars were over? So help me, I can't remember exactly when they were over? I can remember when the bombs came down and it wasn't too long after when Japanese . . . but, which war ended first? I can't even remember.

SHW: The war ended in Europe about three months before Asia.

JLB: You don't remember the months?

SHW: I think it ended in June in Europe and August in Asia.

JLB: I was still stationed in Oletha, Kansas. I remember my wife was there, and I remember my brother who I'd met out in the Pacific had come home and gotten married, and he came down on his honeymoon to Kansas City, which was close to Oletha, Kansas, and lived with us down there for a short time—maybe a week. When the war ended, I had been in long enough, I had enough points to get out. There were people who tried to keep us in. I can remember going to a meeting one time, and he was the new captain of the base in Oletha, and he was an Annapolis graduate. I can remember when we left, he said, "All I can say is so long, suckers!" He wanted us to stay in, of course. The reason I think I got out mostly was because I'd heard . . . we'd had very good maintenance in the navy. They were known for how well they kept their planes. Of course we maybe weren't as active as the army, but we could sit out in Kwajalein and the planes would be

coming and going there, and we could almost tell the army and navy planes by the way they kept the cowlings on them, whether they were dark or with oil on them or washed clean. The navy must have done a better job of that. Anyway, that's what we were told. I had enough points, so that's why I went out. Then there was a question in here . . . There were people I knew in some branches, I have a good friend—it was he that asked me to do this, Michael O'Brien. I had missed the paper when it came. I know he was very interested. He was quite a bit younger than I was. He went in right out of high school. Some of those people were concerned about the war ending in Europe. It was still going in Japan, and some of them were on their way over there. He was one of them that was on his way over there. I never had that concern because I had enough points to get out. I can remember traveling from Oleta, Kansas, to Great Lakes, Illinois, where I was discharged. It was my brother and his new wife, and Ed, and we were living down at . . . We had an interesting place, one of them. We weren't living with her, then, but it was always hard to find a place. We were lucky we had a couple of real nice homes. When I was stationed in Kansas, I was staying at a place where we had kitchen privileges. We had a bedroom, and then we had kitchen privileges. Her name was Snodgrass. She was an interesting lady. There were a lot of cockroaches in her kitchen. I mentioned about it one time, and she said, "That's funny. I never had them before you came." There were reasons to get out, too. But I remember we drove to Glenview, Illinois, and I was discharged and came home again up to Thief River Falls where I lived, or my wife folks lived. That's where we went. After we got out, it wasn't too long after staying up there for a bit, we went down to my folks still living on the farm in Parnell. I went to high school and graduated from Wheaton High School, and I was walking down the street one day, I happened to meet my old superintendent of schools. He said, "Why don't you go over to Tintah," another little town in Traverse County. He said, "They need a teacher so badly there." So I went over there and finished out the year. I couldn't find a place for my family to live, so I commuted weekends between Thief River Falls and Tintah. That's where I spent the first year out of the service. There was another question here that was kind of interesting, "How were you received when you got home?" I was certainly received well. I had a great time after I got home. What was the worst thing about coming home? I was paid pretty well in the naval air corps. Then starting teaching again, oh! Back in those days, we took such a drop in pay, that was maybe the worst part.

SHW: Did you keep on teaching after you got out?

JLB: I taught for thirty-eight years, counting my war years. Counting from the time I graduated in 1941 until I quit in 1979, it was thirty-eight years. First I started teaching in this little town of Tintah. The next town I went to was a town called Balaton, Minnesota, where I suppose you could call it nepotism. My uncle was a superintendent there. He knew I was teaching in Tintah, so he sent me a letter. I wish I would have kept it, because it was an interesting letter. He said their town needed a baseball catcher. Then in his last paragraph he said, "Maybe I could find a position for you in my school." So that's where we went, and we were there for nine years. Interesting time; he was an interesting fellow. He was a good guy to teach under because he was a good man. He had a wife that, at that time, was probably one of the best teachers I've known, besides being kind of a beautiful person. She was a very nice person. From there I went and got my master's degree at the University of Minnesota. I did that through the GI Bill. I happened to take it in School Administration. I couldn't make ends meet in Balaton, so I'd have to go out. Since I was brought up on a farm, there was a beef farmer out there, and I used to work for him.

They paid me pretty well, and that's where I'd help make ends meet. After I was there a while, my folks had to get off the farm, and they moved down to Balaton where I was. That's why I was there nine years. I stayed there until they both passed away. Then we moved to a little town called Evansville, between Fergus Falls and Glenwood on old highway 52. I went there as a principal. I made a little bit more money. Then while I was there the superintendent died, and I was made superintendent of schools there. After being there for eleven years, and our family grew up there—that's what our kids to this day call home—we moved to Watertown. I was superintendent here until I retired in 1979. I don't think I made too many wrong decisions along the way. There may have been some maybe, as far as staying in education. I could have become a pilot, I know, and I know they got paid a lot better than schoolteachers, but we've made it.

SHW: Teaching is so much fun.

JLB: Yes, it is. Do you teach?

SHW: I teach sixth grade at Bayview Middle School in Waconia.

JLB: I see, in Waconia.

SHW: So that's been fun. Just part-time.

JLB: Where did you go to school?

SHW: Boston University.

JLB: You're from the east.

SHW: Married a Minnesotan.

JLB: When my wife and I, last November 4 at our 56th, we went to a play in Plymouth, at a Best Western. The play was named "How to Speak Minnesotan." You maybe should see that one.

SHW: I haven't learned it yet. That's true. I'm still learning.

[end of interview]