

## Interview with Keith Larson

# VRK-A-L-2010-017.01

Interview # 1: April 12, 2010

Interviewer: Mark DePue

### **COPYRIGHT**

**The following material can be used for educational and other non-commercial purposes without the written permission of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. "Fair use" criteria of Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976 must be followed. These materials are not to be deposited in other repositories, nor used for resale or commercial purposes without the authorization from the Audio-Visual Curator at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, 112 N. 6th Street, Springfield, Illinois 62701. Telephone (217) 785-7955**

**Note to the Reader:** Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, interviewee and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein. We leave these for the reader to judge.

DePue: Today is Monday, April 12, 2010. My name is Mark DePue, and I'm the director of oral history at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm here in Springfield this morning, on the north side of town, with Keith Larson. How are you this morning, Keith?

Larson: Well, as fair as can be expected. (laughs)

DePue: Well, that's excellent. And having talked to you before, I know you've got a very interesting story to tell us and a different perspective on the Korean War because you were in the Navy.

Larson: Right. I served aboard an LST [landing ship tank] and made two different tours to Korea aboard that LST.

DePue: Okay. What we want to start with, though, is to talk a little bit about growing up. And I understand you were a Springfield native.

Larson: Oh, yes. I was born on Wabash Avenue. My father was, you might say, a homesteader in that area before the village of Jerome was founded. He built a home there. He was a carpenter-contractor. He built a new home there in 1927, and I wasn't born until 1930, so I didn't get in on hammering any nails into the structure. (laughs)

DePue: What's your birthday?

Larson: I was born September 11, 1930, right at the home there on Wabash. I attended West Grand Grade School, which was also on Wabash, and then I graduated from Springfield High School.

DePue: Okay. I want to talk a little bit about growing up. Being born in 1930, you're at the beginning of the Depression. How well do you remember any of those years at all?

Larson: Well, I know my father had to give up his contracting business, and several of his good customers... He was in business with another carpenter, Ben Holmes, and they did cabinet work on various new structures and remodeling. I know he gave up that business because there just wasn't enough going. One of his customers, namely Producers Dairy, which was an infant back in those days, was later bought out in the sixties by Prairie Farms Dairy. He went to work for them, in charge of the maintenance, and he stayed with them twenty-seven years. And I also worked there for twenty years. That twenty years involved my military service time, also.

DePue: Okay. I know that you mentioned your grandfather before. Had he lived in the Springfield area as well?

Larson: Yes.

DePue: What was his name?

Larson: Charles Seward—Charles Henry Seward. He was German descent. He changed his name, which he said in English it sounded too much like “sewers,” so he changed it to Seward, S-e-w-a-r-d. He was the largest general contractor in central Illinois, and he built a lot of the buildings in downtown Springfield besides a lot of the residential areas surrounding the downtown area. He was quite a man as far as his construction policies. In fact, he built St. John's Lutheran Church, which at that time was at College and Monroe. My family attended that church, and they built a new one here in the '80s, I believe it was, and they opened up the box to the old cornerstone. My grandpa was very proud of his work, and he threw about twenty business cards in there, and on the back of one of them, my cousin noticed that he had a telephone number that consisted of four digits. So that was going back to 1913. (laughs)

DePue: Wow. So the family's been in the neighborhood for a long time. You mentioned Jerome. Where is Jerome, for those of us—?

Larson: Jerome was a village that was formed in 1940 in order to get city water out there. They received sanitary sewers back in the '30s from WPA workers, and I can remember some of those sewers went thirteen feet deep or more, because I was just a youngster of five, six years old running around, and I was warned

by the workers to stay back from the ditch, don't fall in. They were all hand-dug, and it kept a lot of people employed. And one little thing I just thought of: After they got the water system filled, they would take a tap in the main line there and put a hose on it and put it down to help settle the ditch. They would do that all along the water service. And I decided one winter I was going to have me an ice skating area, (DePue laughs) so I took the hose out of the ditch and tried to flood my parents' front yard, which I was reprimanded for. Never did get to ice skate, though. (laughter)

DePue: Well, from that story, at least, it doesn't sound like you had too terrible a childhood growing up.

Larson: No. I had older brothers and sisters. My oldest brother was twenty years my senior, my next brother was sixteen years my senior, and my sister was twelve years my senior. My aunt labeled me when I was born as my father's Friday night nickel beer. (DePue laughs) So they all helped raise me. My mother died when I was eight years old, so...

DePue: What was her name?

Larson: Clara Marie Larson. She was Charlie Seward's daughter. (laughs)

DePue: Okay. Do you remember much of your mother, then?

Larson: Just tidbits. I was spoiled, and I just remember several little things that've been in my mind all these years. In fact, she died at noon on a Monday, and I had just taken and laid out a baseball diamond on a vacant lot next door to her home. I was out there running bases that morning and she came out the back door and yelled at me, and she said, "You better get along to school." And that was the last contact I had with her. They came to school at noon and got me and told me that she had passed away. So consequently, the rest of the family all had a greater hand in bringing me up, and I was still spoiled, so.

DePue: Was it hard for your father, then, when your mother passed away?

Larson: It took a toll on him. She had heart trouble, and had been to several doctors. Of course, back in 1939, they couldn't do too much about the heart. They'd give some pills. In fact, one doctor just absolutely came out; he says, "Well, you might as well expect she's going to pass away soon." And sure enough, she had her forty-ninth birthday on March twelfth, and she died March twentieth. My father was informed about her condition; I think my sister told me, in January of that year. It was right after Christmas that he found out that there was nothing they could do for her.

DePue: Did your father get remarried, then?

Larson: No, he didn't. He had other activities. He had a lady friend that worked at the dairy there, as just somebody to be with. He was interested in playing

shuffleboard, and he was on a couple different shuffleboard leagues at a couple of local taverns. The man, to my knowledge, never did drink a whole lot; he just wanted to socialize with people. I talked to one of the tavern owners when I was on leave, and he says, “Your dad will come in here and sit down and maybe nurse one beer for a couple hours or have a 7-Up, and that’ll be all he’ll have that evening.” He just liked to talk to people, and if somebody would suggest playing a game of shuffleboard, he was all for it.

DePue: So did you inherit your gift for conversation—

Larson: No, I didn’t. Well, I must have. They all tell me I’m quite a talker, but I don’t know. I talk a lot of times just to pass the time of day, I guess. (laughs)

DePue: You were still pretty darn young when Pearl Harbor happened. Do you remember Pearl Harbor?

Larson: Yes, I do. My brother was quite active in church—my second brother—and he taught Sunday school. When he passed away, the obituary read that he was a fifty-five-year duration teacher of Sunday school. He came home from church that Sunday and he said they interrupted the church service and said that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. We looked at each other, didn’t know what Pearl Harbor was, tried to find it on a map, and the maps and the globe that we had at home there didn’t have any information at all about the location. We seen the Hawaiian Islands, but we didn’t know which island it was on. So the following Monday at school, the principal of West Grand School got us all into one classroom—the first and second grades I don’t think were there, but the older kids—and he had brought a radio, and we heard President Roosevelt’s famous speech.

DePue: His “day of infamy” speech.

Larson: Right, right. And I can remember standing with my back against the blackboard next to the little table that the radio sat on, not knowing that this is going to be a piece of history that I heard that was going to last for years. And so after the speech was over with, well, the principal kind of related to all of us in the room there what war was and how it would probably affect our lives because of the fact that Germany—they had declared war on Germany, I believe, the same day, because I can remember him bringing up the map that was hanging over the blackboard. He stood up there with his two hands, and he said, “These two areas are what’s going to be involved with the war.” Well, then the newspapers that night, that Sunday evening... We always went to the grandparents’ house. My brother was driving the car, and a newsboy was standing on Fifth and Monroe selling newspapers, and Dad told my brother to pull over. He says, “We might as well get a newspaper.” And that newspaper stayed in the family up until, well, sometime in the ‘60s there, when we sold the property on Wabash Avenue. My father had passed away in ’64, and

several years after that, we sold the property, and I remember seeing that newspaper then, but whatever happened to it, I don't know.

DePue: You said you were quite young compared to the rest of your siblings. Did any of your brothers see any combat?

Larson: No. Well, my oldest brother was declared essential. He worked in the Navy department at Sangamo Electric, and he was classified 4-F, as my other brother, who had lung problems, and so neither one of them entered service. My sister's husband enlisted in the Army in 1939 and he spent a couple years down at the Canal Zone in Panama the first couple years of the war. They brought him back to Texas and was training them in tropical warfare, and they all figured they were going to the Pacific. Well, it turned out on emergency notice, they delivered them up, sent them to New York, and they were in the Battle of the Bulge. They lost all of their equipment shortly after they entered into combat. He received a couple of Bronze Stars plus an award. I never did [have] the chance to ask him exactly where, but his group was taken prisoner for a day or two and the Germans went off and left them. They never ate that time because the Germans didn't have enough food for themselves, so they didn't feed their prisoners.

DePue: He was a pretty lucky man in one respect, because, of course, the Germans had murdered some of the prisoners they'd captured.

Larson: Yes. I'm remembering him telling my one brother that they had them in an old animal shelter, and everything got quiet. When they got up that morning, there was no noise outside, and one of the fellows was looking out the cracks in the wall and said, "There's nobody out there." So they got out of the building, and sure enough, the Germans had left. They found out later that there was an American detachment coming their way, so the Germans evacuated the area, and so they were fed again. I don't know how long he was in the Battle of the Bulge, but he ended up getting flown to England and was in the hospital there quite a while with frozen feet. The ironic part of the thing was he ended up being a postal mail carrier after all that problems with his feet, and he could get a hold of the skin on his feet and just peel it off right now; that's the way that trench foot worked.

DePue: What was your brother-in-law's name?

Larson: James Whiteside. He was a T/4 and an Army cook. Most of the fellows he was with there were Springfield area people.

DePue: A T/4 meaning he was a technician, fourth class?

Larson: Yeah. And his stripes were sergeant stripes with a T under.

DePue: Do you know what unit he was assigned to?

Larson: Mmm... I think it was 106<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, 32<sup>nd</sup> Mechanized Regiment, or something like that.

DePue: Okay. What was it like for you growing up during the Second World War? Do you remember much about the war? Did you follow the war closely?

Larson: We didn't. I tried following it. I had several cousins that were in combat in the Pacific, and I was trying. Maps were kind of scarce. Most of the maps that were available didn't have all the islands on them. Several of my cousins were in the Pacific, and one cousin spent his war years in White Horse, Alaska. He was a telegrapher, and he was up there. And in his sister's cedar chest—after her husband died, she wanted to move to Kansas City where her daughter was. So they had an auction sale, and in this auction sale was a couple of his books, and in the cover of one of those books was a telegram that he received that the war had ended. I wanted that in the worst way, and another cousin's boy outbid me on it. A couple of weeks later, I tried to buy it from him, but he wasn't interested in selling. I don't know what happened to it now. But I did end up with one of his books that I found at a flea market, and it was one of his Army books that pertained to officers' pay. I can remember that being in there. At this moment, I don't know where that book's at. But it was just part of the growing-up period that I had something I could connect with.

DePue: Do you remember anything like aluminum or rubber drives?

Larson: Oh, yes. I was involved in several of those out there in the village of Jerome. There would be a lumberyard truck that would come down the streets. You put whatever you had for the war effort out on the street—the streets weren't paved; they had ditches. And one of the drives there, there was a family by the name of Welch, and they had a souvenir German machine gun from World War I—how they acquired it, I don't know—but they contributed that to the scrap drive. And all of us guys, boy, we had a lot of time sitting in the back of that old truck with that machine gun there. (DePue laughs) Then we got down to the square. It was a big day that Saturday, and there was hundreds of people down at the square, and all these truckloads of aluminum, rubber, bacon grease—whatever you had—they were all down there, and naturally the radio stations was there and making a big deal out of it. I missed getting my picture in the *Journal* paper. The photographer came along, and I had to go to the bathroom; I got off the truck and was trying to find a place to relieve myself, and in the meantime, they took a picture of my two buddies up there with that machine gun in the back of the truck. (laughter)

DePue: How about rationing? Do you remember rationing from the war?

Larson: Yes. This was before supermarkets. My father traded with a grocery store on Spring Street. Before he built out in Jerome, they lived in Canedy Street, and he traded with this Al Link family that ran a grocery store there. And they did some horse trading, I guess, the same way everybody else was doing. If they

needed a ration stamp—the stamps had dates on them; you couldn't use them all at one time—and he says, “Well, that stamp there will be good in the next week,” so they kind of gee'd and hawed with the ration stamps, and everybody didn't get more than their share, but at least they got the product when they needed it.

Gas rationing was quite a deal. My second brother was district manager for the Illinois *State Register*, the other newspaper we had at that time, and they provided him with additional gas stamps so that he could—he had the routes around Lake Springfield, and also any routes in the south part of town, he was manager of. He carried the routes himself because the man that did it before him was drafted. So they gave him additional ration stamps for gas and also a gasoline coupon book. I remember those coupons being in there. Gas at that time was about fifteen cents a gallon, and they had dollars and cents coupons in there, and whenever he'd fill up with gasoline, why, I always wanted to be the one to tear the stamps out of the book. It was just part of growing up and part of the situation at that time.

DePue: In other words, being at your age, you just took it for granted, I would guess.

Larson: Yeah. I can remember the day the war was over with. They had a station next to the school, West Grand School, there on Wabash. They called it Trackside and fuel storage tanks was above the ground, and they had the price of gas painted on the side of the tanks. One was regular and one was ethyl. Well, lo and behold, the war was over with, and they put regular gas at nine cents a gallon. And they must have had eight or ten gas pumps there, two to an island, and that place was jam-packed. Nine cents a gallon for gas, and we're paying something like (laughs) three dollars for it now.

DePue: (laughs) I'm afraid nine-cent gas is a—

Larson: Long past, huh?

DePue: —thing of the past, yeah. (laughter) Do you remember hearing about the atomic bomb? I mean, even at that age—you probably were fifteen or so—did you even understand what the heck an atomic bomb was?

Larson: Well, we had a little of that in science class in high school, and it seemed like—well, we had no idea what an atom was until they were talking about splitting one, and then our science teacher tried to draw one on the board and give us an example of what they were actually doing to unleash the power of it. But when they bombed Japan, that was quite a day. I'm not talking about the Doolittle Raid, but the actual—*Enola Gay* and *Bockscar*<sup>1</sup> dropping the

---

<sup>1</sup> Boeing B-29 Superfortress "Enola Gay". On August 6, 1945, this Martin-built B-29-45-MO dropped the first atomic weapon used in combat on Hiroshima, Japan. Three days later, Bockscar (on display at the U.S. Air Force Museum near Dayton, Ohio) dropped a second atomic bomb on Nagasaki, Japan. *Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum* [http://airandspace.si.edu/collections/artifact.cfm?object=nasm\\_A19500100000](http://airandspace.si.edu/collections/artifact.cfm?object=nasm_A19500100000) (accessed January 24, 2014)

atom and hydrogen bombs. And years later, I was on a train in Japan, and they had just relocated the tracks after that bomb for the radiation area; they relocated the train tracks to get out of that dangerous area. I happened to be on a train that reverted back to the original tracks. I don't know what day it was. It was one morning, anyhow. We were going to Yokohama, and the conductor came through and was telling everybody that this was the first train. A fellow, a Japanese person sitting in an adjacent seat—there was three of us sailors sitting there—and he turned around and in English told us what the conductor said, and he said, "You should feel privileged." So it was an event that probably wouldn't have happened if we hadn't have got early liberty that day.

DePue: Did this Japanese, did he have any tone of resentment or anger in his voice?

Larson: No. I associated over the years there with several Japanese families—a lady that owned the chain of souvenir shops in Kobe, Japan, her husband was killed I believe at Nagasaki, and her only resentment was that he would not see his daughters grow up. I think the oldest one was about twenty-one; the other one was about sixteen. But another fellow off the ship and I became friendly with the family, namely because they had a new '50 Ford, (DePue laughs) and the oldest daughter could drive, so we got to see a lot of the area around Kobe. We were the only sailors in Kobe. We had to go in there to their shipyard to have repairs done on our bow door that was damaged in the landing. And we were there I don't know how long—I'd say maybe a month or more. But it was good to have somebody local, and mama-san could speak enough English she could carry on a conversation, and she says, "I had to learn English; my customers are English." (laughter)

DePue: Well, that's a little bit ahead of our story here, but it's fun to hear those stories. So let's get you back into high school and just ask you what your thoughts were at that time, what you thought your future would be.

Larson: Well, all of us fellows, we all wanted to enter the military and be of service. There was only one fellow that was a year older than the rest of us, and his father was a chief petty officer in the Navy. So Don decided that he wanted to quit school and go enlist in the Navy. Well, he was eighteen, he could sign for himself, so unbeknownst to his mother—she didn't find out about it until the day that he was to leave for basic training. And she said, "Well, I put up with your father," who was an official with the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, and she said, "I've put up with him being gone all through the war." She says, "I guess I can put up with you being gone." She had another younger son. But Don was kind of a thorn in her side all the time. He would do things, and they would find out about it later. So, consequently, I would say the ones of us that did enlist right after high school, we were more or less all in service when the Korean War started. But the surprise to a lot of our classmates that got drafted—in fact, our best man that stood up with us, he was drafted along with eight or ten other classmates, and they all did their

training together. After our wedding in '51, it seemed like everybody was in service. It was happening and we had no control over it, is what...

DePue: But the war, World War II, ended while you were still in high school, beginning in high school.

Larson: Yeah. In '45, it ended—[I was] a sophomore.

DePue: When did you graduate from high school? Where did you go to high school, first of all?

Larson: Springfield High, the old *alma mater*. (laughs)

DePue: And you graduated when?

Larson: In 1948, June '48.

DePue: Okay. Any work or any employment between that time and the time you enlisted in the Navy?

Larson: Well, I had worked weekends and after school at Producers Dairy. I was my father's stooge, you might say.

DePue: Producers Dairy—that was the company name?

Larson: Yes. It was at Ninth and Jefferson. And my father, being head of maintenance there... The dairy was expanding. They started a big expansion right after the war, acquired a lot more property, and built more buildings. So, consequently, working after school for a couple of hours, I always got the flunky stuff to do, and to this day, I can work at a pipe fitting and a bolt or a nut and tell you what size it is. It seemed that that's all I did for a month or more, expansion of their maintenance garage. They tore out the storeroom for additional parking, and everything was thrown in a pile—all the nuts, all the bolts and pipe fittings. And so Dad and I built new bins, and he purchased some steel storage drawers in that, so it was my duty to get everything back in order. It was a great experience for me because until that time, I had no idea what was going on with nuts and bolts and pipe fittings.

DePue: But apparently you didn't have any intention to stay with that work.

Larson: Well, I didn't. After I graduated from high school, one of the mechanics retired—they had three mechanics—and so they bounced me over into the garage part. They had a fleet of about seventy-five trucks, and there was always something to do on one. And I said, "I'm not really learning what I want to learn," and so I worked some on refrigeration repair, and I kind of liked it. So the refrigeration man was an ex-sailor. He'd spent all of World War II in the Navy, so he talked to me about the Navy. So I got teed off at the dairy there, and my buddy says—I was talking to him one night—he says,

“Let’s go enlist.” And that’s all I needed. So we went down to [the] recruiting office, and we were filling out the papers, and he asked this recruiter, he says, “How good do your eyes have to be?” Louie had one weak eye, so they sent him over to eyeglass business across the street from where the recruiting office was, and he came back with their paper, checked his eyes, and the man says, “Well, that eye’s not good enough for us to enlist you.” And he made the remark, he says, “Maybe the Army isn’t that strong a requirement.” And so he looked at me, and I says, “Well, I’m going in the Navy. I don’t want any”—I heard all the stories from my brother-in-law about the Army, and everything I heard about the Navy was you got three hot meals and a place to sleep, and the old joke was you got three hots and a cot. So I took him to the Army recruiter. We both shipped out that evening. And I told my dad. He said, “Where were you?” I said, “I enlisted in the Navy.” “Well, what did you do that for?” (laughter) He understood that. He says, “Now, don’t get living at this place like I am.” He was there for twenty-seven years, and he was on twenty-four-hour call.

So I worked as a tile setter in between the time I was in service, wall and floor tile. I liked it; I made good money. And then when I came home, there just wasn’t anything available around. I worked for Railway Express for a couple of years, and you had to have fifty years’ seniority there to keep a job. So Dad says, “Come back to the dairy,” so I ended up going back to the dairy as a refrigeration...

DePue: But that’s after your experiences in Korea.

Larson: Yeah.

DePue: That’s a little bit ahead of the story there.

Larson: I’m sorry, I got—

DePue: No problem. When and where did you go to basic training?

Larson: Great Lakes, Illinois.

DePue: You get there in late ’48?

Larson: Yeah. It was cold. You know, I thought about that the other day. I haven’t got anything that’s got the actual date that I know of when I reported up there. I know it was cold weather. Because we ground pounded—the kind of expression was used—drill fields up there with snow on them, and this one day, we had a six-inch snow come. I can remember that vividly, and all the guys in the barracks is saying, Oh, they got a snow shovel for each of us. We’ll go shovel that whole drill field off—which was a large, I’d say a block square blacktop area. And they had just blacktopped it. My neighbor at that time, when he went in, he says, it was all gravel. Your shoes may be shining

when you got out there, but they was all white when you got through. (DePue laughs) So we just drilled it down to nothing.

DePue: When you first enlisted, did you sign up for any specific duty, any specific assignment?

Larson: They gave us all classification tests, and my ability and IQ, I guess, on mechanics, automatically put me in engineering. I told them that I would like to know about diesels. I had some machine shop experience in high school. So consequently, on the tanker, my first assignment, I was assigned to A-gang, they called it, which was a machine shop, small boats, and deck winches. (laughs)

DePue: A little bit of everything. Do you remember anything about the basic training experience, any of your instructors or any humorous incidents?

Larson: Well, we had two pretty good instructors. We had a chief for a company commander, chief gunner's mate; we had a first class boatswain's mate for an assistant company commander. And they were willing to help you. I was on watch one day in the barracks. One afternoon this chief decided that that was going to be the afternoon that he was going to clean all the Springfield rifles that we carried. If you dropped one, you slept with it. But I said, "Well, can I help you?" I wasn't doing anything but standing at a doorway. He says, "Sure, come on over." He had a ten-quart bucket full of gun oil, and the old way of oiling a rifle was to stick the barrel down in there and to suck the oil up with your cleaning rod with a swab on the end. And I must have got an awful dirty rifle, because I pulled about halfway up, and it jerked, and then I hit the bottom of the bucket, and oil went up in the air and got all over the chief's white shirt. And I said, oh, boy, I'm in trouble now. But—no, it was a different way of life in boot camp. They did it for the fact so you'd learn to take orders and do things the Navy way. The old saying was, "The right way, the wrong way, but the Navy way," and that held true with everything I did in the military.

DePue: Well, this is a landlubber kind of question for you: If I was to join the Navy, I'd be thinking, I wonder if I'm going to be getting seasick or if I'm susceptible to be getting seasick. Was that an issue?

Larson: No. If you got sick, you got sick. There was only two times in all my experiences that I became seasick. Once on the tanker, as I moved up the ladder; As a fireman wanting to become a petty officer, you volunteered and you was eager to take on any job they assigned you. So they assigned me the steering engine room watch. That tanker had two screws on it, two props, and it was twenty-two foot across. I know because I wire brushed those things in dry dock to get the barnacles off. When we were in rough seas, and those screws would come out of the water, you'd get a-bucking and riding, you know, in the engine room. And so I started getting a little woozy down there. I

was trying to sit on a metal chair and hold myself in one place. So I got a little wheezy. I hadn't ate yet. But my next assignment on there was the forward fire pump room, which was seventy foot down from the main deck. You go down there, and there's a six-cylinder Hercules diesel engine down there hooked up to a two hundred horse fire pump. Everything was all right until I seen a chain hanging up there, and that chain was going back and forth. (DePue laughs) Katy bar the door. By the door, there's a ten-quart trash can down there by the engine, and I helped to (laughs) fill it up. I had to take it out of there and scrub it out. On the LST, I got sick once on the edge of a typhoon.

DePue: Well, let's get you to your first assignment after basic training, then. Where did you go? And this would have been early in '49, I would think.

Larson: Yeah. Went to Newport, Rhode Island. They gave me train transportation to Providence, and then I took a bus from there. It was a new experience for me just seeing the type of countryside around. I was assigned to USS *Waccamaw*; tankers are named after rivers, and where that river was, I don't know—out East someplace, an Indian name.<sup>2</sup>

DePue: An oil tanker?

Larson: Yeah. It's a fleet tanker. We refueled ships at sea. And it was the newest one the Navy had. The number was AO-109, and it was set up the same as a maritime tanker, which only had a crew of about ten and engineering. Well, we had a crew of about fifty-five and engineering. I mean, you know, if it was automatic, the Navy doesn't use it. You turn the steam valve by hand. And our own port was Newport, Rhode Island. We operated in the North Atlantic, the main Atlantic, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean. We'd just go out on maneuvers and meet the fleet. And then we went [to] Bahrain, Arabia, and picked up a load of black oil. Being in the engine room most the time—the machine shop was also in the engine room—so you didn't get to see much topside except when there was refueling. Another young sailor and I in engineering got the privilege of keeping all the oil cups on the deck winches that they used to pass the hoses over to the other ships, keep oil in those little cups on each bearing, which was quite a challenge, especially when we were in Greenland. We'd have to set the oil cans on a steam pipe inside the compartment there to get the oil thin enough to go out and pour in those containers, and if they're moving hoses, you're trying to keep up with a moving object there. After a little practice, you got to where you could hang on to there and get your oilcan spout in that little hole and fill it up while it was still running. Nobody got hurt. I couldn't believe that. But anyhow, that was our job, and sixty-seven below zero up there.

---

<sup>2</sup> The **Waccamaw River** is approximately 140 miles (225 km) long, in southeastern North Carolina and eastern South Carolina in the United States. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waccamaw\\_River](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waccamaw_River) (accessed February 7, 2014)

DePue: I was wondering. The North Atlantic isn't necessarily a hospitable place sometimes.

Larson: Oh, no. You get your sea legs there, they call it. Very seldom do you have a calm sea. And so we operated on maneuvers. A little side story on this deal: Like I say, they trained you for everything, and so one day they told me I was going to be on a three-inch deck gun for my battle station. Otherwise, before that, I was on a rescue, damage control mission, or group. So this three-inch deck gun fired a shell approximately three foot long. [The] powder case was something like two foot long. And so they give me this asbestos vest with a chin flap, asbestos gloves up past the elbows, and they said, you catch that hot brass case when it comes out after the gun's fired. Nobody told me they was going to fire that gun. The next thing I know, I got this fifty-pound chunk of brass hitting me and practically taking myself off the feet. The firing of the gun was enough startlement; you know, I'd never been around a big gun fired like that. So anyhow, the guy says, "Okay, we'll give you some pointers here." He says, "I'm normally the hot shell man on here, but when you came along, I got moved up." And I said, "Just tell me when you're going to shoot that thing." So this guy with the lanyard, he's, "Head up!" and that's what he meant, he was going to fire. Well, the next thing I know, I had this hot shell in my arm, and I see what that flap on the vest was for; it keeps that hot brass from cooking your chin. (laughter)

So I went from that; they moved me around various stations, and this chief machinist's mate, he says, "You've had some refrigeration training." And I said, "Yeah, at the dairy." And he says, "Well, we have a billet open for a machinist's mate refrigeration. [Machinist's Mate (Refrigeration Mechanic), abbreviated MMR.] They've only had a chief on there." And he says, "Would you be interested in striking for a petty officer rating?" and I said, "Well, yes." I was only making about ninety bucks a month, or eighty-seven's in the back of my mind. That might have been how much the pay was. So he introduced me to this chief, and he quizzed me out a little bit, you know. He wanted to make sure I knew something about refrigeration. So he and I would tour the ship, and they had several walk-in coolers plus all the drinking fountains and all the galley refrigeration and that. And so I went with him, and I learned the Navy way of doing refrigeration. If you had a bad part someplace, they could keep that thing in operation by just changing different valves, you know. So he told me, he says, "I think you'll do all right."

Well, he went home on emergency leave, and what really put feathers in my hat—they had this big main meat walk-in cooler go down, and so the engineering officer came down and he says, "Do you want to take a look at it, or," he said, "we can call another ship and have them send a man over." "No, I can look at it." Well, it had a stopped up dehydrator—I never will forget it—and so I changed the valves around and got the thing back on line, and I changed the dehydrator. And the engineering officer says, "Well," he says, "I

think you're on your way to be a petty officer." And later on, well, I got third-class machinist training.

So after I put my time in there, they had a toss-up in Congress where they didn't appropriate enough money for the armed forces. I had originally enlisted as a three- or four-year enlistment, and this recruiter says, "Whatever is open after you get out of basic training is what you'll be assigned to." Well, I had no idea who was going to assign me what. So we were on station out at Newport, Rhode Island, and the engineering officer called me up to his stateroom, and he says, "Now here's the deal. You're kind of in limbo. I'm going to give you three choices of what you can do." He says, "Congress hasn't appropriated enough money. We don't know how long you're enlisted for." (laughter) I said, "Well, they were supposed to fill that out when I got out of boot camp." He says, "It's blank, enlistment time." He says, "Now," he says, "I checked, and there is very few three-year enlistments." He says, "It's either one year or four years that's readily available right at this moment." I'd already been in the Navy over a year. He says, "Now, tell you what you can do. If I can get you a three-year enlistment"—and he said, "This is entirely up to you"—he said, "If I can get you a three-year enlistment from the Navy personnel"—and he said, "You'd told me several times you would sure like to go to college"—he said, "I'll tell you what. If we can get that, I can get you an agreement that you can get out of active duty right now," or, you know, at the end—I had to have time in. But he pulled some strings somehow, and one morning at quarters, he says, "Oh, by the way, Larson," he says, "plan on leaving this ship day after tomorrow, going home. You're off active duty." And everybody's looking at me, Oh, sucky! (laughter) So anyhow, he explained to the group then what the situation was. And this other guy was standing there, and he said, "Well, check to see my service record, see how long I enlisted." He says, "I'm in the same situation. My recruiter told me the same thing." So there was two of us that got off the ship. So I came home. I taught refrigeration out here at the Naval Reserve, a few meetings that I attended before I got called back in.

DePue: Did you kind of reluctantly leave the Navy at that time?

Larson: Not really. My idea in the back of my mind was that I wanted to go to college, and I figured that with what little experience I secured from the Navy, I was going to apply to some college. My brother was pushing me towards Bradley in Peoria because of the fact his wife had went there. And he says, "It's closer to home," you know, gave me all kinds of reasons. So I secured a job—I don't know whether you want to hear this or not.

DePue: Yeah, sure.

Larson: I secured a job. I worked for Sears and Roebuck; my other sister-in-law got me there. And I was assembling farm machinery. I had to get the catalogue to see what it looked like before I could put it together. They wired all the parts

together and dipped them in paint, and that's the way you got them. I can remember a Gravely tractor—I didn't even know what I had in the crate, and got the catalogue and found out what it looked like, and then I can put it together.

DePue: A Gravely tractor, you say?

Larson: Gravely. It was a brand name that Sears sold. Had a fork handlebar and two big automotive-sized tires and about a ten-horse engine, and they had the snowplow attachments, cultivators, plows, everything. It was a one-man farm operation, gardener.

DePue: Let me take a step back real quick. Do you remember roughly when you were released from the Navy? Is that still in '49?

Larson: I would say it was—the spring hadn't got here yet. I would say anywhere—I've looked on there; I can't find any...

DePue: My guess would be really early in 1950, then.

Larson: Yeah. I would say, because the job she got me at Sears, I was selling shrubbery, which I didn't know anything about, to start with, and then I went to farm machinery. So I would say I was selling shrubbery in the latter part of March or April, and I stayed with farm machinery for a couple weeks. The old guy that I worked under, he didn't like the idea that I didn't know what I was doing. That's what he told the manager.

DePue: Mm-hmm. Well, it seems to me that you were doing more at that time than just working at Sears. Were you dating at the time?

Larson: Dating? Oh, yes. My brother said I had a different girl every night, but that wasn't true. I had about three I was kind of serious about. Married one of them.

DePue: But not at that time.

Larson: Not at that time. I had to make one tour to Korea, came home.

DePue: Well, tell me a little bit about the one who ended up being the one you married. What was her name?

Larson: Marie Nelson. She was a carhop at a drive-in, Milk Bar, in Springfield was how I met her, and she had no way home. She lived out in the North End. Buses didn't run late when she got off, so either she would try to get a ride to Sangamo and ride home with her dad or get somebody to take her home. [Sangamo Electric Company was located at Ninth Street and North Grand Avenue.] And I did both: I took her to Sangamo and also I took her home. It seemed like taking her home got to be more frequent. I had a new Chevy then.

She thought it was my dad's car, but I took a tile setting job, and I had to have transportation. Well, at that time, used cars was junk, and a friend of mine was selling Chevrolets, a schoolmate. His dad had sold them for thirty years, so he was selling them. So I said, "I can't afford a new car," and he said, "Well, the way we work this out, your payments are real low for two years, and then the twenty-fourth payment is a balloon payment," he said. So I could afford the monthly payments under his plan, so I had a new Chevy, and working the tile job, I worked out of town, being as I wasn't married and one thing and another.

So when I got called back in the Navy, my dad said, "What are you going to do with your car?" And I said, "Well, I'm going to sell it, because I don't know what's going to happen." And he says, "Well, I'll buy it." He says, "That old Dodge I'm driving," he says, "it's getting too many miles on it." So I said, "Okay. You make the payments, then," and I said, "What I've got in the car, you pay me a little bit on that." Because I had five hundred dollars, I know, in the car that I paid down on it. And so through the time I was in service and after I got out of the service and we needed money, well, fifty dollars or whatever, he would come up with the money. But boy, when he hit that twenty-fourth payment, I got a real long letter. (laughter)

DePue: You hadn't told him about that part.

Larson: Yeah. (laughs)

DePue: Well, let's go back to the middle of 1950, and June twenty-fifth specifically. June twenty-fifth, of course, is the day the North Koreans invaded the South. Remember that, hearing about that?

Larson: Oh, yes. Ray Cline and I were working in Mexico, Missouri, I believe it was, and whenever we'd work out of town, we'd trade off who drove. Well, it was my turn to drive. We were doing a motel over there, which had several weeks work there. We was tiling all the bathrooms. And so Friday night came, we ate supper, and then he says, "Keith, I'll buy the gas if you want to go home." He was married, and he was kind of lonely, I guess. So I said, "Yeah, don't make any difference to me." So we drove back, and he says, "How about a beer?" So we stopped out there on Wabash at a neighborhood tavern and went in and had a beer, and I took him home. He lived in Jerome, which my dad did, too. I was living there at Dad's.

So Saturday morning—my dad always went to work a half-day on Saturday, just to make sure everything was operating all right. The phone rang about 8:15. The only phone we had was in the dining room. So I got up out of bed, answered the phone. Dad said, "Did you see the newspaper?" "No, I just got up." He said, "I opened it up. It's on the dining room table," he says, "and I've circled the article." There was an article about eleven Reservists getting recalled to active duty, and my name was the last one on the list. So I said,

“Well, looks like I’m going to be back in uniform again.” And at nine o’clock the rural mailman was honking his horn in the driveway; I had to sign for my orders. And he shook hands with me. That old guy, I waved at him for years (laughter)—first time I’d ever talked to him.

So I had ten days to get my personal affairs in order before I reported. So everybody showed up at the train station that night. We left, I don’t know if it was—I’d say eight, nine o’clock, whenever the train headed for Chicago. Every guy but one—his wife was giving birth to their baby in the hospital, and he was over there. I talked to him years later, and he says, “Yeah, you guys were all shipped out by the time I got to Great Lakes.” And so he and his cousin both ended up on an island somewhere off in the Sea of Japan. And we talked to him after... It seemed like we all went to Reserve meeting after we got home, and none of us ever went to any Reserve meetings after that. So it was quite an experience.

DePue: How long after June twenty-fifth when you got this notification?

Larson: About the twenty-seventh of July, I think. (clears throat) I had to report the first of August.

DePue: Okay. When you first heard about the news in Korea, did you understand at that time that might mean something to you personally?

Larson: Well, not really. In a way, I thought it was just going to be a little shindig and it’d be over with. (coughs) Didn’t turn out that way. I think the war lasted three years.

DePue: Okay. What happened, then, after you reported for duty again?

Larson: Well, we stood around up there at Great Lakes for a day. It seems to me like we left Springfield on a Thursday night, because at the train station, there was a lot of people getting off. The State Fair started on Friday, the next day, and I made a remark to my Dad, I said, “Well, it looks like I’m going to miss the fair this year.” He laughed, and he said, “Well, you deserve to miss one.” I’d made every one of them, because they always jerked me around when I was in high school, and I drove a truck out to the fairgrounds, taking supplies out and taking empty milk bottles back to the plant. Like I say, I was well-diversified, with various jobs every place I went. So we asked an officer up there that was in charge of our transit station. He says, “Everybody’s gone home for the weekend.” He says, “You guys, I’ll give you liberty if you want,” And one of the guys said, “Can we go back to Springfield?” He says, “Don’t tell me that. You’re limited to 150 miles, and I think that’s over 150. You guys want liberty passes? Be back here at 0700 Monday morning.” We hopped a train, and we came back to Springfield, and the train got in about 6:30 that evening, Sunday evening. I called my brother, and he came and got me, and I used his car and I went by and seen her. She was working. And then this one guy says, “I got a

new Chevy. I'll get my cousin to ride up there with us, and he can bring my car back." And we left here about one o'clock in the morning, and we got up there just in time for muster. They got on the wrong highway, we got lost, and... (laughter)

So anyhow, after muster that Monday morning, we were informed to watch the bulletin boards. They would post a list of orders up there three times a day. (clears throat) It turned out that afternoon, forty-nine of us were listed on there to be sent to Astoria, Oregon, by train. We slept in Pullman cars. We ate before the regular passengers. We ate in a group. And every time you'd go to the club car, somebody was buying you a beer, some civilian. I didn't drink very much back then—about three beers a week was about my limit—but after I was back in the Navy for a while, it seemed like I could stay up with the best of them for a while. (DePue laughs)

But we arrived at Astoria, Oregon, and, you know, I don't remember how we ever got to the naval base. It was an amphibious airplane base. All these ships of various sizes and types were anchored in the middle of the Columbia River. And we had nice brick barracks to sleep in there. This was all left over from World War II.

DePue: This was a mothball fleet, then?

Larson: That was part of the Pacific mothball fleet. I imagine there was 600 ships there. And we seen all these LSTs. What I was looking for here was a postcard that showed the mothball fleet. I may not have put it in here. No, it looks like I didn't.

DePue: Yeah. We're looking at some pictures that you had collected for the interview here.

Larson: Yeah. (clears throat) Basically in the middle of the river—Columbia River is quite a piece of body of water. It's fairly wide, and they have all these ships anchored out in the center. Those pictures—there they are.



DePue: Yeah, that's a great picture.

Larson: Yeah. I have two postcards here showing the Pacific fleet. This is the only way—I didn't have a camera with me. I picked these up at the naval PX there. I've separated the pictures. This is when I was on the tanker, those first few, and then it goes on to when I got called. That was their first trip over to Korea, this group here. So you can see how those ships are all side by side, and there's just hundreds of them; they're all different types. So we found our ship. Civilian personnel there had started taking it out of mothballs, which they pulled a deep vacuum on those ships, and it preserved everything inside, all the—

DePue: "A deep vacuum"—what does that mean?

Larson: They sealed all the hatches and openings as tight as they could get, and there was no way air could ever enter the ship. And they had a vacuum, gigantic vacuum pump there, that sucked all the air out. And all the gun turrets—we didn't have turrets, we had gun tubs, which is a splinter shield three foot high or so around the gun emplacement, and the gun is in the open. So all those had bubbles on them made out of fiberglass, and they also had a vacuum pulled on them. So it was quite a deal preserving those ships. The engines, we found, were in excellent condition as far as being preserved. We had very little to do. In fact, we were issued an instruction sheet on what the Navy personnel could do to the engines.

Like I say, we slept in a brick barracks, very nice quarters. Chow hall was excellent. And so we worked on our ship for two or three weeks, took on provisions, and we headed out of the Columbia River to head to Bremerton, Washington Naval Base where they put it in dry dock and checked the hull of the ship. We had the privilege of going down and seeing just how flat that bottom of that ship was. I make that remark because of the fact the LST was 325 feet long, sixty foot wide, and took eight foot of water. The tanker I was on previously took ninety foot of water fully loaded. Normally we would run seventy to eighty foot of water with a full load of oil on it. So the LST was similar to a cork out on the middle of the ocean. The top speed on it was ten knots, and we carried enough fuel for about three thousand miles, I think.

DePue: Well, I want you to spend a little bit more time describing the ship, because you've already tantalized us here. LST stands for landing ship tank. Hundreds of these, maybe even a couple thousand were made by the end of the Second World War.

Larson: Well, the highest number in actual combat in World War II was 10,055, I think.<sup>3</sup>

DePue: One thousand fifty-five?

Larson: Yeah, and ours was 1,077. It was built during World War II, but it wasn't commissioned until after the war, and it spent time in the Pacific hauling guys back, moving prisoners back to Japan, and doing various detail like that.<sup>4</sup>

DePue: Well, tell us what an LST is meant to do. What is it designed for?

Larson: The original plan was conceived by an Englishman and an American engineer. Churchill wanted some type—Winston Churchill, who was prime minister of Britain during World War II—he needed some type of craft after their defeat at Dunkirk that could go up on the beach, load up the equipment, and retract from the beach. At Dunkirk, the British had to leave all their equipment; they were lucky to get their men out, by civilian craft that was commissioned for just that duty, to go pick up the English soldiers that was trapped at Dunkirk. So the original drawing of an LST was on a dinner napkin (DePue laughs) at a restaurant. An Englishman and an American engineer—I did know his name; I can't recall it.<sup>5</sup> (coughs) So they went ahead and designed this thing. Originally they thought about a one-trip operation, and then after they got more involved with it, they decided to build it for various things other than just landing tanks on the beach. The first models had an elevator that moved the vehicles from the tank deck up to the upper deck. They found out that that wasn't fast enough in a lot of cases, so they



<sup>3</sup> 1,051 LSTs were constructed during WW2, 670 of which were built by 5 major inland locations, with the largest being Evansville, Indiana, United States. *World War II Database*, [http://ww2db.com/ship\\_spec.php?ship\\_id=317](http://ww2db.com/ship_spec.php?ship_id=317) (accessed January 24, 2014)

<sup>4</sup> *LST-1077* was laid down on 21 March 1944 by the Bethlehem-Hingham Shipyard, Inc. Hingham, MA; launched without ceremony on 18 April 1945; and commissioned on 8 May 1945, Lt. I. W. Matthews in command. During WWII, *LST-1077* was assigned to the Pacific Fleet, then decommissioned 31 July 1946. On 6 September 1950, *LST-1077* was recommissioned and joined the Pacific Fleet in the Far East where she served in operations in support of United Nations operations in Korea. She then returned to San Francisco in 1955 and decommissioned 12 May. On 1 July 1955, *LST-1077* was named *Park County* (LST-1077) and subsequently moved to Bremerton, Washington, remaining in the Reserve Fleet there, until recalled in 1965 for Vietnam service. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USSS\\_Park\\_County\\_\(LST-1077\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USSS_Park_County_(LST-1077)) (accessed February 7, 2014)

<sup>5</sup> At the request of the British, the Americans undertook the redesign and production of LSTs in November 1941, and John Niedermair of the Bureau of Ships designed a ship with a large ballast system. Encyclopaedia Britannica, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/329366/landing-ship-tank-LST> (accessed February 7, 2014)

installed a ramp that folded up to the overhead, and that vehicles on the top deck could drive right on down the ramps and right on the beach.

One time there, we had the privilege of being the first LST out of six at a landing that we completely offloaded our ship in less than fifteen minutes, and that's moving out. I think they said there was twelve tanks on the tank deck besides all the trucks and trailers on the upper deck. And the next ship closest to us was twenty-five minutes. Normally, though, under normal operations, it would take us sometimes six hours to offload, depending upon the terrain that the vehicles had to go on. The last thing loaded on an LST is a bulldozer so it can make a road for whatever equipment you've got to offload. And I've seen those bulldozers, especially one trip with North Korean prisoners on that we conveyed down to an island that they made into a prison camp—Koje-do was the island. "Do" is Korean for "island." Papa-san was standing out there, right. I had opened gangway to the point where if I wanted to see something, I could leave the engine room and nobody would say anything, and I was up in the forward gun tub. And papa-san was standing down there with his big black hat on, cussing the Navy because we landed right behind his house, and the bulldozer just ran right through the house and made a road, and the Marines were off first. Normally when we transported prisoners from North to South, they had about a detachment, eight Marines, and every one of them armed with a Thompson sub-machine gun. But when we got to the island, another ship brought, I would say maybe a hundred Marines, and they lined the road to the contained area for the prisoners. Well, like I say, this bulldozer went through, leveled—don't know if it was papa-san's house; he was the mayor of the island. The government had told all the civilians to vacate the island; they didn't want them on there. And I was told later that day they sent in a LST and they loaded them all up, bag and baggage. And it's really a smelly experience when you get those Koreans in there, civilians, and they all decide to cook supper about the same time. You'll smell odors that you've never smelled before. You don't know what they're cooking. But it was an experience.

DePue: Well, they probably had a little kimchi going on, which is a lot of garlic and red pepper and...

Larson: Oh, yeah. Right. Speaking of cooking, we were playing softball in Pusan, which was a southern port in South Korea, and we would usually challenge one division to a ballgame or something. That was about the only time we could get 3.2 beer, which we carried on the ship. So we'd have a ballgame, and they'd send several cases of beer over. So I'm playing left field, I think, which was near their harbor. I missed a ground ball, and the thing went over the edge, and I didn't know what I was going to come up to when I got to the water's edge. There was some Korean woman down there picking seaweed out of the water. She got my ball and tossed it back up. But here's thirty ships there in that harbor, all disposing of their sewage into that water, and that woman's picking the seaweed. I told the guys that, and they said, "Well, she's

going to boil that stuff anyhow; it'll be all right to eat." So some of the off-breed experiences you have accidentally.

DePue: Let's go back to the time you're in Astoria, and obviously you headed up to, you said, Birmingham, [Bellingham?] Washington, for dry dock, and then what happened? Did they go out on a trial cruise?

Larson: We got refitted with several engineering pieces of equipment. The bottom of the ship was all right. They did put a little preservative on several places, but anyhow, they told us that would get us by. So we had maneuvers all down the West Coast of the Pacific. We was within sight of land all the time. There was about eight of us Ts all making the trip. And we would get orders to land at a certain area. They'd have an Army detachment there and stick up their landing—it's a metal disk like—I couldn't tell you exactly what it's all like now—but they would go out and they'd stick that in the sand on the beach, and that's where you had to head for. I remember one occasion—and it was one of the first landings we made—one of the LSTs ended up sideways on the beach, which, I understand, is easy to do if the current and waves catch it just right. Speaking of the various things—well, I'll go on. I'll tell you this a little later on about an LST on a dock in Korea.

DePue: Okay. What's the ship's complement?

Larson: A hundred and twenty, give or take one or two. We had about, oh, I'd say, about six officers most of the time. Sometimes we'd gain a couple more.

DePue: And the rank of the captain of the ship, then?

Larson: Well, our original—he was a full lieutenant, basically. The first tour over to Korea, our assigned captain—commander, we'll call him—was in the hospital. He never did ever make it to the ship. Executive officer who in World War II, he was just a lieutenant, junior grade. He never was on a ship before; he worked at a desk. He was a line officer, and he learned how to operate a ship by colliding with various docks, buoys. What sent us back to the States after our first tour—he backed into a South Korean fisherman's net. You could see all the glass balls that they used on their nets; he backed right through them, wrapped one of them around one of our propeller shafts, and it burned out the stern bearing. Nobody could repair it, so we—

DePue: I want to pick up that story a little bit later here, because that's well after the time you had quite a bit of service already in Korea when that happens, correct?

Larson: When the fishing net came?

DePue: Yeah.

Larson: Yeah.

- DePue: Okay. When did you ship overseas, then?
- Larson: (pause) I would say it was probably—I remember Thanksgiving was on the ship—I would say sometime in the latter part of October, November. Maybe the date on—no, that was second.
- DePue: Well, here's another thing I wanted to ask you about. Did they actually have a ceremony where they recommissioned the ship?
- Larson: Oh, yes. That was in September of '50, where they officially put it back in commission. Our trip—I think they did that in San Diego; I'm not sure. I don't think they did it in Washington.
- DePue: Is that a big ceremony when that happened?
- Larson: Oh, you got some scrambled-egg officers—I say scrambled eggs—on the bill of their uniform hat, if you were a commander or higher, you got scrambled eggs,<sup>6</sup> the officers did. So that was just another fringe benefit. There was quite a few. There might have been an admiral there of that district or something. But it didn't last too long. They passed the colors and the ship's flag to the commanding officer, which was the executive officer, and had us all stand in dress uniform in formation, and—just another day.
- DePue: But isn't there some distinction to being part of the ship's complement?
- Larson: All the crew members at that time were considered plank owners of that vessel. We didn't get any additional pay for it; it was just the privilege of being a plank owner, and when the other guys later on come aboard, they're told who's plank owners and who is not, and to give us a little bit more consideration. (DePue laughs) We had one black fellow come aboard, and he says, "You know, been in this Navy"—he was first class engineman—"Been in this Navy over twelve years, and," he says, "I'm a plank owner of three ships, but you think they'd let me take them home?" (DePue laughs) That was his comment all the time. He was quite a guy.
- DePue: How did you make your way over to Japan and Korea, then?. What were the ports that you stopped in, from San Diego to...?
- Larson: Well, one trip, we stopped at Guam. That was in '52. Yeah, that was second trip over. The first trip over, we had a load of landing craft on, and we dropped them off it seems to me like Guam again. The other trip we had, we had about forty-five-foot-long I-beams on the main deck that we offloaded at Guam, and I believe that was a trip that they were building an enlisted men's club there. This one picture I show here on the second trip over, I'm standing in front of the American Legion club.

---

<sup>6</sup> Gold braid

DePue: In Guam.

Larson: The enlisted men's club was built on the base there, and they had a work detail off of every LST and destroyer that was in Guam at that time. We got the word through the offices that—of course, I found out later that orders were—we were going to be there long enough that we would make the opening day of the enlisted men's club. They made their own cement blocks and everything, the Seabees did, and we were their grunts. So basically they didn't have anything for the interior, and they took a parachute and opened it up and put a silk parachute for a ceiling in this building they put up. So we all got to go over there and have some delicious GI hamburgers and formaldehyde beer, (DePue laughs) which was something. We was putting the word out to the officers, the crew would sure like to be here on that opening day. Well, the officers knew we were going to be there, but they didn't let on; they was playing games with us. So we broke up into our various duty sections, which we have four sections aboard ship, and we would go over a section at a time for two hours. They didn't want you to get inebriated or anything, but some of us was feeling pretty good. We got under way, it seems to me, early in the next morning for Japan. We usually ended up, except the first time I don't think we hit Japan right away; we went to Korea. They changed our orders.

DePue: I'm trying to give myself a test on geography. Is Guam south of the equator? (pause) Let me ask you this: did you cross the equator?

Larson: Yeah. Oh, yeah. I crossed the International Date Line, too.

DePue: Is there a ceremony—

Larson: Oh, yeah.

DePue: —were you involved with both of them?

Larson: They call them Shellbacks.<sup>7</sup> I've got my card someplace. I haven't gave my cross somewhere by the King Neptune. Anybody that's a Shellback, they get to initiate the new Shellbacks. Our initiation consisted of the cook saving the garbage for a couple of days, and they made a swimming pool out of canvas, and old Shellbacks dumped their garbage all over us. And we only had about four that were Shellbacks, but they gave us a good treating. Then you got to go down King Neptune's private slide, which is a chutie-chute, you know, a

---

<sup>7</sup> The ceremony of **Crossing the Line** is an initiation rite in the British Merchant Navy, Dutch merchant navy, Royal Navy, U.S. Navy, U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. marine Corps, Russian Navy, and other navies that commemorates a sailor's first crossing of the Equator. The tradition may have originated with ceremonies when passing headlands, and become a "folly" sanctioned as a boost to morale, or have been created as a test for seasoned sailors to ensure their new shipmates were capable of handling long rough times at sea. Sailors who have already crossed the Equator are nicknamed (Trusty/Honorable) **Shellbacks**, often referred to as **Sons of Neptune**; those who have not are nicknamed (Slimy) **Pollywogs** (in 1832 the nickname **griffins** was noted). [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Line-crossing\\_ceremony](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Line-crossing_ceremony) (accessed February 7, 2014)

slide, made out of canvas with a fire hose getting you down there. Naturally, you're painted up—they paint you up with Mercurochrome, deck paint, whatever's handy. And they told us that morning don't wear any good clothes that day, so all of us are running around with dungarees on with the knees out and shirts with sleeves tore or something. I just threw mine over the side when I got through; I wasn't about to try to clean those things up. But it was an experience.

Going across the International Date Line—I think I did that on that tanker. It was just another day, and at quarters the next morning, they handed you a card signed by the captain and stamped with the ship's seal that you crossed the International Date Line.

DePue: Okay, we're finally about the time now where we're getting you close to combat, and by this time—it sounds like you were on ship on Thanksgiving.

Larson: Yeah.

DePue: Were you hearing any of the news that was going on in Korea while you were on ship?

Larson: Very seldom. We were in our own world. If you're on an LST, it's not high enough on the totem pole that you get all the news. Some of the larger ships get a hold of Armed Forces Radio and they broadcast it. We very seldom ever got a broadcast. Our radio listening consisted of long-play records with radio programs on them. *Fibber Magee and Molly*, Red Skelton, and then they had a musical show that was classical music. Up in the radio shack, they would put them and then put it over our radios. We had radios in the mess hall that you had a selection of about three different stations, so they say. Well, they'd just have different records playing on the turntable for that. Once in a while, if they were going to get a direct broadcast from Armed Forces, they'd announce it over the PA system that Armed Forces Radio was on channel three, you might say. And we would hear some of the news—which meant nothing to us if you hadn't been there; you don't know what's going on. They're talking about the Iron Triangle and Rocky Fords and Heartbreak Ridge. It meant nothing to the Navy. If there was a landing at Hungnam or Inchon or someplace, well, if you'd been there, you knew it.

DePue: What I wanted to mention here before we get into some of the specifics, though, is just put this into context. So you're leaving the West Coast of the United States in October. By the time you get to the theater of operations, it's probably early December, so at the time you left, the war's going very well for the United States. They've crossed the thirty-eighth parallel; they're driving north; Pyongyang, they've liberated—the capital of North Korea—they've been moving north. In November, the American forces and then the South Koreans got a bloody nose for a couple of days, and then the Chinese kind of disappear again. I think it's the day after Thanksgiving when the Chinese

come into the war in a huge way, and for the next month and a half, it's the American forces and the South Koreans are sent reeling back. So about the time you get there is when all of this total breakdown of the front line is happening.

Larson: That's when they evidently changed the orders. They had to evacuate troops, the Marines and the Army up there at Hungnam. And we—trying to think—having never been to Japan yet, you know, I had no idea what Japan was. And then when we landed, this was an operation that—here we are.

DePue: Was that your first operation, is going to Hungnam, then?

Larson: Well, it wasn't exactly Hungnam. It was, I'm thinking, because my buddy was on a PC boat—patrol craft—and he witnessed the blowing of the dock at Hungnam. We were south of Hungnam—either south or north, but we wasn't really there. We picked up disabled equipment that—most of it, they either drop it on board with the big winch on the tank deck or a bulldozer pushed it up there, and most of it was junk. And we took it to Pusan, and I don't know what they did with it there, but they unloaded it the same way they put it on there, dragging it off the ship with a bulldozer.

DePue: Is this Marine equipment or Army equipment?

Larson: I couldn't tell you. To me at that time—a little scared, you didn't know what was going on. You couldn't get any information, and the officers, they didn't know. One thing about an LST—everybody knows everybody on there, and most of those officers knew your name, you know, and they'd have conversations with you. And I remembered having a cup of coffee with the first lieutenant there who was in charge of the storekeepers and whatnot. I said, "Well, what's up next?" He said, "Your guess is as good as mine. Lieutenant [William] Craig hasn't gave us one word. He probably doesn't have that information." So next thing I know, they're waking me up at the wee hours of the morning and then said, "We're going to get underway." "Where are we going?" The messenger didn't know. He said, "I was told to wake up the engineers." So I looked at the roster there, and I thought, What the hell; everybody can get up. I was leading petty officer of one division, and the roster didn't say who was going to have the watch, you know. They usually say, before they get underway, Man your getting-underway stations, or, Man your docking positions, sections, so on and so on. So I just got everybody up, and I said, "The messenger just came down and said we were getting underway." We were in the harbor of Pusan at that time.

We made various moves. It seemed to me like we made a couple of Army moves. There's no roads in those mountains that would hold the equipment, handle the heavier equipment; it was just ox trails, on the average. Most of Korea is mountains. So the Army—

DePue: Especially the east coast of Korea.

Larson: Right, so we'd go up the designated place, load up vehicles and troops, take them six hours down the coast, and put them ashore again.

DePue: And then head right back up again.

Larson: One night, we were anchored off the coast—where, I don't know—but you could see the artillery flashes in the sky, and then about ten o'clock—my buddy always—he was from Wisconsin—he walked constantly when he'd get off watch. And he hollered at me, "Come on up topside. You can hear bugles." Well, the Chinese was attacking someplace there, and the wind was carrying—every once in a while you would hear a bugle sound. So we got underway the next morning and loaded up some troops. No, we didn't, neither. We went back to Japan then—that's where we went. We went to Yokosuka, because there's two guys from South Florida that had never seen snow, and Yokosuka had about a three-inch snowfall, and those guys went crazy. And the engineering officer says, "Well, put them in the boat crew, and they can go over and throw snowballs at each other."

DePue: Well, but when you were in the Sea of Japan off the coast of North Korea, this was December and January I would think for some of that time.

Larson: Yeah. Well, then we made various trips back to Japan all the time to pick up supplies. We carried aircraft jet engines, we carried bombs, we carried ammunition, we carried food supplies, and whatever they needed, the LSTs did.

DePue: Were you guys hauling that equipment primarily to Pusan?

Larson: We would take a lot of it to Pusan. Later on, the second tour, we'd offload a lot of it in Inchon, and they could send it up to that railway hub up there. And I can't remember names anymore, but Pusan had a railroad from it up to—I want to say—it's Manganese or something like that, the name of the place. Anyhow, all the railroads met up there, and that was one thing—we would use an area, an inlet, and they'd shell the railroad track, and the North Koreans would rebuild it at night and send another train the next day down it. Destroyers would shoot the hell out of it, usually destroy it; they'd have it cleaned up right away. Manpower was something over there that was plenty of, not only South Koreans, but the North Koreans and Chinese.

I'm going to tell you another little story on the manpower deal. We were anchored in Wonsan Harbor, our second trip there was mothershipped PT [Patrol Torpedo] Boats and had a rescue helicopter aboard. Well, we anchored in one place for several weeks. Some commander on one of the LSTs got promoted to captain, so that gave him the choice to have a dress inspection on every ship. So on Saturday morning, the guys used to draw

straws to see who didn't have to get on dress uniform and stand the watch in the engine room, which we manned twenty-four hours a day.

So we're up there, and all the sudden you see this flash on the shore, and you see a big splash of water. And the second splash of water was faster. We didn't wait for the third flash; we broke ranks, manned the engines, and we drug the anchor to start with—the anchor detail didn't get it raised fast enough—and we anchored out of their range. Well, about that time, the cruiser *Saint Paul* came steaming past us, firing its eight-inch guns, and then we could hear the airwaves of the sixteen-inch from the battleship *Missouri* go over. The whole hillside lit up over there. Wonsan Harbor's a pretty good-sized area. We were informed that the Chinese had dismantled the coastal gun and had moved its location so they'd have range enough to get to us, and they got two shots fired, as far as I know. I don't know what happened after I hit that engine room.

But the game they played in Wonsan Harbor, they would send our destroyer escorts and heavy destroyers in to draw fire, then the cruiser or battleship called the coordinates, and then they would eliminate them. A lot of their guns that they used were multiple. Later years through a tour of the East Coast, the wife and I went aboard the heavy destroyer that had the longest gun battle, which was four and a half minutes for the short battery, and they gave the destroyer two direct hits, and naturally the short battery was eliminated. But they would keep constantly moving those guns, but that was the only experience we had at being fired upon.

DePue: What was it like in the Sea of Japan during that time? I mean, this is rough seas, isn't it?

Larson: Well, it depends upon the time of year. We've cruised from Korea to Japan and vice versa and you'd thought you was on Lake Springfield. Other times, it'd take longer to go because we were in rough seas and you had to go slower. But normal procedure, if we had troops aboard, we were always picking up new troops in Japan, normally at Yokosuka or Sasebo, and transferring them to Korea depending upon what the war was, where we would offload them. Pusan was a favorite port. So was Inchon if we controlled it. Our landing at Inchon, the second, is when they pushed us all the way back, and we took in fresh troops at Inchon then to help move them back up the peninsula.

DePue: Yeah. What you're referring to there is after the Chinese came in, they pushed the Americans and the UN forces all the way south of Seoul.

Larson: Pushed them out of—yeah.

DePue: And then back north of Seoul in the next month or so, and so Seoul's changing hands three or four times, and Inchon—

Larson: They took over Kimpo Airfield, and we still had troops there, I was told, that were still fighting the Chinese, that never did get evacuated; they held their own until some fresh troops landed at Inchon. Kimpo is about twenty miles from Inchon and about the same distance from Seoul.

DePue: So you're saying the Americans never did—the time when the Chinese captured Seoul, the Americans were still in Kimpo, right?

Larson: Kimpo, yeah.

DePue: I hadn't heard that.

Larson: That's what those guys with the amphibious DUKWs<sup>8</sup> that was on our ship for three weeks. We picked them up, and they didn't know where they wanted them at. Most of them is all black troops with a white officer. They were a good bunch of guys.

DePue: This was an infantry regiment you were dropping off?

Larson: It was amphibious DUKW unit. They used them for transferring supplies, patrols, stuff like that.

DePue: It's kind of a boat on wheels, isn't it?

Larson: Yeah. GMC, and them black boys took care of them vehicles like they were a Cadillac. I mean, they did a good job. We got to know them pretty well. I got several stories I could tell about that.

DePue: If you would.

Larson: All right. Like I said, they were aboard the LST with us for three weeks. They didn't know where they were going to need them at. It seems to me like we picked them up—could be at Inchon. And we laid off shore. We steamed up the west coast of Korea, we steamed up the east coast of Korea, just waiting for orders. We was just staying out of action, you might say. They got accustomed to our deals. They had quite a gambling casino in the mess halls between meals. And they played for keeps! This one guy caught a .45 slug in the side for cheating. In fact, the bullet hole was still in the insulation in the mess hall there. The main tables in the mess hall give you kind of an outlay of how the mess hall was laid out. They had three mess halls, and each one of them had two large tables that would sit about sixteen guys, eight on each side. And along the outside hull of the ship, there was just a narrow table with a swing-out seat to sit on. Well, the bullet hole is in the insulation right above

---

<sup>8</sup> The **DUKW** (colloquially known as **Duck**) is a six-wheel-drive amphibious truck that was designed by a partnership under military auspices of Sparkman and Stevens and General Motors Corporation (GMC) during World War II for transporting goods and troops over land and water and for use approaching and crossing beaches in amphibious attacks. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DUKW> (accessed February 7, 2014)

this one seat. The guy that got shot wasn't sitting down, he was standing up, but the bullet went through the side and exited. So anybody that'd sit there, any new guy, we said, "You're sitting in the death seat there?" "What do you mean?" "Well, look at the bullet hole there." (DePue laughs)

So anyhow, we taught some of those guys how to stand engineering watches. They were efficient after we trained them to do the thing; they just absolutely wanted something to do. Several of them studied Navy training manuals for advancement and reading.

So three weeks is a long time when you've got 180 extra guys on a ship, and so when we landed them back at Inchon, which I think is where we picked them up, they set up camp outside of Inchon, and they did patrols out of there and whatnot. Well, I had acquired a couple of service weapons over there that came from the field of battle, and I needed ammunition. The captain said, "As long as you don't use the ship's ammunition, I don't care how much you shoot." Well, we kept acquiring more of these carbines and M-1 rifles, and there was a dump there at Pusan that for a pack of cigarettes, you could pick up a gun off the South Korea labor in there. "Take your choice. I got a pack of cigarettes," you know? (DePue laughs) This amphibious DUKW outfit supplied us with their carbine and M-1 ammunition, and when we was at sea, we would shoot at garbage, throw it off the fan tail—cardboard boxes, cans, anything.

So, the sergeant came pulling up in his Jeep one day. I was going after mail with the mailman at Inchon, and he says, "Boy," he says, "what do we have to do to get to see some of those movies?" Aboard ship every night we had a movie. We might show the same one night after night, usually we had six or eight of them that we rotated. Well, those guys got to watching those movies, and so I went back to the ship and told the engineering officer, "The amphibious DUKW guys want to see some movies." He says, "Aha! Maybe we can arrange that." I said, "Cooper, I don't like the look on your face when you..." (clears throat)

The officers had bought a Jeep out of a surplus yard in San Diego. An LST doesn't rate a ship's vehicle, so the officers bought this old, rusted Jeep that had been hauled in from some island, and we tried to do our best to get it... We picked up a litter Jeep that was on the beach at one of our landings that had hit a landmine, carried it aboard, and [by the] time we got to sea, we had everything we needed off of it. The rest of it went in the drink, gave it the deep six. So they sent my buddy Bergraff and I back ashore, and we inquired from some Army guys where this camp was for the amphibious DUKWs for (unintelligible). One guy says, "Get in," and had a big deuce-and-a-half truck.<sup>9</sup> "Get in, and I'll drop you off over there." So we pulled up there and went up and talked to that white second lieutenant. He says, "Hey, I got a lot

---

<sup>9</sup> Standard Army slang for a two and a half ton truck

of extra-duty guys here. I've been trying to get some duties for them. You bring that Jeep over with a list of what you want done to it, as long as you bring some movies over and show us." So we were going to be there, Inchon, for three days, and I was a qualified movie operator, and so we each took a day. We showed movies twenty-four hours a day. In fact, one of those guys even changed reels for me. I just couldn't stay awake. And he'd change reels aboard ship. He said, "I'll show you them movies." And his sergeant says, "You've got work to do on that Jeep out there." (laughter) So they put in a new engine, they put all new tires on it, they painted the Jeep—we furnished the paint. We stenciled the Jeep. They had one guy that could letter, and it looked like— They put a new windshield on it. They didn't have any Jeeps assigned to them, and so Bergraff, this first-class engineman that I still see every once in a while, he said, "Where'd you get the parts?" He says, "We have a department in our outfit that secures parts for us, the midnight requisition." Other Army units furnished the parts for our Jeep.

So for three days they got to see movies twenty-four hours a day, and we got the officers' Jeep fixed, and we still had a bunch of friends. In fact, we challenged them to a ballgame, which took several months before we ever got it. Did you ever play ball in foul weather gear? (DePue laughs) I mean, it's kind of hard throwing with those heavy jackets on. But we had fun.

DePue: Do you remember any of the movies?

Larson: We would get movies before they were released to the public in the States here. John Wayne was a favorite; Hopalong Cassidy another one. I don't think we ever had any Roy Rogers. The Navy term for a Western movie is "horseshit and empty brass," and that's the way we would post it on the day's menu. Love stories, they would have some rude remarks made. Two guys would get shouting back at each other, and before it was over with, there's five or six making comments about some gal on the screen. I would get a kick out of—I had the duty to show the movies. I would try to pick one that there would be less contempt from the officers over it.

During rough seas one time, one of the other projector operators didn't take down the movie screen, and it got damaged in rough seas, so we requisitioned another one. Most ships had two or three in their supply room. LSTs got one projector. You kept the projector repaired, and you could see movies. So while at Wonsan, while we were up there, they were going to deep-six that old movie screen, and I said, "Nah, save that. You can throw the metal away; I want the screen." So I made a sign that we hung on the quarterdeck—and I got a picture of it here. We refueled those PT Boats, so I considered our ship a filling station. So I constructed a sign and we hung it on the quarterdeck. And that thing had been published in I don't know how many publications. That's me there.

DePue: Okay, you're on the left, then, of the picture.

Larson: Yeah, and the other one is Edmondson. We all had diesel ratings, en-ja-min diesel, and he had en-ja-min gas. He was in PT Boats, World War II, and his flotilla was the one that moved MacArthur out of the Philippines.

DePue: The sign here says, “USS *LST-1077*, Wonsan, Korea, super service station. Twenty-four hours daily open. No flats fixed.” (laughs) Why nothing other than the number for the name of the ship?



Larson: Well, at that time, there was no name to LSTs. Later on, they were named after counties. The 1077 became *Park County*. It seems like the state of Wyoming and another state—there was two states involved that had Park Counties. They named them after counties. But when we were on it, it was just the number, just like in World War II.

DePue: But I imagine there’s a certain amount of pride that’s connected to the guy saying, “Yeah, I’m on the 1077.”

Larson: Oh, yeah. Even in the Illinois—I belonged to the national LST association and also the Illinois LST association, and our jackets and hats all have our LST numbers on them. The new guy—there was a new guy at Seneca. We have our semi-monthly meetings at Seneca, Illinois, which was a shipyard there that built LSTs on the Illinois River. And the new guys, they have their ship’s number plus the name. And this one guy—I don’t remember the ship number, but the county was Cheyenne, and everybody called him “Cowboy.” And he was in Vietnam on a LST. They used them in Vietnam—I’ll just throw this out while I mentioned it, you know the 1077 and 1076 stood moored side-by-side, and they supplied the riverboats in Vietnam. They were mother ships there. And several guys I talked to at the VFW, one guy was on a riverboat, and those things are jet boats, most of them—no props, just a jet of water coming out—because they could run in shallow water. And he said his boat could get up and do nearly fifty-five miles an hour, and he says, “Sometimes you need all that speed.” He was a gunner. He was a seaman on there, but he was a forward machine gunner, and he says, “When you’ve got all guns operating and the shore is just nothing but solid red along there, them shooting at you,” he said, “you want every knot you can get out of that thing.” But that’s basically what the LSTs did in Vietnam.

DePue: Mm-hmm. I got just a couple more questions, and then we’re going to give you a break for a little bit of time here, and then we can finish up in our second session. You’d mentioned when we first met about moving some North Korean refugees south, and I would assume that was very early in your experience there as well.

Larson: Yeah. There was a lot of Koreans in North Korea that were basically South Koreans. Before the war, if they had family in North Korea, they could go visit them. That was an agreement evidently set up between Russia and the United States or whoever had control of the DMZ, thirty-eighth parallel, which wasn't a DMZ then, it was the thirty-eighth parallel. It was the border, more or less. So they had all those people up there, but when we advanced through North Korea, these people were wanting to find out how they can get back to South Korea. And they had so many refugees that walked. Well, in those refugees is also North Korean soldiers disguised as refugees, and our GIs had a terrible time dissecting between the two. And so the United Nations under MacArthur decided that we would supply sea transportation for them—Missy(?) you know him—supply sea transportation, and we hauled them down to Pusan. They were on their own then. Pusan, being an open port which could handle a lot of shipments, was easier than dumping them off at Osan or someplace where it wasn't equipped.

Speaking of Osan, we happened to be offloading some troops there or vehicles or something, and so four of us—like I said before, I had open gangway; I could leave the ship anytime. I was known as the professional scrounger. I would secure alcohol for the officers or whatever parts we needed aboard ship. We were in there, and here comes this whole road full of people walking and one or two oxcarts. And I asked an Army sergeant that was there directing traffic. He says, "Well, fellows, I don't know. You're not armed." He says, "I wouldn't vary too close there." He said, "We've had infiltrators infiltrating them, the civilians." So we gave them wide berths. I took a few pictures, and that was it. But it's surprising how many people there are in Korea that don't have a place to live at that time.

So after we transported civilians, they acquired quite a few North Korean and Chinese prisoners, and so they had to detain them someplace. So they took the whole island Koje-do and put an installation in there, and we took several loads of prisoners there. Do you want me to relate anything?

DePue: Well, if you've got some stories—I'm especially curious about your impressions about both the refugees and the prisoners that you had.

Larson: Yeah. Okay, the refugees came aboard ship. We put them on the tank deck. We built a latrine for the refugees and also the prisoners. We always carried wood in our damage control brackets, which were various places throughout the ship. And the engineering officer, being as I was a carpenter—I was tile-setter, but I was in the carpenters' union—I was delegated to build a trough over the side of the ship out of this rough-cut lumber that we had. And so naturally, three two-by-twelves and a couple of smooth one-inch lumber. I built a trough that went over the side of the ship, and we secured an inch and a half fire hose at the end to keep a flow of water going through. And they put out several rolls of GI toilet paper. And this storekeeper who was supposed to—that was his job, making sure the toilet paper was up there—them guys,

those civilians and the prisoners, would steal the whole roll. They passed word over the PA system one time that said our supply of toilet tissue was running very low; everybody use one section a sheet. (laughter) But you had to make a joke out of things to have something to laugh about.

And our civilians cooked their own food. We supplied them some rice. So the prisoners had no food, and the captain said his orders were to feed them. So we had these eighty-pound bags of rice on board in our stores. Well, they complained the first time, the first serving, that the rice had bugs in it, so the captain said, "Open another bag." And he said, "If they complain about bugs, that's all they're getting," because we didn't have any more rice. You feed them GI food, they get sick and throw up all over. It's bad enough they did their number twos in the cloverleaves that was flush in the deck to tie the tanks down with. They used those. They thought they was sewers or something, and they pottied in them. The poor deck force that had to clean that ship up afterwards used gallons of Clorox, and they scrubbed down everything. And everybody says, "Oh, we're going to get a swimming pool on the tank deck there," scrubbing it down with Clorox so we'll have clean water to swim in. The crew made jokes out of everything that went on, which was just natural.

And so the second load of prisoners, we had replenished our supply of rice, and they had a bunch of plastic bowls that they ate out of, and they were told in Korean and Chinese both that that bowl was theirs, that they only get the one; it's up to them to keep it. They had a garbage can there with water in where they could wash it out. So the second group we had on there, our electric shop, paint locker, and machine shop—if you want to call it a machine shop—we had a drill press, and I think there was part of a lathe in there. And there were only two of us that were qualified machinists that could operate a lathe—didn't have all the parts to it. So we'd go to the repair ship and let them do it; it was easier. The second group of prisoners we had on there, we would dog down a door or a hatch—there was turn handles on a door that would be about six, seven—two each on the sides and one top and bottom—and we would slip a pipe handle or two of them so they couldn't turn them.

They got into the electric shop, which had a hatch open to our sleeping quarters, and they got up there and stole the foul weather gear off the hooks on the guys' bunks while they were still sleeping in there. If they had got to my compartment, my .45 was underneath my jacket. I carried a—issued a .45 for boat crew use. That's why we picked up the carbines; none of us figured we could ever use a .45 effectively, so we picked up carbines out of that battlefield dump, and every member that was in a boat crew had a carbine besides. So we reported our foul weather gear missing. The captain and this Marine officer said, We're going to search them when they go. They made them disrobe on the bow ramp under Marine guard. One guy even stole a pair of long johns, had them on. They made them strip down to the nude, throw all the GI clothes in a pile, and put their old clothes on and line up under guard.

So the captain, he looked at the supply officer, and he said, “Do you have enough foul weather gear in storage to reissue foul weather gear to our crew?” And the supply officer said he thought. We backed out to sea, and they took shovels and threw those clothes—it was full of lice and everything else—because when they brought them aboard ship, they used DDT on them, shoved that powder up their sleeves and down their back and everything. They did that to civilians, too, because we didn’t want lice infected on that ship.

So consequently they pitched all those clothes overboard. They passed word over the PA system, anybody needing foul weather gear, line up at this one storage locker. So my buddy and I says, “Hey,” he says, “I need one of these coats when I get home.” I said, “By gosh, I could use one, too.” So we stood in line, and we each got another coat. Well, that lasted—somebody didn’t get the second coat, and they squealed on us, so the chief says, “You guys turn in your extra gear.” So I was reluctant. I kind of held back. And they had my name, so I turned it in. The chief looked at me, and he said, “Well, I’ll just keep that one for you.” And about a month later, he came back down to the engine room, and he said, “Boy, it’s cold down here.” He had my other coat on.

DePue: (laughs) Well, that reinforces what your comment about being the ship’s scrounger.

Larson: Right. I’ve acquired everything from alcohol to extra lockers, engine parts. In fact, one day they used life jackets—we would transfer movies from one LST to the other. Like I say, each ship had six or eight. So they put these movies in a wire stretcher, a casualty cage, they called them, and put life jackets around them. And they was using the high line from one LST to the other. Well, after being on that tanker, I learned quite a bit about high lines. You have to have extra slack there for when the ships accidentally go apart from the sea. And I told that boatswain mate, I says, “You haven’t got enough line laying there.” “Ah, we got enough.” And I said, “All right.” So I had my camera with me. And we sent our movies over, and—let’s see, how was it? No, they were sending their movies over to our ship, and we had to have enough line to go over to their ship and bring the dolly back with this casualty cage on it. Got halfway in between the ships, and all the sudden the ships spread out and the line was gone, and the casualty cage went in the drink with our movies—our new movies—and we watched it go away with six life jackets, you know, keeping it afloat. Well, they said, “Why don’t we put a small boat in the water and go get them?” And so the time they got a boat down and everything, that thing was miles back, you know. Because we was in formation; we had to stay with the other ships. So they never did ever get the small boat in the water, and we was without movies. They had some training films that one of the guys showed one night, and he says, “I’ve seen them things ten times already,” and he says, “and then I got to sit there and show them again.” So we had resupplied on movies, and that was usually one of the movie projectors’ jobs, was going to the movie exchange, and if you give them one,

you can get a new one back. And so the commanding officer had to write a letter, sent with this electrician's mate over to get new movies, that we lost our movies at sea. And, oh, they weren't going to give them. "How do we know he signed this?" Boy. So we got the movies.

DePue: Well, I think this is probably a good place to take a break now, and we're going to start the next session with—you had talked very briefly about this accident that sent you back to the West Coast of the United States, so we will start with that story in a little bit more detail.

(end of interview #1)

## Interview with Keith Larson

# VRK-A-L-2010-017.2

Interview # 2: April 14, 2010

Interviewer: Mark DePue

### **COPYRIGHT**

**The following material can be used for educational and other non-commercial purposes without the written permission of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. "Fair use" criteria of Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976 must be followed. These materials are not to be deposited in other repositories, nor used for resale or commercial purposes without the authorization from the Audio-Visual Curator at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, 112 N. 6th Street, Springfield, Illinois 62701. Telephone (217) 785-7955**

DePue: Today is Wednesday, April 14, 2010. My name is Mark DePue, the director of oral history for the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today is my second session, it's in the afternoon, with Keith Larson. Good afternoon, Keith.

Larson: Hello, Mark. Glad that you've returned in great spirits.

DePue: Well, how can I be anything other than that (Larson laughs) with these interesting stories that I know you're going to be talking about as well? We had a great session a couple days ago about your experiences in the Navy, and we hadn't quite finished yet. I thought a good place for us to start today is for you to talk about the incident that brought you back to the United States in mid-tour of your time during the Korean War.

Larson: Well, it all started, you might say, in early morning hours. We transferred some troops on the east side of South Korea, which the fighting was more up at the thirty-eighth parallel and further north at that time, but due to the type of roads, which were ox-cart trails and whatnot, we would load an Army unit up, move them to wherever they wanted to go, usually to the other side of the mountain. So we went in this little cove that morning, and as I mentioned before, earlier in the interview, our commanding officer, the first one, never did ever arrive at the ship—he was hospitalized—so the executive officer, which during World War II did nothing but man a desk in the States—

DePue: And his name again?

Larson: Craig. William Craig, I believe. He was a lieutenant. I believe he was a full lieutenant maybe.

DePue: Which in Army jargon would equal a captain?

Larson: Would be a captain. So we retracted from the beach. There was two other LSTs that were loaded, and we were in the first three that went ashore to offload. So the captain, he learned his seamanship on that LST by colliding with—I remember one good-sized dock one time. Another time, we ran over a marker buoy. This time he retracted all the way, and being in a hurry, he backed right into the midst of a South Korean fisherman's nets that he had placed out. He didn't realize the fact that all those glass balls that he'd seen was the floaters on those nets. Well, they wrapped around our starboard screw pretty good.

DePue: How many screws did you have?

Larson: We had two, port and starboard. And there's a stern tube bearing—proper name—and it's right as the shaft comes out of the ship to the prop. And all this rope and whatnot there came up and wrapped around the shaft and put undue pressure on it, and it burned out that bearing. Also, it cut a pretty good groove in the shaft to where it wasn't making a good seal. So right away, we knew that the starboard engine, main engine, which was a General Motors twelve-cylinder diesel—same as they use in railroad diesel engines on trains—forget the model, I want to say it was 456, but I think that was the earlier model. So we went to Yokosuka, Japan, at the naval base there, and they said they couldn't get the parts for it. They had the facilities; they could do it. So then they contacted Pearl Harbor, and they said for us to come there and they would take a look at it. So we went there, and they put divers over the side, and they decided that it could not be done. So that left us only one other choice, and that was to hit the mainland of the United States and go into Hunters Point Naval Shipyard and go into dry dock. They said they could make any part that was needed, and also the hull of our ship was due for inspection, so we went into dry dock, and they made additional repairs.

Another little side story that was taking place on our way back to the States: I was in charge of the auxiliary engine room, which had three diesel-driven generators. Our number-two generator had been giving us problems. It was burning the tops out of pistons and burning holes in the heads. The heads



consisted of a two-cylinder setup. So in the early hours one evening—we had worked on it that day, and we were putting it online and seeing if it would last—and all of a sudden we heard a tremendous noise, and everybody connected with engineering headed down to the engine room. It had a crank case explosion. One of the bearings on the crankshaft had seized, and the heat and everything from that created an explosion from the vapors of the crank case. So, well, it blew the oil dipstick and bent a half-inch piece of steel on the overhead. So our orders from our captain was that as soon as

we hit Hunters Point, he was having the Navy investigate what was wrong with that engine. Well, naturally, the know-it-alls—I will use that expression—because there was also a factory representative there who manufactured the diesel engine. So they furnished a new crankshaft, and our orders from the captain was that nobody in our section gets to go on leave until that engine's rebuilt. So, consequently, they secured a new crankshaft, cut a hole in the deck, and lowered it down with the yard winch, and we laid it right next to the engine. Completely tore down the engine. We worked three shifts, including the engineering officer, who, after the captain gave that order, he came up to me and he said, "Larson, put me on whatever shift you want." Him being a mustang, which meant that he started out as an enlisted man, and he wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty. In fact, he was a real sharp, shrewd mechanic. So our leave was delayed for about two weeks. He had a house full of kids he was wanting to go home to, and he was a good enough officer that he figured if his men had to stay, he was staying, too. So we got through that episode, and I came home, and consequently got married. (laughs)

DePue: Well, you know, you've gone into quite a bit of detail on most of these stories, but (Larson laughs) you kind of glossed over when we first talked about dating... You didn't mention the fact that when you left, you were engaged. Was that the case?

Larson: No, it wasn't.

DePue: This was Marie, right? We're talking about Marie now.

Larson: Right, right.

DePue: How did you end up getting married during that time?

Larson: Well, she proposed to me, I keep telling her, but she says that it's not true. If we could find those letters I wrote to her, she claims in one of the letters, I ask her in a roundabout way that I would like to have her and I have our family or something similar to that. So—

DePue: Was this the case of distance makes the heart grow fonder?

Larson: Yeah. I think it was the middle of the Sea of Japan I probably wrote that letter. But, now, I dated her, and two other young ladies beside, and it just seemed like she and I had a little bit more in common than what I did with the other two. In fact, one of them was the city police chief's daughter, and I knew better than to get too involved with her. (laughter) But we've had a very nice life. Two children, and this July, if we make it that far with our lives, it'll be fifty-nine years of marriage. So we're pushing for the sixty. My daughter mentioned last night when we visited her—I said something about we attended another friend's sixtieth this last Sunday, and I said most of the people that I worked with at Franklin Life were there because they had worked there also earlier. And I told them, I said, "You're going to have to watch the paper, because I'm too cheap to send out personal invitations, but you..." And this one lady says, "Well, we're going to Alaska," and she says, "We don't want to go in July." I said, "That's a good time to go up there. When we went, it was the latter part of June, first July, and we still had a little inclement weather now, you know, in various places." So hopefully we can make the sixty mark.

DePue: Your anniversary date is July 22, 1951, is that right?

Larson: Right.

DePue: I wonder if you can tell me a little—this had to be a pretty quick arranged affair when you came back.

Larson: Well, it seemed like—I explained to her, I know, in one of the letters, that my leave was going to be held up, and the near as I could figure that I would probably bank on the latter part of July. So she proceeded to start doing stuff. She worked at the Sangamo Electric at that time. And she started making arrangements and bought her wedding gown, and she rented the pavilion at Washington Park, and that's where we held our reception, being as it was in our price range. (laughter) So I had a thirty-day leave. We were married on a Sunday, and we took off for a week or so vacation in the Ozarks. Let me back up. She wasn't working at Sangamo yet. She didn't work at Sangamo Electric until after we were married. She worked at the Milk Bar, which was a drive-in on South MacArthur, at MacArthur and Ash. Their employer owned a camp down in the Lake of the Ozarks, and we spent a few days at Rockaway Beach and then went to his per se 'resort.' Well, the resort was nothing but a fishing

camp, and they had two buildings there that had three rental units in each one. You had one bathroom at each apartment, per se. But the furniture consisted of a 1920 iron bed that had iron springs and a very, very hard mattress. So, consequently, we stayed there one or two nights—I don't remember—but then we went to a luxury area, and, like I say, about a week later we returned to Springfield. I had bought a new Chevrolet before I got called back in the Navy, and so my dad—who purchased the car from me—he was more than gracious to let me use it on the honeymoon.

DePue: I'm wondering. You got a nice-looking suit in there. Was that something you bought special for this occasion?



Larson: No, that was a suit that I had bought prior to getting called back in. My brother, one brother was quite the churchgoer, and I had a sport jacket and a pair of slacks that was my good dress back then. He says, "You need a suit." So he went with me to Harvey Brothers Clothing Store—I never will forget that—and I got to open my second charge account, my first one being at Kay Jewelry Store. And I can remember getting that suit, and it's a good thing I bought it. (laughs)

DePue: Well, so many of the guys who went overseas, to places like Japan, especially, had suits that were custom-made for them over there.

Larson: Right. We returned to Seoul, Korea, in '99, and Walter Ade had two suits custom-made there, and him being a tailor himself—he was taught that in Germany by Hitler's forces—and he checked these guys out. I never will forget. He came up to me at the hotel there, and he says, "I ordered two suits, Keith, and they're going to put my name inside of them, and I get two hand-made ties. I get a tie with each suit." And I said, "Well, you made out." He said, "We haven't really discussed all the price yet." (laughter)

DePue: Well, you mention Walter Ade. He's another person that we've interviewed in this series, so you might want to check that one out, too.

Larson: He turned out to be a good friend. He belonged to the same gun club I did for years. He was an instructor there. He's an excellent shot. And right away, a lot of the guys out there resented him because he was one of the few that ever trained a bunch of youngsters and took them to the state tournaments, and they placed real good. His thought was the ones that beat them wasn't using American-made ammunition; they were using Canadian ammunition, so he had the ground rules changed that only American ammunition could be used.

Walter's quite a guy. He's very persistent. I remarked to him one day, I said, "You know, you're wearing out your welcome a lot of places." We started running around together about 1990 in the group Korean veterans. And I said, "Walter, you have a lot of resentment coming. You better be nice to me because I'm your last friend," and he's never forgotten that.

DePue: Well, I can vouch that he's got more than just you as a friend. (Larson laughs) Let's get back to your experiences during the war, and talk about going back to Korea, then, after you had this extensive stay to fix the ship and to get married.

Larson: Right. Well, we returned to Korea for another tour of duty, and it seems to me like it had to be around December or January. I'm saying December, because it seemed that this would be December of '51, and it seems to me like we did some troop movement, some supply hauling from Japan to Korea, and then we went out to north of the thirty-eighth parallel into an area that was Wonsan Harbor. It was a big port. The harbor itself was twenty-one miles or so across. The Chinese and North Koreans was on one side, and the United Nations forces was on the south side, and the South Koreans had liberated the city of Wonsan. So we were sent up there as a mother ship to a flotilla of American PT boats that was given to the South Korean navy, and we supplied them with food and ammunition and fuel. Every one of those PT boats had a little statue on the stern, and it was Buddha or somebody. Anyhow, they would come alongside. We had a crew member that was in the PTs, World War II, and he was in the flotilla that evacuated General MacArthur from the Philippines to Australia, so he knew everything there was about the PT boat, PT standing for Patrol Torpedo. So the officers put him in charge of refueling these boats, and then the gunner's mate was in charge of resupplying the ammo.

So we had put an ice cream-making machine aboard the LST when we was in Hunters Point Shipyard, and it seemed that all the larger ships had ice cream making machines. So being as I had worked for a dairy, the engineering officer said that's my detail to get that thing up and running, which we did right away, before we left Hunters Point. We could order mix out, which you add your flavor to it and run it through the freezer, and you could dispense the soft-freeze ice cream. And we had little paper cups that we put it in. So when these PT boats would come along the side, somebody got the idea, "Why don't we give them some ice cream?" Well, most of their crew had lots of fillings in their teeth, and this one crew member on that one PT boat, I used to get a kick out of him. He would be the one to get over and the get the bucket that had the ice cream in, and he would be the one to pass it out to all the crew members. Well, we'd always send an extra one down, and they would raffle it off or something, but he was putting it in his pocket and saving it. He had very bad teeth or had an awful lot of fillings, and that cold ice cream hit there, and he would dance a jig. And it was comical to see him react, but he wouldn't give up eating that ice cream every trip.

So one day, well, I was down in living quarters, just came out of the engine room, and this first class petty officer that was a PT boat man, he said, "Grab your camera. The lieutenants will see if I know how to run that boat."



So there are several pictures that I supplied you off of that PT boat. We went down on a shakedown, and I will give the man credit, he could make that boat talk out there. He'd show the lieutenant something, and the South Korean lieutenant would try it, and he really enjoyed, you know, seeing somebody else operate it. But also, the same time, we're

anchored out in the same place. We had a helicopter there, a Huey, that was supplied from an aircraft carrier.

DePue: It probably wasn't the Huey that we remember from Vietnam, but we got some pictures of a helicopter here that you've given us as well.

Larson: Yeah, right.

DePue: Go ahead.

Larson: And so it was used for rescuing downed pilots if they had to ditch their planes. To my knowledge, we only really saved one man. Most of them died of hypothermia when they hit that water, which



was very frigid. One guy they picked up on land, he had been wounded, and one of the crew members goes down on the winch that's attached to the side of the helicopter, and if they jettison their parachute, they leave the harness of it on. Well, on this harness, there's a D-ring, and the helicopter crew member snapped the hook from the winch to his D-ring and hoisted him aboard. Well, he passed away before he got to the ship, and like I said, he was pretty well shot up. But at least they retrieved his body. Something that I found out in later years that a lot of our planes went down there, and they're now finding the bones and the remains of the pilots after all these years. Usually a local farmer or somebody took care of burying them, and the graves are unmarked.

DePue: I did have one question here. This is late 1951 when you got back to Korea, so maybe into '52 even.

Larson: No. Well, this was—yeah, yeah, it would be '52.

DePue: And by that time, the line had stabilized somewhere around the thirty-eighth parallel, and my understanding was that Wonsan was well behind enemy lines.

Larson: I believe it was still in our possession.

DePue: Part of the port itself was still in your possession?

Larson: All of the city and the port. And the South Koreans get the credit, for the way I understand it. The Marines got in landing craft and APAs [U.S. Navy ship classification for Attack Transports] and everything was going up there to make the landing. The South Koreans went over land, and they beat them there and liberated the city and the port.

DePue: And they retained control of it even though the rest of the lines had moved U.S. out.

Larson: Right. They had all the Marines, and some of the Marine units stayed there and gave additional support to the South Korean troops. We would send a boat in, an LCVP [Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel], to pick up mail, so it had to be in our hands. And the way the mail got there was by puddle-jumper airplane. In the middle of this Wonsan Harbor was an island, and we had an observation plane there that supplied information to the cruisers. Usually one cruiser and one battleship is on station up there. And they would fly over these gun emplacements, which the Chinese were very good at dismantling the coastal gun, moving it to a new location. A lot of the guns were mobile, they were on wheels, but these bigger ones that they brought in, they were probably Russian-made like most of the stuff was. They would relocate it, and the one that took the pot shots at us anchored there was an area that had never fired before, but when the cruiser and battleship got through, the whole hillside was lit up.

DePue: And you're talking before about pilots who go down, these people who were injured, especially. They're going down in enemy territory, then. So you're going to rescue people who were behind enemy lines.

Larson: Right. A lot of the planes were off of the carriers, and then Sea of Japan. Well, they had to fly over these gun emplacements, but they were a lot higher than an observation plane would be. And they usually had picked up their damage from the enemy either from ground control anti-aircraft, or the big alley was easy to get to, which was in northern Korea, on the western side.

DePue: Right along the Yalu River, as I under—

Larson: Right. And so their route over Wonsan Harbor was always picked because they knew they could get rescued. Another LST—I believe it was 914 or

something—it had that duty just prior to [when] we took the duty, and then we were relieved by another LST from another flotilla, and we resumed our duties with our flotilla, then, hauling supplies mainly from Japan to Korea someplace. We had jet engines, we had bombs, we carried ammunition, we carried food, we had extra vehicles, we'd pick up the stuff in Japan, and it had a destination somewhere along the coast of Korea, and we'd go to shore, and the Army would accept it. One time we had these bombs on there. I don't know what size; I guess five hundred pounders or something, but—

DePue           Aerial bombs?

Larson:        Yeah. They were on special steel skids and bolted down to them. We had two forklifts on that LST, and they could go up and lift those bombs up, two at a time, on a skid, and the Air Force had a little boy trailer there, and they'd load them on it. Another time, the Air Force provided their own forklift, which was a gigantic piece of equipment, three times the size of those little carts that we had on the ship. And I thought, Why do they got such a big one for? Well, I found out. Those jet engines were in a metal capsule, and it was maybe twelve, fourteen feet tall, about four and a half foot across, and it is just like a big pipe. Inside was this jet engine that was supported in there; that's the way they transported them. They brought that forklift to board, and it had the rigging on it, snapped on those engines, and went off there just like they'd done it every day, which maybe they had. So it was very well organized with whatever we had.

One time—and I believe you have the picture of it in the group—we landed at, I want to say Kumsong, or something like that. The reason I



remember that name—a friend of mine on *LST-1101* had to go in the same place and pick up a Navy airplane. A Russian or Chinese pilot, whatever it was, had crash-landed there, so at that time, they was wanting to know the Russian secrets on that MIG, so he went in and picked it up. But we offloaded plywood, and the Army had

no other way of getting that plywood up to where they wanted it (laughs) except to carry it sheet by sheet.

DePue: Oh, this one right here. I think it's number ten that we've got.

Larson: Yeah. They brought the troops down, and I thought, boy, that's going to be forever. They just had a steady stream of complement going back down to get another sheet, and out they went. Like I mentioned before, I had open gangway and I took off with my camera. I had to get a picture of that. The hill was quite steep that they were going up, but they managed to get that lumber up there. And we've hauled steel I-beams; we've hauled extra landing craft, tanks, trucks, trailers, and...



DePue: You've got some excellent pictures that illustrate what life was like on the ship.

Larson: There's the dead engines, in that picture there.

DePue: Okay. That's number thirteen, then.

Larson: The electrician's mate that had the duty to show the movie that night, he decided to put the projector up there.

DePue: (laughs) Okay. I wanted to ask you some questions: Was there a home port that you used in Japan when you were...?

Larson: Yokosuka.

DePue: How often did you get a chance to get shore leave at Yokosuka? And I want—

Larson: Well, both tours of duty over there, we each drew our complimentary R&R leave. The first time, it was (laughs) like I say, the LST doesn't rate very high in the naval ranks. It was an afterthought, more or less, that our ship better get some R&R, so a group of about six of us that worked together, we went to Nara, Japan, which was full of elaborate temples and big Buddhist statues and monuments. There wasn't really a heck of a lot to do there. And the second time, I missed going to Australia by the draw of one number, and we ended up in Atami, A-t-a-m-i, I believe, Japan, which is on top of a mountain, and there's a nine-hole golf course there. Earlier, the Japanese, that was an officers' resort—nice hotel, horseback riding, horseshoe pitching, baseball, anything you wanted to do. And we had a good time there. We'd go for four to five days on those R&R trips. The group that did get to go to Australia, which was about thirty guys from our ship, they flew them there; they taxied them right to their hotel, and they had anything they wanted to eat. Same way with us at Atami. Nara, we had to fetch for ourselves; it was like it was an

afterthought—oh, we'll make that an R&R place. But it was good to sleep in a bed instead of a rack like you had aboard ship; you had a good, thick mattress and springs under you. The dining area we ate at was super.

So as far as liberty goes, if the ship wasn't going to leave, we could get seventy-two-hour passes or whatever, and we'd go into Tokyo and Yokohama, either that or we'd have ballgames. It's the only time the Navy ever gave you any beer to drink, if you had a ballgame. And we challenged everybody on that ship, the engineers did, the ballgame. We only had two ball gloves and one softball and two bats, and we lost the ball, so that was the end of the ballgames. Somebody bought one in Japan. It wasn't too bad of a ball.

DePue: You mentioned, I think, in our first interview, that you had a chance to see Nagasaki. Can you tell us a little bit more about your impressions of Nagasaki?

Larson: Yeah. We were on the train this particular day—it was early in the day. Another fellow and I was going into Tokyo. We had the duty, extra duty, that... So we were on the train, and I said, "Ooh, this is different." And the conductor comes back, and through another Japanese passenger who spoke English, the conductor told them that that was the first train to run on the old original track before they moved radioactivity—which, a lot of Japanese people was wandering around the rooms, and even when we went by that first time. But they had moved the railroad out several miles from the populated area that was in shambles, and that was to keep people from getting exposure, because the railroad ran the whole length of that particular island there in Japan, from Sasebo all the way up past Tokyo. And from what we could see, all the streets were clear. They had cleared those off, probably by hand labor. But where there is buildings—which a lot of it wasn't mortar and brick buildings, it was wood construction, and naturally they all blew down and burned up. And it didn't take too long to go past it, you know. Where they had their railroad originally, it wasn't like, you might say, Springfield, run ten miles through the city. This was something like two, two and a half, three—very short. The train didn't stop there, and that's something we got to talking about. And I think this is kind of a trial run or something. But it was interesting. Two things while I was in Japan, I was kind of proud to be involved with. When we were in—want me to go on?

DePue: Sure.

Larson: We were in Tokyo—or, excuse me, Kobe, Japan—went there from the shipyards. You've got a picture of when we lost our one bow door on the ship. We had to go in the shipyard there. Every ship carries a set of blueprints, and if they need a part built, any shipyard can build it. So, consequently, we went in there, and the way that door was twisted and hanging up there, we had to secure it with a cable to get from Korea to Kobe. And—let me see.

DePue: Go ahead and—

Larson: Yeah, that's it. I'm looking at it upside down.

DePue: Number eleven here.

Larson: So they removed that door manually—now, no crane, no nothing—by manpower. That's a bamboo scaffold that



you see there. And they worked off of there, and that door—I'm guessing it's eighteen feet high—it's the same height as the one shown—they removed that, kept it upright, secured it to that bamboo scaffold and took it down, around the end of this dock, and then they had a stationary crane there, and they lifted it up, took it in the shop. We got it back five days later, and it was in better shape than what the other door was on the ship.

DePue: Was this an American crew who was working on this?

Larson: Japanese. Two things I noticed while I was there—and we were there for six weeks, I guess, getting other things done—the fire pumps rebuilt and one thing or another—everything was manual labor. They carried a two-hundred-pound or heavier, a hundred-horsepower fire pump on a pipe on their shoulder, two guys did, carried it up the gangway. They was going to put it down in the engine room. They would do anything for the Americans at that shipyard. Sailors, they didn't see many of. There's an Army base on the outskirts of Kobe; they were tired of the soldiers, and the local clientele and the souvenir shops and whatnot, which we became very friendly with. One family, that mama-san owned a chain of souvenir shops in various Japanese cities. Her husband was killed by the atomic bomb, and she said, "Cinder." She could speak some English. But when they IDed his body, she said he was a cinder and just burnt.

DePue: Did you ever sense a bit of antagonism or resentment from her?

Larson: She didn't show it if she had it. Now, the one girl, the youngest—she had two daughters. One was about twenty-one, and the other one was about sixteen. And my boiler tender buddy, he liked the idea that they had a new Ford and had girls to take us every place, show us all kinds of sites, and one thing and another. But getting back to Kobe itself—I was privileged to stand on the keel of the first merchant ship the United States allowed Japan to build, there at Kobe Shipyard. I don't know whether you've kept any of the pictures or whether I supplied any. They completely built the diesel engine that was going in that ship—which was about three stories high. The bearing inserts for

the connecting rods were two foot wide, and the pistons were something like thirty inches across. I mean, that was one big engine. They built that thing in a machine shop, disassembled it, and carried it to the ship and put it all back together. That was what they were going to start doing. They were disassembling that engine our last week there, and I wanted so bad to go back to see more about the construction of that ship.

DePue: I wonder if you can take a couple moments here to compare your impressions of the Japanese people and the Korean people.

Larson: Well, the Japanese were further advanced than the Korean people. The Korean person or country didn't have hardly anything to speak of, like being in the rural Japan for so long, where MacArthur saw to it that the Japanese were steadily advanced forward. He was God to the Japanese person. I happened to be in Yokohama the day that Truman fired him, and you want to talk about droopy-faced people—they were saddened because they thought their world and good things was coming to an end real fast. So we talked to several of them, my buddy and I, the ones that could speak English, which is surprising. (I went—a group of us—Walter Ade, Bernie Scott and George Pembreck—four of us went back to Seoul in 1999. The children on the street come up and ask you if they could have permission to talk to us, and spoke very excellent English. The one kid, he says, "What's your name?" And I told him, and he spelled it right and wrote it down and handed it to me. He said, "See, I'm going to be a GI someday." That's what he said. He was about twelve or thirteen years old.

The schoolgirls over there, actually, they all wear uniforms like the Japanese did when we were over there, and the schoolgirls, they would come up and bow to you before they asked your permission to talk to you. Walter and I stood in an alley over there one day surrounded by twenty schoolgirls, and every one of them had different questions to ask, like they all got together and decided who's going to ask what, and then compare notes later. But I do believe Japan was further advanced than Korea.

Two experiences now of the craftsmanship of the Korean people. My buddy had a sole come loose on his shoe. And we was out scrounging, and he's the guy that lives in Florida and Arizona; he's retired from the Ford Motor Company. And he said, "I wonder if that guy can fix my shoe." He goes over there, and he looks at this half sole that came loose, pulls out this little knife that had been sharpened for centuries, cut that sole off, reaches behind him, and he has a GI tire casing there, and he cuts him a new half-sole out of the side of that tire and hand-sewed it on there. He didn't have a new nail in that little can that he had; everything had been used. And he renailed that shoe across the thick part of the leather on the instep. Bernie took about four or five steps, and he said, "That feels good. I think I'll have him do the other one." And so we went back.

When we returned while he was doing the other shoe, I think Francis Burke was with us, and a guy over next to this building was taking—he had a bunch of beer cans on an old burlap sack. It was probably rice straw that he made the sack out of, but he'd picked up these GI beer cans. He made a bucket with nothing but two pieces of stone and a piece of steel and a little bitty—we named it the beater. He'd pick up this one stone that he could get in his hand, flat here, and that was his hammer, and he made a bucket. To prove to us how good of a craftsman he was, he reached around, and he had another one that he had made with water in it. He poured that water in the new one, and there wasn't one drip came out of that, and he did it all with very, very crude, ancient tools.

DePue: And this particular story you're talking about happened during the war itself?

Larson: Yeah. This was in Korea. I believe it was someplace north of Pusan, because we had a layover there. The Army couldn't get all their equipment down to the shore, and we stayed there until they got all their stuff down, and so we'd go ashore usually on these exploits, two to three ships at a time, because there wasn't enough area to get any more a lot of places we went into. So we had all this time to kill, and one good thing about our officers—it was just a little fringe benefit that they'd let you leave the ship. And like the one first lieutenant said, "When you hear that ship's horn blow, your little fanny better be on that ship," because that's when they was retracting. So it was an experience.

DePue: Did you have any opportunity to work with any of the other UN forces while you were there?

Larson: We had the Turks aboard, we had the Greeks aboard, we had the Australians—

DePue: Hopefully not the Turks and the Greeks at the same time.

Larson: No, no. No, those Turks are a clan of their own. Every one of them carried two or three knives, and they had that bag of goat meat hanging on them that they would open up. I don't think it was cooked. It stunk, and that ship stunk when they got off, but they were hell of fighters. My dermatologist's father was connected with them during the Korean War, and he says they prided on how many ears they could hang on their tent pole outside their tent as to how many of the enemy they killed. They'd bring back an ear. And he said they would decide if it was going to be the right ear or the left ear before they went out on patrol. And I said, "I can see why they got so many knives; they got a knife (laughs) for every purpose." But them and the Greeks entertained us. They would play their musical instruments and do their dances, and then one skinny—I don't remember now whether he was a Turk or a Greek—but that Russian dance, you know, where they kick on out? That guy could go all night. He was just wound up. They would keep playing as long as he could

dance. And finally he just collapsed, and everybody cheered. That was better than watching a movie, watching them guys.

But as far as the Australians, they came aboard by the spur of the moment. In fact, I think one outfit of the Australians must have got detached or something; they came aboard without any provisions, and so their officers asked our captain if we could provide them with provisions, and they would transfer their provisions to our ships. Well, about two months later, here comes this little civilian scow, which they hired in Japan and Korea too. They gave, you know, as much work to the local population as possible. Here he comes with all these wooden crates, and it was Australian-stamped. I remember that one crate says, "This is very good product of Australia." I never will forget that on the side of that wooden crate. It turned out that it had mutton in there. They ate all of our good beef steaks and hamburger and bacon and sausage and that, and we ended up with tons of mutton and bully beef. Bully beef is supposed to be an answer to our Spam, only it was beef. It's like bear meat. I had some bear meat in later years with a group of hunters, and the more you chew it, the bigger it got. That's the way that bully beef was. So the fishes ate real well in that area. Everybody would take a double helping and throw it over the side. (laughter) Throw it in the garbage cans. And the supply officer, he says, "I can't understand how come we're getting so much garbage." (laughter) Of course, the officers are still eating steaks.

DePue: How did you manage to keep conversation, communication going back home?

Larson: Well, we had the franking privilege, which was free mail—just write "free" wherever you put the stamp. We normally had our mail—if it was around a port, fleet post office knew the schedule of all the ships, and they would forward the mail to whatever port was nearest, and then they radio the ship and tell you that the mail was in there. When we was in Korea, we picked a lot of our mail up at Inchon and Pusan, because we were in and out of those areas pretty often. You might get three, four weeks of mail at one time. We got in the habit of putting the date in the corner of the envelope, and then that way if you got a bunch at a time, you knew which one to read when. In Japan, we picked up the mail at Yokosuka Naval Yard. You get mail going out every day if you was ashore. And it would take about ten days. She'd write a letter and mail it, and ten days later—most of the time I would get it in ten days to two and a half weeks.

DePue: Wasn't it kind of tough being a newlywed to get the mail?

Larson: No. The family would write to me, too, and she lived with my oldest brother's family when I went back to the Navy until she got her apartment, which was across from Springfield High School. And that's when she worked at Sangamo Electric. My sister-in-law and my oldest brother both were old employees at Sangamo, and being Marie was an artist, well, they had an

opening for her right away. There was times when you'd get homesick. You'd want to ask a question, and nobody around to answer it, you know, and so you put it in the next letter, and then when you get the answer, Hmm, I wonder what they wrote that for. Especially my one brother. He was quite— (background noise) that's the dog. She snores at times. And he'd answer a question; he wouldn't give you a hint, you know, about what you asked, and maybe you had already figured it out for yourself in the meantime. But mail was a great thing. Pictures were super. A lot of times, members of her family—her mom would write me every once in a while, which, she didn't know me that well, but she would tell me about different things going on and mention people's names or their family who I hadn't met. My father-in-law had a brother that was in Korea. He was the same age as what her oldest brother is, and he was in field artillery. I remember him telling me that. And he was a lot of places I was, but heavens.

I was fortunate when I got my orders to return to the States. I hit Kimpo Airfield, I heard somebody calling my name. I'm looking all around, and here comes this guy walking fast, waving—a fellow I went to high school with. (DePue laughs) And he said, "You guys thirsty?" and he had a beer. Well, we'd been hitchhiking for about six hours to get to Kimpo, and dirt roads, rode on about anything that would stop for us. Went over to his tent, and below the floor of his tent he had an ammo box buried, had water in it, but being in the ground, the beer was cool. And of course it was all three-two formaldehyde beer; the government didn't buy anything else. We carried three hundred cases of it aboard that ship. Every time the storekeeper would count, and he says, "I know there's no hole in my ship, but," he says, "I'm missing so many cases." And he got the old carpenter's trick of putting the pencil mark down all the pile of cases to see if anything was missed. Well, I had a key to the padlock, being the leading petty officer, and I know for a fact that those guys got my key off my pants while I was sleeping and unlocked that manhole, that they welded a hasp on and put a padlock on there. There's about thirty-six brass half-inch bolts around that thing, and I heard a remark, I said, "I don't want to know anything that's going on; it's none of my business." But they'd already set a can of beer out, and I drank it. (laughter) But they got it down to where they could take all them nuts loose on that cover and unlock, lift it off. One guy was a little acrobat. He'd drop down in there, grab a case of beer, come over in the back side, and then he would kick the other pile of cases around to where the guy's pencil mark wouldn't line up. "Oh, rough seas," you know. (laughter)

DePue: You talked earlier about getting pictures from home. Did you have a picture of Marie pasted on the side of the bulkhead?

Larson: Well, I had it inside my locker door. I had a photograph of her taken at a studio. And then on the street in Yokohama, they had these little street vendors that if you'd give them a picture, they would paint that picture on a silk scarf. So I mounted that up there behind the piece of Plexiglas, which we

had Plexiglas scraps left over from—the flying bridge was wide open on those LSTs, and the officers, they wanted some protection from the weather up there, so they requisitioned a bunch of Plexiglas, and the engineers cabbaged down to all the scraps, and we made picture frames and everything else, knife handles. We always had something going on.

DePue: You wouldn't happen to have that silk scarf, would you?

Larson: That's what I'm asking my daughter about. It's around someplace.

DePue: Well, I'd love to get a picture of that.

Larson: Yeah. I don't know what happened to it.

DePue: Tell me about the kind of environment you're in, I'm sure that you formed some pretty strong bonds with a couple of guys on the ship. Tell me about a couple of your best friends that you had.

Larson: Well, I had, you might say, three or four real close friends. Our bunks were all near each other, and we'd talk laying in our bunk there and go on liberty together. So one of my friends was a third-class engineman from Green Bay, Wisconsin, Harold Berkee, which we visited back and forth over the years, but he and his wife and two daughters have all passed away now. He died on the operating table while they were in Avon Park, Florida, and she was blind when she died. His brother was chief of police in Green Bay, and he was keeping me informed what was going on.

Then the other one was Netley Bergraff. He's the one that worked for Ford Motor Company for many years in the truck division. He could outfit these particular Ford trucks—the big ones, I'm talking about. And he retired from Ford. He quit Ford, and the vice president of Ford called him up, and he said, "You're not leaving; you've been too good to us too long. Where do you want to go, Berg?" He got kind of teed off at some college graduate that just came in that didn't know too much of anything, but he ended up his boss. So he called Ford in Detroit and said, "I want all my stock and everything; I'm leaving you." So the vice president said, "Where do you want to go? I've got an opening in Jacksonville, Florida." Bergie said, "That sounds right." So they went to Jacksonville for a few years, and then he got transferred to work at Tampa. But while he was at Tampa, guess who came down there to work, and Bergie was his boss. (DePue laughs)

So it turned out that he stayed in Florida; he bought a 150-acre ranch down there, which to me, it was all sand, and the termites were terrible there. He was using railroad ties, treated creosote railroad ties, for fence posts. But he had 150 acres, had three nice houses. The main house was a Spanish décor, sunken living room, the whole thing. And what amazed me is letting their daughter and her husband live there, and he was living in one of the ranch houses on the thing. Bergie was kind-hearted, and he had a sister-in-law that

her husband died early in life; he built her a house down there until she found another man to marry, and that's the house we stayed in, he was living in. And that guy, he's got to have the best of everything. When he lived in Davenport, Iowa, he had to have the biggest and fastest boat on the Mississippi. We were very good friends. We still see each other; occasionally he drops in.

The fourth guy was one of my engineman strikers, and he was from Reno, Nevada. Jerry May was his name. I went home with him one weekend, and his mother had a note on the table and says, "Here's ten dollars. You guys get you something to eat, and I'm over at so-and-so playing keno." His dad was a railroad engineer, I believe. He wasn't home too often. And Jerry said, "Boy, if they ever outlawed keno, Mom wouldn't have anything to do." (laughter) But they had a very nice home.

DePue: What stories have we missed so far during the time that you were over in Korea?

Larson: Well, I told you about the prisoners, I guess, using the cloverleaves for a...

DePue: Right. We've covered quite a bit.

Larson: Yah. And also, we—(laughs) we always seemed to be the last ones on that LST to get the word.

DePue: "We" being the folks in the engine room?

Larson: Yeah. What went on, we didn't know anything about, and unless somebody up topside called down on the phone and tell us, you know, "Hey, look outside" or something...

DePue: How many worked in the engine room?

Larson: Usually on watch in the main engine room we'd have about six guys; auxiliary engine room would be an engineman, an electrician. Then I had eight guys under me in the auxiliary engine room. We worked a three-section shift. When we were in the forward area, you worked four hours on and four hours off watch besides standing gun watchers. I finally got off of that twenty-millimeter gun, and then the engineering officer said, "No, I want you down below. Any of them dumb seamen can shoot that gun. I want you down where I need you." So I lost out on my play toy on the main deck.

DePue: I know what I wanted to ask you now. I've got a series of questions here. I know you didn't see too much action—you had shots fired on you one or two times—but was anybody injured while you were over there?

Larson: Now, this is hearsay; I don't know whether it's true or not. But anyhow, I got a letter—we had a chief on there that had a ship shot out from under him in

World War II. We nicknamed him Shaky Jake. He was also the barber. And you imagine him coming at you with a pair of scissors.

DePue: With his hands shaking.

Larson: Yeah. (laughter) So anyhow, he and this PT boat engineman were in charge of the deck equipment and the forklifts. We had a cherry-picker on the main deck, which was on steel crawler tread. And they would have to take that down, the ramp from the top deck down to the bow ramp where the doors open up, and then park it there and raise that ramp up and back it into the tank deck. Well, once they moved it down to the tank deck when I was on there. The second time, I was already home, or—I got the letter from one of the guys, and he said the chief got his life jacket tangled up. It went over the side; they couldn't stop it. And naturally, the first class that was—one of them ran raising the boom, and the other one ran the tread. It's why there was two men on there—it's two separate operations on that old cherry-picker. And somehow or the other, the chief got tangled up with his life jacket and went down with the equipment. The petty officer that was riding the other end, he jumped away from the machine when he was going over.

And then they tell the story—I've heard this even here within the last ten years—that one kid took one of the small boats and went out and committed suicide. I don't know. You know, I was on the ship when that was supposed to take place. I didn't know anything about it for a month or more.

DePue: Now let me ask you this first: Was the ship integrated? This was early in the timeframe shortly after Truman had integrated the military.

Larson: Okay. Truman decided to integrate the troops. We had either the 24<sup>th</sup> or 26<sup>th</sup> Division people on there, which were black.

DePue: The 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment was the black regiment.

Larson: Was it? Okay, that's the one we had on there. White officers. The next time we got them, there was black and white in there—mostly black, but there was a lot of sergeants that were white. That amphibious DUKW unit, they were black.

DePue: But how about your own ship complement?

Larson: For a long time there, there was a first class boatswain mate that was black. His name was Baker. I don't know why I think about that. We had two steward's mates that were black.

DePue: What mates?

Larson: Steward's mate. They wait on the officers.

DePue: Which was always the tradition in the Navy back in—

Larson: That or Filipinos. We had two Filipinos. You couldn't understand them. You know, you couldn't carry on a conversation with them. About the same on that tanker. They spoke English, but they mixed it up. They didn't want to be your friend, it seemed like.

DePue: Were there any racial incidents that you remember?

Larson: No, no. Well, one time, yeah. We had a fireman on there that was from Fort Myers, Florida, and we had a first class engineman come aboard. I had acquired a .45 caliber burp gun off of a guy on horseback. A pack of cigarettes could get you anything. And Harold, my buddy, Harold Burkee, the guy had a Russian burp gun also. And he didn't want to give it up. He was some kind of nomad, just from his dress. He was out to see whatever he could get, and he came there wanting food. We was beached. And so I made a gesture about that burp gun. He takes his off his shoulder and touches it on my shirt pocket, and I had a pack of cigarettes there. So I gave him that pack. So then Harold comes down there, and he says, "What are you doing, talking him out of his horse?" He says, "Do I have to smell horse all the time now?" He said, "I want that Russian burp gun." The guy wanted the whole carton of cigarettes. Burkee didn't smoke. (laughter) And he says, "How many cartons of cigarettes you got?" And I said, "I'll go get you a carton" and came back with a carton of Camels, the oldest carton I had in that locker, and gave it to the guy, and he gave him the burp gun and handed him a cloth bag with Russian ammunition. (laughter)

So the incident that we were talking about, racial incident, this guy from Fort Myers, Florida went down and grabbed that .45 grease gun I had, came up, and he was going to wipe out that first class black man. The white guy was drunk, the black man was sober, and he was a head higher than what this guy was. And he jerked the gun out of his hand and threw it over the side. I was on liberty when this happened. I come back, and he says, "I'll pay you for that gun of yours that I just threw over the side." He says, "Your buddy from Florida there was wanting to waste me." I said, "You don't owe me nothing for that gun." I said, "It cost me a pack of cigarettes, and I'm glad to get it off the ship." It was fully loaded, and I hid it down in the storeroom. Well, this guy came across it somehow, and he knew it was down there. So I put the word out to my guys, I said, "You got any personal firearms, lock them up." (clock chimes) But we had a lot of carbines that we'd got from that battlefield pickup dump, and so I emptied out a steel storage box, and there was only two keys, and we kept all those carbines in there. If a guy had duty, he'd come and get myself or the other fellow that had a key, and we each had our name on the guns. And that was the only incident, though.

Those amphibious DUKW guys, God, they were playing cards constantly or rolling dice and they was in arguments. Like I mentioned before,

one guy pulled out a .45 and shot the other guy through the side, which was just a flesh wound. The bullet hole is still in the wall. And they had a knifing, and—

DePue: But this is among themselves, it sounds like.

Larson: Yeah, yeah. Oh, they were more than polite. A ship member would come on there, and, I mean, they gave you gangway. They turned the mess hall into casinos between meals. They had nothing else to do. We made the best with what we had, with no matter who we had on the ship.

DePue: You've talked quite a bit about the relationship you had with a lot of the people on the ship. Can you give us just your general impression of the officers and the NCOs that you worked with?

Larson: Well, all the—

DePue: I guess you'd call them petty officers for NCOs, right?

Larson: Well, I was a petty officer. Most of the petty officers, we all learned together. If somebody found something out about a piece of equipment, it was passed amongst the other guys. It just made your job easier. As far as the commissioned officers, for a year and a half I had no problem with any of them until they got an ensign on there off the battleship *Missouri*, and he was wanting to do everything by the book.

DePue: Do you know where he had gotten his commission? Was he an Annapolis guy?

Larson: I have no idea. He didn't ask me, and when the commanding officer told him, he said, "You don't do anything in engineering until you check with Larson." Well, from then on, he and I was at odds with each other because he wasn't going to ask me anything. He knew it. We was in Yokosuka, getting ready to go back to Korea, and his freshwater barge came alongside. He thought he was OD; he was in charge of bringing the freshwater aboard.

DePue: "OD" being officer of the day.

Larson: Officer of the day, or officer of the deck in the Navy. And we always brought it aboard the fire main. Secure the fire main, flush it out, and use that to transfer fresh water to various tanks. Well, he didn't shut off the fire pumps. He was sucking in seawater with all that freshwater. And we get over to Korea and we switch tanks—jimmy Christmas, you couldn't drink it. You could smell it, you know, salt. And right away, they were calling me in living quarters there—What's going on with the water? I said, "I'll have the oil king check, which is the guy that sounded the tanks every day, and he knew how to transfer fuel and water around, keep the ship buoyancy right. So I got him. I said, "Put out your pipe; go find out what's the matter with the fresh water."

So he went and sounded the tank that he was using, and they got a tape they dropped down to see how much was in the tank. Well, they can snap on this other little container and lower it down, and it's got one little hole in the top of it, and it will fill up with water, and then you bring it up, and they can test it. And it had all kinds of salinity, which was salt, that got sucked out of that dirty bay there in Yokosuka. So he came back to me and he says, "You want to go tell the engineering officer, or you want me to?" after he told me what, and I said, "I'll go talk to him."

So I went up to the stateroom and knocked on the wall. "What do you need?" I said, "Well, the freshwater in all the tanks that was filled in Yokosuka's got saltwater in them. (sighs) He said, "Who was on duty?" I said, "I was." "Well, you know better than that." I said, "I didn't bring the water aboard; your new ensign brought it aboard." He said, "Stay here. I want the captain to hear this." He went and got the captain and brought him in there, and I told him. I said, "A year and a half we've been bringing fresh water on this ship, never had a problem. Get a new guy on here, and he screws it up." So at the next morning quarters, they issued this ensign orders: You do nothing in engineering without checking with Larson. I was a plank owner; I was the oldest guy on the ship. I wasn't the highest rated in the engineers, but I knew every... This Bergraff and I, we didn't have any money when we put that ship in commission and go on liberty, and we stayed on there. We learned every valve, every light switch, every fuse. And I'm glad that I did it. It made my life easier through the rest of the tour.

So anyhow, when I left the ship—to further on with this episode—I left the ship to come back to the States for separation to inactive duty. The captain and all the officers was lined up on the quarterdeck and shook hands and patted me on the back and everything, wished me well, except this ensign. They made him OD and they told him to stay out of trouble. (laughter)

DePue: He was nowhere in sight, huh?

Larson: And I'm not sure, but our ship had the first reunion last year, and a guy called me, and he sent me some snapshots just a month ago and showed me pictures of people that his dad had took that was on that LST, which a lot of them—there's only one picture of three guys that I knew; the rest of them was all low-grade officers. They probably came aboard that ship after I left. And I told the wife, "I just wonder if this is the kid of that ensign trying to find out..." His dad died in 1964, and he was seven years old, he said in the letter. So anyhow, it's a small world.

DePue: What would you say is the toughest part of your service while you were in and around Korea?

Larson: Well, my biggest fear all the time was losing power and putting the ship in jeopardy, because I was in charge of supplying the power for the ship. And

unreliance—you don't know what's going to happen. If you get water in the fuel, stop up the filters—you could have a million and one things go wrong unexpectedly, and even after I came home, I would have dreams about having casualties on that ship. That was my greatest fear, I think: being jeopardized to a situation where I wasn't fully in charge. To this day, I like to be top dog; then I know what's going on. But like I say, there were higher-rated petty officers than I was on there. The chiefs absolutely didn't know what was going on. They stayed in their quarters and read and played pinochle and one thing and another. We had a chief engineman and we had a chief electrician's mate for a short time—he got transferred. But those guys absolutely had no idea what [was] the everyday routine that we would go through.

DePue: Did you ever have the sense—you worked with an awful lot of Army troops, Marines, I'm sure; others—did you ever have the sense, you know, feeling for those guys because they're going into some real nasty combat?

Larson: Well, yeah. They've brought up time and time again, says, you guys have got heat. You guys got showers. One thing our captain would do—when we get troops aboard, the crew stood back, took no showers, and let the GIs, ground pounders, have access to the showers, and they normally would have a change of clothes. The Army, as you probably know, they didn't have many changes of clothes. My good friend that I run around with, he was 187<sup>th</sup> Airborne, and he says, "I wears the same clothes for six weeks at a time." And he said, "When I got to the shower truck I put on a clean pair of clothes, and," he said, "probably some other GI had just taken them off before they washed them, and he wore his for six weeks or so."

And he said, "It's surprising when you get to the shower quarters how some guys had dirtied themselves and had to live with it. There was guys that absolutely defecated in their long johns, and they had to live with it." And he says, "I was fortunate. When I got blowed out of that truck that night," he said, "I was scared. I was shaking so bad. I went to unzip my coat, get a cigarette, and I threw up inside my coat." And he says, "That was easy to clean up, but you crap in your drawers, it's no easy thing when it's down around zero." (DePue laughs)

DePue: Yeah, we laugh now.

Larson: But they were treated 200 percent better than what they had before they came aboard. The captain always passed that word on the PA system, and those guys were willing to clean up the showers after they got through. They scrubbed the deck and everything; they left it just like they found it. The crew that was on watch would eat first, and then the troops would eat, and then the rest of the crew could eat.

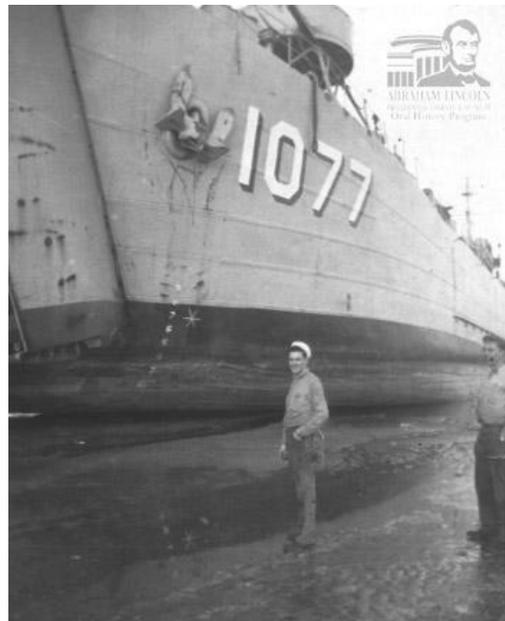
Usually if we had a halfway decent bunch of guys on there, they always had a baker. We didn't have no baker. That ship didn't rate a baker.

The first time we was over there, we stood gun watch, and I was gun captain on the stern forty-millimeter, which had a hot shell hatch that opened right to the kitchen, to the galley. We had this little bitty guy, and he was just tall enough to get in the Navy, but he was agile to all hell. We opened up that hot shell hatch—we kept smelling this bakery, being right over the galley—and opened that up, and there was tray after tray of cinnamon rolls. So he said, “I can get it. Hold onto my boots.” And they put him head first down in there, and he’d come up with handfuls like that. (DePue laughs) They got enough we served... But they’d bring hot coffee around to you while you was on gun station, and it went real good with those cinnamon rolls. We went through chow the next morning, through breakfast, and the first lieutenant was standing there. (laughs) He had all our names on that gun crew—no sweet roll, no sweet roll. (laughter) You had to make fun yet still do your requirements, and you could always pass the time of day by making a joke out of something or somebody else come up with a story.

DePue: Well, I’m afraid it’s about time we bring you home here, so why don’t you talk about that? When did it happen that you found out you were on orders to come home?

Larson: Well, it seemed that the mailman—we were in Inchon—and the mailman went over to the fleet post office to pick up mail, which I went with him several times. I was qualified to pick up the mail if need be. But I’d go with him a lot of times because he’d have a heck of a time carrying a couple of bags of mail back by himself, and I figured, what the heck, I’d get off the ship, I can see something else, and maybe I can find something we can use. So he went by himself that day because we’d got the big mail the day before. So he went back over there, and there was a bunch of *Stars and Stripes* newspapers there. And the postman there at the fleet post office wanted to know how many guys was on the ship—120—and he said, “Take ten of those copies back to the ship with you.” So after lunch, I take my tray up and dump it, and I was going up topside to get a little sun and pass the time of day. We were beached up there on the shore; you had to get loaded before the tide changed, because we’d run out of water. It dropped twenty-eight feet whenever the tide would go out. Then we spent a few times on the beach at various places, but at Inchon, it was real severe.

I grabbed one of those papers that somebody had laid on the end of the mess table, and I go topside and



I'm reading that thing, and it's got the list of how the points are going to be issued. You get so many points for every month you're over there, you get so many points for a forward area, and it just went on. I don't remember the total amount you had, but I do remember I had two too many. So I started filling out a request chit, turned it in through the channels, and it was rejected. And the last one—I turned three a day in on Saturday and three on Sunday. When they'd reject them, they'd always give them back, send them back by the messenger on the quarterdeck. I never got that one back from Sunday, and I thought, "Well, I'll get it at quarters tomorrow morning. You know, they'll reject it."

Four o'clock in the morning, and the messenger's waking me up, and he says, "We've got orders up there for you," and he started naming off the other guys in engineering who were leaving the ship at 0530 for air flight back to United States. I looked at him, and I said, "Am I dreaming, or are you shitting me?"—excuse the English. And he says, "No., Your orders are on the quarter deck." So I get up, I turn on all the lights. I'm cussed out from one end of the compartment to the other. The other guy in the other compartment did the same thing. I was giving away stuff, selling stuff. I had a big helicopter radio, and nobody wanted it, and I didn't have room to take it. So that Jerry May, I says, "Give me five dollars, and you can have my radio." So he ended up with my radio. So we had to hitchhike. Our orders read, "Own transportation to Kimpo Airfield," which is twenty or twenty-one miles away.

DePue: Was that outside of Tokyo?

Larson: It was outside of Inchon.

DePue: Oh, I'm sorry. Kimpo, okay. Yeah, you were in...

Larson: Between Inchon and Seoul. So anyhow, we take off, the eight of us, and we walk up the road from the harbor front. The tide was just coming back in, and the ship was supposed to leave later on that morning. So we get up there, and here comes an Army vehicle, and he said, "Where you swabbies going?" "We're going to Kimpo." He says, "Well, I can take you part way." And so we all piled in there, bag and baggage, and four hours later, we get the twenty miles, because we were just waiting till another vehicle came. To heck with that walking on that dirty road.

The last one we got a ride in was a six-by-six that had eight bombs in the back of it, and this guy had a canvas top on the truck and had the top down. And one of the gunner's mates said, "Where's the fuses for these things?" He says, "Don't worry. Been hauling these for almost a year now." He says, "Our ammo dump is over there, and I'm just going back to the airfield with these." And he says, "They won't blow up. If they blew up, I wouldn't be here."

So he took us on into Kimpo, and that's where I met my school chum from here in Springfield and drank our beer. I said, "Now, really, Glenn, I don't want to lose a flight." He says, "There's a flight leaving every three minutes. You're going to be riding in a litter plane. You might have to stand there and hold a plasma bottle up," because the back part of the plane was racks to hook stretchers in—a C-47 Gooney Bird—and the front half had bucket seats down each half of the plane. And this gunner's mate, Kurskey, I believe his name was, took his hat off. They had a gun port in the Plexiglas in the window, and the air was whistling. He took his white hat off, rolled it up, shoved it in there, and pretty soon—(makes popping noise). (laughter) So then when we got to Tokyo, we landed at Tachikawa Air Base outside of Tokyo, and right away, they had a Navy bus there, and this SP [Shore Patrol] on the bus started giving him a bad time for being out of uniform—he didn't have his hat. And I said, "His hat is out there over the Sea of Japan someplace," and we told him about it. He started laughing. He said, "Get on the bus. We're taking you to chow hall," which was good; we hadn't had anything to eat since that morning.

So we flew back. They put us up in a two-story barracks, just the same old wooden barracks that you'd have in an Army camp. It was on a floating barge, and it was anchored in the bay right in front of the Imperial Palace. It was sixty feet from the palace wall. And a bus would come there. The bunks were eight high in that. Naturally I didn't want the top bunk. I stopped at about four. I figured I could fall that far. So the bus would pick you up for every meal. We was there three days. No liberty. The same old deal—put all your sea bags in a locked-up room, had to show an ID to get in there, had to show the guard that your name was on the sea bag if you wanted to get something out of it. So they kept telling you the same as they did at Great Lakes: Keep your eye on the bulletin board; they're going to post a list of when you're leaving.

So I just got off the bus coming back to eat, and there's a note from a guy that I became friendly with. We'd sit together on the bus to go eat, and he didn't go that day. He put a note on my bunk that said, "Check the board." I went over there, and there was about forty names on it, and I was one of them, to fly out of there two hours later that afternoon. They flew us back to the airport outside of San Francisco, Travis Air Base. We got to Travis, the bus was waiting for us at the plane, the Navy bus, took us to Treasure Island there in the San Francisco Bay. (phone rings)

DePue: I'm going to pause this.

(pause in recording)

DePue: Okay. Let me get it started again here. Okay, go ahead.

Larson: All right. Where were we? (laughs)

DePue: Well, we had you at Travis Air Force Base.

Larson: Oh, yeah. We got to Travis Air Base, and that bus took us to Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay and put up in a brick barracks there. Not a soul in that barracks when I got there and I was a little hungry, so I started walking around. I ran into a lieutenant sitting at a desk on the lower level, and I asked him about the chow hall. He says, "Oh, that's been over with a long time ago. I don't know what to tell you." He says, "I'm a transit myself, but in the next building over, I know that there's soda pop machines. There might be candy machines over there." I didn't have any American change, or American money; I still had scrip. I didn't exchange for U.S. currency until the next day. So I went over there anyhow and verified there was machines there. I seen a couple sailors walking down the sidewalk. It was just about getting dark. And I said, "Hey, I just flew in. I need to beg, borrow, or steal a couple dollars from you. I haven't had any chow, and there's a candy machine there." And he says, "Why don't you go over to the PX? It's still open." I said, "I have no idea where it's at." So they walked me over there. It was about four blocks away. And I got myself a GI hamburger and a GI milkshake for fifty cents, and I thought, Boy, that's all right. And then I decided, I haven't got any money. (DePue laughs) So this guy working there, I said, "I tell you what. If you'll take an IOU until tomorrow morning..." I said, "I just got off the plane from Korea. He said, "It's on me." So at least I got a hamburger and a milkshake.

The next morning... Oh, during the night, about twenty more guys came in, and so the next morning, they said, "Well, where do we eat?" One guy said, "I was only here five years ago. I don't know where anything's at." And so I went down to that office where I seen that officer, and this chief sitting there, and he said, "Go up and ask the rest of the guys if they're ready to go to chow. I'll call and get transportation." Well, the chow hall was about maybe twelve blocks away, and it's good to ride, you know. So we got over there and ate breakfast, super breakfast. I don't remember what we had, but it was—any time you change a Navy cook, it tastes better. So we ate breakfast. I told the bus driver when I got back on the bus, I said, "Where do I change scrip?" "Well, tomorrow," he says, "the currency exchange will be open. They're not open today." So I thought, oh, crap, I'm going to be screwed now. I haven't got any money." So they went ahead, and we played around that day. They had a parade in San Francisco that day. I don't know what the parade was about, but this chief says, "Hey, they usually put on a big feed—a couple churches meet at the park during it, feed all of the sailors." He said, "You want a home-cooked meal? We'll go over." So he and I got on the bus, went over with the drill team that they was sending over. Sure enough, boy, we got to that park, and all the women had tablecloths on those tables, and boy, they was serving you up good. So I told him when we was sitting there eating, "I'm sure glad I ran into you." (laughter)

So anyhow, it took about three days to get processed. They gave me my orders, and I caught a plane. I can remember walking out of Treasure Island, and I thought, Now, I got to be sure to get on the right transportation here, and so I was just standing there kind of, and my mind wasn't even 100 percent functioning. This fellow walked up there, and he'd been on the plane, and he says, "Where are you headed for?" And I says, "Well, I'm trying to get to Springfield, Illinois." He says, "Well, I'm going to Chicago." I said, "What flight? What airline?" You could buy a hundred-dollar ticket then and fly from California to Chicago. Of course, they stopped at every crossroads in America coming home. He happened to be on—I got a ticket on the same airline. And when I went to the travel agent, that was the only airline that he let me believe would be going, and so. We got to Chicago, and I thought, Well, I haven't got enough money to fly to Springfield." American Airlines is coming here then.

So I went up and talked to a Greyhound bus driver, and he says, "Yeah. I'm going to St. Louis in about three hours." He says, "Get on my bus, and I'll take you to Springfield—go right through there." And I said, "Good." He said, "Where you want off at?" when we got closer—he had me sit behind him there. I said, "Anyplace in town. I can make a phone call and have somebody come pick me up." So my brother came and got me. I went to the apartment there by Springfield High School, and she thought I was coming home the next day, and so she was surprised when she got home from work I was sitting there in the living room waiting for her to come in. And then my dad brought me by the car so I'd have transportation.

So I didn't do anything for about three or four weeks, so I thought, I got to find out what I'm going to do. So I acquired a job with Railway Express Agency; I was a money clerk and a swing driver for them. Stayed with them about two and a half years or so. You had to have thirty years' seniority to keep a permanent job with them.

I'd learned tile setter in between times I was in the service, and so consequently, Dad said, "You come back to the dairy, I can use you there." So I stayed with them for eighteen more years or whatever.

DePue: Did you have an opportunity to use your GI Bill benefits?

Larson: Yeah. I had some refrigeration before I went in the Navy with the experienced refrigeration man there at Producers. I went aboard that tanker and became a petty officer there under a man, a very, very excellent refrigeration mechanic. They had an opening for a refrigeration man there at the dairy, and so I worked between refrigeration and plant maintenance. I stayed there until '66, and I thought to myself, I'm on the road all the time, I haven't got any time with my family. And what really cinched the deal—I took a Friday and Saturday off. We came home one Sunday. We went down to the Kentucky Lake and played around down there for a couple days. I came back, and they got a washing machine repair guy to come in and try to repair refrigeration

where I had it all set up for the refrigeration man. I said, "That's it. They don't appreciate me." My neighbor came over and talked to me on the CB radio one night. I was coming home, and he says, "I'll tell Marie to put the coffee pot on; I'll meet you at your house." And he says, "I talked to the business agent at the union hall, and he said he could put you to work tomorrow." I said, "All right," because I was already licensed by the state of Illinois as a qualified electrician.

So I told them at the dairy, I said, "I'm going to give you my notice right now, the first of August, I'm leaving." "Well, fair week's in August." "Ah, that's your problem. I got another job I'm going to." I had the vice president of Prairie Farms call me up, which, they owned Producers at that time. He took us out to dinner, gave me 125-dollar-a-week raise. I said, "It's not the money. I got money now. I can't have time off to spend it. My kids are growing up without me." So he said, "I can see you're convinced you're going to do something different, but just look at it this way. Anytime you want to come back, you can come back, irregardless of what the situation is." And I thought to myself, Boy, I hope I never have to.

And I stepped into the electrical. I worked at a shop for six months. In fact, the man died that owned it. I took over, because I had a license. I took over that business, ran it for five and a half years. I had a dispute with his wife, and I thought—she was wanting me to buy the company. I said, "They're all my customers now. Why should I buy it? I got a new pick-up truck. I don't need your ten-year-old trucks." She said, "Well, you don't need to stay here." I said, "That's good."

I went out to the union hall, and they said, "Do you know Russ Karmine?" I said, "No." They said, "Well, that's who you're going to." Stayed with him for fifteen years, and he had an account at Franklin Life to do their work. I worked most of the time at Franklin Life; if I wasn't in Franklin Life, I was in the office. Then I went to work for Franklin Life, stayed almost thirteen years, and retired from there. But the ironic part of it—the last day I worked for Russ, I was in a ditch running conduit at this bank on Peoria Road, and the next day, I'm working on carpet. (laughter)

DePue: What I want to turn to next, then, is just some closing questions and ask your reflections on some things here. You've lived a pretty eventful life, it sounds like.

Larson: Yeah, I try to do the best. (laughs)

DePue: I want to go back to reflecting on your service in Korea, though. Let me ask you this: Do you think that timeframe that you were in the Navy during the Korean War—you know, you were sacrificing? You had a wife back home; could have been doing a lot of things then. Was it worth it?

Larson: Well, I believe educational-wise, yes; experience-wise, yes. Resentment? Yes. Two guys, they absolutely finagled a way to stay out of the military, and one guy, I just absolutely quit even talking to him, and the other fellow, I didn't see that much of him over the years, but we went to his sixtieth anniversary last Sunday. He's got Alzheimer's, full-blown, and he probably didn't even know all we were there.

DePue: Do you think that the Korean War was worth the fight? Did you believe in the cause?

Larson: Yes, because of the fact it kept communism from spreading any further. I had heard stories about communism up until that time. I didn't really understand right off the bat why we were going all out as United Nations for this. I mean, I kind of realized the fact that we were a member of the United Nations and the United Nations were the ones that we were under in Korea. Of course, the United States ran the United Nations at that time. I resented a little bit of guys being able to do stuff that I missed out on. Like years after high school, I was seeing the tops of the waves, and they were enjoying seeing ballgames and being active and doing boating and skiing and everything, and I couldn't do all that. But I think the experience and what now more than made up for what was going on here at home.

When I got home, I found out things wasn't as rosy as what they were two years earlier. The construction trade had settled down. I couldn't go back setting tile, which I had planned on. There wasn't that much work going on. So that's why I ended up working for Railway Express and going back to Producers Dairy. But I do believe the years I spent in the Navy had bettered myself to the point where I know how other people live, I know the hardships, I know the good life of what the United States has.

DePue: So it's changed you.

Larson: Yeah.

DePue: And changed you for the better, would you say?

Larson: I would say yes. I joke a lot, to the point where it helps me get by, thinking about a lot of things that I could have done, and just personal reasons. But if I die today, I figure that I have had an excellent life, and a lot of it's contributed to my wife. She put up with a lot of stuff in the last fifty-nine years. (laughter)

DePue: A lot of Americans have kind of overlooked the Korean War. It's called the Forgotten War.

Larson: Oh, yeah. Right. There is—

DePue: What are your feelings about that?

Larson: Well, basically I think a lot of it was that Korea came along five years after World War II. People was tired of hearing about war all during World War II. So they put Korea out of their mind, which lasted three years. And they fired more artillery shells, I read, in the Korean War than they did all of World War II. That's just something that jumped in my mind. But all in all, I do believe that people just absolutely wanted to forget about it, but when Vietnam came along years later, they had another situation there. They had GIs that became dope heads; they absolutely resented the government of the United States. It seemed like there's two wars in a row that we didn't win really; we wasn't the sole victors. Vietnam was a standoff, Korea was a standoff, and it still is.

DePue: Do you recall your feelings at the time when the armistice was signed in July of '53, which is just about a year after you left?

Larson: Yeah. I was home then, working a couple jobs just to try to make ends meet. And I would catch what news I could on television at that time. It seemed supertime was the time I'd be home, and with what news we'd catch on that Sears television set we had—it was in repair most of the time. But I thought, well, at least they're stopping all this stuff and saving lives. But when you get thinking about it, and then after being back over there again, we went out to the DMZ and seen the Freedom Bridge where the prisoners came across, and knowing that what you're looking at out there, the North Korean people have nothing. My roommate at a reunion in Washington, DC was Vince Krepps, who was the editor of the *Graybeard* Korean magazine. Vince lost his twin brother over there, who was taken prisoner and died in prison. He was sent back over with a group of people by the president to North Korea. When they got off the plane, they were given two apples, and they weren't offered any other meal. He said finally the Swedish embassy sent a representative to them and invited them to the embassy for dinner. He said, "So the two women"—and I think there was three guys—"We looked at those shriveled-up apples, and we thought, "If we're getting a meal, we sure don't need these apples," not knowing that that would be the last meal for the next couple of days. So they threw their apples out into this vacant field, and he said this field erupted with young kids out there scrounging for those apples. That was all they had to eat. He said that the week that he spent in North Korea was an eye-opener. Those people were still under the thumb of communism so bad they have nothing. And that guy that's running North Korea, his son's as bad as he is, if not worse.

DePue: Kim Jong Il.

Larson: Yeah. And the commentary, short subject deal I watched on satellite here a while back said this guy, the son is the biggest alcoholic there is, and he could care less as long as he's got it. So basically, political politics, I'm not up on all the way, but I think that the Korean War did a lot of good at the particular time. Now I think it's going to be a big explosion. There's going to be a power

struggle there between them and China and Taiwan, and if they start in a nuclear age, I think a lot of people's going to lose their lives.

DePue: So you think Korea's still a hot spot today.

Larson: Oh, yeah.

DePue: You were there in 1999, you said?

Larson: Right. We went on a revisit.

DePue: I want you to compare what you saw when you left Korea in 1952—and this was a country that was really beat up—versus what you saw in '99.

Larson: I was only in Seoul once when I was there the first time. We had picked up some observation officers—I don't know whether I mentioned or not—but we had a specific detail boat crew, which I happened to end up being an engineer on, and we would take—and these intelligence officers, and they had a group they called I&R—no, I got that backwards, R&I maybe. Anyhow, they would capture a prisoner and brainwash them more or less, get all the information that they could get from them. George Pempek was one of the guys that that was his job, getting the prisoner.

DePue: I think it's I&R, which is intelligence and reconnaissance.

Larson: Yeah, okay. I don't use that term now. (laughs)

DePue: Go ahead, go ahead.

Larson: So anyhow, we picked up this Army lieutenant, and he says, "I have got to get to Seoul and report." So we had requisitioned a Jeep. You know the old story about carrying a rotor cap in your pocket; you can drive any Jeep that's parked. Well, this lieutenant went up to this Army officer that's standing there, backpack on and carbine on the shoulder and everything, and he says, "We need a Jeep," and he put his ID out in front of him. He says, "I will secure you a Jeep." He took off half-trotting down this road, and he comes driving back a Jeep, and he said, "Here it is." So we piled in it, and this officer from the ship says, "You guys don't need to go." "Hey, we want to go." He said, "Well, you froze your butt off out there with me." He says, "You might as well go." So there's five of us in that Jeep. We headed into Seoul, and we dropped this guy off. Everything that wasn't burnt was burning. You know, it was still in shambles. So we left. I said, "What are you going to do with the Jeep?" He says, "I'm going to drive it up to the LCVP and leave it. Somebody'll get it." (laughs) I thought, well, yeah.

So seeing Seoul, the only thing I recognized when I went back was the train station. Seoul's got massive gates to get into—this is way back from—

DePue: Ancient gates.

Larson: —ancient days.

DePue: Yeah, I think it's North Gate, South Gate, East Gate, and West Gate.

Larson: Yeah, and there's a gate not too far from the train station. But we was on this bus in '99 there, and the front half of the bus had Marines; the rest of us was a duke's mixture. There was only two other sailors and myself on there, and one was a aircraft mechanic; he had been stationed ashore for observation planes. So anyhow, this Marine says, "Sergeant Major"—he called this one guy Sergeant Major all the time—"isn't that the train station there?" And the sergeant said, "Yeah, I think it is." He said, "You remember you set me up with a machine gun nest back of that thing and didn't leave me no ammunition?" "Boy," he says, "don't tell everybody that." (laughter) So then later on, he was talking about going across the Han River, and he says, "We got over there, and there was all kinds of opposition." And he says, "You'd have thought I was Johnny Weissmuller swimming back across that river. I gave them everything I had on that I didn't think I needed."

So the return trip was an experience, not only listening to other people, but getting to see how Seoul had changed. They're building streets over there three lanes each way, and in between is where their traction system runs. Under each of these streets, they have the underground Korea shopping. There's at least two levels of stores underneath all the new streets over there. But the only fault that I've found: their sanitary sewers and their storm sewers are all one and the same. When you start to cross a street and there's a sewer opening in the curb alongside of you and you're getting all the fumes from the sanitary sewers right up through there. But they seem to be a very congenial people now. Very polite.

DePue: Different from when you were there?

Larson: Oh, definitely. When I was there, they had nothing. They didn't know how to associate with anybody because they didn't have to, you know. They was in their own little world, you might say, and now—

DePue: And before when you got there, they had spent the last forty-five years under the thumb of the Japanese.

Larson: Right, and the Japanese didn't let them have anything. A book a friend of mine had me read a couple chapters out of was how the Japanese—if a man and wife produced more than two children, they would decapitate the man or fix him up, leave him alive, but he'd cut his genitals off or something. And they played rough in certain areas—the Japanese soldier was a vicious animal. And they were afraid, basically, even in the start of the war. My buddy was a medic over there. He said, "Injured civilians we treated also, and they would shrink back from you. They thought you was going to harm them. They had

this fear built into them by the Japanese and some of them, you just couldn't treat; you couldn't get near them." (laughs) He turned out to be quite a lawyer. (laughs)

DePue: We've spent over four hours now talking about your experience.

Larson: I'll be.

DePue: And these have been wonderful stories. They're illustrative of so many things. But I wonder if you can kind of sum up this experience that you had in Korea and reflect on what it is about your experiences, about the American experiences in Korea, that you'd want future generations to remember.

Larson: Well, one thing about it—we came to the aid of a people in great need, and I'm thankful that we were able to do that. And hold our own, bring them back up to our standards a bit, and give every young kid that grew up under American occupation and American guidance a better life. I read a story a while back. The man that invented the baseball cap was a seven-year-old boy during the Korean War. He's a multi-millionaire now. He's the one that makes all the caps with the logos on them and all that—Tom's Caps. I think I have one in my collection. But there again, the American went in and helped, per se, that one individual, and now he's a member of society, which before, if we hadn't come to their rescue, they would be right in the same boat they were before, maybe even more so.

DePue: It sounds like you're proud of your service, then.

Larson: Yes, for no more than I did over there to help the war effort. I am proud. And I'm privileged. A lot of the guys that was ground-bounders over there, they always figured the Navy had it easy, but in my respect to responsibility that I encountered, I don't think I'd want to be out there dodging bullets; I think I liked the way I had my service. Not only has it helped me later in life; for years, there, everybody got to go to college—I couldn't. I had a family. My father couldn't afford to help me go to college. So I knew I had to make it on mechanical ability, and, of course, the time I was in the Navy I learned four, maybe five different trades. I was studying all the time. And throughout life, that's why I get involved in restoring Volkswagens, Jeeps, boats, riding tractors—I've been in everything, and she's been real good to stick up with me, except when I get a collection out in the front yard. (laughter)

DePue: Tell me about getting involved in the Korean War group here in town.

Larson: Well, I don't know how it came about, but I asked my buddy Tom, the one that was in the Airborne—he's not a joiner. He's a member of the group, but he doesn't particip—

DePue: What's Tom's last name?

Larson: Walker. He was in the 187th Airborne. He's got cancer real bad now. And I said, "What's these guys with these blue caps on I see in this parade?" Well, his aunt was a naval officer, I think, in World War II, and she finds out everything. If he needs to know something, she'll find out for him. So he called me up. He says, "Well, they're meeting out at the VFW on Jacksonville Road, and they're Korean War veterans." So somehow or the other, I went to one of their meetings one night. I found out when they was meeting and met the guys. I knew Walter from the gun club, and he and I started hitting it off jokingly. Walter's a nice guy, it's just that his way, sometimes he thinks is the only way. (laughs) But that's his nature. So I participated in a parade. I think it was the first participation out that night, and it was Veteran's Day, November, and the streets were icy. And I said, "This is the first time I ever marched in the city of Springfield"—because I was in lots of parades as a clown, shrine clown, which I was in for thirty-five years. I said, "This is the first time I take one step forward and slide back a half a step."

So from then on, I just participated pretty strong, and then I ended up with cancer again, and I fell off the roadside(?). We had a family function with our wives this month instead of a meeting, and every other month we go someplace and have dinner. They're a good group of guys. I told her brother the other day—he's a Korean veteran, too, but he doesn't do anything. He says, "You belong to too much stuff," and I says, "I know a lot of people. I've had friends all over." He's never been out of Springfield. So, anyhow, I enjoy being around people, and I just feel that my experience in the Navy was real good.

DePue: Well, then, what do you want to say to close this up? Any final reflections or thoughts for the future for others who might be listening to this?

Larson: Well, I think about the only comment I got is what I made earlier, that if I die tomorrow, I feel that I have had a 100 percent full life; I've got to do what I want to do—some of the time, not all the time. But anyhow, I like a challenge, and I've had quite a few of them in life, not only personal, but with employment, I'd say, one thing or another. But it seemed that the Navy gave me the go-ahead—that and Dale Carnegie<sup>10</sup>—I have no problem associating with anybody. In fact, a lot of the doctors call my first name because the fact that I—I made a statement one day. I was really teed off—and I don't know if you want this on the tape or not—but I told my family doctor, I said, "I consider you guys the same as a garage mechanic. Some of them, you can tune up an engine, and some of you, you can't even get it started." And his comment was, "Where do I fit in your program?" I think was the way he phrased it. I says, "I think you're doing a pretty darn good job. You saved my life twice. (laughter) So he thanked me for it. Then you walk in there now, and he says, "Well, you shooting black powder this week or you shooting pistol,

---

<sup>10</sup> Dale Carnegie was the author of *How to Win Friend and Influence People*; he also conducted many seminars on that topic.

or what are you doing? God, how many tractors you got now?” “I still got four.” “Well, what are you going to do with them?” I says, “Oh, every once in a while I’ll open the garage door and look at them.” (DePue laughs) But it is just something to do. I mean, as long as I can keep busy, I stay out of trouble.

I’ve enjoyed this, Mark, tremendously. I mean, you’re an excellent interviewer in my respect. I thought it was going to be a lot harder, but you didn’t follow me up too many times (laughter) on questions.

DePue: Well, you have an excellent memory, Keith, and it’s been nothing but a joy for me to sit here and listen to the stories, and—

Larson: Oh, thank you. DePue: —you paint the picture very well for us.

Larson: I have trouble. The wife’s the one that’s got early Alzheimer’s. I think it’s rubbing off on me. I can’t remember some things, and I—

DePue: Anybody who listens to this is going to say, “No, no, he remembers stuff (Larson laughs) very well.”

Larson: Is this—you saving it? Is that on now?

DePue: Yeah. Well, let’s go ahead and close it up, if you don’t mind, Keith. Thank you very much.

Larson: And thank you, Mark.

(end of interview #2)