

Interview with Gene Jaeger

VR2-A-L-2012-016.01

Interview # 1: April 30, 2012

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 30, 2012. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, and this afternoon I'm in the Library with Gene Jaeger. Good afternoon, sir.

Jaeger: That's Jaeger [Jāy-ger], by the way; the J—

DePue: Jaeger.

Jaeger: Jaeger, yes.

DePue: Boy, we're starting off on the wrong foot! Sorry about that.

Jaeger: (laughter) All right. You got my name right, and good afternoon.

DePue: Is it Gene, or were you named Eugene to start with?

Jaeger: Yeah, on my birth certificate it's Eugene, but I use Gene exclusively and I would hope you would do the same.

DePue: Okay, we will do that, then. Tell me when and where you were born.

Jaeger: I was born in Ottawa, Illinois, which is a town on the Illinois River between Peoria and Chicago, on October 6, 1920.

DePue: Tell me a little bit about your family. How did the family get to Ottawa in the first place?

Jaeger: In spite of the German name, it's an Irish family, so most of them came from County Carlow. We know that some of them landed in New York at the beginning of the Civil War. Why they happened to come to LaSalle County, I don't know, but many of the Irish were coming over at that time because of the famine. They were taking menial jobs, such as canal digging. I think my predecessors were canal diggers on the Illinois-Michigan Canal, from Chicago to Peru on the Illinois River. Some of them became farmers, but the immigrants, the ones I'm just talking about...if you want to go further—

DePue: What was your father doing at the time, when you were born?

Jaeger: It says on my birth certificate that he was a candy salesman. Now, I never heard that he was doing anything like that, and I find a lot of the records were rather slipshod at the time. He certainly became a bank teller in an Ottawa bank shortly after I was born. I don't know about this candy salesman business.

DePue: What's your father's name?

Jaeger: Justin J. Jaeger.

DePue: JJJ.

Jaeger: That's right.

DePue: I'm sure that wasn't by accident.

Jaeger: Unh-uh.

DePue: Okay, it's a-e, not e-a, okay. And your mother's maiden name?

Jaeger: Her name was Blanche, middle name Dorothy, I believe, Schott. That's German, S-c-h-o-t-t.

DePue: Well, you mentioned before, Jaeger sounds very German, and you got some German on your mother's side anyway, huh?

Jaeger: That's right, on both sides. What do we have, eight great grandparents? I have five Irish and three German, but I got the German name.

DePue: Okay, very good. You said your father was a bank teller. Did he stay in that job?

Jaeger: After few years, after I was born, he—through some political connection I'm not familiar with—he got a job with the state auditor's office. The state

auditor was from Geneva, Illinois, but his job took him to Springfield, and that's where our family moved in 1923.

DePue: Is this the auditor of public accounts, at the time?

Jaeger: Exactly.

DePue: Now, what is that today, because we don't have that office anymore?

Jaeger: That's right.

DePue: Is it the comptroller's office?

Jaeger: Financial institutions enters into it, the Department of Financial Institutions. They may have even changed that, but he was acting head of that department at his retirement.

DePue: Okay. Well, that came quite a ways after when you were born, I'm sure.

Jaeger: That's right; that's right. I lived in Springfield for about five years, I think.

DePue: Before we get to the point where—I know the family moves to Geneva—I wonder if you can give me a character sketch of your father and then your mother.

Jaeger: Well, my father was a very bright man. Also, he was a musician. He could play the piano and sing and actually did sing on a stage a few times back then. A few people remarked on it. He was considering going to an eastern college, but he met this younger girl and married her. They had a family and so, he was working at a bank. He lived in Ottawa, Illinois, where he was born in 1893, and he stayed there until 1923, when he took his young family to Springfield. We lived in various locations in Springfield, when my memory was coming on the scene.

DePue: Did he have your typical Irish sense of humor?

Jaeger: Yes, he did. Yes, he did. He was very humorous, a humorous man. He liked to tell stories, and he was good at it. As a matter of fact, he did some writing, but never published.

DePue: Well, then, that's where you got your writing bent.

Jaeger: Very possibly.

DePue: Now, we're going to refer to this later, but, since we mentioned that, I do want to mention into the record right now that the reason I got in touch with you in the first place—I think you found me. But you have written a book, entitled *Flat-Bottom Odyssey: From North Africa to D-Day*. So, we are going to be

talking about your life and career, the time you spent in the Navy during World War II on a flat-bottom boat, otherwise known as an LST [Landing Ship -Tank].

Jaeger: That is correct.

DePue: And it's a fun book to read.

Jaeger: Thank you.

DePue: I got a way to go on it yet, Gene, but it's fun to read. Okay, your mother, then?

Jaeger: Her name was Blanche Dorothy Schott, S-c-h-o-t-t, and her father was a butcher. He was German, Charles Schott. He was kind of a migratory butcher, you might say, because I know he worked at least three places in Chicago and other towns in the state. He worked for one of the early chain stores. It was unusual back in those days for anybody to have a business located in more than one place. It wasn't entirely out of the question, but you didn't see much of it. Buehler opened a butcher shop in Ottawa, Illinois in about 1912, let's say, or later, and Charles Schott was manager of it. That brought Blanche Dorothy Schott and Justin J. Jaeger into the same town at the same time.

DePue: How would you describe your mother's personality?

Jaeger: She was an excellent homemaker. She also had some musical talent, but she was so devoted to raising seven children that she didn't have time for much "away from the family" stuff.

DePue: Well, that answers my question about brothers and sisters. Where did you fit into this mix of seven?

Jaeger: Number two man. I had an older brother by the name of Jack.

DePue: How much older was he?

Jaeger: Jack was born in 1918, and I was born in 1920. I guess, two and a half years, actually.

DePue: 1918. Was your father a World War I veteran?

Jaeger: My father was not eligible for the draft at that time. He was one of the victims of the flu epidemic that hit so hard. And one effect of the flu attack—I don't know if this was usual or not—but he lost a lot of his hair. He was very bald as a very young man. But he was not eligible for the draft.

DePue: Yes. I think that influenza epidemic, 1917 - 1918, was probably the worst that we've had in modern memory.

Jaeger: I've read that the casualties exceeded the military casualties.

DePue: Yeah, that's my understanding, too. Okay. You lived in Springfield in what years?

Jaeger: 1923 to 1928.

DePue: Well then, what happened in 1928?

Jaeger: The Auditor of Public accounts felt it was necessary to open a northern Illinois branch, and he just happened to own a building in Geneva, Illinois, which suited his purpose perfectly. So, he rented the building to the State of Illinois and established the northern Illinois branch of the state auditor's office, managed by a young Justin Jaeger who moved his family to Geneva.

DePue: He was manager of the branch office already.

Jaeger: Yes.

DePue: And you would've been eight years old at the time?

Jaeger: Yes.

DePue: Do you remember much about that move?

Jaeger: I can remember leaving Springfield. We're all in the car. Automobiles were not as widely owned then as they are now, and most of the traveling he did as a bank examiner—I didn't mention, he traveled all over Illinois, examining banks—a lot of that was done in a state car, driven by state chauffeur. And when we went to Geneva, that's the way we traveled. I remember the chauffeur's name was Roy Wagner. Why I should remember that, I don't know.

DePue: I was going to say, you've got a heck of a memory to remember that.

Jaeger: Yeah. (laughter)

DePue: Tell us a little bit about Geneva, because that factors large in your life.

Jaeger: Geneva: my memories are fully on the line by this time because I was in second grade when I went up there. In May of 1928 I was in second grade. Geneva was a town of 4,200 people on the bank of the Fox River, thirty-six miles west of Chicago. The river towns up there all had mill dams, which is rather important because it gave them an industrial character, which mixed with the agricultural character of the farmland around them. They also had a—what do you call—commuter town, that kind of character, because a lot of people commuted to Chicago and worked in offices in the Loop. So, we had the commuters and the farmers and the industries.

Gene Jaeger

Interview # VR2-A-L-2012-016.01

DePue: I imagine, at this time, it's strictly train commuting, isn't it?

Jaeger: Yes, it was. Hardly anybody drove, and the train service was damn good, too.

DePue: Well, we're up now to—you've lived in Geneva for one year—1929, September, October—the bottom drops out of the stock market, and, for the next ten years, the United States is going to go through the Great Depression. It didn't occur to me until I was reading your book: wait a minute, he's a bank examiner. The banking system in the United States went through some terrible times through the early '30s. Did that play out in your family? Do you remember any of that?

Jaeger: Yes, I do. He traveled widely, and he was under great strain because the result of a lot of examinations then were, walk out the front door and put a sign, "Closed" on the bank, that it was out of business. He did a lot of that. You probably see a lot of these small, concrete banks throughout the state. They're all converted to tearooms or whatever now. But, he would examine those banks, and, if their assets and liabilities did not have a proper balance, he closed them.

DePue: He had the authority to do that?

Jaeger: Yes, he had that authority. And, I know by the depth of the Depression, which I always take to mean 1932, he was pretty exhausted. I remember, he took six weeks off and went up to a lake in Wisconsin. We went up there and spent the summer. He was laid off because of exhaustion.

DePue: Well, a lot of these banks were rural banks, were farm banks, and, of course, the farmers were really struggling, and oftentimes the banks would have to seize land, too, as well. Did he talk about any of this stuff with you guys?

Jaeger: No, not much. He wasn't exactly silent on the subject, but I can't remember him talking much about it. I should point out that there are two charters for banks in the State of Illinois. At the time, there were national banks and state banks, depending on where the charter came from. Of course, he audited state banks or investigated them. He did mention to me once that the examinations were very abrupt. The crew would pull into a town five miles away and spend the night there. They'd drive down to a bank, and, when they opened the door in the morning, the examiner fell right in, closed the books, counted the cash—take it from there, you know.

DePue: Oh, the banks weren't aware he was coming.

Jaeger: Exactly.

DePue: Wow. I imagine that the bankers (laughter) feared these auditors when they came in, then.

Jaeger: I can recall him citing one suicide. When these guys walked in the front door, the guy went in the back room and shot himself.

DePue: Wow. But you mentioned, also, he didn't talk about it much.

Jaeger: Not the details of the banking. He might tell us about what the town was in, whether they had a baseball team or how the fishing was, but, actually, the credits and debits, no, we didn't get into that.

DePue: How many brothers and sisters were there by this time—1932, say?

Jaeger: There were four of us, three boys and one girl.

DePue: Then there was quite a spread on the kids in the family?

Jaeger: That's right. It was, I think, '33 the next was born—'33, '35, and '41. They were all three girls.

DePue: (laughter) So, you're gone by the time the girls were ruling the roost, huh?

Jaeger: My brother would've been twenty-two when his little sister was born, so it was a pretty good spread, yeah.

DePue: As far as you and the other kids were concerned, were you living through a depression when you were growing up?

Jaeger: No, not in any way because he drew a salary. That was back in the days of what they called, the spoil system. You may have heard of that; when a new party came in, you fired everybody and put in your own buddies. They do that to some extent now, I guess. But he managed to survive these changes of party, although the roughest step was 1932, when the big change from Republican to Democrats, when Roosevelt was elected.

DePue: Yeah. I know that Louis Emerson was the governor prior to that time—he was a Republican—then Henry Horner got elected in '32, and he stayed there until he died in office in 1940.

Jaeger: That's correct. And Henry Horner enters into the description here. It hasn't been mentioned, the religious angle here, but my father and mother were devout Roman Catholics. They raised their family that way. When Emerson went out and Horner came in, Dad was out of a job, practically, he tells my brother; he was packing, cleaning his desk and wondering what to do. The local priest was aware of the situation and talked to the local bishop, who talked to the local cardinal—or was it Cardinal Mundelein at the time—who was not only a religious leader, he was quite a political factor. But, to make a long story short, the Catholic bishop talked to the Jewish governor, (laughter) and they may have set this thing up. The young man kept his job, and I got my three meals a day.

- DePue: (laughter) From what you said before, you and the other kids were kind of oblivious to most of that?
- Jaeger: Didn't know about it. I point out, I think, that I did see some of my classmates wearing castoff clothes that I recognized as belonging to my cousin a couple years ago. That's about all I remember. I lived in a small town. We didn't see the bread lines or anything like that. Most people didn't have any money, but they all seemed to be living in houses. Some of my contemporaries would have to move out of their parents' house, particularly if it was a big family, and move in with their grandparents. I saw some of that. But actual starvation in the cities, yeah, but I didn't see it.
- DePue: You mentioned a pretty strong Catholic background. Did you go to public or private schools in those early years?
- Jaeger: Both. I went to the public school when I came to Geneva, but a Catholic school opened in St. Charles, and I went to there in sixth grade. I graduated from there. I went to a Catholic high school in Aurora and graduated from there and went to Notre Dame University.
- DePue: Oh, Catholic all the way down the line, then, after that?
- Jaeger: (laughter) Right, oh yeah.
- DePue: I wanted to spend some time on Marmion, and military academy especially. But, let's back up a little bit. Do you happen to recall the World's Fair in Chicago in '33, '34?
- Jaeger: Yes, I do recall that. It was there two years, you know. It was successful the first year, so they held it over, and there was a second year. I was twelve or thirteen years old. I don't know if you've ever heard of the Streets of Paris—very risqué show in there, nudity. I went in there with some older boys one day, and we were admitted to the show. The idea was that we were to draw. It was an art show, and we were given charcoal pencils and a piece of white paper to draw on. Then the girl would come out and strip. I got quite a laugh from my buddies because, when we came out, it turned out I'd drawn a very good picture of her head at that time. (laughter) It was kind of, the laugh's on me.
- DePue: Okay. Tell me more about the family's religious life: go to church on Sunday and going to the Catholic schools? Was that pretty much the focus?
- Jaeger: Church on Sunday was mandatory. Back in those days, no meat on a Friday was mandatory. My father even went to church every day. There was a monastery in Geneva that had a chapel; he'd go to the chapel and then catch his train for Chicago, where his office was.
- DePue: Did you get to be an altar boy?

Jaeger: Absolutely. I can still give you a little Latin if you'd like. I can.

DePue: (laughter) Was that part of what was expected of you?

Jaeger: Oh yeah, sure. Both my brothers and myself were altar boys. That was expected.

DePue: Okay. That gets us up to the high school years. I'd like to have you tell me a little bit about going to Marmion. Is it Marmion Military Academy? Is that the proper name for it?

Jaeger: Yes, it is.

DePue: How did you end up going there in the first place?

Jaeger: Well, that was Fox Valley High School, run by the bishop of the Rockford diocese in middle '30s when things were at rock bottom. The order of priests—I think they were from Kankakee—they ran out of money, just like a lot of other people did, and they couldn't do it anymore. The bishop needed help. He couldn't wipe out a Catholic school in a town the size of Aurora. So, he made a deal with the government. They gave him money, and he made it a military academy.

It was kind of humorous, the first couple years. A couple of young guys, like myself, and kids off the farm and kids working in the shops in Aurora, all of a sudden, they put uniforms on us and put us in line. We were cadets. It was a long time before it was really effective, I think. A very highly organized place now, a big campus, lot of money. But, back then, it was just a high school building on Lake Street in Aurora and a bunch of ordinary kids put into uniform. We got Springfield 02 rifles. Does that ring a bell to you?

DePue: Yeah, World War I vintage rifles.

Jaeger: Yeah.

DePue: Did you have officers as instructors?

Jaeger: Yeah, one, a major. He was a West Pointer. And he had a lieutenant. We had a private who'd been doing duty in Panama. Back in the peacetime Army, Private First Class was something of a rank, rather than not very much of a rank—was better than being what they call a buck private, you know. But, we had a Private, a Lieutenant and the Major: the West Point gang.

DePue: But you said this is also a Catholic institution?

Jaeger: Yes.

DePue: Did you have priests or a nun there?

- Jaeger: Yes, priests of the Benedictine order.
- DePue: So, was it more of a military academy or a Catholic high school?
- Jaeger: I'll never know.
- DePue: (laughter) You're elusive on that one, huh?
- Jaeger: Yeah. (laughter)
- DePue: Had a strong mixture of both?
- Jaeger: Well, we did both, sure. We went to chapel, and we went out in the field and drilled. I guess it was a pretty good balance.
- DePue: Was it a live-in school, a boarding school?
- Jaeger: Partially. It developed more that way. They brought in a new order of priests, and they bought a lot of old, two story, frame buildings along Lake Street there, and put the boarders in there. We were the day students and a little friction between us. But they were smaller. Probably, about a third of it was boarding school, and two-thirds of it was day school.
- DePue: Any stories you remember from those years you were in Marmion?
- Jaeger: Yes. (laughter) We had the usual conflict with the military, which the young students didn't take too seriously, but the West Point Lieutenant and Private all did. One day—I was probably an instigator in this thing—a bunch of us seniors—a couple of us had cars—and we didn't show up to class at all. We went into Chicago, (chuckles) and we went to the theater. All the theaters had vaudeville-type shows with them at that time. We went into one of those, no big deal, nothing very—but the major was furious. (laughter) He called it a mutiny! But there was nothing they could do about it. We all graduated about four weeks later.
- DePue: The typical public perception of kids who go to military schools is that they're disciplinary problems; they need some structure in their life, et cetera. Was that the case for you or for the other kids going to Marmion?
- Jaeger: I missed that. They were doing what?
- DePue: Well, oftentimes, if you had a kid who had some trouble in his life, they would send him off to military school.
- Jaeger: I believe some of the boarders were that way. The day students, no. That was their school anyway. They were going to the local Catholic high school. They would've gone there no matter what. Some of the boarders, I understand, were difficult cases, but I don't remember any unusual events.

Gene Jaeger

Interview # VR2-A-L-2012-016.01

DePue: Did going to a military school and high school whet your appetite for serving in the military?

Jaeger: No way. (laughter)

DePue: Just the opposite?

Jaeger: We didn't take it too seriously. See, I was a platoon leader. I don't know what that amounted to, except I didn't stand in the ranks; I stood in front of a platoon. But, that's what we were required to do. We were required to go to mass, we were required to take drills, and we did it. So, nothing seemed out of the ordinary when you're that age.

DePue: You said that Marmion's in Aurora, right?

Jaeger: Yes, it's got a new, big campus. It's a big deal now. The campus is out on Butterfield Road.

DePue: And the family's living in Geneva. How did you get to school then?

Jaeger: Well, we used to hitchhike mostly, and a couple of the kids drove cars. By the time I got to my sophomore year, my brother was a senior. My father bought us a car, forty bucks, and quite a car. It was a '26 Chevy, four door convertible. We used to call them touring cars, didn't they? Cars that had disc wheels, beautiful thing.

DePue: Must've been popular with the girls, then.

Jaeger: Oh, yeah, (laughter) we sure were. We sure stood out. I'll tell you, we could run a cheap... One of my classmates borrowed the car one day, without my permission. It had the stick shift, of course, and he stripped the reverse gear. We got it home. The police stopped us once because we had to be driving forwards when we should've been going backwards. But, my brother was a pretty good mechanic. We went to a junkyard and bought a transmission, and he gave us the tools and said, "Take it all, but you owe seventy-five cents." We took it back and propped it up, and he took the old one out and put the new one in. I'm just thinking, what would it cost you to replace a damaged transmission now? We did it for seventy-five cents, plus labor. (laughter) But that car served us well.

DePue: What were your favorite subjects going to school?

Jaeger: I can't say I really had one in high school, but I was a heavy reader in grade school and high school, and I always read heavily. So, I had a lot of books under my belt. But, I can't remember any particular course in high school that appealed to me.

DePue: Did you get involved in any extracurricular activities?

Jaeger: I was a football player.

Gene in a football stance, in 1936.



DePue: A good football player?

Jaeger: Fair. Fair. I was first string. More to my liking—and this had nothing to do with college—I was a hockey player. I played hockey all my life, and, matter of fact, I played hockey until I was fifty-two. Of course, not that slam bang hockey, but I did play the game, and I did have a State of Illinois' referee's license, too, up until I was about fifty-four.

DePue: Oh. How about a job? Did you have a job while you were going to school?

Jaeger: Oh, yeah. We were expected to work all the time. My job in my senior year was cleaning these Springfield rifles. I was cleaning them, cleaning the bores and oiling the bolt mechanism, and, also, I had to put some kind of grease preparation on the straps. Maybe you know what that is, Cosmoline or something of that—

DePue: Cosmoline, yeah.

Jaeger: Yeah.

DePue: Now, was this a job—you said you were expected to have a job—was that by the school or by your parents?

Jaeger: By my parents.

DePue: So, you're drawing a salary for doing this?

Jaeger: Uh-huh.

DePue: Helping to pay for your own schooling?

Jaeger: Yeah, I believe it went to—I'm sure I didn't pay much attention to the thing—but I'm sure it went to the tuition somehow. I never saw it.

DePue: Well, that was my next question. (laughter) Okay. My guess is you didn't get an allowance, either.

Jaeger: No. We caddied. The funny thing is, you didn't need any money then. You didn't get an allowance, but, if I wanted to go to a Saturday night show for a dime, I could probably get a dime from my parents.

With the ease of moving about in a small town, with creeks and pasture and farmland and a river, we could go anywhere we wanted to and do damn near anything we wanted to. We would get baseball games up on somebody's vacant lot, and the freedom of motion was great.

DePue: It sounds like—

Jaeger: But, you didn't need any money.

DePue: Yeah. It sounds like, the way you look at those days, those were truly the good old days.

Jaeger: Yes, they were the good old days.

DePue: (laughter) What did you think you wanted to do after you got done with high school?

Jaeger: I didn't have any ideas of what I was going to do. I went to college and took liberal arts my freshman year and sophomore year. I had to major my junior year, and I majored in English.

DePue: But, when you were in high school, you didn't really have any feel for what your future would be?

Jaeger: No, and I didn't know when I was in college, either.

DePue: Were you the kind of kid who would be paying attention to what was going on in current events?

Jaeger: Yeah, to some extent. I think I mentioned it in there. I did write occasionally for the college paper. I remember writing an article in there about the RAF [Royal Air Force (UK)] casualties, or the RAF victories over the German air force. I compared them to national league batting averages. The good Father who checked my paper said, "That ain't funny, pal. (laughter) What's going on in there is not anything to laugh about." He read me off pretty good.

DePue: But, that kind of reveals where you were at at the time, huh? (laughter)

Jaeger: That's right. I wasn't... That was something happening way over in Europe, and we read about it.

DePue: Okay. You graduated from high school in 1937?

Jaeger: Uh-huh.

DePue: When did you start at Notre Dame then?

Jaeger: Gee, '42, '41...'38, I was a freshman.

DePue: Does that mean there was a year between ending high school and starting college?

Jaeger: Uh-huh.

DePue: What'd you do that year?

Jaeger: I worked in a factory in Geneva called CETRON.

DePue: CETRON?

Jaeger: And I was on an assembly line. We were working with some pneumatic bulbs. They'd come down the line. They were like light bulbs, but they had a different function. I forget what it was—a rectifier? Is there such a thing, a bulb that's a rectifier? It's a vacuum bulb, but we had to solder the tungsten pieces to the copper pieces all day long.

DePue: This was just something to keep you out of trouble?

Jaeger: And make some money, too, yeah.

DePue: Were you still living at home?

Jaeger: Yeah, but that only lasted a while. A friend of mine got me a job working on construction, and, eventually, I did get a union card as a laborer back then. I remember it because the real name of the union I belonged to was the International Brotherhood of Hod Carriers. You ever hear of a hod?

DePue: Yeah.

Jaeger: Not many people have.

DePue: Yeah. That's mill work often time.

Jaeger: Yeah, that's right. It's a V-shaped thing, and you carry it like that.

DePue: Yeah.

Jaeger: We didn't carry the hod. We had wheelbarrows and run up on the scaffolding then. But, I did a lot of construction work, lots of it.

DePue: Whose idea, then, was it for you to go to Notre Dame?

Jaeger: It was just expected of me, and a great effort from my father to do that for my brother and I. There was just no question about it. He decided that. I don't know where he got the money. He borrowed it somewhere, I guess. When I was told that I was going to Notre Dame, I certainly didn't object. I was all excited. As a matter of fact, I think we were intense football fans by that time, so, who would turn down Notre Dame, right?

DePue: Yeah, and those were good years to be a Notre Dame football fan, especially.

Jaeger: That's right.

DePue: Not quite as good anymore. You played in high school. Did you play at Notre Dame?

Jaeger: Yes, I did. I was on one of the... They let anybody play then. Now, they restrict the squad to about forty guys. But then, they had eighty, and I was in the top seventy, I think.

DePue: The top seventy, you say?

Jaeger: Yeah.

DePue: Does that mean you didn't get to play in the games much?

Jaeger: I didn't even travel with the squad, but I did play against them when we'd get the other teams' signals and formations from the scouts. We would play against Notre Dame once a week, and that was a pretty good workout.

DePue: What were the big rivalries with Notre Dame at that time?

Jaeger: Pittsburgh used to beat us regularly.

DePue: Really?

Jaeger: Yeah. And we had good battles with Northwestern, and Army or Navy were always big games.

DePue: You mentioned your major in college was English?

Jaeger: Uh-huh.

DePue: Now, you've already alluded to this a little bit, but what did you think you were going to do with this English degree, once you got done?

Jaeger: I had no idea. And, in my senior year—when I was supposed to be making a choice like that—December of my senior year the Japs attacked Pearl Harbor. So, the decision was made, and I didn't have to worry about that.

DePue: Well, we're going to ask you about Pearl Harbor. But, was your dad just a little bit frustrated that you didn't know what you wanted to do with your life?

Jaeger: No, he probably assumed I was going to be a



Gene on his Notre Dame graduation day.

in

to

teacher. You study English, what else can you do? I don't think I ever intended to be a teacher, but we never discussed it.

DePue: Okay. Pearl Harbor: what do you remember about that day?

Jaeger: It was a Sunday. The Bears were playing Detroit, I think, and I was laying on the couch at home. In the middle of that Sunday, we had our traditional Sunday meal, and I was laying on the couch. The president or somebody interrupted to say that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor. I think we all pretty well knew where we're going. It was a funny thing that Pearl Harbor was not understood by most people. We knew Honolulu. We knew Hawaii. We knew Honolulu was a big seaport, but Pearl Harbor didn't mean much to us. And matter of fact, it was a standard joke then... You tell this guy that Pearl Harbor has been attacked, and he said, "Why are you telling me? I don't even know the girl." (laughter)

DePue: Hadn't heard that one before! (laughter) That's a new one. Before that time—you were in college when these things happened—1939, September, the Germans attack into Poland. So, most people mark that as the beginning of the Second World War, at least in Europe. Do you remember anything about hearing about that one?

Jaeger: Well, yes. In fact, we lived in big dormitories then. We didn't have our rooms, we had a hundred desks in one room, and our lockers were all on the first floor, and our beds were all on the... I had a roommate there, or at least a classmate, by the name of Francis Gabreski. Did you ever hear of him?

DePue: No.

Jaeger: Francis Gabreski was a Polish guy. I didn't realize that he even spoke the language, but he left right away and got into Poland. He was a top ace in Europe.

DePue: So, he was flying with the Poles, once they got to England?

Jaeger: That's right. He was flying with a Polish outfit. He finally got captured, I think, He was in some kind of a hassle; he flew so low that he was skidded on the ground and (laughter) put his own plane out of action, and they captured him. But he got out. He's still around. But I'm surprised you don't know of any of the Air Force guys back then. There were a couple of them. I can't think of their names, but Gabreski would be right on top.

But a few guys went in end of September '39. But most of us, that was a remote going-on. And hell, they'd been fighting in Europe ever since Napoleon, hadn't they? Why worry about that stuff?

Gene Jaeger

Interview # VR2-A-L-2012-016.01

DePue: Did you take the same attitude in 1940 when the Germans attacked Holland and Belgium and France, and conquered France, so only England was standing?

Jaeger: Not exactly the same. It would be... Like, see, we're closer to France and England than we are to Poland and Eastern Europe, aren't we? Now, that may not be a politically correct position, but I think we were more concerned about what was happening then—not to the point where we were going to enlist. Some guys did. Some guys enlisted in the brigade down in Spain that was fighting—Who was this guy? I can't think of his name, but—

DePue: Franco.

Jaeger: Who?

DePue: Franco.

Jaeger: Yeah, yeah. I knew one. But, for the most part, it was more European turmoil—like I just mentioned—been going on for 100 years.

DePue: Before Pearl Harbor there was an awful lot of people, probably of your parents' generation, who were very concerned about what was going on. And there was a strong isolationist movement at the time, where we didn't need to get ourselves involved with all of that over in Europe. And at the same time, Roosevelt and some people were trying to position ourselves, because, as far as they were concerned, they knew we were going to have to go over and do something in this war.

Jaeger: That's correct, and the two sides had names: the *Interventionists*, and the *America Firsts*. Ever hear of those?

DePue: Yeah.

Jaeger: Yeah...

DePue: So the question is...

Jaeger: ...and we had two professors at college that were debating that. They were nose to nose there, and we paid pretty good attention to that.

DePue: Which side of the equation would you find yourself on?

Jaeger: I guess, the best way to put it: I'd like to see [us] help England and France all we could, just short of my own involvement. (laughter) Actually, when I did go in, I didn't get terribly excited about it, more because everybody was doing it—hell, my whole class, ninety-five percent of them, went.

Gene Jaeger

Interview # VR2-A-L-2012-016.01

DePue: So, that was the attitude after December 7th was, well, everybody else is doing it?

Jaeger: Pretty much, yeah.

DePue: That's what's expected of me?

Jaeger: Most of our guys...There's another factor in there, which I don't fully understand. You were talking about, we're motivated to help our friends and all that, but there's another motivation in there. You're 22 years old, and your country's at war. How are you going to stand? Are you going to lay low or are you going to put on a uniform and walk in front of the girls and get your name in the paper and all that? What would I call that, status? That was a factor.

DePue: Typical young man's pride.

Jaeger: I would say so. How long have they been doing that?

DePue: Were you in an ROTC program at Notre Dame?

Jaeger: No, they didn't have one. They didn't have one going when Japan hit. What they did have was, the government would take any of us who wanted to and teach us to fly. I joined that program, and I went out to South Bend Airport. There were some civilian guys there, and I'd go out there and learn how to fly biplanes. But when the war came, I wanted to join the Navy Air Force.

DePue: Why the Navy Air Force?

Jaeger: Because that's where all my buddies went. That's the only reason. Why they went, I don't know. Notre Dame had quite an affiliation with the Navy, because they turned their campus over to the V2 program right away, as soon as the war started. Our class was the last one, and things were never the same. The campus was grinding out ninety-day wonders, as we used to call the guys who trained ninety days, and you hang officer bars on them and send them off to war.

DePue: But not you. You weren't in that?

Jaeger: I didn't get into that. It's in the book, but do you want me to tell about my enlistment?

DePue: Well, yeah, but beforehand, you mentioned the V2 program. What's that?

Jaeger: It's where young college graduates would be assembled, generally in an inland college, and trained, drilled, and instructed in anything they felt was helpful. At the end of the program, which lasted three months or ninety days, they were given an entrance commission. It was called V2. I don't know why.

DePue: Okay. Yeah, from here on out, much of what we are going to be talking about is certainly something that people might want to pick up the book and read that, as well. I would certainly encourage them to do that. So, we're going to be covering pretty much the same territory, if you don't mind.

Jaeger: Well, I'll be quoting right out of my own book, if it's all right with you.

DePue: Yeah, and there'll be times that I read passages out of there, too, or ask you to read passages.

Jaeger: Quite all right.

DePue: You graduated in 1942, and what happened after that, after you graduated?

Jaeger: I went home, and I didn't do anything for about eight weeks because, I guess, I had a draft number. You know, we all enlisted in the draft and waited for our number to be called. I wasn't particularly worried, and I wasn't in any big hurry to get into the thing either, I guess. But I took a job. I needed some money, and I took a job working in a foundry where I used to work when I was coming home from college.

I knew I had to join. So, I went into the Board of Trade in Chicago, and, on the twenty-second floor the Navy had an office there. I went in to join the Navy Air Force.

There was an eye test. It was a long, rectangular covered thing, and—well, to make it short, there were two sticks, and you would draw these sticks on strings. At about a distance of six feet, you'd try to line up one of the sticks against the other. It was a depth perception test, and I'd failed it.

I went out in the hall when I left there, and I saw a name on the door that rang a bell: lieutenant commander so-and-so. It happened the night before my uncle had told me, "If you're in the Board of Trade building tomorrow, as you say you're going to be, look up lieutenant so-and-so or lieutenant commander so-and-so." I didn't give the matter much thought. I think they had just had a drink together earlier in the week. But, I saw his name on the door, and I walked in there.

He was very friendly. I told him what happened. I'd come in to join the Navy Air Force. They can't handle me, and I got to find something to do. He said, "Well, why don't you go down the hall and talk to Lieutenant Smith? He's looking for couriers." That sounded pretty good. I envisioned myself carrying top secret orders to Eisenhower in London, something like that. (chuckles) So, I went in there, but the lieutenant wasn't there. I filled out a very long application for a job as a courier. That also was another group of special non-combat jobs. I didn't realize it at the time. But I went home, and about ten days later I came back from the foundry, and there was a brown envelope, not only giving me orders, but it had a commission. I was

commissioned right on the spot. I'd been commissioned for ten days while I was in there shoveling sand.

DePue: (laughter) Before you'd done any military training whatsoever?

Jaeger: Absolutely, absolutely. That wasn't unusual then. A lot of big industrial guys went in to help, and they were commissioned colonel right on the spot—Colonel Crown of Chicago. And Wilson of General Motors became a general, didn't he? Charlie Wilson?

DePue: You could be right. I don't recall the specifics.

Jaeger: I was at a very, very low level, but they assumed that I was to be trained for noncombat duty because I went in to get this thing. The guy never saw me; his yeoman saw me. We were all sent to Princeton University for our training, and that was rather desultory training.

DePue: But training just to, kind of, put the shine on having an officer's commission?

Jaeger: Yes, that's right, so I could look, at least, like an officer. I mentioned in there that, once while I was at Princeton, I took a train down to New York. I was in my Navy officer uniform when I got on the Staten Island ferry. When I got down to the Narrows, I could look out and see the Atlantic Ocean, and that made me a sailor.

DePue: (laughter) Now, I want to back up just a little bit. You wanted to be a Navy pilot. This is early 1942. And early 1942, one of the more dangerous things you could do in the American military was to be a Navy pilot.

Jaeger: I guess so. I heard some of these carrier landings. I lost a lot of friends. A lot of the guys that I was going in with were killed that way.

DePue: Did it occur to you that—did you want to sign up for one of the most dangerous things going? Was that your motivation?

Jaeger: I wasn't a very deep thinker. I said, jeez, that would be nice. I'd like to fly in the Navy, and—

DePue: For a little bit of adventure.

Jaeger: —and I wasn't the least bit bothered by the fact that it was dangerous. That doesn't mean that I'm intrepid in any way. When I'm faced with a real problem, I want to get the hell out of there as fast as anybody else. But, at the time, I wasn't really—

DePue: Did either of your parents express any concern about your desire to be a Navy pilot?

Jaeger: Let's see... I had to get my old man's permission to start flying at Notre Dame. The war had started, and he knew. All he said was, "You can go ahead with this if it doesn't involve any more money." He didn't have any more money to put on the thing.

DePue: How about your brother? Jack was a couple years older than you, right?

Jaeger: Yeah. It's a long story. (chuckles) He was my big brother in all ways. I followed him around like a puppy when I was a kid. Good looking guy, good athlete. They were playing hockey on the lake at Notre Dame once, and he got a body check—not a severe one, but it gave him a sharp twist. We went down to the theater in South Bend, and he came back to me. When we left, he'd gone to the men's room, and he said, "You know, I'm pissing blood." Well, to make a long story short, he had a kidney removed.

The war comes along, and he goes there to enlist. The Army wouldn't even talk to him. You know, "We don't want to inherit all your medical problems." Those were difficult days for guys like that because everybody was expected to be in the Army, and it would not be unusual for a mother who had a boy in the Army to stop a stranger in the street and say, "Why aren't you in uniform?" They did that. He used to take a lot of heat in that score because he was a good athlete, looked fine, twenty-two years old, wearing civilian clothes. I could tell a little anecdote in there. I don't know if you want that or not.

DePue: Yeah, because this is something that I don't think many people would remember or know about the war.

Jaeger: He married. One day, one of his buddies was going to report to the Army; I think he was going to Fort Bragg. So, my brother and his wife and the draftee, or whatever you call them, and his girlfriend or wife go into Chicago to put the guy on a train, and he goes away. My brother walks out of the station with a very attractive woman on each arm. And a soldier coming up, wearing a duffel and carrying an order in his pocket, stops and said, "How do you do it?" That was a mild one.

He took the train up to Wisconsin. He was doing an engineering job up there. He walked through a trainload of drunken GIs, and they reacted the same way. Here's this healthy young man, wearing civilian clothes, and we're dressed like this. They were beginning to push him around before a sergeant came in and broke it up. They were all drunk, of course. There was a pretty strong feeling about that. Of course, everybody felt that they should be in the war, but you never get a hundred percent of anything. A lot of the guys wanted to stay out, too. (chuckles)

DePue: Well, there are plenty of reasons why the government needed people to stay home: farmers, people working in the factories...

Jaeger: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

DePue: It sounds like your brother was an engineer, or had an engineering—

Jaeger: Yeah, he was a graduate. He graduated from Notre Dame. He had an engineering degree, and he was designing some kind of arctic warfare stuff. What the hell was it? Sleds or something like that? I forget, but it had to do with travels through snow.

DePue: So, he was contributing to the war effort in a different way.

Jaeger: Oh, yeah. He was quite eager to get in, too. Probably more than I was.

DePue: (laughter) Well, there's one other person that factors in here. Maybe this person didn't exist. Did you have a girlfriend at the time?

Jaeger: No, not... I brought one girl to the prom and went to another girl... No, no, nobody steady.

DePue: So, nobody to tie you down at home when you went off to war, huh?

Jaeger: (laughter) That's right.

DePue: Okay.

Jaeger: That's right.

DePue: Then, tell us about this bizarre story about getting your commission in the mail. The thing that struck me in the book—and I'm more than happy to have you repeat stories to me that are in the book, as well—but, the thing that struck me is, you didn't even have a uniform. You were expected to get your own uniform?

Jaeger: Oh, yeah.

DePue: How do you do that?

Jaeger: I borrowed a hundred bucks from my father and went into Marshall Field and bought khakis and dress blues with a single gold stripe, and wore it the next day. And I was a Navy officer then. (laughter)

DePue: That was all the insignia you needed?

Jaeger: Yeah, that's all. Well, I bought a cap, of course, sure. I bought a cap and my blues. The Navy caps, you could change it from blue to khaki. I don't know if you ever saw one. You could take the blue liner off and put the khaki one on. You didn't have to change caps.

DePue: No, I didn't know that.

- Jaeger: Yeah, you could do that. So, when I went to Princeton, I took a train down there, and I was dressed as a Navy officer. I was somewhat nervous, making these young military men, just drafted themselves, salute me. I wonder what they would think if they knew the guy was shoveling sand last week, you know, marching along there and throwing salutes. (chuckles)
- DePue: Now, I know, when we had our pre-interview, you mentioned the humorous story about Baker School?
- Jaeger: Oh yeah. I think there was an exclusive prep school. You hear the names. I can't think of now... Groton and things, like, for people like Roosevelt would go to. There was one by the name of Baker, and this guy graduated from Baker and went to Harvard, got a Harvard degree. [He] should've been an officer, but the first personnel guy that looked at his service record saw Baker School on there and put him in the galley.
- DePue: (laughter) Well, at least they tried to make the effort. Normally, you hear—
- Jaeger: Oh yeah, they did.
- DePue: —the stories about, the guy has an engineering degree, and he ends up being an infantryman or something like that.
- Jaeger: Oh, a lot of that happened, sure. You can't kick the government either, because, I was looking at it the other day, and I think we had about 200,000 people in the Navy at Pearl Harbor. The following year, we had 3 million, you know. You've got to work fast. How did they do it?
- DePue: Well, if 200,000 is correct—and I'm not questioning you on that—that would've been an incredible increase from just two years before, with the size of the Navy.
- Jaeger: Yeah, that's right. There was just about 100,000, wasn't there?
- DePue: Yeah, because, before 1940... it was 1940 when the start of the draft occurred, before the war even started.
- Okay, here's what I want you to kind of lay on detail now. Basically, was this classroom experience that you had at Princeton?
- Jaeger: All right. The classroom experience was almost negligible in terms of preparing me for deck duty, which I eventually got, deck duty on a landing craft or landing ship, I should say. What would it be? We marched to and from class. We were in uniform, all guys in the same boat I was in... guys in their thirties, men with families and who were already rolling in their career. They were there to do a storekeeper job, a public relations job, non-combat, that day they needed them; that's who were in there. Because I had put in for this glamorous courier job, I was in a noncombat status, too; although I was

twenty-one years old and in perfect health. I didn't belong there at all, but I was with them. And we studied things like Navy regulations and navigation, gunnery...and what the hell kind of gunnery can you take sitting in a classroom, you know? But we studied all that stuff. And when it was all over, there was tremendous demand, at the time, for landing craft because, the peculiarity of that war, particularly the European side of it, was that the enemy not only held all the land that we had to retake, but they held all the seaports. We could not bring the kind of weapons in there that we had to bring in to fight them. We could bring them in in World War I; they went into Le Havre, and they went into Cherbourg; they went into Brest. In World War II, if you got within twenty miles of those ports, they'd open fire on you, you know, so we had to land on beaches. We didn't have any landing craft. The landing craft was designed. Young men were trained, or not trained, as the case may be. And here we come, out of Princeton, all of us, these young insurance men and lawyers, as well as myself. Our orders sent every damn one of us down to Little Creek, Virginia for assignment to landing craft duty.

DePue: Now, kind of back this up to make sure I understand. The people who were going through this six week course at Princeton where you've already got a commission, and you're just kind of putting some fine points on it. The intention was that they wouldn't be put into kind of combat positions?

Jaeger: As I understood it. I don't think that was ever in writing. But, they were being trained to do these jobs that I'm talking about. They were being given the kind of training at Princeton, so they could at least sound and look and talk like Navy officers.

DePue: So, the people who the Navy wanted and expected to be sent for shipboard combat duty would've gone through a different kind of an officer training course?

Jaeger: V2.

DePue: V2, what the Army would call an OCS [officer candidate school] program.

Jaeger: That's right. They were the young guys just out of college. Give them ninety days, and send them out on the ships. You've got to hand it to the guys. Some of them did a good job. Some of them did a rotten job. But it took a while. How do you think a chief petty officer would feel when he's taking an order from a guy who's a college boy, and he's telling me, you know.

DePue: (laughter) Well, I know how a sergeant in the Army feels about a guy who went through military academy or ROTC program.

Jaeger: The chiefs, they were really the backbone of the thing, and they were smart. They understood that the chain of command has to exist, and this guy has to pass the word on down. But, I'd tell an anecdote in there about I got out of

line once, and, instead of telling the chief what had to be, I tried to tell him how to do it. Boy, I fell right on my face on that one.

DePue: Well, here's the part that amazes me for the entire military structure in World War II—and I'm sure, as we go through your stories, this is going to be one of the threads—but you mentioned yourself, the Navy was small at the beginning of the war. It had grown immensely between 1940 and December of '41, and now it explodes in size. So, there aren't enough chief petty officers, or even petty officers of any type, to go around. There's nobody with the experience to run these things.

Jaeger: That's right, and it would be tempting to take the chief petty officers and make officers out of them. They did. They called them mustangs. But, christ, there just weren't enough of them to make any difference. Besides, if they're up on the bridge, who the hell is running the ship, you know? (laughter) It was a tough call.

DePue: So, I want you to walk through now: you've graduated from this shake and bake course, if I can call it that—

Jaeger: Yeah.

DePue: —from Princeton, and what happens after that?

Jaeger: Well, I was given ten day leave, and I took a... I'll be talking very much like the book from here on out.

DePue: That's fine, as long as you're okay with that.

Jaeger: I walk out of the class at Princeton and catch the Pennsylvania Railroad back to Chicago. It's crowded; I couldn't even get a seat on the darn thing. I got a seat; a lot of people had to stand. But, I mention one episode there that would give you an idea of the temperament of the country at that time. There were a bunch of soldiers on there, and several of them were drunk. One of them was extremely loudmouthed and offensive. I would like to have thrown the guy out of the train, but I couldn't. But one officer, a guy I happened to know, walked up and told him to shut up, quiet down. The drunk looked around. He didn't see any MPs, and he didn't see any back-up. He told the officer to go to hell, and it stuck. There was nothing the officer could do. So, I learned a lesson there, by god. I wasn't going to throw my weight around unless I had the guns to do it, you know. (laughter)

DePue: Unless you could back it up.

Jaeger: Yeah, that's right. With the US Navy behind me, I could be as tough as the next guy.

Gene Jaeger

Interview # VR2-A-L-2012-016.01

DePue: (laughter) Did you know at the time you left that you were heading to LST duty?

Jaeger: No, no, I didn't. So, I went home, and I visited my parents. I caught another train all the way back to Norfolk, Virginia. God, that was painful, standing up on those trains. That was one of the hard (laughter) parts of the war. I get down there, and I report to the duty officer. He says, "There's a waiting room." I went down, and there's five other ensigns in there. They were all in the same boat I was in. We didn't know what kind of training we were going to get. Along comes the yeoman, who gives us all orders. We're all assigned to an LST crew, which was training up in the Solomon Island—not the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific—there is a Solomon, Maryland, on the bay at—

DePue: In the Chesapeake Bay, you're talking about. Yeah, we're looking at the map in the book here.

Jaeger: Yeah.

DePue: Okay.

Jaeger: And we go up there and meet our crew. I say it's 3065, as I remember. The crew had a name. They were just out of Newport, Rhode Island, most of them. And they were mostly kids, a lot of them, eighteen. The five of us, five officers, walk in there, and I couldn't think of what to say. (laughter) Decided to call roll; that's the best start.

Then the duty officer came along and said we were to go out and take some training with another LST the next day, and we did. We got up the next morning and took our crew, and we boarded an LST, and these were veterans. They'd been on about two weeks, I think, before we...

DePue: That classified as a veteran?

Jaeger: (laughter) That's right. We watched them and came back in and said, "That's good. We're going to get some training here." The officer of the day—I guess, on shore—sent for me. He said, "Your orders are ready." And I said, "Orders for what?" And he said, "The crew is supposed to report to Newport News, Rhode Island and take over your ship, the LST 400." I said, "This can't be. These guys aren't trained yet." And he said, "Well, if these orders say they're trained, they're trained. Have them down at the dock at eight o'clock tomorrow morning." And, goddamned if we didn't. [We] Took it back to Newport News, and we went on that ship and commissioned it with a bunch of (chuckles) untrained kids.

DePue: Untrained kids, untrained sergeant, untrained officers.

Gene Jaeger

Interview # VR2-A-L-2012-016.01

Jaeger: That's the way it was doing. You could see the paper pushers, they couldn't tell all the time. They couldn't make a decision, but we got a captain. Off record?

DePue: Ah...

Jaeger: Okay, I won't do it then.

DePue: Yeah.

Jaeger: All right. We had a captain, and we got a couple of chiefs. So, we weren't completely abandoned, but we got on the ship. I know they sent some people down from Washington to commission the ship. They read the papers: *the commander in chief of the armed forces turns this ship over to your care for the protection of the United States...* All good, flowery stuff. We ran up the ensign for the first time, our flag, upside down, which was a distress signal, international distress signal to fly your...

DePue: Did you do this by mistake? (laughter)

Jaeger: And I remember an incident there: the new skipper, standing there with a roster in one hand and the ship's organization chart in the other. He needs a messenger up here on the bridge to keep him in touch with the other parts. So, he turns to a seaman there and looks at the roster. He says, "Go get Scalamone." And the kid said, "Yes, sir," and turns around and runs down the deck, and stopped, and come walking back really slow. He said, "I'm Scalamone," you know. (laughter) This is the way we put it together. Eventually we took it across the Hampton Roads up to Lambert Point, and then spent about a month loading, it seemed.

DePue: What point?

Jaeger: Lambert.

DePue: Where's Lambert's Point?

Jaeger: Norfolk, Norfolk Navy Yard.

DePue: Oh, okay. So, it was just a short—

Jaeger: Yeah, saying the Norfolk Navy Yard, that's just as good.

DePue: Okay, and before we go any farther here, LST is kind of a new creation. We're going to talk quite a bit more in a little bit here about what an LST is. But my guess is, it's not necessarily the sexiest kind of a ship to be stationed on, to be assigned to.

Gene Jaeger

Interview # VR2-A-L-2012-016.01

Jaeger: No, it's an ugly, awkward kind of a ship, a cumbersome ship. But it can do services that you can't imagine, and it did.

DePue: So, at the time you were assigned to a ship, what did you think about LST. I don't want to be on an LST!

Jaeger: It was all so new to us anyway. I don't know if it would have made a lot of difference if I'd have got a destroyer, which was the glamorous ship of the time. Everybody wanted to be on a destroyer. I didn't know much about it anyway. You can remember, I got my previous training on the Staten Island ferry.

DePue: Did you even know, at the time you were assigned, exactly what an LST was?

Jaeger: No, no. I can tell you something about how they came about. I mean, that's a long story.

DePue: Yeah, please do. I think that's important for this story.

Jaeger: Well, I mentioned to you that there was a need for a ship that could put heavy weaponry ashore in Europe. It couldn't be done at the ports. It had to be done on the beaches. So, we needed a ship that could run up on a beach and discharge its cargo. The prime example would be, we needed a ship that could pick up 20 Sherman tanks in Philadelphia and put them on the shore in Europe, under fire, let's say, and that's what an LST does. To do that, it takes a certain kind of design, and that was done by a man... Churchill was instrumental in demanding these, but he couldn't do it. His shipyards were all full and—

DePue: Winston Churchill?

Jaeger: Mm-hmm. He was the guy pushing for LSTs, but he wasn't able to build them. The Navy said they would build them, and they called on a guy by the name of John Niedermeyer. Now, this is an important name in my book. Nobody had ever heard of him. The correct spelling is in there.

DePue: Right.

Jaeger: Niedermeyer designed this ship that was 328 feet long and had a flat bottom, flat, all the way across, fifty feet wide. And that bottom was made into tanks, ballast tanks, fuel tanks, freshwater tanks. By pumping those tanks, you could put the hull in certain positions, one for riding in the high seas, one for landing on a beach, in which you would fill all your after tanks and void your forward tanks, so that you went in with your bow high and your stern low and get in as close to the beach as you can.

Then, instead of loading out of hatches, like the ordinary cargo ship did, your bow opened up, and a ramp came down on the dry sand, if possible.

This huge, garage-like deck, 250 feet long, loaded with tanks, they run out and run up the shore and attacked the enemy. That was the idea. Niedermeyer designed that thing in a week or a day or whatever. But the US shipyards had to design themselves to make these, and the first ones came down the line in...let's see, Pearl Harbor was in January.

DePue: Or December.

Jaeger: December. Niedermeyer designed it just about that same week. The first LST bottom was laid June. The first one came into the water in, I would guess, October, and the first one was commissioned in December of '42. They did it that fast.

It's a wonderful ship. It's an ugly looking thing, granted, but it could do things that no other ship could do. I mentioned there, if you want to take a load of chicken soup to Sumatra, you could do it in an LST. It could do anything.

DePue: Well, part of the unknown story, I think, and the unheralded story of World War II, is the incredible production feats that the American society did.

Jaeger: I can't believe it. I can't believe what they did. And here's another element there. Because this ship had a flat bottom and only drew nine feet of water, they could build them inland. They built them in the Ohio River. They built them in the Illinois River, up there in Seneca, you know. About half of them were built inland. They built 1,051 in all. That required a hundred men on each ship, which would be 100,000 men, wouldn't it? Seven officers, 7,000 officers, all in a year. It was quite a production. The officers could stand a lot of improvement, but the ships were designed damn well!

DePue: (laughter) Well, now you're being critical of yourself and your colleagues, I mean. But how can it be anything else? You're thrown into this and expected to perform almost immediately.

Jaeger: Yeah, well, as I said, we did pretty well. By the time we got across the ocean and made our first landing—that happened a couple of months later, too—we were in combat, you know. By that time—

DePue: Well, I was thinking about the timeline here. It was November of 1942. You said the first ones were launched in October of 1942. November of 1942 were, in Europe at least, the first amphibious landings in North Africa for the United States—

Jaeger: (interrupts) Well, that was at Casablanca.

DePue: Yeah. Iran and Algiers were a couple of the specific locations, and they must not have had LSTs at that time.

Gene Jaeger

Interview # VR2-A-L-2012-016.01

Jaeger: They must not have had heavy artillery, either, or tanks or anything like that.

DePue: You mean that they were facing going into the beaches.

Jaeger: Yeah. Well, remember, there was kind of a question of whose side your line was on, wasn't there?

DePue: Yeah, where French, the Vichy French, yeah.

Jaeger: Yeah. And what they did was land personnel. They didn't land armor, did they?

DePue: Well, I know they did eventually, but it wasn't anything like... There was resistance in those landings, but nothing like you're going to face at Sicily or later on.

Jaeger: To our way of thinking, it all started at Sicily on July 10th. That thing out on Casablanca and Iran, we never knew exactly what that was. It was pretty confusing.

DePue: Yeah, well, I'm just mentioning that to kind of put things into context here.

Jaeger: No, there were no LSTs.

DePue: Okay. So, here's a question a landlubber would ask: How long does it take for you personally to get your sea legs?

Jaeger: A day and a half. I can answer that pretty accurately. Almost everybody has motion sickness. A lot of people don't like to mention it; it's a macho thing. But, for most of us, if there was any motion at all, you'd feel kind of queasy and lightheaded, and loss of appetite for the first day. But, about noon the next day, you begin to get hungry, and you were acclimated. Some guys never did. But we'd get acclimated in about a day and a half. That's not the same for everybody. That's the way with me, and I was fairly representative. We had one guy on there, a yeoman. I remember, we were tied up at a dock in Falmouth, England. Somebody hands out today's mail, and he opens up orders, sending us to sea the next day. He got seasick right on the spot.

DePue: Before he even got to the ship?

Jaeger: Yeah, he was sitting in a chair in the office. Yeah, but the Navy wouldn't recognize this. If you were, say, chronically seasick, that's tough, you know. We can't recognize that, or probably they feared that everybody would be gold bricking on that. "I'm seasick; I don't want to work today." But it was tough on those poor guys who couldn't hack it.

DePue: Were you considered a plank holder on this ship?

Gene Jaeger

Interview # VR2-A-L-2012-016.01

Jaeger: Yep, mm-hmm.

DePue: Tell us what a plank holder means.

Jaeger: A member of the crew that was on a ship when it was commissioned.

DePue: Was there quite a ceremony for the commissioning?

Jaeger: Yeah, I was describing it a while ago, that some people were sent down from Washington. We got up out of our trucks, or whatever it was, and got up on the deck, and the crew stood; I don't know whether they were drawn up in formation or not. But, people from Washington, one of them was wearing a gold stripe. I don't know what it was. But, they read some material about the job we had to do. Then they get down and read explicit orders, putting the ship in our control, under command of the United States Armed Forces and assigned to protect our country at all costs, you know, that kind of thing. It was formally turned over to us. We didn't sign anything, but it was a verbal commitment on our part to run this ship the way the United States wanted it run.

DePue: Was there a champagne bottle involved?

Jaeger: No. There might've been, at the launching; that's a different thing. The launching and the commissioning are not the same ceremony, are they? The launching is when it comes out of the yard, it slides down the ways. Every one of those ships was launched with a champagne bottle by a local, young woman. I don't know who did ours because it was done long before we got there.

DePue: Where was yours built? Do you know?

Jaeger: Newport News.

DePue: Okay. And it was LST 400.

Jaeger: Right.

DePue: Now, those ships have names.

Jaeger: That didn't happen until after the war. This steam, I understand that...But, see, battleships are named after—

DePue: States.

Jaeger: —states, yeah, and the cruisers after cities. Is that the way it goes?

DePue: I think you're right.

Jaeger: Yeah. LSTs had no names at all. There were a thousand of them. They all had numbers. But after the war, they did give them names, after counties.
(laughter) We were the USS Bradley, but long after I'd left.

DePue: Okay. Well, I want to find out more, to have you talk more detail about what an LST is because I think that's going to provide the context for everything else we talk about here. You've been very good about laying out the combat mission. How about its seaworthiness out in the middle of the ocean?

Jaeger: A very, very uncomfortable ship to ride because it rode on top of the sea and took all the motion the sea had to offer. You see, other ships, your normal freighter or oil tanker or battleship, they all have V prows, and that cuts the waves. They all set down deep into the water, twenty-five feet or more under the water, so they're riding below all the wave action. The LST has a rounded bow. It doesn't cut the wave at all. It hits it [claps his hands once], every one, and the mast goes like that, and this deck snakes up and down. They're very uncomfortable to live in. And mine, and damn near every one I ever knew of, broke the main deck at sea from rough water like that, cracked. The deck could be snaking up and down on the—what the hell were they, three-eighth inch plates that—

DePue: They would break the plates? Really.

Jaeger: I was walking on the tank deck, which is the huge second deck that carries everything and has no compartments. It's wide open for the whole length of the ship. I was walking along there, and I looked up and saw daylight. There was a crack in the main deck from side to side. It opened it up and closed it. It was broken the night before on a heavy sea.

We came into port, and I thought, this is going to be great. We're going to have a weekend of dry dock, now. They tied us up and drove a truck aboard with a welding machine on it and a bunch of steel plates. They laid the plates down and welded them and drove off, and the game was over. We went back to it the next day. (laughter) That happened to a lot of ships.

We were designed light. We did carry guns. We started up with six 20 millimeters and two 40 millimeters and a three inch 50. The three inch 50, we got rid of in Europe because it was worthless. It was pointed in the wrong direction when we beached. It was on the stern, you know.

DePue: A three inch gun? The 50 would stand for what?

Jaeger: Fifty-five. Three inch 55...I forget the terminology now, but we called it a three inch 50...three inch 55 millimeter, would that make sense?

DePue: Yeah, that's probably about right.

Jaeger: Yeah.

DePue: Now, what were the other guns that you had?

Jaeger: Automatic 20 calibers, you know. They fired out of these round canisters that would feed the thing. They were automatic, and they shot quickly.

DePue: Basically a machine gun then?

Jaeger: Yes.

DePue: Okay.

Jaeger: And a 20 millimeter...that doesn't do much good, does it? (laughter) And the 40 millimeter would be—oh god, you know, as round as a can of tomato juice or something like that.

DePue: But, I would imagine both the 20 and the 40 millimeter guns, they're meant to be very rapid fire, aren't they?

Jaeger: Oh, yes.

DePue: So, are these weapons primarily for anti-aircraft defense?

Jaeger: Absolutely. It was an anti-aircraft battery, and that's all it was. We did have the three inch 50 on the back, which, presumably, could hit a surface vessel or a submarine that surfaced or something like that, but we never had occasion to use it. We fired it in anger a few times at high bombers, but, god, we never came near them.

DePue: How about the armament, then? If your design is entirely towards hitting the beach, how would the armament be used when they do hit the beach: Soften up the defenses, or just to protect whatever's coming off the ship?

Jaeger: I didn't get that at all.

DePue: When you hit the beach, the armament that you had, was it useful for that? Was it designed for that?

Jaeger: Oh, I'm with you now. You mean to deal with enemy resistance?

DePue: Yeah.

Jaeger: Definitely not. You know, it was very seldom that we would meet any resistance right on the beach. We used to get shells from back in the hills, but on the beach, no. They would never send twenty tanks in where, let's say, a well-placed shot could put twenty of them out. We had to have the beach clear before we went in.

DePue: Okay. So, I think we can talk about that in more detail when we get to the Sicily landing, to figure out how that all goes. So, that's the armament. How about the crew? How many officers? How many men?

Jaeger: We started out with seventy-five men and seven officers, and that would be we had three divisions. Really, not... divisions is probably the wrong word. But we had what we called the black gang. They ran the engines, and they were all motor machinist mates. We had another name for them. They had an F designation, for Fireman. The others were the deckhands, handled the lines and handled the hatches and all that kind of thing. And the third group were called ship's control. Think about quartermasters, navigating and all that kind of thing, up in the wheelhouse. And that was my group. I was in charge of ship's control.. There were about seventy-five men on a watch. The watch would come on for four hours, eight off. During the eight off—

DePue: (interrupts) Wait a minute. You said that there were seven officers and seventy-five men, so...

Jaeger: Mm-hmm.

DePue: But then, you said there are seventy-five men on a watch.

Jaeger: Oh, that's a mistake.

DePue: Okay, so—

Jaeger: I meant to say twenty-five.

DePue: Okay.

Jaeger: Yeah. You'd have the black gang that would be running the engines, and the deck gang would be standing—there's a lot of lookout duty, when we're underway. The ship control guys would be up there plotting the ship's motion and writing in the log, by the way.

We'd be on for four hours, and then, we'd be off for eight. During the eight, you ran your other duty. I would call myself a deck officer, primarily, because I stood watch, managing the ship in the conning tower. I was in charge. But when I was off, I was a communications officer and the ship's control officer and the navigator. But so, what I'm trying to get clear here, and I'm not doing very well, is that your primary duties of these officers was being an officer of the deck, standing a deck watch. They all had secondary duties, like I had. One time, I would be a gunnery officer. You're in charge of all the guns. Another would be what we call first lieutenant, which is kind of confusing because it's not like the Army first lieutenant. A first lieutenant on a Navy ship takes care of all the deck operations—the winches and the hoists and everything like that, the boats. That's a first lieutenant. Communications, first lieutenant, gunnery... There might've been another.

DePue: Did you have a choice in the kind of specific duty you were going to get, once you're on ship?

Jaeger: No. Oh, you might let the skipper know what you'd like to do, and, if he could accommodate you, he would.

DePue: You mentioned earlier that the skipper was somewhat experienced?

Jaeger: The first skipper we had, I don't think had any experience at all, but he only lasted about three weeks. They had a very rough system there for those poor guys. The hardest thing to do—I'm talking about these untrained young men and untrained young officers. Can you imagine an untrained skipper? But, they had to do it. They needed a thousand skippers for those LSTs only. And, when you're captain of a ship, you've got to know what the hell you're doing, you know.

So, they were using kind of a trial and error thing. They'd send them out. If they didn't like them, they'd send them somewhere else and put a new guy in. That's what happened on our ship. Three weeks after our commissioning, we got a young guy. The Navy calls their skippers the old man, you know, because, generally, he's a guy who's been twenty years at sea, and he's in his forties. All the Navy kids call him the old man.

Our old man was twenty-six years old, and he had been an officer aboard the California when we were bombed at Pearl Harbor. In that capacity, he may have learned a lot about various parts of the Navy, but he didn't learn anything about ship handling or anything like that. And they put this young guy on board, and he did a perfect job for the next two and a half years. I can't say too much for him. He handled his green crew. He learned how to run the ship.

We'd get to a port in the Mediterranean that we couldn't have pilots or tugboats on. He'd take the thing into the dock, you know, a ship 328 feet long. He made over a hundred landings, put thousands of tanks and guns in, right up their nose and never lost a man. I got a lot of respect for him.

DePue: What was his name?

Jaeger: Charles Lyden, L-y-d-e-n.

DePue: L-y-d-e-n.

Jaeger: Yeah.

DePue: What was the rank of the skipper?

Jaeger: Lieutenant. A Navy lieutenant is the same as an Army captain, you know, two-striper.

DePue: Okay, two bars.

Jaeger: Yeah.

DePue: Okay, I can't remember what I was going to ask next. How about the engines that you had? What was the power that you had?

Jaeger: Oh, we had a pair of GM, 1,200 horse[power], side by side. I didn't know too much about the engine. Oh, I used to go down there now and then, just to keep in touch. But we had two shafts, two screws,—when we say screws, we mean propellers—and there were three auxiliary engines. They were smaller diesels. They weren't 1,200 horse, but they were used to power the ship. Generally, we'd get along on one auxiliary. We'd do the lighting and all that. But, [when] we'd need extra power, we would call for another auxiliary power line. I tell a little story about that in there, too. You may have seen it.

DePue: So, operating the ramps, I would think would take quite a bit of power to do that.

Jaeger: Damn right. And there's another element I didn't mention here in the landing ship. It has a stern anchor. It's an anchor that is dropped over the stern, as you would think, and there's a huge winch right there to control it. As you're approaching the beach, when you're the proper distance off you drop that anchor. It plays off the spool. And you hit the beach, you draw it tight, so the stern won't flop around. It's great to have when you're trying to get off the beach, too. You can back down on the propellers and pull on the stern anchor. Wonderful feeling.

DePue: What kind of speed could you make?

Jaeger: We cruised at nine knots, and they called that standard speed. I think we were doing about 102 RPMs. But there is a name, got a funny name for it, full speed—which would be around ten, ten and a half—and flank speed. That's everything, all out—maybe eleven, eleven and a half.

DePue: Which would make you about the slowest thing that was bobbing around in the water, didn't it?

Jaeger: Oh yeah, hell yes, because... The only thing slower would be an underwater submarine, I guess. They couldn't keep up with us. But they did about seven or eight knots underwater. I'm not sure of that.

DePue: The destroyers in that era could make what kind of speed?

Jaeger: Well, they cruised around eighteen. But, when they're wide open—I understand the Missouri could do thirty-two knots. Imagine that type of thing that size.

Gene Jaeger

Interview # VR2-A-L-2012-016.01

DePue: (laughter) What I know, there's lots of stories about the Queen Mary and the Queen Elizabeth, you know, the old cruise ships that got converted over to transport duty. They were the fastest thing on the water.

Jaeger: Yeah, they were fast. They tell a story about them. If the Iowa or Missouri, one of the big ones, was going along at flank speed, and you shut off the engine, it would go on for twenty-two miles before it would stop. Boy, that's momentum...

DePue: In other words, you can't stop it on a dime.

Jaeger: Oh, no. I talked to river pilots down here, and that's the name of the game with them, too. When they make a mistake, there's nothing you can do now. You're going to hit that bridge up there. The game is over. You just can't stop; the momentum is in control there.

DePue: Um-hmm. Would you have something that you would classify as a test cruise for the ship, or was it when the crew arrived, and it's a brand new ship, did you take it out for a test cruise then?

Jaeger: Yes. I think a pilot took us over to the Navy yard to load up. Then they took us out to anchor. After that, we were on our own. We went out in the southern Chesapeake Bay with this new young skipper, the one that didn't stay. Yeah, we were a couple of weeks, I think, we were out there. Of course, it wasn't quite as bad as I make it sound. They were a green crew, but we did have a chief motor machinist mate on there, so the diesels were running. And there was a guy who knew how to make them run. But, for the rest of us up there running things in the bridge, it was pretty touch and go.

DePue: You touched on something else I was curious about: maintenance of these things would be so important. It's a brand new engine, and was it designed specifically for these LSTs?

Jaeger: I think so. Well, designed exclusively for marine use. I can't think of General Motors kicking out a 1,200 horsepower engine for—for what, the railroad? Maybe, sure. A diesel engine? Maybe, that's about the same size they had in the railroad things, huh?

DePue: Could be, but my thought was that, knowing how to maintain that beast, would be just about as important as any job on the ship.

Jaeger: That's another factor that I mentioned in there. I talk about these guys like they're all hicks from the sticks, you know. They were a cross-section of American youth, and some of them were damn sharp. One of them was—god, you'd think he invented diesel engines, he was so good. He must've worked on it before he got on there, but he was great.

DePue: Okay.

Jaeger: I remember his name, if you want it.

DePue: Yeah. As much as possible, we want to give these guys some credit, where credit is due.

Jaeger: He was a young guy from southern Indiana, named Carl, C-a-r-l, Grabbe, G-r-a-b-b-e, Carl Grabbe.

DePue: Okay.

Jaeger: He did a hell of a job. And another guy: we had a thirty year old electrician from Pittsburgh by the name of John Lieber and he saved our bacon many a time.

DePue: Did you have any, what you would consider now as, combat drills or combat training?

Jaeger: Very little. In Chesapeake Bay, the Navy would send a fighter plane out with a sleeve. Then we'd fire at the sleeve. We did a little of that.

DePue: Fired with a sleeve...

Jaeger: Yeah, they'd tow a sleeve behind the plane.

DePue: Oh, okay, a target.

Jaeger: Yeah, a target sleeve, that's right. I think we only did it once or twice. But there's a big factor here, of training that we didn't get and should've got, was how to identify enemy aircraft. We weren't trained in that, and we had tragic results. I tell you about that in there. God, it still shakes me up to think about what happened in Sicily that night, you know, shot our own people there.

DePue: Did you have any practice in actual beach landings?

Jaeger: What in beach landings?

DePue: Did you practice beach landings?

Jaeger: Oh yeah. We did a couple of them. Beach landings: each beach is generally different than the last one. Ideally, the beach would be sloped sharply, so that, as your ship came in, you'd hit the sand, and drop your ramp out in the sand. If it's real shallow, you might beach out here. Then, you had to put pontoon bridges down and bring them in. We carried pontoon bridges on the side of our ship. We'd get into the area; we'd take a torch and cut the wire and drop the pontoon over the side. (laughter) There's a ship called an LCM, landing craft. A landing craft is smaller than a landing ship. It was 120 feet long. We carried it on our deck. Our deck was long and open, all the way from the bow, back to the deck house.

DePue: Was that landing craft medium then?

Jaeger: No, it was landing craft tank, I think, the LCT. The landing craft medium might've been something else.

DePue: Oh, I thought you said LCM.

Jaeger: Did I? I should've said LCT.

DePue: LCT, okay. Landing craft tank. Go ahead.



LCT 461 sits atop LST 400's main deck, 1943

Jaeger: We lay huge timbers across the ship—athwart ship, if you want to sound salty. A huge crane would pick these things up back in the Navy yard north, and put them on there. We'd chain them down, take them across the ocean, get in Oran Harbor, and—all those tanks again—We'd void the port tanks, fill the starboard tanks, put a heavy list on us to starboard, pull the trigger, and that damn metal thing would go right over the side. We'd launch it.

DePue: And that was standard, that you'd have one of these strapped on?

Jaeger: We did it twice. Yeah, we did in the Mediterranean up to England, too.

DePue: Was it pretty straightforward when you were actually practicing these landings? Were there any challenges in actually learning how to do it the first time that you—?

Jaeger: Actually, we didn't get much experience in that. We did it, I'm going to say, maybe six, eight times, and always at the same place, as I recall.

And there's another thing, if the beach wasn't right for us, we would not hit the beach at all. We'd go to an LCT. We'd open our bow doors and drop our ramp. They'd drop their ramp. We called it marrying—the tank would run off our ship onto theirs, pull up their ramp, and they'd turn in, and they were much shallower than we were. They'd run right into the beach. We did a lot of that kind of unloading.

DePue: Okay. I would think another one of the important things that you'd have to know how to do right—that there isn't much room for mistakes—is how to tie down the loads. The way you guys would be bouncing around in the ocean, you don't want things sliding around on the ship.

Jaeger: That's right, and the ship—there is one that comes up the Illinois River every now and then. Have you ever seen it? The LST 325.

DePue: I've heard about that.

Jaeger: Yeah, I was on it last year and looking at it. They have plates on the floor, and they have little fastening devices. Not little, they're pretty powerful...called them dogs. One end would fit in and graft the plate that's on the deck. The other was like a turnbuckle, running up to a fastening on the tank. And you'd hook them up and turn the turn buckle, so you had them tight as could be. You couldn't have any motion, God, no. That probably happened, probably had some serious one. But, I think we had...We carried some trucks on our main deck. We had elevators that would take us from the tank deck up to the main deck, and so—

DePue: Would the main deck be exposed to the elements? Yes? Okay.

Jaeger: And we'd drive trucks on there, generally lighter stuff, of course. But, I think we had some trucks with some loose gear in them once. But, we'd always batten down those axles, right to the deck. We would fasten them tight. I don't remember us ever having anything loose on deck, because you're right; it's extremely important.

DePue: Okay. Well, I wanted to take some time; you've done a great job getting pictures in our minds of exactly what these things are like and what they're designed to do. So, let's now talk about getting overseas.

Jaeger: All right. After a sporadic training and a lot of time loading in the Chesapeake, we were given the word one day to go outside of the Chesapeake Bay, into the Atlantic Ocean, form up into a convoy headed for New York, which we did. We got to New York; we pulled up into the inner harbor, and we anchored near Governor's Island, over near Brooklyn. And we got word to seal the ship, which is *nobody on, nobody off*. We were getting ready for a European convoy. We knew that. We got ordered by signal light to send a courier ashore to one of those Navy offices down on the Battery, there in New York. They chose me. We put an LCVP, one of our—I didn't mention our running boats, and I should.

DePue: LCVP?

Jaeger: Yeah.

DePue: I think that's the classic one that we think of when we think of landing on the D-Day beaches?

Jaeger: Yeah, it's a Higgins boat.

DePue: Yeah.

Jaeger: That's what everybody called them. Thirty-six feet long, had a ramp instead of a bow.

DePue: Yeah, LCVP, landing craft vehicle and personnel?

Jaeger: Exactly. We carried two. Some of them carried six.

DePue: So, you had two of these. You had one LCT.

Jaeger: Well, that was just a passenger, the LCT. We carried it from New York to the Oran and popped it off—the sooner the better.

DePue: But the LCVPs, you'd always have two as part of the ship complement?

Jaeger: Yeah, they're mounted in a hoist, called davits. Some people call them dāvits, but we call them dāvits. They are heavy hoists to throw down and hang out over the side. You'd drop your cable down and hook on to the LCVPs and pick them up and bring them inboard. I got a story about that. We had a collapse on one of them once though. But we were talking about New York, weren't we?

DePue: Yeah.

Jaeger: And, with the LCVP, I went in. I got the orders, brought them back to the ship, and they were pretty much what we expected: that we were to form up with convoy MKB2, or whatever you call it, the next day. What it meant was, New York to Gibraltar. That's where we were going. There were about 140 of us going.

DePue: Hundred and forty ships?

Jaeger: Yeah. And forming up the convoy is quite an operation. You get those guys in line out there and get your screen of destroyers around it.

But there was a little incident that happened on the way out there. I was standing on the bridge, and we were anchored at Buttermilk Channel, over there near Brooklyn. I could see one of the patrol boats was heading for the beach for some reason or other. I got my binoculars and looked, and I could see a swimmer in the water. The patrol boat picked him up and brought him back to the ship. I've often wondered about it. Was he a deserter in time of war or some frightened kid trying to get the hell out from under, you know?

But, the next day, we formed our convoy and headed for Bermuda—not Bermuda. We ended up there. But that's when I did my day and a half, getting my sea legs.

DePue: So, you did get seasick for a day and a half.

Jaeger: I did, yeah. And most of them did. We used to carry Army guys, and, oh god, they're not seasick; they're practically green. You could see through them, they were just so upset. But they wouldn't admit it. We had a pretty experienced young bosun from Connecticut. If we were in for a month without going out, he'd go on his first watch, he'd bring a bucket up with him.

Nobody argued with him or made fun of it either. He knew damn well what was going to happen.

We figured: let's say your convoy, ten columns, ten deep, a hundred ships, and a ring of destroyers and patrol craft sub-chasers around them, all equipped with sonar and depth charges, this would protect us because we were awfully good targets in the Atlantic. The North Atlantic was really a hotbed back in those days. We lost, I think, 10,000 men out there during the war, and God knows how many ships.

DePue: Did your ship have depth charges on it?

Jaeger: No, we weren't fast enough. They have a submarine [that] could come up and outrun us, and you have to be able to attack, I guess, to carry them. We didn't have them, no.

DePue: Was there anything larger than the destroyer?

Jaeger: No. Not there, because—what was in the Atlantic then? Germans had the Bismarck, didn't they, and...?

DePue: Yeah, but that would've been much closer to the continent.

Jaeger: That's right, so we didn't have to worry about that. A submarine could surface and shell us on the surface. That never happened to us, but we were in a lot of submarine conflict. What did happen was, about two days out of New York heading for Gibraltar, the chief comes up and says that he's having trouble with the starboard shaft, main shaft. The skipper asked him, "What do you need to fix it?" He said, "We've got to shut it down." "And how long will this take?" "Can't tell. I got to shut it down." We called the commodore and told him our situation. He said, "Go ahead and fix it." And we cut down to one engine driving us. So, we began to lose place in convoy, and pretty soon we were out of convoy. The convoy was going over the horizon. The commodore sent a destroyer back to cover us. We weren't getting anywhere with our repair job, and the commodore couldn't spare one destroyer for one LST. So, he called the destroyer back and ordered us to go to Bermuda, unescorted. Didn't like that. It took us about two days.

I kind of got a test then. I had told them that I knew how to navigate. So, the skipper says, "Give me a course for Bermuda." Well, you can do it. I'd lay out a line, out of New York harbor, and mark about nine miles for every hour we traveled, and that put me right here, and here's Bermuda. So, I gave him a course, and we made it. We got in all right. And—

DePue: So, this is not celestial navigation.

Jaeger: We did that. As a matter of fact, even on that one, I did celestial because we had a sextant along. With that sextant, you bring down celestial bodies down

to the horizon and measure the angle, and you use Greenwich time. We've got a chronometer on there. And, if you have this angle at this time here on this line, that's where you are. So, you get another line; where they cross is where you are. That's celestial navigation in a nutshell. We did it, yeah. And we did the sun quite a bit. The stars, you could only get just at dusk or dawn, because you need to see the horizon to measure it. And that was kind of fun.

DePue: I would think, having to go to Bermuda...there are worse places to have to go to.

Jaeger: Sure was. (laughter) We were there ten days, and there were no automobiles on the island at the time. So, we were riding around, horse and buggy up into the hills, finding fancy little restaurants. You wouldn't think there was a war going on.

I have a little anecdote in there about that, too. I was ashore with one of my fellow officers, who was a lawyer from Massachusetts. He was a pretty sharp-tongued guy. He and I wanted to get a jeep to ride around the island. We went to the officer in charge of those things and told him we wanted a jeep. He said, "Well, I can't let you take a jeep out there." We pressed him, "Why the hell not? You know, we're only here a few days. We want to see the other end of the island." So, he said, "If I did something like that, they'd ship me out of here." And my buddy, Fred, said, "Now, we wouldn't want that to happen, would we?" (laughter) He was sitting there on paradise for the rest of the war, you know.

DePue: (laughter) Some people have it tough!

Jaeger: We pulled out of Bermuda and picked up another convoy, and just jumped in, took our place in line. Next thing I know, we were going to Gibraltar.

DePue: What was the cargo that first trip? Do you recall?

Jaeger: What we were hauling?

DePue: Yeah.

Jaeger: It wasn't tanks. It was all trucks, but I don't know what the hell were in them. The trucks [were] loaded, you know. Very often we hauled those four by six, or whatever they call them, loaded with everything you can imagine—food, ammunition and...

DePue: The standard Army truck of the—

Jaeger: (interrupts) That's right, yeah. And we're supplying the army. That's our purpose in life.

DePue: For either of these convoys, did either of them have any kind of air cover?

Jaeger: Not until we got in range of Gibraltar. I think we got some there because, at that point, the German Air Force was just driven out of North Africa. They had just left Port Bonaire, Point Bonaire, or whatever the hell it is. And we were subject to air attack from France because the air—but we didn't get that close that we had trouble. No, we had no air trouble.

DePue: I know that, later in the war, they constructed a lot of light carriers, and that was primarily to provide air carrier for anti-sub patrols.

Jaeger: That's right. Yeah, those—what did they call them, jeeps or something like that?

DePue: Jeep carriers, yeah.

Jaeger: The jeeps were anti-submarine warfare, weren't they? Now, when we got to the Mediterranean, we needed air cover because, our first night, we tied up in—no, our second night—we went into Iran. And we did get bombed that night. We got our first taste of fire. We did all right. Those kids all got out on deck and opened up. The damn thing was out of range. We never got close to it, but they fired the guns.

DePue: It was a German bomber that was dropping bombs on you?

Jaeger: Yeah, yeah. They bombed the North African coast. As a matter of fact, before we ever went to Sicily, we did lose the ship, the 333, we lost near Algeria. That went to a German aircraft.

DePue: When did you leave New York harbor? I think you said April in the book. Does that sound right?

Jaeger: That sounds a little early, more like May.

DePue: Well, you mentioned in the book that you arrived in the Mediterranean in May. So, what was the standard...?

Jaeger: I was in the Mediterranean at the end of May?

DePue: That's what I read...or maybe you told me that in the pre-interview, I think.

Jaeger: Well, I left the station, I would think, would be more accurate.

DePue: Okay.

Jaeger: I'll have to look it up when I get in there.

DePue: Okay.

Jaeger: It could've been a mistake there.

DePue: But, I guess the only thing I was leading to here is that, by that time, the beach head was well established. They were well inland. Where did you offload the supplies that you had, once you went into North Africa? Was it Oran?

Jaeger: Yeah, we offloaded at Oran. Mers-el-Kébir, that's the name of the harbor there. And we did get bombed there that night, so...I never thought of North Africa as being a combat area that we were supplying. I thought of it more as a staging area for the attack on Sicily. That's when the war started.

DePue: Yeah, by that time, the combat was well forward of the harbor itself.

Jaeger: Yeah, I think the Germans were driven off that peninsula on the other part of the cape Tunis, Tunis Bay. They went off of there, I think, in April or May, didn't they?

DePue: Yeah, that's probably right.

Jaeger: We got in there after that, so we never had them on our side. But, what the hell, Sardinia and Sicily and all those things were still there.

DePue: Well, the next question I got—and we're going to close here pretty soon. But I wanted to ask just a couple questions of a logistical nature, if you will. Yours is not a ship that's going to be going back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean over and over again. So, there were other larger ships, liberty ships and other ships that would bring cargo other, and then, before a major landing, they would go to the harbor, like Oran, and you would load up there?

Jaeger: I'm sure there were. I think you've described it exactly. The cargo ships were untroubled at that point. They could pull into the harbors that were docks and cranes in North Africa. And we'd go back there for supply, to hit the beaches. But the ships, the liberty ships as they called them, and the cargo ships, they were coming from all the ports in the United States, and they were loading North Africa. And we staged from there. As a matter of fact, when we went to make our first run into Sicily, we had to go into Bizerte and load up.

DePue: Okay. Well, here's the teaser for the people who are listening to this, we're going to talk in great detail about Sicily and Italy in the next session we got. But I think you've done a great job of painting a word picture for us of what it was like to be on these ships and the experiences and the training you had. So, I'm looking forward to part two here, Gene.

Jaeger: Okay. I've enjoyed talking.

DePue: Anything you want to say for conclusion for today?

Jaeger: Yeah, I hope I can get something into this that will tell you something of the civilians in the 1940s. That's a story in itself, but it was part of the game, you know.

Gene Jaeger

Interview # VR2-A-L-2012-016.01

DePue: You mean the civilians that were left back in the United States?

Jaeger: Yeah.

DePue: Okay.

Jaeger: Yeah, because this was our nation at war. It wasn't the same as any time before or after. There were things—rationing of food, and some of the factors I talked to you about, people resentful of some guys having to do heavy duty and some getting off. And they did a wonderful job, but it wasn't Camelot. There were draft dodgers, and there were manufacturers who were screwing the government, you know. This was the United States of America. (laughter) They netted out. They did a good job, but I get a little intolerant of the flowery stuff. I got to get that in.

DePue: Well, we can talk a little bit more about that at the beginning of the next session, if you'd like.

Jaeger: Yeah, well, I don't have a lot of evidence on it. I know...Well, I'll talk to you about it later.

DePue: Yeah. Well, I know, that that's one of the things that...Truman came to some prominence because he was leading that Senate committee that was investigating some of the abuses in the industrial sector.

Jaeger: Yeah.

DePue: Okay, thanks a lot here, Gene.

Jaeger: All right.

(End of interview #1. Interview #2 continues.)

Interview #2 with Gene Jaeger

VR2-A-L-2012-016.02

Interview # 2: May 21, 2012

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 Monday, May 21, 2012. My name is Mark DePue, the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I'm in Henry, Illinois, in the home of Gene Jaeger. How are you?

Jaeger: I'm feeling fine, Mark.

DePue: This is our second session with you, and we had a wonderful experience the first time. We Learned a lot about growing up in Illinois in the depression and a little bit of banking history and bank regulations, then got you into the Navy, got you commissioned in a different kind of way than most people did. I know that we left off—you had sailed on LST 400, gone across the Atlantic Ocean, and were in the Mediterranean Sea and about ready to support the Sicily landings in July of 1943, right?

Jaeger: That's correct.

DePue: What I wanted to , though, is—before we got into Sicily itself—kind of as a little background again, tell us about, at that point in time, what your specific duties on board ship were.

Jaeger: You could describe it as a watch officer. That means you take control of the ship in place of the skipper for four hour watches. It's four on and eight off at sea. You're in the conning tower, actually



An LST equipped with a barrage balloon.

guiding the ship. Or, if you're important, you run the ship for twenty-four hours. Everything clears through the watch officer. That would be my primary duty. The secondary is, there's a division that you run, and I was the communications officer and also head of a small group known as ship's control. That included signalmen, quartermasters, and the communications people and the people on the bridge. But, to answer your question, I was a watch officer, and I was a communications officer.

DePue: Eight hours on—or, excuse me—four hours on, eight hours off.

Jaeger: That's normal cruising watch. Yes, there are more stringent setups: if you're in any kind of a threat you might go four and four.

DePue: Well, if I'm doing my math right, that means that you weren't pulling duty the same time of the day. That was always shifting.

Jaeger: It was always shifting because they broke you up—the watches all had a name, and the watches started at what we would call, four o'clock in the afternoon. [It] was called the dog watch. Instead of being a four hour watch, the dog watch was a two hour watch, so that it would stagger you. You'd never get the same duty two days in a row because, if you didn't have the dog watch, you would get the same one, day in and day out.

DePue: Why the dog watch? Why that name?

Jaeger: Beats me. A lot of naval tradition comes from, not only well before you and I were born, but well before the United States Navy was put together. Some of that stuff has been around for years. I can't—

DePue: So, probably something from the British Navy, huh?

Jaeger: Oh, yeah, and maybe even before them...the Vikings. Who knows?

DePue: (laughter) Yeah, the traditions in the Navy, I know, is much more of a factor than it is, even in the United States Army. When you say you're a communications officer, what were the means that the ship was able to communicate?

Jaeger: Well, let's start with the radio. We did have a transmitter and a set of receivers, but in wartime you don't use radio at sea very much because there is a device called the RDF, radio detection finder. It's a loop you might see...a metal loop. A man using that loop could pick up your signal and zero in on your position. So, we didn't transmit much.

Our other system would've been flag hoists. The signalmen had what you call a flag bag right behind the conning tower. The signalmen are very adept at hooking these flag hoists on. The typical flag hoist would be a group of four letters, and the letters had names. So, when you'd read the hoist, you'd

call out, not ABCD, but Abel, Baker, Charlie, Dog, you know. It's changed now, but that's, I guess, what you call phonetic. That was usually a system that the convoy leader used to signal to a group of ships, like "Prepare for a 45 degree turn to starboard," or something like that. A four letter hoist would tell you that. There's a flag book with a meaning of the four letter hoists. Maybe there's a couple hundred of them. I don't know.

The next thing would be ship to ship communication. About the time World War II started, a semaphore, which you may have seen—a man standing with two flags, one in each hand, putting on various positions. It wasn't used too much because you can't see it too far.

What we did use, and used extensively, was signal searchlight. It would be about a fourteen inch or sixteen inch diameter searchlight, a regular searchlight, which has panels in there, which are worked from the side by a lever that they flutter up and down. With that, you'd send Morse code—dit,dah,dit, roger, you know. That can be read for quite a distance at a signal searchlight. So, we communicated with them.

So, your question was about the people in the division, wasn't it?

DePue: Well, about the different ways that you did communications.

Jaeger: Yeah that...well, let's see...That's about it.

DePue: Did you have to know Morse code yourself, then?

Jaeger: No, I didn't, but I picked it up watching the signalmen because, if a signalman is reading a searchlight, he can't take his eyes off it. So, he can't write down the message, he's got to call it out. He's got a writer standing next to him, and then, he's just chanting out words like Abel, Baker, Charlie, so forth. I got used to it. So, I know that di-dah-dit is roger and di-dah is...I forget. (laughter) I used to know it.

DePue: Well, you haven't needed to know it for a few years. Radio communication: was that AM? FM?

Jaeger: Now, that I don't know. This is kind of strange, because the officer in charge of the different divisions, he didn't have to know a hell of a lot about it, technically. I was a gunnery officer one time, and I didn't know much about guns. But the gunners all knew about it. I would tell them what had to be done, you know, and they knew how to do it. Same with radio. I know very little about radio, but I was the communications officer.

That's not unusual. The Navy has built up a chain of command, from the admiral on down, and these very junior officers are, to the most part, passing commands on down to the men who actually carry them out, you know. The technicality is mostly in the hands of the rated, enlisted men, the

petty officers. They would all have gone to a specific school—gunnery, or motor machines, or radio, whatever.

DePue: You say petty officers. In the Army, we'd consider them noncommissioned officers.

Jaeger: I'm sure that's right.

DePue: And so, they're enlisted men.

Jaeger: Yes, they are.

DePue: Okay. As you move up in the officer ranks, do you end up moving from division to division? Is that the assumption?

Jaeger: The rank—you'd start out as an ensign in the Navy. That's a very preliminary rank. And then you become a lieutenant junior grade. Now, normally that is done on merit, I would believe. But, during the war, it was done on the numbers alone. When you get your service number—I forget mine right now—but sometime in the course of a year, they would send a message out from Annapolis saying, everybody whose service number is higher than or lower than XYZ now moves from ensign to lieutenant JG, regardless of what the guy knew or what he'd been doing. That was necessary because of the tremendous demand to operate a Navy that only had a couple of hundred thousand people in it, and moved up to three million during the war. So, we expanded like hell. They had to do things that way.

DePue: Well, we talked about, last time. [I'm] just trying to wrap my brain around the fact that there was 1,000 LSTs, which would take 100,000 sailors to man those 1,000 LSTs. That's mindboggling, compared to what the Navy was before the war.

Jaeger: That's right. It took, I would think, over a couple of hundred thousand people in the Navy. I have seen the statistics, and I'm sure that it was—

DePue: I think that's probably on the high side. That would be my guess.

Jaeger: Yeah.

DePue: Maybe, only because in 1940 they started the draft. So, they were boosting up all of the services at that time because they saw the war clouds building.

Jaeger: Yes, I remember that. They were drafting, but I don't think they were drafting into the Navy.

DePue: Oh, really?

Jaeger: That would be my guess, but this was seventy years ago.

- DePue: (laughter) But anyway, a huge explosion, and a lot of amateurs running the Navy at that time, I would guess.
- Jaeger: Oh yeah, sure. Well, I think we may have talked about this before. The way they could get them most quickly was to take young men in their early twenties who had a college education and shove them through ninety days' training. I don't know if you still hear the name "ninety-day wonder" anymore, but that's what they called us, myself included.
- DePue: Well, it certainly was a term that was used in the Army an awful lot, as well, because the Army was produced during that timeframe—
- Jaeger: They probably did the same thing.
- DePue: They did the same exact thing. Okay, what I want to do next—and you've talked about some of these to a certain extent—but I thought it might be helpful for the rest of our conversation today to kind of go through the litany of different kinds of landing vehicles. I'm going to go through them, and you can tell us—again, you've talked about this some—but you can tell us what these ships are. I think I even got some things off the Internet to look at the pictures. An LCVP.
- Jaeger: That is a landing craft vehicle personnel. It's thirty-six feet long, and it doesn't have a V-shaped bow. It has a flat ramp, which can be lowered. And incidentally, it's called a craft because of its size. It can be carried on an LST and was carried. We carried two. Some of them carried six.
- DePue: Okay. So, this right here is an LCVP?
- Jaeger: Yeah, that's an LCVP.
- DePue: And—
- Jaeger: Yeah, absolutely.
- DePue: That's the one that, anytime anybody mentions the landing craft today—and if you're not really an expert on this stuff—that's probably the one that people think about because that's the one you see in movies that land on the beaches. The ramp comes down, and the troops run off.
- Jaeger: That's right. There are a modification, a bigger one like that, but, in general, yes. This one carried the troops. There was an LCI. We'll talk to that later, when we get there, I guess.
- DePue: Well, let's go ahead. Before we do that, though, is the Higgins boat the same thing as an LCVP?

- Jaeger: I believe so, yes, because Higgins was the head of a shipyard. He may have designed them, but he produced most of them, I think, in New Orleans or Seattle. We never called them that, but, after the war, I hear them called that all the time.
- DePue: I think that's why the D-Day Museum, and now the World War II Museum, is in New Orleans, because that's where the Higgins boats were manufactured. Okay, you mentioned LCI, landing craft infantry?
- Jaeger: Infantry, right.
- DePue: And that's a base like...I hadn't seen much pictures of before. If you ask me, it's a weird looking thing.
- Jaeger: It is.
- DePue: This thing right here, down at the bottom. Is that an LCI?
- Jaeger: That's it. That's the LCI. If you'll notice it, on each side, near the bow, there's a platform leading to a ladder. Climb the ladder that is lowered onto the beach, and, theoretically, the attacking infantry or soldiers would run down that ladder and up the sand and make their assault. But, very often they beached before they could reach the dry land, and they had to walk, sometimes, knee deep or chest deep in water. Some of them drowned.
- DePue: What was the bow like? Was it like your LCTs?
- Jaeger: No, it wasn't a blunt bow. It had a regular prow. No vehicles could load off of that. It's personnel only. The LCVP, you could put a jeep in that. But, in this one, it had a bow, and it just had these platforms running along each side that the soldiers would file down the platform. When they get to the bow, they go down the ladder and onto the beach.
- DePue: It looked like—see if I'm using the right terminology—it looks like it's pretty narrow in beam, too.
- Jaeger: Absolutely, absolutely. I imagine—
- DePue: That would be the width of it?
- Jaeger: That's right.
- DePue: Okay.
- Jaeger: I mean, I don't know the statistics, but the LCT was fifty feet wide. That thing was half of that.
- DePue: So, we're talking about a ship that's quite a bit smaller than the LSTs.

Jaeger: Yes, and there's a distinction I might mention here. It's an LCI, and that's landing craft infantry, and we have the LST—that's landing ship tanks. The distinction there is between the C and the S—landing craft. In my book, I believe a craft is a Navy ship that is less than 200 feet. The LST was a landing ship because it was more than 200 feet. You never referred to any of those as a boat. A boat is something that can be picked out of the water and put on the deck of a ship.

DePue: I know enough Navy people to know that, when us landlubbers say boat, then we're quickly corrected: no, that's not a boat; that's a ship.

Jaeger: That's right. You landlubbers call the *Queen Mary* a boat, you know.

DePue: (laughter) Okay. How about a duck? I think the acronym is DUKW, but it's universally called the duck.

Jaeger: Yeah, I don't know what the word stands for, but we did call them a duck. And it's a regular truck, but its rear port forms with a watertight hull. The wheels were on the outside. I don't know exactly how long it was, but they were very unstable. I drove one once. We drove it down the ramp and just floated around.¹ But, when those things would leave a ship—an LST, say—and try to make it ashore for a thousand yards, if it was rough weather, it's liable to swamp. We lost of them. But I've often wondered what the enemy would think when they first appeared. They looked, what they saw was a boat coming toward them, loaded with men to attack them. And, when that boat hits the beach, instead of stopping and unloading, it waddles a bit² and comes up the sand and keeps right on (laughter) coming at them. I wonder how they felt about that.

DePue: What's the size? How many troops could it carry? Do you know?

Jaeger: Not many. Fifteen—

DePue: Like a squad or something?

Jaeger: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: So, a smaller craft than your LCVPs would be.

Jaeger: Yeah, it would be less serviceable. It wouldn't carry as much. But, of course, it could move inland. Probably, what it carried, more than personnel would be gasoline, in what they used to call, jerry cans. Did you see those? Yeah.

DePue: Yeah.

¹ (Editor's note: My recollection is that floating around made them act like ducks, and the duk made it easy to remember.)

² (Editor: making them act even more like ducks.)

Jaeger: About five-gallon cans, or—

DePue: Five-gallon cans, yeah. Jerry³ can, because that's what the Germans used, isn't it?

Jaeger: I think so.

DePue: Did you have on your ship, did you carry a couple ducks with you? I know you carried the LCVPs.

Jaeger: No. We only picked up stuff at our loading point and discharged them on the beaches.

DePue: Okay. LCT: Now, you talked quite a bit about that the last time. LCT versus all these other things?

Jaeger: Yeah, LCT is landing craft tank, so it's less than 200 feet, isn't it? The LCT is about 110 feet long. I think it might carry four or five tanks. It had a blunt bow, very much like the LCVP we just described. And the entire bow was a ramp that would be dropped on the beach, hopefully.

I keep mentioning this all the time because these things couldn't always reach the beach. You've seen beaches where there is little sandbars in close that are not expected, and those things round 100, 200 feet off, and the LSTs grounded. I understand they had a hell of a time at Tarawa on that.

DePue: Tarawa, yeah.

Jaeger: Yeah.

DePue: So, what's the advantage of having an LCT, if you're got this much bigger LST?

Jaeger: It had a shallower draft,⁴ for one thing.

DePue: So, it could theoretically get to different kind of beaches than you guys could.

Jaeger: Absolutely. We drew about nine feet in the stern, and they probably only drew about three and a half or four or something like that. We had a proposition—and we used this a lot—where we would get close to the beach, and we would anchor with our rear anchor and open our bow doors and lower our ramp. The LCT would come along, bow to bow, and lower its ramp onto our ramp. We called it a marriage. Our tanks would run off onto the LCT, and they'd close up the ramp and head for the beach. They could get in with the three-and-a-half-foot draft, where we couldn't with our nine-foot draft.

³ Jerry or jerries was the pejorative used by U. S. service personal for enemy Germans. *Editor*

⁴ Depth of the hull at the lowest point below the waterline.

- DePue: We talked about this a little before: I know that on your trip across the Atlantic Ocean, you had one of these LCTs latched on the main deck. So, the question is... You've talked about this in the book—and we're going to talk quite a bit about your book. I would certainly encourage people to buy his book because it's a fun read, *Flat-Bottom Odyssey: From North Africa to D-Day*. You published this not too long ago. But anyway, one of the things you talked about in here is how you got that monster off of the deck.
- Jaeger: Yes. And—you want to hear it?
- DePue: Yeah, please.
- Jaeger: Well, one of the characteristics of an LST is management of its ballast tanks. The entire lower deck was made up of tanks, so the compartments were watertight. We could put fuel, freshwater, or saltwater ballast in there. We could empty them fast and load them fast because it was important, as we approached the beach, to void our forward tanks and fill our after tanks, so that our bow would be at a high angle and right up on the beach, and the stern would be low. Also, you could do this with those tanks. You could void all your port tanks, fill all your starboard tanks, and there you are with a twelve percent list to starboard.
- Now, on the deck we had huge timbers, and they were greased. We go to the Navy yard in Portsmouth, where they had a huge crane that would pick up this 900 ton LCT and place it on our deck and lash it down with the steel chain and all that and carried it for about a month. We got to Arzou, a place in North Africa, and it was time to get rid of it. We did what I just described. We voided our port tanks, filled our starboard tanks, and, one by one, we undid the lashings. We cut the last one, and that thing slipped right over the side beautifully, hit the water, bounded back against us, as you'd expect. But we were ready for that. We had huge cane fenders, as we called them. They were, maybe, about four feet in diameter. We had them lined along our starboard side to catch the rebound. We did that twice.
- When we finished in Italy, we picked up an LCT in Oran and took it up to Portsmouth, England then. There, I think, we were able to get it under a crane, and they picked it off.
- DePue: So, you only had to do the ditching one time.
- Jaeger: I think so.
- DePue: Okay.
- Jaeger: I think so.
- DePue: Well, I know we've talked quite a bit about the LSTs already. Let's talk about the landing at Sicily, then. I've got a map here to help you out. Your book has

a lot of excellent maps; that's really useful. I love to have maps. But, tell us as much as you can about that particular landing. This is really the first serious combat that you're going to see?

Jaeger: I think it was the first landing that had used all these newly designed landing craft, but the ones that could run up on the beach and lower the bow, to any great extent. It was a major landing. It was a major event, and we had a lot of LSTs, LCIs, LCTs all there.

We were anchored in the Bay of Tunis on, I guess, the ninth of July. We were combat loaded, and we got the word to sail out into the Mediterranean, where we picked up an eastbound convoy. We joined it and sailed east in the Mediterranean, which had been very calm all the last several weeks.

When we got abeam Gela or Scoglitti, or one of those towns on the south coast of Sicily, we turned sharply to port. About that same time a storm came up. It was really a sharp storm. It was one of the first times that we had to deal with weather that heavy. It was so heavy that, at one point, our screws came out of the water. Of course, with the engine drive still on them, they went into high speed. They kicked up the over-speed trip, I think. So, it killed the engine.

Our skipper, who was no more experienced than anybody else in that game, he did one hell of a job in keeping that thing in control. He was steering with his engines, and the rudders weren't responding. The screw coming out of the water, he'd have to go stop the port engine and drive with the starboard to try to keep in line. We were heading straight for Sicily at that time. We were following the ship ahead of us in the darkness, and we were still with them when the sun began to come up. When it did, we noticed that there was a ship ahead of him, and then nothing else. The three of us were all alone out there. So, one of the ships in our column, in the convoy, had gone astray, and there we were out in the unprotected part of the Mediterranean.

The only way that we hooked up again was, we could all see gunfire off to the port bow, and the skipper could steer for that. By the time the sun came up, we were close to our flagship and able to take orders and get back into the game again. But we had a bad time that night.

DePue: Were these submarine infested waters?

Jaeger: Certainly, yeah. We had already lost one submarine, the 333...

DePue: You mean an LST? You said, "We'd lost a submarine." Do you mean an LST?

Jaeger: You're right, my mistake. We lost LST 333 at a place back in North Africa, somewhere near Oran or Algiers; it was torpedoed. Yeah. You asked a question about a submarine threat. Absolutely, it was there.

DePue: The thing that also surprised me, reading in your book, you talked about barrage balloons. Was that a time you were actually using a barrage balloon?

Jaeger: Yes, we were.

DePue: And what's the rationale for that? First of all explain what it is, and then tell us why.

Jaeger: Well, it's a blimp, a single unit blimp. It doesn't have compartments. I would say it's thirty feet long, forty feet long, and it was on a 3/8 inch cable. (laughter) It was strange to watch them because the blimp would be filled at the naval station, and we're tied up at the dock. The guy comes down to put it on us, walking, holding it with one hand, and the thing is up about 400 feet. He'd fasten it to our bow.

Now, about—I'm saying 400 feet—that's a guess. But, about 300 feet up the cable, there was a canister, an explosive canister. The idea of those things was that dive bombers couldn't come in on a fleet that had a lot of those. They couldn't get under 400 feet because, if we had the barrage balloon and the next one had a barrage balloon, they had a whole twenty, thirty barrage balloons out there on the convoy. He couldn't get in. He had to stay above that level.

That's what they were for. If he did get in, and he caught his wing on one of those cables, the explosive canister would run right up to his wing and explode and put him out of business. That's what a barrage balloon's about. They had them all over the place. England had them, even at their bases on the ground there. They weren't entirely used for sea duty.

We had an incident about that. You probably know—it's in the book. I don't know if you want to hear about that or not.

DePue: Yeah, please.

Jaeger: When the wind was at its toughest, as we were heading north on the final leg, the barrage balloon was whipping back and forth violently as I was watching it. Suddenly the wind was too much for it. It snapped—the cable did—and the balloon went skyward and disappeared into the hemisphere (laughter) or whatever, atmosphere. Stratosphere is what I'm trying to say. The explosive charge came flying right back at the bridge. I was standing on the port wing, and the thing was coming right at me, I thought. I dived behind a gun tub for protecting, and it landed in the LCVP, which was up in the davit. While (laughter) I was wondering what the hell to do about it, some seaman ran up there—I guess, he took a clipper with him—and cut the cable and threw the

damn thing over the side. I thought he should've got a medal for that, but it was never mentioned. It was just a routine thing.

DePue: But it took a little bit of guts to go out there and do that.

Jaeger: And quick thinking. I was sitting there wondering what the hell to do, and he just went ahead and did it. (laughter)

DePue: You mentioned a term here, we might want to define, davits? How do you spell that?

Jaeger: D-a-v-i-t. A lot of people would pronounce it dah-vut. We called it day-vut. I don't know which is right. It's a hoist, a double hoist for picking boats out of the water. Normally, the davits are kept inboard, and they have to run down some rails so that the heads of the davits are hanging out over the water. Cables go down, pick up the boat, bring it up to the head of the davits, bring them up the rail again, and latch it down. They ride well at sea. But davits is what we pronounce it.

DePue: Okay. Before we talk about the actual landings at Sicily, let me ask you some questions about what the ideal conditions would be for using an LST going into a beach. So tell us, what's the ideal beach to land on?

Jaeger: The ideal beach would be a steep one. We had it later—we'll probably talk about it. It did happen a couple times, but not often. The ideal beach would have a steep grade, so that, when you went in there, you'd open your bow door before you got there. And the bow would run right up on the sand. You'd lower your ramp, and it's out in the sand, instead of a shallow beach, where you would probably ground a couple of hundred yards offshore.

DePue: It needs to be sand, not stone or rock?

Jaeger: They're almost always sand. They always chose sand, I think. I don't remember ever landing on a rocky beach.

DePue: Okay. How about the prevailing wind patterns or weather patterns for a beach area. Do you want something that's relatively calm?

Jaeger: Yeah, it's got to be kind of calm. One of the things you have to worry about is, when they're holding an LST onto a beach to discharge your cargo, you've got to have it at a right angle to the beach, you know. That means the wind can't be blowing your stern around. Actually, they use the expression, broach. I don't know if you've ever heard that. That's when a ship goes sideways on the beach, and that happened a lot of the times. We couldn't control them.

One way we had to control them is, we approached the beach; we let go of our stern anchor, which was not a chain anchor. It was a cable, big cable. I think, at least an inch cable, and maybe more. It had a huge winch on

the stern of the ship that controlled that stern anchor, and we really depended on it. It was damn important, too, that you didn't let that go too fast when you're coming into the beach. Otherwise, the cable came right off the spool, and you lost it, you know, never see it again. So, you couldn't let your stern anchor go too soon. Couldn't let it go too late, either, I guess. It wouldn't do you any good.

I always admire what these LST skippers did, and with this kind of new seamanship, because nobody had any experience. Not only were they inexperienced, but there was nobody around who could tell them how.

DePue: How many practices did your skipper have before you did that key landing at Sicily?

Jaeger: Less than six.

DePue: Was that enough?

Jaeger: He was an exceptionally bright guy. I've got a lot of admiration for that man.

DePue: Did you do the practices with troops on board, as well? I would imagine the—

Jaeger: No, no, the practices were all done in Chesapeake Bay, around Little Creek.

We learned how to beach. I don't think we ever practiced with troops.

DePue: Isn't it different when you have a full load versus an empty load?

Jaeger: You're damn right. It would be a difference if you had loaded tanks. You bet. You'd have to control your angle of the ship, trying to keep your bow high and your stern low. But it's harder to do with a load than empty.

DePue: Because you'd be riding lower in the water?

Jaeger: We ride low when we're at sea. We ride as high as we can when we approach a beach.

DePue: But a heavy load's more difficult to—

Jaeger: Absolutely.

DePue: It's a matter of physics then, isn't it?

Jaeger: Yes.

DePue: Okay.

Jaeger: And we had a little control, as I said, with our ballast tanks, to try to get our bow high.

Gene Jaeger

Interview # VR2-A-L-2012-016.01

DePue: Okay. Well then, tell us about the specific landings that you had, offloading at Gela, I guess, is where you actually—

Jaeger: Gela. I think it was Green Beach, too. After we came out of the darkness and found the fleet again, the flagship told us to prepare to go into the beach, and the beach was a shallow one. The LSTs couldn't reach it. They were running aground a couple hundred feet offshore. A lot of water between them and shore. We carried what we called a pontoon bridge on the side of a... God, they were versatile ships. They could do anything. We carried our bridges with us. They had a special name for them, but it was a bunch of tanks latched together with steelwork and had a huge outboard motor on the stern.

DePue: For these pontoon bridges? Is this what they called the rhino?

Jaeger: Yeah.

DePue: Okay.

Jaeger: Yeah. Rhino. I'd forgotten that. We had two ships—the 311 and 313 were unloading at our beach, and we were waiting to go in. We were under attack. We had some high level attack from FW 200s, but, when we got into the beach, ME 109s were coming in low and dive bombing. They'd come down the river valleys and bank sharply over the beach. They were on the ship before they know it. One of them—we were firing at the guy—but he hit LST 313 right in the middle and [it] burst into flame. I've got a story about that. One of the survivors is a man who lives right up the river here in Spring Valley, Illinois.

DePue: Well, I wondered if you wouldn't mind if we have you actually read that story into the record because—

Jaeger: I'd be glad to.

DePue: That's one of the place—gives you a flavor of what the quality of the writing is. I've got it highlighted there on page forty-eight.

Jaeger: Just the highlighted portion?

DePue: Yeah.

Jaeger: All right. *The FWs, they are multi-engine, high level bombers. The FWs were overhead, and the MEs—that's a fighter, a Messerschmitt 109—had just left the beach.* Oh wait a minute, this is a different story.

DePue: Oh, is it?

Jaeger: Yes, this is not the one we're talking about. We're talking about the letter from Sam.

DePue: Okay.

Jaeger: That's—

DePue: Well, go ahead and tell that story then. We'll get to this one later.

Jaeger: Yeah, that's big.

DePue: Okay. So, again, we're back in talking about the Sicily landings.

Jaeger: Yeah, well Sam... I met him several times, and I asked him to write. He wrote the story of his, and I put it in the book. It's about a page there, about his survival of that bombing. He was in the engine room, of all places, when that bomb hit. He got out all right. It's a long story, if you want to read that, why—

DePue: Okay. Well, I was hoping to have you read this other incident, as well, if you could give us the background for that incident.

Jaeger: Well, it's a little later. It's a later incident.

DePue: But it's affiliated with the Sicily landings?

Jaeger: Oh yes, Sicily landing, all right.

DePue: Okay.

Jaeger: I'd be happy to—

DePue: Okay. Is there a little bit of background you got to tell us before you read that?

Jaeger: All right. Well, we had finished beaching. Actually, after the LST 313 got hit, and I think its pontoon bridge that it was loading over was damaged in the process and couldn't be used. So, we couldn't hit the beach, and we married to an LCT and unloaded our whole thing. But we never hit the sand there on the first day. We unloaded everything into LCT, which kept working back and forth, maybe three, four loads. It took all our tanks and put them on the beach.

DePue: Again, the classic perception of amphibious landings from World War II— and for people like myself, anybody who watches too many Hollywood movies—it's the LCVs hitting the beach and the ramp going down, and the infantry rushing off, and maybe some vehicles are being brought in at that first landing, as well. How long after the actual initial landing on the beach would you and the LSTs start to discharge your cargo?

Jaeger: Generally, no more than six to eight hours. They had to get in and everything. You couldn't commit an LST full of tanks to a beach that was under fire from artillery or other tanks, but we did. We did come under fire. But that was a

damn risky thing to do. One good shot could put twenty tanks out of business, you know, and that would really set you back.

DePue: So, they would want to have a relatively secure beach before you guys got close?

Jaeger: The LCVPs just made the landing, and the LCVPs and the ducks and LCIs, they put the soldiers ashore, and they had to take out the resistance on the beach. They had to take out close-by artillery, like mortars and things like that. And, when that was done, they could bring us in. We were still subject to long distance shelling. We were subject to strafing and bombing and all that, but generally there was no personnel in range to shoot us—only, that did happen at a later date, I'll mention that—but normally, what I'm trying to say is, you couldn't commit your tanks to the beach, unless you had control of the area.

DePue: What was your biggest threat, then, when you're actually coming into a beach to unload?

Jaeger: Aircraft.

DePue: Fighters, bombers, or both?

Jaeger: Fighter bombers. When you're on the beach you're pretty vulnerable, and they could strafe and bomb. They hit quite a few.

DePue: Were any of the beaches you went into mined?

Jaeger: They all were. The mines...hat was part of the game, too. They were committed early, and we knew they were mined. But they would sweep channels, and we'd take the channels in. I didn't mention that, but yes, they were mined. I don't think Sicily was heavily mined, but Normandy sure as hell was.

DePue: Okay. And were you concerned about submarines or surface ships, enemy surface ships?

Jaeger: No.

DePue: Not in Sicily, at least.

Jaeger: Unh-uh.

DePue: Okay. Well, why don't you set us up with this passage, then? You can read that passage.

Jaeger: All right. We had made our discharge. We got rid of them, and the next thing to do, then, is get you back to Africa as fast as you can.

DePue: What was the first load that you took over? Were they tanks?

Jaeger: No, it wasn't. Ammunition, mostly, and trucks because it all went out—and some ducks. We took about a dozen ducks, and the rest were—The Army had a name for them, four by six or something like that—they're loaded with jerry cans of gasoline for the tanks' follow up, or they might have shells for the tanks. That's what we had in our load. When we finished, we pulled out, and it was getting dark. I remember this was summer, and the Mediterranean is pretty far north. You probably think of it as more at our level, but it's more like Quebec. You'd have long days when you get up that far north, so it was still light around nine o'clock, and maybe close to ten. We pulled back and waited for orders sending us back to Africa, so we could pick up the follow-up load. That was very important, to turn us around fast, because Patton was running this particular operation. He could get so far inland and run out of gasoline, and he's in big trouble. So, we had to get back fast to reload them.

Let's see what we've got here... *These FW 200s came at us from the southeast again. None of their bombs fell close, but then, tragedy struck. The next episode was one of those grotesque nightmares that are as much a part of war as Arlington Cemetery. The FWs were overhead. The MEs had just left the beach. The sky was filled with red tails of our anti-aircraft tracers, when a new flight of planes entered the scene, approaching from the southwest. They were from North Africa. They were flying low and dropping flares as they came. But the flares weren't for illumination. They were recognition flares, but nobody recognized them. The trigger happy invasion fleet opened fire on them with immediate success.*

Many of the intruders began to fall and burn, and a few of our gunners began to realize that these were not German bombers. They were cargo planes, our own C47s and their cargo—God help us—was our own paratroops. I don't know how many planes we shot down. We didn't know the full extent of the catastrophe until...we saw our own airborne soldiers floating face down in the Gela Bay the next day.

DePue: What's the feeling that the folks have when you realized what had just happened?

Jaeger: I can't describe it. They talk about the motivation of soldiers at war, and you talk about the freedom and the flag and all that. That's probably there. But one thing that really does exist is an affinity and a loyalty to your own people, you know, and a responsibility for them. Soldiers go to great lengths to keep each other out of trouble and protect each other. To shoot your own men down... Well, we just had to get over it, that's all. But it still bothers me.

DePue: Well, this is a different tone entirely, but another thing that I ran into in the book: You made several trips back and forth, resupplying.

Jaeger: We always did.

DePue: In one case, it sounds like you had cargo that you didn't even know about. Somebody had decided to bring a cow on board?

Jaeger: That's right. (laughter) I had the watch. I was in the bridge, and we were tied up at Bizerte and ready to go. One of the sailors had told me that he had just loaded a folding canvas bathtub. It was personal for General Patton, I understand. (chuckles) We laughed that off.

But then, a chief came up, a chief petty officer of boats. He was kind of excited because one of those trucks that had just come on, one of the Army trucks that was loading in our tank deck, had a dead cow in it. I asked him how in the hell that happened. He was quite upset. He didn't want anybody carrying dead cows on his ship.

He said the soldiers who were going to board us, were going to back up their fellows who made the initial landing and were now on the front lines. And they were having a party at a pub somewhere in the vicinity of Tunis, there. Somebody suggested that they should do something for their buddies who were already on the front line. As the night wore on, they became convinced that what the guys needed was fresh meat. And, by the time the tavern closed, they were all set to provide them with fresh meat.

They took their truck to a farm and killed a cow, threw him under the tarp, and drove him onto the tank deck. I asked the chief. I said, "How'd they kill that cow?" He said, "With a tommy gun." And he said, "What the hell am I going to do about this?" He was really sore about those Army guys bringing a dead cow on his ship. I told him, "Forget it." I couldn't think of anything to do about it. So, as far as I know, the dead cow got taken all the way up to the front line.

DePue: Yeah, but if you're not butchering something like that right and draining the blood in the way you're supposed to, that doesn't sound too enticing to me.

Jaeger: (laughter) No!

DePue: I wonder if you can take some time—before we get to the Salerno landings—to walk us through a typical day while you're in combat, from the time you got up in the morning, through the end of the day for you.

Jaeger: Well, when we get into combat, there are several stages. In cruising, a normal watch is set four on, eight off, I'm talking to. If there is a danger of aircraft, we go on to four on, four off because we can man more guns. See, when we're sailing, the guns aren't manned at all. When we're general quarters, as we call it, all of them are manned. If we're just under a threat, half of them are manned, so that would be four on, eight off. General quarters was brought

about by an alarm that had an awful, raucous sound and would wake you up, no matter how much you were sleeping.

We'd run to our battle stations and put on all our gear, even wearing anti-flash gear on our faces, and man all our guns. Everybody was in battle condition. We might stay that way. Here we were being attacked by high level and low level bombardiers. We hadn't had any trouble from the shore artillery as yet, so it was mostly watching for the enemy air action. I described it: they got our people on the beach, and they hit a big ammunition ship out there. Our four-on were spent manning the guns, or our general quarters. Our four off was spent trying to get some sleep and something to eat. All other duties were gone. They put you in our jobs as communications and gunnery and all that kind of thing. We were just sleeping, eating and fighting.

DePue: But you had a decent sized crew. It sounds like the crew was larger than you needed to run the operations of the ship.

Jaeger: Yeah, that's true. I estimated that we could run that ship with thirty guys. That's probably what your average 300 foot cargo ship has right now. But we had six 20 millimeter guns, each taking three men, and we had, God knows how many 40 millimeter guns, each taking five men. So, we had a crew of 100 people to man everything. And we had other things, like the boats would be manned and ready to go. So, a Navy ship at general quarters has a hell of a lot more men than it needs to just run itself on the open sea.

DePue: So, what do all these extra sailors do when you're not under attack?

Jaeger: I'll tell you—

DePue: Because having idle sailors isn't necessarily a good thing.

Jaeger: No, they weren't. You've often heard of them chipping the deck and polishing the brass. We did a lot of that, and we kept our ships in damn good shape. They were clean. We were always cleaning things.

And then with training, too, as much as we could, we'd get some manuals and try to train them and ourselves in aircraft recognition. That was quite a problem. You look up at the sky right now, and look at an aircraft going over, can you say that's a Boeing 737 or a 47 or something like that? Most of us can't do that. We couldn't then, either.

I remember standing on the bridge one day with a British army officer next to us, and this was at Sicily, and some plane comes streaking overhead. We open fire on them, and the Brit starts screaming his head off. It was a spitfire, you know. A spitfire, as you probably know, is probably the foremost British fighter plane.

DePue: Yeah, he probably took that real personal.

Jaeger: He sure didn't like it.

DePue: Well, you mentioned food. What was the food like on board?

Jaeger: It wasn't bad, really. We had good facilities. As just kind of an aside here, remember, most of these kids had just come in from the cities and the farms, and they hadn't been eating all that well in the depression. There wasn't much chicken about then. There was a lot of frozen stuff and dried stuff, you know. I never could get used to dried eggs. I'd try to make an omelet out of that, and I couldn't eat the damn thing. But I think dried potatoes and dried milk... They'd freeze things as long as you could. We had lockers on there, freezing lockers.

We had to train men on that, too. That wasn't where we had a bunch of rookies. We had a chief commissary steward, they called him. What the hell was his name? Chief Stevens. He did good.

DePue: Did you get much in the line of fresh vegetables or good, fresh meat?

Jaeger: Damn little. Damn little. We'd have frozen and dried. We'd get in—we'd do our best to do that. As I say, Stevens was pretty good at it. He was an old Navy man, and he knew his way around. He could operate a chiller, and he'd bring us... I think we did better than most ships. I don't know if you're aware of it or not, but the pharmacist mate carried quite a bit of alcohol. I never took official notice of this, but I know damn well Pete would pick up a bottle of alcohol, take it ashore, and come back with pork chops or something like that. He was a good operator. What the hell did we call that? Jungle juice or something like that. Ever hear of that?

DePue: (laughter) But, this is for medicinal purposes?

Jaeger: Yeah. (laughter)

DePue: Theoretically, at least, huh?

Jaeger: That's right.

DePue: How about when you had Army troops on board? Did you feed them, as well?

Jaeger: Yeah, we did, and that was a problem. I can tell you an incident about that, if you want.

This was probably in England. We were told we were going to get 400 troops to carry over. Peterson went and drew what he could from the commissary. All they could give him was liver. He got enough liver for 400 men. Just before we sailed, they said, "Take the vehicles. The men aren't coming." So, we went to sea with enough liver for 400 men. (laughter)

DePue: Fresh liver.

Jaeger: Yeah. Stevens couldn't throw it away without permission from the officer of the deck. Unfortunately, I was officer of the deck, and I don't like liver at all. So, he came up and asked me permission to jettison the damn thing because he didn't like liver. We threw the whole goddamn thing overboard. (chuckles)

DePue: Okay. Let's get to the Salerno landings, then. How was Salerno similar or different from what you'd experienced at Sicily? Because that's what, October? When did the Salerno landings happen? Got it here someplace... Looks like it's September ninth. That was the main landing, at least. You probably were there a little bit later.

Jaeger: That's right, but we went in fairly quick. Well, it had its pluses and minuses. In the first place, the Salerno Beach, was ideal because it was a steep beach. We put our ramp right in the sand there in our first one. Our first landing on September tenth, it went fine. We went into the beach. The aircraft activity around us was not particularly severe. We discharged our load in two hours or so, and pulled off and went back. It was just a textbook landing.

On the way out, the flagship told us to go over to the 152. They had picked up casualties from a seagoing mine sweeper that had been hit. We were going to get back to Africa as quick as we could, so we picked up the casualties. And, God, they looked awful.

They were carrying high octane gasoline. They were all burned, and their heads as big as pumpkins. We took them back to Africa and got loaded up again and come back.

We landed on September fifteenth, our second landing. They had secured the beach then. Some tanks moved back or some artillery moved back, and we just took a pounding there.

DePue: Some German tanks and artillery?

Jaeger: I'm quite sure they were 88s that were hitting us. The flagship sent us into the beach there on late afternoon of September fifteenth. Just as we got there, they told us to halt and pull off. We started back and they said, "Go back in again." They did that about two or three times. I was standing next to an Army officer, and he was really getting upset. "The Navy's chickening out. They're afraid to land here." I tried to tell him that, probably, the Army was trying to take out the artillery that was pounding the beach, you know, so that they didn't want to risk all those tanks to one shot.

But, anyway, we finally hit the beach, and when we did lower the ramp, the first shell comes flying over us. It lit about fifty feet to the starboard side. The next one fell about fifty, sixty feet short. I don't know if you're familiar with gunnery or not, but that was a bracketing situation. The gunner

would, then, correct his error by fifty percent, and his next one should be right on target. They laid in seventeen and never touched us. I don't know how they got away with it. They were close, too, and the damn things were landing there. Some of them didn't explode.

DePue: The 88 would've been the typical artillery that might've been used at you at that time. What would have the effect been if an 88 had actually hit the ship?

Jaeger: It all depends on whether it hit ammunition or oil. It might not have been bad at all if it just hit the superstructure. We could probably stand a lot of that. But, if it hit any gasoline loaded vehicles, setting off a fire in the tank deck is usually what happened to LSTs. Almost every time they got hit, the tank deck would catch fire because it was full of fuel.

DePue: Was the ship armored at all? A battleship would be very heavily armored, and that 88 would, probably, kind of bounce off the thing.

Jaeger: Yeah, we had pretty good armor, three-eighths of an inch. You could almost poke a screwdriver through those damn things.

DePue: So, it wasn't much armor at all.

Jaeger: No. As a matter of fact, in a rough sea, the ship kind of ripples. The steel plates would ripple. Actually, they broke on one occasion. But that's another story.

DePue: Well, I assume you weren't the only LST sitting at the beaching area at that time.

Jaeger: At that time, we were.

DePue: Really?

Jaeger: We were. We had smoke generators that we put on the stern of our LCVPs, and we put them in the water. But, they weren't generating enough smoke at all because the enemy was just over the rise. They could see us all right, but we couldn't see them. They were hammering that stuff into us. And along come a Canadian corvette. He had good smoke equipment because he socked us in good. They couldn't see us, and we couldn't see them.

DePue: The corvette is a surface vessel?

Jaeger: It's a Canadian anti-submarine vessel. It had a good smoking device because they saved our bacon. That couldn't have kept up very long, or we'd have been hit.

DePue: You mentioned LCVPs. Did you always—I don't know the correct term—discharge those or have them in the water when you went in yourself? Did they help you go in?

Jaeger: They could. Around harbors, we used them like tugs. We'd hang a lot of rope matting on the bow, and, if you come up against the ship and push it, or we could throw line, and they could pull the bow around.

The big ships in a harbor, like the *Queen Mary*, comes into New York, they need tugboats to push them around. They can't go fast enough for the water to have any effect on the rudders, so they can hardly steer them. They got to push them.

We used our LCVPs that way. We used them for everything. They were wonderful little devices. We used them as a smoke device. The trouble is, we didn't have enough of them.

DePue: Well, I think you mentioned this before, but the crew for the LCVP would be part of the complement for the LST, right?

Jaeger: Absolutely, yeah. They did everything.

DePue: Okay.

Jaeger: And I might mention, these young kids, just like the rest of us, when they came on board, they'd never seen an LCVP. By that time they were good. There was nobody could run them better than they could. They could actually do the job of tugboat because you had to be pretty good to bring that LCVP up to the side of a ship without smashing into the ship, you know. You got to come up gently, and they could do it.

DePue: Especially when you really didn't have much armor in that ship, huh?

Jaeger: That's right. (laughter)

DePue: You didn't want to be bumping into things. Most of this time, for both Sicily and Salerno, then you guys are running back to North Africa ports to get resupplied?



A group of LST 400 shipmates in late 1943, after supporting two successful invasions at Sicily and Salerno.

Jaeger: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: Did you spend any time in those North African ports on liberty or...?

Jaeger: Not yet. Between invasions, yeah. Before the invasion, between the Italian and Sicily invasion and after the Italian invasion, we spent some time. But, when we were working, we didn't stop.

DePue: Okay. So, in between those two invasions, then, did you have enough time in North Africa to make any impressions about the people or the terrain or the culture?

Jaeger: Yeah, a little bit. We were in Oran, and we were in Algiers. Our time was short. We'd go down; we'd look for girls or bars. Bars were easy to find; the girls weren't. And we had our baseball team play out. But, no.

We did have a little dust up with a Muslim group in Tripoli. We went down to Tripoli once for some reason; I don't know why. After the Italian invasion, we went down to Tripoli to pick up a bunch of India soldiers—that's from Asia—India soldiers, Sikhs, I think they called them.

DePue: Sikhs, yeah.

Jaeger: When we were down there, one of our guys, who was a very mild mannered little boatswains mate from the Norfolk area—some Muslim got the idea that he had desecrated one of their temples or something like that. One of our officers thought they were going to do a physical job on him. Although we couldn't speak Muslim or whatever it is—and they couldn't speak English—he did manage to calm the thing down, get the guy out of there. But he was in trouble. Mixing with the natives, no.

DePue: Was that, basically, something that the Navy was saying was forbidden, that you weren't supposed to be doing?

Jaeger: There's no time for it. You almost have to live in a place for a while before you start talking with the native shopkeepers and things like that and get to know people. Here, you'd see a guy once; you'd never see him again. No, we had no real contact with the North African natives at all. England was a different story.

DePue: Okay, well, we'll get to England after a little bit. I guess some of my curiosity in this regard is...well, it's based on the notion of the sailor has a girl in every port. And what's a soldier or a sailor do when they're out in combat? And when you go into port, you're looking—especially enlisted men—you're looking for women.

Jaeger: Yeah.

DePue: Then, you've got the Islamic culture that is very different from the culture these kids were coming from.

Jaeger: Yeah, there would be absolutely none of that. There were, of course, the professionals there. There was plenty of prostitution, and the native people may be involved in that. But, for a boy meets girl thing and taking her out on a date? Hell, there was none of that at all.

- DePue: Okay. But it sounds like they were keeping you too busy for most of that anyway.
- Jaeger: Yeah, that's right.
- DePue: Okay. But, you told a story (laughter) in the book about getting some good French cognac.
- Jaeger: What?
- DePue: About getting some good French cognac.
- Jaeger: Oh! (laughter) Well, I mentioned in there that, when we were coming in and I had a little time there, I got a hold of some bad booze. I really poisoned myself. I couldn't get out of my sack for a couple days. I think it was between Sicily and Italy; I was back there. And a JG I knew on one of those ships, he knew a place where you could get, I think, Hennessy or a good cognac. I asked him if the bottles were labeled and sealed, and he said yes. So, I went down there, and I bought four bottles of it, paid through the nose for it. But, the problem was getting them back on the ship because you're not supposed to carry booze on a Navy ship. It's against regulations.
- DePue: Except what was there for medicinal purposes, huh?
- Jaeger: Yeah, that's right. (laughter) Yeah, that's right. The old jungle juice, gyro juice they called it. They had a lot of names for that. But, on this occasion you're talking about, I knew the mail clerk was ashore. He worked for me. I was communications officer, and so, I knew he was over near the post office, the fleet post office. I found him there and stuffed the four bottles in the mail sack and told him to bring them up to my cabin the next day, you know. He was a happy-go-lucky kid from Vermont. He didn't mind breaking a few rules.

The next morning, I sent for him, and he comes into the room, and he's empty-handed. "I don't have the bottles." I said, "What the hell happened?" Well, (laughter) it involved getting the bottles onto the ship over some adjacent ships.

They had a system in a busy harbor called nesting. If you wanted to get all your ships into the harbor, you didn't have room at the docks unless you put one outside the other. The first one would be tied to the dock; the second we tied to the first one, and the third one tied to the second one, nesting. If you wanted to get onto the third ship, you had to cross two ships before you got there.

Now, the Navy have a tradition, when you come aboard a ship, the officer of the deck is standing at the gangway. Your first thing, you salute the colors, and then you salute the officer of the deck and ask permission to come

aboard, sir. Well, our clerk got that far. He got to the first deck, and he has got the mail sack over his right shoulder, and he can't salute. So, he swings the mail sack over to his left shoulder, and you could hear the bottles clanking all over the harbor. (laughter) The OOD took him aside and relieved him of his contraband. (laughter) That's where they were.

So, I decided to talk to that OOD because I was worried he might be pulling some charges against that kid for trying to smuggle the booze on board, and actually, it was my fault, you know. So, I went over to talk to him, and he said, no, he wouldn't proffer any charges about the kid. I said, "Well, how about the booze?" And he said, "I'm sorry. I can't let anybody carry any illegal liquor on board a Navy ship, you know." "Okay, I get the message." (laughter) He got the booze, and I was empty handed.

DePue: In other words, you don't think he disposed of the booze itself?

Jaeger: He had a big party, believe me. I didn't even get invited.

DePue: (laughter) Okay. So, there's a humorous side, as well as the tragic side, of what you experienced.

Jaeger: Well, you know, there's something about... You can put guys that age into situations, like shooting down our own men or getting hammered on the beach with artillery. Some guys—you read about it now—they come back crippled for life, but a lot of guys recover fast, and they're having a good time. They're twenty years old and what the hell?

DePue: Well, you learn how to cope, huh?

Jaeger: Yeah.

DePue: Speaking of that, how important was mail call, because you were just talking about that mail sack.

Jaeger: Yeah. You want it verbatim of what I had in that book?

DePue: Well, do you have a story about here? Can you find it quickly, because...?

Jaeger: Yeah, sure.

DePue: Okay. I know you wrote extensively about it.

Jaeger: (pause) I was writing about our regular ship routine: duty, and mail call was very important. We used to drop an LCVP, and it was a mail boat when it got to shore, and they called it that. The mail boat was the first thing that we'd get sending in there. This might take more time than...

DePue: Well, tell you what, while—

Jaeger: Oh wait, I got it.

DePue: Okay, here you go.

Jaeger: Yeah, here's... I'm telling about the mail clerk being a feisty young guy. He was just a seaman, but he really prided his position. When he had that bag of mail, he was better than the captain of the ship. He wouldn't let anybody near him. He'd hand out the mail individually, and he'd laugh if he knew it was from a guy's girlfriend. Here's a sentence you could read, starting with "I once watched," the second to the bottom.

DePue: Okay, you want me to read that into the record, then?

Jaeger: No. I want you to read it before you decide to go in the record.

DePue: Oh, okay.

Jaeger: It's only a line or two and the next page.

DePue: (pause) You're talking about the colorful language, huh?

Jaeger: Oh, yeah. I thought that was great. Alliteration, and...

DePue: Well, we've had worse. Well, maybe not much worse, but go ahead.

Jaeger: You want it?

DePue: Yeah.

Jaeger: All right, here we go. It's coming out of the book. [reading] *For a few hours, the ship was his. The first step after anchoring in a new port was to lower the—and I'm talking about the mail clerk now—Everybody was looking for their mail. And this particular mail clerk was very proud of his position. When he came back from the post office, he'd climb the ladder and go down to the mess hall, where he'd mount a table and read off names and flip letters to outstretched hands. For some reason, he'd guffaw loudly when he identified the sender as a girlfriend. I once watched him doling out mail to the off duty crew. An impatient seaman had the temerity to thumb through the packet of mail lying on the table. The mail clerk eyed him coldly. "Keep your filthy fucking fingers off the mail," he said. That blast of contemptuous alliteration has not been matched in my lifetime. The mail call ends on a gray note for those who walked away empty handed.*

Oh, hi there!

Female: I came by at a bad time, Gene.

Gene Jaeger

Interview # VR2-A-L-2012-016.01

DePue: Okay. Well, we're going to ask you to be a little bit quiet here, but we're well into our story today, aren't we, Gene?

Jaeger: Yeah. (laughter)

DePue: And, I think, what I want to ask you about next...the other thing that struck me is, you guys, the officer, got to censor or had to censor, the mail.

Jaeger: That's right. And we took that very seriously at first. And we were—

Female: (interrupting) I hope I don't blow (unintelligible).

DePue: No, no, it's fine.

Female: That might be good.

Jaeger: Okay. Yeah, and at the outset we had seventy men aboard. Suppose each of them wrote a letter every day—they didn't do quite that much—but, that'd be seventy letters that would have to be censored every day. The officer coming on watch didn't feel much like doing that. We'd read them for a while. But, after a while, we'd glance through them. Then, pretty soon, some of the guys quit reading them at all. They'd just mark them censored and pass them on, so...

DePue: What kinds of things were you looking for that you had to censor?

Jaeger: Identifying a location of another ship would be one. If you said, "The *Savannah* just pulled in port here today, and I got a friend on it." Unh-uh. We can't have that handed around, that kind of thing.

DePue: Okay. I wonder if the mail also included things like movies.

Jaeger: My God, I can't remember much about movies. We must've shown some on the tank deck, but I just can't say anything about that. I don't recall anything about movies.

DePue: They must have kept you guys pretty busy, then.

Jaeger: They must have, yeah.

DePue: Okay.

Jaeger: For entertainment, they did give us some—did you ever hear of V-discs? During the war, some of the recording artists would record the regular old-fashioned records, we used to call them. We used to have the 48 RPMs. This was much bigger.

DePue: Well, I know they had 78s at that time, too, didn't they?

Jaeger: Seventy-eights. That's what I meant, 78s.

DePue: Okay.

Jaeger: And the 78s—and these were much bigger. They never went to the general public. They were just issued to the Armed Forces. We had those. I can remember, the turntable was in the little room off the wardroom. The wardroom's where the officers' ate. There's a little room there, where the servants served the food. They had the turntable and the speaker in there for some damn reason. They had control of what music was being played.

And this really happened: We were heading for a beach. I think it was our second in Sicily, and I think we went into the sand that day. I don't know. We were getting some trouble from the beach. But, just about the time the skipper gave the order to drop the stern anchor, which means we were pretty damn close, one of those guys in the wardroom flipped the switch, and the loudspeaker comes out playing the "Pennsylvania Polka" (laughter) by the Andrews Sisters. You've probably never heard of them, but they were a trio that sang. I wish there were some of the enemy within hearing range of that. I wonder how they'd feel about that.

DePue: No, I'm a big fan of the World War II era music.

Jaeger: Oh yeah.

DePue: How about pin-ups? What was the pin-up in your wardroom? Or next to your bunk?

Jaeger: I don't recall. I remember there was a guy by the name of Petty, something like that, that drew pictures of girls with ridiculously long legs. Their legs were tall enough for people that were seven feet tall. The names you would think of would be Betty Grable and Rita Hayworth. I don't know who else, Ann Sheridan.

DePue: So, were some of those pictures that the sailors might have up?

Jaeger: Yeah, there were a few of them, but I don't have any distinct memories on that.

DePue: Okay. And you mentioned the music. One of the things that I did find that was kind of humorous in the book, how you guys would greet each other as you were walking around the ship.

Jaeger: I don't know how that came about. There was a kid from Texas, an ensign by the name of Krezdorn kind of started that. He would meet you in the passageway or something like that, and he'd just throw out the first lines from a song, like...Oh, I can't think of anything offhand. But he'd do that by way of

greeting, and you might reply in the same vein. It made absolutely no sense at all.

But, I think I told in the book: He used that approach on a guy on the beach in England, shortly before the invasion when things were getting pretty tough. He was talking to this clerk, and when he leaves he said, "For all you know, we may never meet again." That was a pretty popular song at the time. The guy got pretty uptight about it. He said, "What the hell do you mean by that?" (laughter)

DePue: But you know what that reflects, is how much a tiny, very tight knit community that ship was.

Jaeger: Oh yeah, huh-huh. Well, we were together, most of us, for two and a half years in close quarters.

DePue: Okay, you're spending all that time with a bunch of guys. There's no female distractions going on.

Jaeger: Damn little.

DePue: Did you have some rows on the ship occasionally, or...?

Jaeger: Yeah, there were a few fights. Two of my signalmen got into a fight. It was brutal. Boy they... You see fights in the movies where these guys wham each other with big roundhouse blows to the face, and they never get a mark. You ought to see a guy when he's been hit with bare knuckles just once. You can hardly recognize him. I don't know if you've ever seen that or not, but I couldn't recognize this one kid when the thing was over. He'd caught about two or three in the face. I've seen maybe two or three fistfights in my life, and guys come out with their eyes swollen shut and their lips the size of bananas, and it's terrible.

We had a fight between two petty officers, and I remember I made a little show out of it. I called them up to the bridge, and I was going to give them a good chewing out, you know, about how the hell can we run a ship if we're going to have the petty officers fighting in front of the crew, and that kind of thing. But, it wasn't so much anything I was saying to them, but I just wanted the whole crew to see me gesticulating and barking at them... which I wasn't really doing.

DePue: Well, I would imagine, in the long tradition of the Navy, the ship's captain, or the skipper is what you would call him, is the guy who can mete out the discipline?

Jaeger: Yeah, they had a thing for minor disciplinary troubles. They called it Captain's Mast. And if a sailor made any infraction that didn't justify court marshal or something like that, like being absent over leave or being late

coming back, why, he'd be put on the list to go up to Captain's Mast. That just consisted of: generally the chief who was accuser would bring him up into the captain's office and tell the captain what happened. He was always guilty. And the captain would deprive him of a few liberties, going ashore and that, which was kind of important.

See, the captain was always known as the old man. Ours was only twenty-six years old, but the captain of a ship is the old man. And that was a chief's threat to a kid who was giving him trouble, you know. "You get out of line again, buddy, and I'm going to have you up before the old man." That was Captain's Mast. Never a big deal. Anything serious would have to go to summary court martial, or general court martial if it were treason or something.

DePue: Which means it would be taken out of the hands of the skipper and sent up to a higher level?

Jaeger: Yeah, he would report it to the squadron command, but we never had anything like that.

DePue: How serious an offense would it be if somebody showed up late for a watch? Was that a big deal?

Jaeger: Not officially, but the guy who was on watch would (laughter) certainly come down pretty hard on it. If you'd been up there four hours, say, in the mid-watch—you went on at midnight—about a quarter to four in the morning, you're ready to go, you know. If the guy doesn't show up until 4:30 (laughter) he'd get his punishment in one form or another! (laughter) But he didn't have to go to Captain's Mast.

DePue: Did you end up having discipline issues, sometimes more so, after you had been in port for a while?

Jaeger: Yeah, discipline problems were about what you might expect. There was fighting, and, for the most part, it was being over leave or missing the ship when it pulled out of port or something like that, that kind of thing. I can't remember anybody challenging a chief's authority or anything like that. We never had anything like that.

DePue: Okay. Well, let's get you from the Mediterranean up to England.

Jaeger: All right.

DePue: What timeframe are we talking about, when you sailed out of the Mediterranean Sea?

Jaeger: We finished with Salerno in, let's see, probably middle of October, our last trip being the one going down to Tripoli, that I was talking about. From there,

we went back to Oran. What had happened was that the Allied troops had moved up the Italian peninsula to a point where we had sufficient ports. You didn't need LSTs if you got Naples and Rome, and you could land in there, Bari. So, we were drawn out to go to England to prepare for the invasion of France, which is kind of a good thing because we left before the Anzio invasion, which I understand was a nasty show for the Allies.

We went into Oran, and they put an LCT in our deck again. We steamed out of Gibraltar. God, we were all hoping we'd head right back for Virginia. But we turned north and headed up for England. And we ran into a really nasty trip. First we had a submarine attack, and this was a wolf pack; ten of them hit our convoy. Some of them, we brought to the surface. We didn't. Hell, we just held our position in the convoy in the middle of the night. By the time the sun was going down I was on watch. The two screen ships behind us were both Canadian Corvettes. Sometime in the middle of the night, somebody brought a submarine to the surface, and these few Corvettes dropped back and battled them out. I think they sunk it. I don't know how it got to the surface. They weren't back into position until about noon the next day, getting back from where they had their battle. I remarked that it was the second time these Canadian Corvettes had saved our bacon. I've really got a lot of respect for those guys.

But then, the storm hit us. It was probably the worst experience of my life—five or six days of that high wind coming in on the front of you, and the bow of the ship would lift way high. It wouldn't cut through the next wave; it would hit it with its round bow, and the whole ship would shudder. It even broke our deck, it was so rough. You could hardly sleep because you had to hold yourself in so you didn't fall out of the bunk. We ate standing up. It was, like, just about as miserable as could be, that constant jar every time we hit the next wave. We were going so high that we couldn't see the ship next to us. They were in the trough and we were on a crest, or they were in a crest and we were in a trough. We couldn't see them there. Those things were thirty, forty feet high. And—

DePue: That was something that you hadn't experienced in the Mediterranean?

Jaeger: No. Well, we had the thing coming in to Sicily that I told you about. That was high, but not as bad as that Atlantic storm. That was awful.

DePue: Was that a factor, just that the North Atlantic was a much more violent place in that respect?

Jaeger: That's right. The thing that sailors—I mean, the people who run sailboats—talk about, that you may be familiar with, is reach. How far has that wind been blowing, you know? If the wind is only coming out from the shore a couple of miles, it hasn't had a chance to build up the waves very high. But, if it was coming all the way from Bermuda, let's say, it's been blowing those waves

steadily. They're getting bigger and bigger and bigger, and offering more surface to be blown on. They can usually get big if they have enough reach, and these did. I think these were coming from Iceland or something like that.

DePue: Here's another term that I wasn't familiar with—I'm sure you know exactly what it means—a heading sea. Is that the right phrase?

Jaeger: Yeah, that means a sea that's coming in on the head. We refer to the bow of the ship as the head, from time to time. A heading sea... I don't hear that much myself. I think I was getting a little fancy footwork there.

DePue: But, what would be worse, though? If you're plowing through the waves, I would think, would be a little bit more stable than if you're sailing parallel to these seas.

Jaeger: Yeah. When you're going, the best way to do it is taking them on the bow, let's say, not on the stem or on the beam, but forty-five degrees down the bow, so you can roll a bit and plow a bit. If you get broadside to it, god, the rolling is terrible. Most of the sailors would pride themselves on being able to walk very easily on the deck on a rolling sea. You couldn't do it on those things. You couldn't even get on the deck, it was so bad.

DePue: The seas that you're describing, though, as you're bobbing up and down, and I imagine—you mentioned the props are out of the water quite a bit—doesn't this put incredible strain on the ship?

Jaeger: Yes, it does. We finally broke our main deck open. I was walking on the tank deck, which is below the main deck. I looked up, and I could see daylight coming in. There was a crack up there, and it was opening. As the motion of the bow changed, it would open about half an inch. The whole plate on the main deck was cracked.



An LST rolling in a moderate sea.

DePue: (laughter) Well, again, as a landlubber, was there any danger that the ship would literally split in half?

Jaeger: Damn right, there was, yeah. But the other decks held together, and probably less leverage, you know. If the front end or back end were moving up and down, it would be worse on the main deck than it would on the lower deck. So, the main deck cracked, but the hull did not. So, we got in all right.

DePue: And that happened on the way up to England?

Jaeger: No, it happened when we were following up on the Normandy invasion.

- DePue: Okay, so we're a little bit ahead of our timeline, at least. But what do you do for repairs in something like that?
- Jaeger: I thought, when that happened, we were going to be in for a month to get our ship fixed up. We pulled into Southampton, and we radioed ahead what our problem was. We got in there, and a welding truck drives in and uses the elevator, and goes up on our main deck. He got a bunch of steel plates with him. It took him about an hour and a half to weld those steel plates on. He was gone, and we were out to sea again.
- DePue: You weren't the first LST this had happened to, were you?
- Jaeger: It happened before.
- DePue: Okay. Where did you make landing in England, then? How long did it take you to get up there, first of all? Do you recall?
- Jaeger: Oh, I guess eight days. It should've been five. Yeah, we went out of Gibraltar, and we come up past Cape Finisterre, which is the northwest corner of Spain or Portugal, if Portugal goes up that far. We ran from there to Land's End in England and—
- DePue: That's a name, but it also is a very descriptive name?
- Jaeger: Well, yeah. Cape Finisterre—that's probably Spanish for land's end. You go up to England, and they're in English up there. So, we went from Land's End to Land's End. When we got into the English Channel, that's the first we got out of the trouble, out of the rough sea. We had to go up about a hundred miles or so, and we picked up the buoy leading into Portsmouth. I was never so damn glad to get off a ship in my life. That was awful.
- DePue: And we're talking about somebody who had gotten your sea legs a year before that, right?
- Jaeger: That's right. Let's see, I got on that thing in January of '43, and this was fifteen months later, yeah.
- DePue: So, you arrived in England, what, about December of '43?
- Jaeger: Yeah, that's right. It was close to the end of the year. As a matter of fact, it could've been... We spent Christmas Eve, I think, in dry dock in a town called Phlegm.
- DePue: Tell me about Christmas Eve, then. Was there a special meal that you got that day? Was there anything special you guys were able to do?
- Jaeger: I don't know if the chef tried to cook up anything special or not. I don't recall.

Gene Jaeger

Interview # VR2-A-L-2012-016.01

DePue: Okay. I don't think this is too far off the mark—I had another passage I wanted to ask you to read. This one's about a davit incident that occurred. Was that one in Plymouth harbor, maybe?

Jaeger: Yes it was, and it fits in with what I've been telling you about using those LCVPs as tugboats.

DePue: If I could ask you to read that other passage, because I want to illustrate to the public, the people listening to this, that they might want to actually pick up the book because it's very well written, I think.

Jaeger: Thank you. All right. [reading]

We kept one LCVP alongside at all times when moving in the harbor. We'd pick it up on the run as we left. At 9:45 a.m. on January 12, 1945, we pulled away from our mooring and headed out of Plymouth Harbor, passing the sea buoy. We pulled the LCVP alongside and shackled it to the steel cables leading down from the davits, hoists. With the boat crew still aboard, we started hauling the boat up to the boat deck.

It had just cleared the water when the forward starboard davit collapsed and fell into the boat. Three ton steel davit could kill anybody it fell on. I rushed to the starboard bridge wing and looked down on two crewmen lying on the bottom of the boat, unhurt. Coxswain Reggie Atkinson, saw the davit coming down, and he leaped over the stern and was now swimming for his life, as the ship pulled away.

I called for a lifeline and a buoy, but the after-line handlers were way ahead of me. We lowered the port boat to pick up Reggie, and soon we had all three aboard without a scratch. In peacetime that incident would've called for a full board of inquiry. We briefly described the incident in the log and got on with the war.

DePue: Was it an issue where the metal and the davits had just failed?

Jaeger: Yes. That's all. It could happen that we put the wrong kind of strain on it, as we were still moving through the water, and instead of an up and down strain, we had a bit of a fore and aft strain, yeah. I don't think that happened, but I wouldn't rule it out.

DePue: By this time, though, would you say you're about as seasoned a crew as you could possibly get?

Jaeger: They were damn good for LSTs. Who else knew anything about them, you know? Sailing ships, god, guys have been on it for thousands of years. But, that LST we picked up in Newport News in January of 1943 was probably only about the twentieth one ever built. It was that early, and loaded with people who'd never run one before. It was really a remarkable experience

because there was no precedent to hold us against. Now, who could they say we did anything wrong? There were a lot of accidents, and a lot of people in the Chesapeake Bay, the old seasoned skippers there, thought LSTs were treacherous. (laughter) They were worried about them, were a real threat to navigation, but they weren't that bad.

DePue: Maybe this story illustrates something—that, again, the public reads military history, and it's huge. There's a huge industry of lots of military history out there, and you always read about the number of casualties in battle. But you hear about those incidents; lots of people were getting seriously injured or killed just in the normal performance of their duties, aren't they?

Jaeger: Actually, I don't have any hard statistics on that, but I'd say, between illness and accidents, probably 50/50. I've got a kid from my hometown; he got killed in a jeep after the war. Didn't General Patton get killed in a jeep after the war?

DePue: Right.

Jaeger: There was a lot of that thing. We could easily have lost three men in that davit collapse. We were fortunate. Yeah, I think you're right. It could be as much as 50/50.

DePue: Well, the next part of the book: Here, you're talking about going into Northern Ireland and then to Scotland. (chuckles) My question is, why did you guys go to Northern Ireland?

Jaeger: This is not too clear to me. At the time we had for our armament, six LCIs—LCIs, what the hell am I saying?—six 20 millimeters and one or two 40 millimeters and a three inch 50. Now, that's a cannon. That isn't an anti-aircraft gun. That's a three inch shell. It was not needed by us at all. For one thing, it was on the stern, pointing aft, and it wouldn't do us any damn good at all when we're on the beach; it was pointed in the wrong direction. And it wasn't good for an anti-aircraft gun, either, but...Oh, you asked me about Glasgow and Londonderry. We went up there to put more guns on.

DePue: Okay. Did you get a chance to see any of Northern Ireland?

Jaeger: Yeah, a bit of it. Yeah, Londonderry is right on the—what is this?—Lough Foyle—up there, is the bay off the North Sea. County Donegal lies immediately to the west. County Donegal is part of Southern Ireland. It was neutral during the war, so we weren't allowed to go in there. I understand, if we had gone in there, we'd have been held as belligerents or something of that nature.

What I do remember, I wanted to take a look at Belfast. Of course, officers, for a couple day pass, could only leave one at a time. We couldn't travel together. So, I went down there alone. I just took a train down to Belfast

and wandered around the docks there, a grim looking place...old factories, old waterfront structures. I guess it's quite a harbor now, but it was really an ugly looking place, the waterfront was.

But, came back to Derry, and we didn't stay there long. We went across the—whatever that sea is between Scotland and Ireland—and went up the Clyde River to Glasgow. Spent a couple days there. We put some more guns on, and then came back. We came all the way back to the English Channel, went up the channel to one of those—because there's a lot of ports in southern England—and we picked up seventeen new men to run those new guns we got. We didn't have the men to do it.

DePue: What were the guns you got equipped with?

Jaeger: We picked up some Twin 40s and more 20s, So, we really got some anti-aircraft stuff, which was kind of odd because we really needed them in the Mediterranean. By the time we got to Normandy invasion, we weren't attacked by aircrafts at all. They were driven out.

DePue: Had command of the air by that time?

Jaeger: Yeah. Yeah, that's right. I think our fighter planes...we had the Thunderbolt P-38 was it? And what's that one with that greenhouse on it? Really good one.

DePue: P-51s?

Jaeger: Yeah, P-51, Mustang. We had those things, and they had the Germans driven out of France by that time. They were in there bombing bridges and tearing up railroads. There were some on the beach, I heard later, but I never saw one.

DePue: Well, I asked some questions about your impressions of the people or the culture of North Africa. It sounds like you didn't have much opportunity to see much there.

Jaeger: That's correct.

DePue: How about in England?

Jaeger: England: I did get to see some people there, but I didn't form... We moved from port to port. It was just a one-on-one situation. I see you, might have a drink with you, might talk about one thing or another, but I'd never see you again the next day. We'd move on. So, I chatted with cab drivers and bartenders and a couple of girls that we took to a dance, but I don't remember them. I never saw them again.

DePue: You made a distinction I wasn't aware of before—the difference between a liberty and a leave.

Gene Jaeger

Interview # VR2-A-L-2012-016.01

Jaeger: Yeah. Liberty, you're back the same day, generally midnight, if you leave the ship at noon on liberty, same day. If you stay overnight, it's a leave.

DePue: Did you get any leaves?

Jaeger: Yes. After we had landed the troops on northern France, at Normandy, we followed up continuously. We ran across that channel fifty times. But our troops, the Allied troops, drove the Germans back to the point where it was more of a cargo trip, and we could spare one officer and five men for a weekend every time we were back. We'd catch a train from Southampton up to London. So, I did do some London time. Maybe three times, I went up to London during that time, which was really—I don't know, I couldn't kick. I wasn't anxious to see more ME-109s coming at us, but that was pretty dull stuff running back and forth across the channel, carrying cargo, like we did. We were just a cargo ship for the rest of the war.

DePue: What were your impressions of the English people then?

Jaeger: I liked them. You have to admire them, that, with all the trouble they had, London was crowded with people. A lot of them were from the European continent. People had got out, and different races, different tongues. But what they really had to put up, I think, were a million GIs there. Having that many young guys put on you like that must've been quite a chore. What'd they say? There was this thing about that you were—

DePue: (interrupting) Oversexed, overpaid, over here.

Jaeger: That's right.

DePue: Were they resentful, or did they treat you well?

Jaeger: Treated us well. Treated us well. Not only that, you had to admire the English in London were able to go in there and have dinner, have a show and all that, and they were still under fire. They were getting hit by those V-1s and V-2s. You may have heard of them. The V1 was a small jet, one of the early jets, that had short, stubby wings. They'd limit the supply of fuel, and, when the thing got as far as London, it would run out of fuel and drop down and blow up. Then they came with the real deal, the V-2, a rocket. That would fire from inland, and I understand, it went fifty miles high.

DePue: Could you get a good meal? Did you like the British, English food?

Jaeger: They didn't have any food. They did the best they could. I went to one place, and I was offered a squab. I tried it, and I know damn well it was a pigeon they caught in Piccadilly Square or somewhere. (laughter) They didn't have any food. They were lucky to have enough to eat.

DePue: Well, how about the drink?

Jaeger: I bought a bottle of Scotch for sixteen bucks, Johnny Walker.

DePue: Sixteen dollars, that was real money back then!

Jaeger: Oh sure, about a week's work. But, yeah, you could get a drink at the bar. You could get Scotch and stout. Stout is a very strong, dark brew. We could get bitters, pint of bitters; we could get that. DePue: Did you develop a taste for that?

Jaeger: Yeah, I kind of liked that.

DePue: But it was warm, wasn't it?

Jaeger: What? Rum?

DePue: No, warm. Didn't they serve it warm?

Jaeger: Yeah, they did. That was always—I forgot about that. You're right. I mentioned stout. That's something made in Ireland. It's a very high class product, compared to your bitters on draft. I saw a bottle of stout in a bar, and I told the bartender, "Yeah, I'll have that." And he said, "The women around here won't like you for that." I said, "Why's that?" He said, "The nursing women like to drink this stuff." So, I didn't get it.

DePue: Did you have a chance to see any shows or get any entertainment when you were on shore leave?

Jaeger: Very lucky. That's another thing. With these bombs going on and all that, they had the theater. It was almost as good as New York. They had what they called the Old Vic—I forget what...I think they still have it. But, the shows on there were top notch. Then I saw *Peer Gynt*, and *Arms and the Man*, Shaw and another Shakespearean play that had Gielgud in it. I forget his first name.

DePue: John, I think.

Jaeger: John, yeah. Ralph Richardson. I was going to say Richard Burton, but I may be a little early there.

DePue: I think you are, for him.

Jaeger: Yeah. There was another guy of that stature.

DePue: Did you have any USO shows that you guys saw?

Jaeger: No. Yes! Glenn Miller put a show on at Southampton. I went to that. It was crowded as hell. You couldn't get anywhere near the stage. Dancing was out of the question. They really crowded in for that. But, I can't remember

whether Miller was there or not. He got killed shortly thereafter or shortly before. I forget which.

I ran across a hometown guy when I was there, a guy that I'd gone to high school with. That was something—when you're overseas, with a million other guys, running into somebody you know didn't happen often.

DePue: (laughter) Do you remember his name?

Jaeger: First name was Gene. I can remember that. Duffy.

DePue: Gene Duffy. Another good Irish name.

Jaeger: Yes, and Don McNally. I met him in London. He didn't survive the war.

DePue: Was he in the Army?

Jaeger: Air Force.

DePue: Air Force.

Jaeger: Yeah.

DePue: Okay. I want to take you back to the timeframe before D-Day, and just ask you this, I guess. Was it your impression that southern England, where you were making port, doing all your work and exercises, was it essentially just one giant, armed camp?

Jaeger: Oh, yeah. As a matter of fact, every port was surrounded by these barrage balloons, and there were so many of them around, the joke was that they were holding the island up. The island was just crowded. You got through a farm field, and there'd be fifty tanks parked out there with you. Southern England was almost solid Army camps and Army equipment trucks, and you know. There's a lot more to supporting an army like that, at that time, than just guns. Got all the ammunition carriers, and you've heard of things like half-tracks and assault things like that. What is that one that they carry the personnel in all the time? They're always sitting up there in benches, four by six or something like that.

DePue: Well, deuce and a half is what I was familiar with, but I think that might be a later version of these trucks that you guys had.

Jaeger: Yeah.

DePue: Well, you participated in two major amphibious landings before this time: Sicily and Salerno. They weren't small operations. How would you compare the scale of those two, versus what you were seeing build up here for the invasion of Northern Europe?

Jaeger: Well, let's start with size. When most people think of the Normandy invasion, they think of that holocaust, there on Pointe du Hoc.

DePue: Which is part of Omaha Beach.

Jaeger: Yeah, Omaha Beach, that's right. There was a lot more to it than that. The Normandy beachhead was at least fifty miles long. Halfway up to Cherbourg on the peninsula was the western end of Utah beach, and had come and curled around and headed east from Pointe du Hoc there—that was Omaha beach—Then there were two British beaches and one Canadian beach. Altogether there were fifty miles. That's why it was so tough for the Germans to stop us. They didn't know where the hell we were going to go.

DePue: So, on a scale much, much larger than you'd seen in Salerno and Sicily?

Jaeger: You know, maybe ten to one or something like that. Normandy was like nothing the world has ever seen, in size.

DePue: Did you have an appreciation for that as you were preparing, that this is going to be something like the world had never seen before?

Jaeger: No, I don't think so. And while we're doing all this talking, we're ignoring what was happening on the eastern front. I talk about Normandy being the biggest thing that ever happened; how about the Russian army coming across to East Germany? God, that was tremendous, too, wasn't it?

DePue: Well, that's where the bulk of the German army was.

Jaeger: Yeah. A lot of guys say that the war in Europe—we talk big about it, but the Russians won the damn thing. They're just waiting for us to make a diversify—

DePue: Diversion?

Jaeger: Diversion, that's the word.

DePue: In the several months, then, leading up to D-Day, how much did you know about the specifics of what was going to happen when we did do the landings at Normandy?

Jaeger: Well, remember, we'd been through two landings already, so we anticipated it was going to be about the same thing. In many ways it was. What else? We did add radar, but that came late in the thing and wouldn't have much significance anyway. We did add new guns and took on new personnel. I guess our attitude was, more of the same, only bigger.

DePue: Did you do some more practice landings in preparation for D-Day?

Jaeger: Yeah. There was one massive one, six weeks before D-Day. There was a piece of land at the western end of Lyme Bay that they call Slapton Sands. We had our final operation before D-Day, and it was a full dress rehearsal, live ammunition.

We were in Plymouth, and we picked up a load of soldiers and their equipment and sailed around Start Point, which was an extension of Dorset there. The fleet was already working there, and we were to simulate our approach on a beach in such a way as to match what we were going to have to do on Normandy. We didn't know at the time that our object was Utah Beach. So, here we had to simulate a landing on Utah Beach.

So, they sent us out fifty miles up Lyme Bay. We hit point X, turned around, and came back and made our assault. So, that gave us the hundred miles that we would eventually have to make to go down to hit Utah. And we made it.

We got in late afternoon, but the convoy behind us, they called it Operation Tiger here—you've probably heard of that—it was a terrible...

DePue: Yeah. I think in the book you called it Exercise Tiger.

Jaeger: Okay. Yeah, exercise, that's right because an operation has to be the real thing. The exercise is a practice.

Well, I had the watch that night, and I was up in **conning** tower with a signalman and a messenger. We'd come in. We came in and anchored off the beach. We'd done our job. We were ready for our invasion the next morning. But the convoy behind us had just rounded point X that I mentioned, fifty miles out, and were heading in toward Slapton Sands beach at about one o'clock in the morning. They were attacked by e-boats, of all things.

Now, an e-boat is a German torpedo boat; Schnellboot, they call them. This is a hard thing to believe because it never should've happened, for two reasons. One, because of some communication trouble, that convoy that was behind us—there was only six LSTs—it was only protected by one very slow, older, modified World War I English ship of some kind, that was out in front of it by about a thousand yards, I read, because I didn't see it. But the e-boats came out of Cherbourg. Now, how the hell they could be in Cherbourg is hard for me to believe. I just mentioned that we had the Thunderbolts and the Mustangs, and the British had whatever that other ship was I just mentioned, wiping out all the roads and bridges in northern France. Yet, they allowed this squadron of e-boats to exist in Cherbourg, which was only ninety miles away from us.

Well, they came off that night, and they picked up this convoy, which was poorly protected. They sunk three of those ships, and the loss was terrible. We lost 750 men. I was up in the bridge that night, and the messenger was up

- Commented [F1]:
- Commented [F2R1]:
- Commented [F3R1]:
- Commented [F4R1]:
- Commented [F5R1]:
- Commented [F6R1]:

there with the signalman and myself. He said he thought he saw some fire out that way. We scanned it with our binoculars, and we didn't see anything. But the kid was right. There was something going on out there, but I never knew it.

That wasn't generally known until well after the war was over. The Navy didn't report the casualties until after Normandy, so they could work the casualties into the Normandy casualties. When they reported them—and they did, to a large extent, keep that debacle quiet—I didn't know about it until the war was over, and I was only forty miles away from the thing.

DePue: But you said that you'd seen something going on at the horizon.

Jaeger: Yes. I know that we were standing watch, a mid-watch at anchor, quiet. And I know the kid said he saw some lights over there, a flash. The signalman and I both looked at it, and we couldn't see anything. But then, that came to my mind later that year. I think the *Stars and Stripes* carried the story that something did happen out there. But I can't blame the Navy for keeping it quiet because we didn't want the Germans to know that we had lost three LSTs out there because LSTs were key to that Normandy thing. They had to have these big shiploads of tanks and trucks running up on the beach, or that thing wasn't going to work. I have heard that there was even some thought to canceling, or not canceling, but delaying it, until they could replace them.

DePue: Yeah, especially the immediate lead-up to D-day landings, when, I'm sure, the intelligence security was at a very high level.

Jaeger: Absolutely.

DePue: Even a few days before, you were one of the officers on the ship, did you know exactly where you guys were going to be landing?

Jaeger: No.

DePue: When did you get that—?

Jaeger: We really didn't know... Everybody knew—hell, Hitler knew—that it was going to happen, and happen damn quick. But we didn't know precisely when, and we didn't really know until we were in a place called Torbay, or Torquay, I forget which. It's right near Lyme Bay there.

DePue: Torquay? Is that two separate words?

Jaeger: Torbay would be one word, T-o-r-b-a-y, and Torquay would be T-o-r-q-u-a-y. I may not have those accurate. That's kind of, as I said—We were in there, and it was crowded. God, it's a little harbor, and it was full of ships, and there were Army and trucks all over the place.

I had a little episode there that might be kind of on the side. I was chosen to do shore patrol, you know. The Navy doesn't have MPs. The Army MPs are trained; they're special. The Navy just takes a couple of guys off the ship that comes in, and the harbor master will say, "Send me a couple." They put an armband on them and give them a club, and send them out to patrol the streets at night, so that there's not too much hanky-panky going on. Well, I got the message, and I showed it to the skipper. I said, "They want to send an officer in to do shore patrol tonight," and I laughed it off. I thought, "Fine, you'll do great." (chuckles) I got the assignment, and I went in there. I get an armband, and I'm wearing a 45. I'm walking up and down the street, in and out of the pubs, where everything was crowded with servicemen. We go, looking as authoritative as we could. But, we didn't have any trouble. We didn't arrest anybody. (laughter) Thank God, I wouldn't have known what to do anyway.

DePue: They didn't want to get in trouble, and you didn't want to have to take care of them.

Jaeger: The next night, the word comes down: the ship is sealed, nobody on or off. We knew, then, we were going. Also, they send you a plan. Every ship gets a plan. That plan was called Overlord⁵. It had a name. By that time, it was given to the skipper, and he could open it and read the plan. He was sealed, couldn't get off the ship. The game was on.

DePue: What did you have on board at that time?

Jaeger: We didn't have tanks...trucks and ammunition.

DePue: Okay. I think this is probably a good place for us to stop today. We've been at it for two hours already. It's been a fascinating discussion again. Now we get to talk about the D-Day invasion, and that's going to take a little while for us to kind of lay out, as well. So, I'm looking forward to that.

Jaeger: So, let's set up another date. My place or yours?

DePue: Well, let's stop the recording here, and then we can figure that out. Thank you very much, Gene.

Jaeger: Okay.

(End of interview #2. Interview #3 continues.)

⁵ Operation Overlord was the code name for the Invasion of Normandy

Interview with Gene Jaeger
VR2-A-L-2012-016.03
Interview # 3: June 12, 2012
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 Tuesday, June 12, 2012. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, and I'm in the Library today with Gene Jaeger.

Gene, we've talked twice before. This is our third session, and you've had a fascinating story about your experiences as an LST officer during World War II in the Atlantic. I think we stopped last time just a day short of D-Day landings, so that's where we're going to pick it up. But, before we begin, I do want to mention to anybody who's listening here that Gene has written an excellent book, entitled *Flat-Bottom Odyssey: From North Africa to D-Day*. I would certainly recommend anybody to pick that up, and they'd really enjoy that memoir that he's written. So Gene, good afternoon.

Jaeger: Good afternoon, Mark.

DePue: Thanks for coming to Springfield, again.

Jaeger: I enjoy it.

DePue: Well, let's pick up with the fifth of June and you on the LST 400 in, I guess it was Plymouth. Is that where you started on the fifth?

Jaeger: Our flotilla did, but we joined from a little port town in southern Dorset, named Torquay, spelled T-o-r-q-u-a-y. It was a small port, and you'll see it on the south coast of Dorchester.

DePue: Okay. So, kind of on the way between Plymouth and the D-Day invasion landing?

Jaeger: That's right. I might show you on your map here, if you want to look.

DePue: Oh, yeah, yeah. We've got a map from the West Point Atlas here. So here's Plymouth and here's Portland.

Jaeger: Okay. There's Torquay right here.

DePue: Okay, in that little inlet, about—

Jaeger: Yeah, a little inlet.

DePue: —eight miles to the northeast.

Jaeger: I think so.

DePue: Something like that.

Jaeger: Now, this, right down here, is a place that's easy to remember. That's Slapton Sands, where they had that disastrous dress rehearsal, Operation Tiger.

DePue: The one you told us about the last interview session we had.

Jaeger: That's correct, yeah. That was right here. And that point starts the main—We came out of Plymouth, went around the point here and started picking up smaller groups from places like Dartmouth and Torquay. There may have been others, but we came out of Torquay.

DePue: Well, there were only a few thousand vessels involved with D-Day, so, I'm sure they were coming from all over the map.

Jaeger: Boy, I'll say they were. Southern England was a military camp. That's all you could call it. Every field was filled with artillery and trucks, tanks.

DePue: What was the cargo that you were carrying at that time?

Jaeger: I really can't say, so I assume it was ammunition because we weren't carrying tanks. I know that. We were carrying trucks and trucks loaded with ammunition I'm sure.

DePue: Okay. What was the mood like? I mean, you guys had to know this was big one coming up. What was the mood like?

Jaeger: Yes, we did. We were in Torquay, and, on the day of the fourth, I believe, we had orders to seal the ship, which means nobody could get on or off. At that time, we were loaded with the soldiers we were going to carry, and we were to take off the next morning. I can't say that the mood changed a lot because we

had been aware of this for some time, as I'm sure everybody else was. I'm sure Hitler knew we were coming damn soon, but didn't know where.

But the attitude of the troops aboard? - hard to say. I would say somewhat subdued. But, remember that, on the morning of the fifth, instead of taking off, we got information, a flash from S.H.A.E.F. in London, saying it has been postponed one day. So, we did not take off on the morning of the fifth. We didn't take off, I think, until late afternoon of the fifth. We should've taken off on the fourth, I guess, but the delay had us take off on the afternoon of the fifth.

So, at daybreak on June the sixth, we had sailed the south coast of England and made our right turn and headed for France about sun-up.

DePue: Okay. What was—

Jaeger: And...Go ahead.

DePue: What was the weather like that day?

Jaeger: Moderate. I can't remember any heavy storms, at this point. We got down to our beaching area without any heavy weather.

DePue: Okay. Can you walk us through as much as you can remember, then, about June sixth, the actual landing day? This is Utah Beach, is it not?

Jaeger: Is what?

DePue: Utah Beach.

Jaeger: Utah Beach is correct. So, ships like LSTs do not hit the beach early in the assault. They've got too much at risk. An LST on a beach with twenty tanks—the tanks could be put out of action with one shot. An 88 shell coming through your bow door would put twenty-eight tanks out of the game, so we couldn't

commit the LSTs early. We had to have the artillery—at least the artillery in range of the beach—had to be moved out.

But, what we did do was anchor with our stern anchor and



LST 400 sits "high and dry" on Utah beach.

open our bough doors and unload—I may have described the process before. We unloaded into LCTs. They would pull up. They'd lower their ramp. We'd lower our ramp. We called them married. Well, then the trucks and tanks could run off an LST onto an LCT, which could hit the beach because it was carrying only two or three tanks, at most. It was shallow and only drew three feet. Well, we drew nine when we got in there. The LCTs carried the bulk of our original material going into Utah Beach.

DePue: I think, in the book, you described that there were some ducks that you had on board, as well?

Jaeger: Yes, I remember, we put ducks ashore, first at Sicily. Is that what you're talking about?

DePue: Yeah, but did you have any on D-Day, as well?

Jaeger: I can't recall. I doubt it.

DePue: What would you estimate the range you were, from the actual beach itself? How far out?

Jaeger: Six miles.

DePue: That far out?

Jaeger: When we were waiting to go into a staging area, we'd lay there for about a couple hours. [When] we'd have to meet our LCT, we'd go in close at two miles.

DePue: But still, two miles would seem like a fairly long distance, but—

Jaeger: Out of range of artillery shells. Actually, we had been through several invasions, and the Normandy invasion was not our most difficult time.

DePue: Did you see any enemy aircraft during that?

Jaeger: One. I saw one plane, one enemy plane. The Luftwaffe had been pretty well defeated by this time. The British, the RAF, and the American Army Air Force had dominated the skies over France and Belgium for six months. They were flying in there, bombing bridges, destroying roads, and hitting railroads, and all that sort of thing. I didn't see...I'm repeating myself. I saw only one enemy aircraft over the beach at the Normandy invasion.

DePue: Okay. Now, the next thing, then, is the return trip to England. I wanted to ask you if you would read this passage, which is on page 111, that I've highlighted because it's so different from the normal stories you hear about D-Day. I thought it was very well, colorfully, written. So, if you could read that, I'd appreciate it.

Jaeger: [Reading] “On the morning of June seventh, the first LCT approached our bow. The bow to bow unloading went well, in spite of the choppy sea. We spent the rest of the day discharging the usual cargo, but then, a new development. In most of our Mediterranean landings, we had returned from the beaches empty. This time, we were going back to England with a mixed load of military personnel. An LCI brought us seventy Army glider pilots, all happy to be alive.

“In the early morning of June sixth, their troop laden gliders had been towed to the erratic landscape behind Utah Beach. Once turned loose by the tow plane, it was the glider pilot’s job to find an obscure landing strip in the poor visibility. Many of them didn’t make it.

Next alongside was LCT 474, with a load of soldiers. But they weren’t our soldiers; they were prisoners of war. “These men didn’t look like members of the Wehrmacht that we had previously seen. There were about 200 of them, and, apparently, they were conscripts from defeated Eastern European countries. Some were in their teens. Some were over forty. Dutch troops, I was told, surrendered easily. We settled them on our tank deck, saving the remaining bunks for our own troops. It’s well we did.

“The next alongside was another LCI. This one brought us casualties, some able to walk. We had bunks for those guys.”

DePue: So, there you go. You’re heading back with a full load and quite a mixture, as well. Did you have any concern about having those German POWs on ship?

Jaeger: It isn’t the first time we’d carried them. I don’t recall any difficulty with them. Of course, the only difficulty I can recall is a sanitation problem. Hauling that many men, we weren’t equipped with the disposal problem. We had to use buckets and that type of thing. So, the tank deck was not a pleasant place.

DePue: I can imagine that was quite a chaotic scene.

Jaeger: It was.

DePue: Were there any armed guards guarding the POWs?

Jaeger: Yes, yes. The Army sent some men. I can remember a few khaki-clad people milling around with them. But the ones coming back from Normandy, I don’t remember being at all worried about those guys. There was just something about their demeanor, that they were damn glad to be out of it, you know.

DePue: Okay. I know that you also had a couple hairy experiences coming back on that first trip that you talked about.

Jaeger: Well, one of them had to do with the heavy traffic. I don't know how many ships were involved in the invasion. Do you know how many men were in the invasion in the early stages? Was there a million went ashore?

DePue: Well, within the first few weeks, there was a million.

Jaeger: Yeah. The—

DePue: I mean, the D-Day landings—it astounds people—that covered fifty miles of beaches.

Jaeger: That's right. But, as soon as we could unload a ship on the beach, the idea was to get it back to England and reload it as fast as you can because of the need for fuel and artillery shells, food. So, we had to shuttle it back and forth fast.

I'm messing up because there was a traffic problem, and I mentioned one there, when, in the middle of the night, we sailed north towards Southampton. There was a convoy coming the other way, right at us. We sailed right through each other without an accident. I think we were tremendously lucky because none of could show any lights. I mentioned, I believe, in there, that one of the lookouts shouted to me that—I was officer of the deck. I was at the con, and here's a big high-bowed Liberty type ship coming at us. And, I could see that big bow. The stem of the ship come shooting past us. I could even make out the white face of one of their officers, up on their bridge. He must have been as scared as I was. I don't know how I got by that. We passed each other within twenty feet, I know.

DePue: I would imagine, after that, you had people watching very closely.

Jaeger: That's right (laughter); that's right.

DePue: Were there any U-boats or any E-boats that you talked about before, in there?

Jaeger: There? I read about them. But, E-boats, now that's something else. yes. No U-boats. I don't think there were any that I was aware of. There may have been some attacks. But, for some reason—I referred to this before, and it still bothers me, that we allowed a squadron of E-boats, which is the German PT boat, as we call them. They carry, I think, two torpedoes, and they make 35 knots, and they can launch at a high speed. They were in the port of Cherbourg, which is only ninety miles away from the south coast of England. They attacked our ships when we were practicing for D-Day. I mentioned that earlier. But, also, some of our ships, returning to the beach on their second run back, were attacked by these E-boats, coming out of Cherbourg. I still can't understand why our Air Force hadn't wiped them out. It hit a couple of them. I think I put a letter in there from Joe LePage of California. Joe was sunk, and spent three and a half hours floating in the English Channel in the cold water. I don't know how he survived.

Gene Jaeger

Interview # VR2-A-L-2012-016.01

- DePue: You think, well, it's June, so it must be pretty warm water. That wasn't the case at all, was it?
- Jaeger: It takes a long time. The weather starts to warm up in June and isn't finished until September.
- DePue: Well, I recall, in the book, you also mentioned that you picked up some survivors out of the water on one of these return trips.
- Jaeger: Oh, no, we didn't pick them directly out of the water. Our small boats went over to one boat, I guess you could say. Yeah, we picked them out of the water, I guess you'd say. Our LCVP went alongside. Several of them were working in the area. I forget the number of the ship that was hit, but there were several of them that were hitting mines, too. That's what our difficulties came from, mines and E-boats. We didn't have any difficulties from aircraft or submarines or shore artilleries.
- DePue: Well, certainly, they would've had mine sweepers scouring that whole area before the D-Day landings, didn't they?
- Jaeger: They certainly did, and they lay buoys down for us to follow the mine paths in. But, you can imagine the sixty miles of frontage; you talked about it. The Germans had been laying mines in there for a year, so your mine sweeping would not be perfect. Besides, they had a system there where, if you carried your electronic gear over the mines, it was supposed to detonate them. Well, the Germans got onto this, and they had the mines fixed so, the first time you passed over it, it would only trip the switch. They had to have five passages before they'd go off.
- DePue: Oh, wow.
- Jaeger: Yeah.
- DePue: A bit of a problem, if you're the fifth ship.
- Jaeger: That's right. You think everything's fine because all the ships ahead of you went fine. But, if you were the fifth one in there, and you tripped that switch, bam, you were gone.
- DePue: I'm sure that was carefully calculated, that you get to the fifth and the sixth ship. You're probably talking about bigger ships by that time?
- Jaeger: (laughter) That's right.
- DePue: Well, I know that you didn't make just one run to Utah Beach. You made multiple runs back and forth between England and the Normandy landings.
- Jaeger: I think it was just under fifty.

DePue: Fifty.

Jaeger: Yeah.

DePue: What was the average turnaround? About a day?

Jaeger: Yeah, we could go over there...it was only about ninety miles. We made about nine knots. That would be ten hours; we'd get in there one day. Take us a better part of the next day to unload, and we're back on the third day and do it over again. That's about right.

DePue: Okay. Well, tell us about some of the memorable trips you had, going back and forth. I know your next trip, I think, was an ammo run to the Utah Beach, where you got closer to the beach the second time around?

Jaeger: What kind of a run?

DePue: An ammunition run.

Jaeger: Yeah, we made several of them. I don't recall this item I wrote in the book. It probably happened, but I don't remember.

DePue: Okay. Well, a better reason to check out what's in the book, right?

Jaeger: Yeah, I ought to read that thing! (laughter)

DePue: One of the things that I was always fascinated by, in reading about the D-Day landings, is these huge mulberry harbor systems that they hauled over from England and then set up outside the beaches themselves. Did you see any of those? Did you use any of the mulberry harbors?

Jaeger: We hauled a section.

DePue: You did?

Jaeger: Yes. The mulberry—they had two systems there, and I think they had different names for them. The other one was called a gooseberry or something like that. One of them, they would take old cargo ships, 400 foot long, old ships and take them in off beach and push them in with tugboats and open their valves and sink them. So, they made a harbor with sunken cargo ships. That was one.

The other, I think, was the mulberry you're talking about, where they had huge concrete caissons. Concrete sounds like it wouldn't float, but then, neither does steel. But, you make it hollow enough, you'll float. We picked up one of those and had a cable, my god, that was a thousand yards behind us, it seemed to me—well, not that much. But, we hauled that thing out of

Plymouth, I believe, where they had poured the concrete and made the caisson.

How would I describe it? It's the length of a dock, maybe fifty feet long and twelve feet high and hollow, and had a deck, so you could take it in and lash it to the next one. Then, your trucks could run from one to the other and get into the beach, a regular dock.

DePue: Yeah, it just amazes me, the scale of this operation. I guess, what it really reinforces, is, there's no ports for you to land any supplies on.

Jaeger: That's pretty much what I'm concerned about all the way through this book is that, at the beginning of World War II, particularly in Europe, our major problem was that the Germans held all the seaports. We could not fight an army as well equipped as they were, unless we could get our own heavy equipment up to bear on them. The only place you could hit them was on the beaches, when you find them.

DePue: So, you do extreme things, like you develop and you build one thousand LSTs, and you build these huge harbor operations that you haul across the straits, and—

Jaeger: There was some good thinking going on back then!

DePue: Yeah, a lot of planning.

Jaeger: Yeah.

DePue: Do you remember—I know that, in mid or late June, there was quite a nasty storm in the channel that caused a lot of damage to the ports and caused some concern, as well, in being able to resupply the troops that had already landed. Do you recall that storm?

Jaeger: Yes, I do recall that storm because we had already—well, I think, we already discharged...Well, maybe not, because we approached the beach, and we were signaled off. The wind was building up, and we laid off about a mile, so there would be no conflict with other ships. We anchored—rode the hook, is what we called it. We rode the hook for about five days. It was a miserable time because the ship was bobbing up and down there all the time. But, that same storm was the one slamming the mulberries and destroyed them, I think. They got hurt badly. That storm lasted, I would guess, from, maybe, June eighth to June twelfth, something like that, fourteenth.

DePue: Not good timing, either, when you've got this army that's just recently arrived.

Jaeger: You can imagine what it was like to try to land on the beach, with the storm pounding like that. But, then, you've got to remember that that was a high tide

beach. So, if you could get your landing craft, your LCI, LCT, in there at right angles to the shoreline and hold it there long enough, the water would run out from under you. And pretty soon, there's going to be no water. Half a mile behind you, you're high and dry, so unloading was no problem. Then you'd wait for the water to come back in and pick you off. Low tide is a hell of a lot. I don't know if you've seen anything like that in our country. I understand the Bay of Fundy in Maine is fifty feet. More people think of the tide as a foot or two, and that's what it usually is. But, the channel's, well...

DePue: One of the trips that was especially memorable, when I read about it, was the one where you took jerry cans to one of the places. I guess it was a beach landing at Saint-Michel-en-Grève, however that's pronounced.

Jaeger: Let me see. How's that last word...? Saint-Michel-en-Grève. Where'd it go?

DePue: Right here.

Jaeger: Yeah, that's what I do. What happened there was, after the breakthrough— You might remember, the Utah and Omaha Beaches were pretty well held down, early in the invasion. There was a breakthrough at Saint-Lô. After the breakthrough, Patton's troops headed in two directions. They wanted the Brest Port, and they wanted Paris. They were moving so fast out towards Brest that they ran out of fuel. We were called into the port in Southampton to load up. This was not going to be big gasoline tanker trucks, as you would expect, but they loaded five gallon jerry cans, and five gallons of gasoline. I don't know if you've ever seen them; they had that slanted top. Have you seen the jerry cans?

DePue: I've seen a few of them in my day, yeah.

Jaeger: All right. (laughter) We had 18,000 of them. They come aboard in truckloads, and we had to unload them from the Army truck by hand. By the next morning, in Southampton, our entire tank deck was filled with those things.

DePue: They're not on trucks, but they're loaded individually?

Jaeger: By hand, starting on the bottom deck and going straight up, until the whole thing... We had to lay them in careful, so that, when the ship rocked, they wouldn't move. We had to batten them in there tight. And we took that off.

Patton was going in the wrong direction. He wasn't going towards Germany. He was going back toward the Atlantic Ocean to take this port at Brest. So, we went down to the Channel Islands and went down to the Brest Peninsula and went out to this little town of—It wasn't a port; it was just Saint-Michel-en-Grève.

It had some sandy beach in there, and we landed. And we did the same damn thing, although we had the Army help us this time. Patton's guys came

in with their empty trucks. So, the soldiers pitched in for twenty-four more hours and got those things out, got those cans on the trucks and got them back to Patton's tanks in time to complete the attack on Brest.

We weren't the only ones doing it, either. There was more quick thinking there. We have Patton running out of gas in front of a major operation. How are you going to get it to him? For some reason, we couldn't get the big gas tankers on the road; they were too vulnerable. So, we did it by hand.

DePue: Well, that story illustrates just how important logistics was to that operation. That was really the important part of the whole operation. Of course, the guys in the front line, they're doing courageous things, but they don't go anywhere until they get the supplies they need.

Jaeger: That's right. About the same time, we're taking Cherbourg. We finally got rid of those damn E-boats. We also got some docks in there., and we've got docks at Brest, and also the mouth of the Seine River, Le Havre. There's a town there. There was a town there. When I looked at it, there wasn't a brick on top of a brick. The thing was just leveled there. Nothing left of it. They've got it built up to a fine city now.

DePue: But that town would've been leveled by American bombing, no doubt.

Jaeger: And British, yeah. Even before we got there, they were probably bombing, the British Lancasters. They had some heavy bombers.

DePue: Well, this operation, if you're making fifty trips, and it's taking two or three days for a trip, this is going on for several months.

Jaeger: Absolutely. We were still doing it. We landed at D-Day on June 6, 1944, and we were still doing it about February.

DePue: Did you get any breaks at all? Did you get a chance to take some shore leave occasionally?

Jaeger: We didn't until probably three months—I'm just guessing here—after D-Day. I think the Allies had passed Paris. About that time, they felt they could let us go ashore for three day weekends, and, maybe, ten men and one officer could take off. And, yes, we were working out of Southampton then. There was a passenger railroad to take us right into Waterloo Station. I went there three times, went to London. Loved it.

DePue: Waterloo Station's in London itself, then?

Jaeger: It was...What?

DePue: Waterloo Station's in London?

Jaeger: Or Paddington, one or the other.

DePue: Well, tell us about—This is so typical, and I've encountered this myself, but tell us about the date with the Wren [for WRCNS - the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service] that you had...where she found out where you were from.

Jaeger: Oh, I didn't know her! I just met her at a dance. We were just dancing and talking. I don't know if we went home together or not. Several guys and several girls were dancing. I'm dancing with her and making ordinary conversation. She tells me she's from some place in northern England. I didn't want to try to tell her where a little place like Geneva, Illinois was, so I told her I was from Chicago. Right away she got excited about the fact that I'm probably carrying a gun because all the English people think that Chicago, then, is only populated by Al Capone, you know. We did have that reputation. Have you ever talked to English people about that on their own turf? They think of Chicago as a place of gunmen. I guess we're working our way back to that now, too, aren't we?

DePue: Yeah. Well, just the news this week...I think there was eight that were killed in one day over the weekend.

Jaeger: Again?

DePue: In Chicago, yeah.

Jaeger: On Memorial Day there were ten.

DePue: Yeah.

Jaeger: Good god.

DePue: Well, but—

Jaeger: It wasn't that bad back then! (laughter) At least, back then, the hoodlums were shooting one another. They weren't shooting civilians, like today.

DePue: Do you recall any V1 or V2s that were being fired at London at that time, when you making these trips?

Jaeger: Yeah. Well, they were being fired at Southampton, too. The first one I saw was a V1 came in. A V1 was actually a jet, more like a big rocket that had wings and a bomb. They could launch it, almost like a ski jump. You see, here in the States, they slide down and turn on the jet engine. By the time it goes off the bottom of the ski jump, it's airborne, flies across the English Channel. There's a limit in its fuel. When it gets over what they think is the right target, it runs out of fuel and drops and blows up everything it hits. That's a V1. We could hear the engine all the time. We called them buzz bombs because we

could hear them. We fired at them. I have read stories—and maybe you have, too—about English fighter pilots flying alongside them and bringing the wing tips together and flipping them over. Did you ever hear that?

DePue: No.

Jaeger: Yeah, and, of course, I didn't see anything like that, but I can well believe it happened. And so, the V1, hell, it had no effect on anyone. It was just a vindictive thing to do because the war was moving into Germany and just a chance to kill a lot of British civilians.

But then, you had another one that was a little harder to deal with. It was called a V2. This was a pure rocket, one of the earliest, I believe, that was launched from inland. It didn't have to be on the beach, anywhere in Belgium or northern France, about fifty miles. They'd tip and fall. It had vanes on it that would keep it pointed, and it would hit with a little more accuracy. And, yes, I've heard V2's when I was in London on leave. As a matter of fact, I think I mentioned in the book, three of our sailors came in there one day. We were just leaving Paddington or Waterloo Station, whichever it was. And one of those damn things went off about six blocks away. These kids got on the train and went back to Southampton. "That's enough of London."

DePue: Was London a fun town to be in, though?

Jaeger: Oh, yeah. London was a great town. The British people, I don't know how they did it after the pounding London was taking. You could see the devastation all over the place, but they were having a hell of a good time there. There were guys from every nation. There must have been 100,000 Yanks in town, and everybody raising hell and having a good time.

The theater was going good. I think I mentioned that their legitimate theater was showing plays by Ibsen and Shaw, and we had performers like Ralph Richardson, I remember, and John Gielgud. These were young men then. So, I enjoyed London. Of course, you could find a few girls, but that wasn't too easy to do with 100,000 Yanks in town, you know, and only about a couple hundred girls, it seemed to me. So, you'd meet a few at the dances, but that was about it...or maybe a bar.

DePue: Well, a couple of the other supply missions that really caught my attention, one of them, where the LST sailed up the Seine River. I would've never have imagined that.

Jaeger: It happened at the Battle of the Bulge. The Germans broke through, you know, at Bastogne. Our armies and the British armies were still in place, but they were running low on supplies. The normal thing for us to do would've been to take our LST over to Cherbourg and unload and then haul it all the way to the front, which was clear over near the Rhine River. It was much faster if we could go up the Seine River as far as we could get toward Paris and unload

there. It was a short run from there to the front at Bastogne. So, we did. We went up as far as Rouen.

DePue: Did you do that more than once?

Jaeger: No.

DePue: But they needed the supplies so desperately that that saved a day or two.

Jaeger: Yeah, they'd show us up there. We had a little episode with a French pilot there, I mentioned. You know, when you get into a river with a ship, your skipper doesn't run the ship up the river, the pilot does.

DePue: Oh, this is a pilot who gets on the ship to guide—

Jaeger: That's right. This happens when you go into New York Harbor, or, if you're going up to New Orleans, you get on now at the southwest pass. If a harbor pilot comes aboard, he runs it. He runs it up the river, and I don't think he could let anybody run across New York Harbor without a pilot's license... all that stuff out there. So, we did have that pilot incident. I mentioned the boats; are you interested in that?

DePue: Yeah.

Jaeger: Well, we pulled into Le Havre, and the pilot's boat comes out. He has his own boat. It's a very dignified position in any port; pilot's a big deal. We threw our chain ladder over the side to take him aboard. Generally, you receive a little ceremony and saluted and brought up, and introduced to the captain.

But this guy comes aboard, and some careless sailor had thrown the chain ladder in such a way that it ran right over the vent to one of our auxiliary generators, diesel engines. So, when the pilot—whose name I recall because I wrote the log—his name was Andre Pisibon. We all got a kick out of that. But Monsieur Pisibon climbed up the ladder and wasn't aware of it until he got there. He was climbing right through the exhaust of a diesel engine, and it choked him. Instead of backing down, he kept going and got through to the top.

But when he got on deck, he was plenty sore. Fortunately, none of us could understand French, because he had plenty to tell us. (laughter) But, we went up the river that night with Mr. Pisibon at the helm or at the con, I should say.

About halfway up there, the skipper was getting nervous. He said to the pilot, "Aren't you sailing a little close to the shore?" The pilot said, "Well, I have to. I can't see very well, and the diesel skipper said to drop the anchor; we're through for the night. (laughter) So, we did. We anchored in the Seine

that night, and he took us the rest of the way the next day. A day later, we dropped him off at Le Havre. That was the last we saw of Mr. Pisibon.

DePue: (laughter) It is a great name.

Jaeger: Yes, it is! (laughter)

DePue: Well, the other cargo that surprised me—and you apparently carried this quite a bit—were railroad boxcars. How does a ship carry railroad—how do you get them on the ship and off the ship in the first place?

Jaeger: Well, you may know or you may have seen the narrow gauge railroad in France or in Europe, and...

DePue: Go ahead.

Jaeger: Okay. Sometime, maybe about three months after the invasion, maybe four, we pulled into, I think it was Falmouth. The welders came aboard with the rails, and there were three sets of tracks in our tank deck. Those three tracks could handle three open gondola cars there. We didn't get any boxcars, I remember; they were all open cars or like those hopper cars. And to get them on there they had to weld a switch on our front ramp, so that, when we pulled into a hard, as they called them, to unload, the rail ran right down at the water.

We would drop our ramp, and it would hook up to the rail. The minute the front wheels of the car got on the ship, we'd switch it to one of the three tracks. We had a switch that would feed three tracks. So, we'd load one track and then throw the switch and load the center track, throw the switch again, load the third track, chain them all down, take off for France. We got over to Cherbourg. They had the same setup over there, and they'd take them off. So, we'd take whole carloads.

You can think of the advantage of that. They have a whole carload of railroad type freight sitting somewhere near Southampton, and the next day, it's rolling towards Paris. Now, that's one hell of a boon, you know.

DePue: And these are loaded up cars, I would assume.

Jaeger: Absolutely.

DePue: Do you recall the kinds of things that these cars would've been loaded with?

Jaeger: No, I don't.

DePue: Probably a little bit of everything.

Jaeger: Yeah, yeah. There may have been some boxcars in there. What are those like? They're open—

DePue: The picture in the book looks like boxcars.

Jaeger: Do they? Oh, they did clear the...

DePue: And the caption does say it's LST 400, so...

Jaeger: Okay, let's call them boxcars, and so much for my memory.

DePue: Well, the number on the ship looks like LST US 400, so it must be your ship.

Jaeger: That's us, yeah.

DePue: Okay. And the other thing, I think you mentioned last time, but somewhere during this whole operation, is when you had the problem with the cracked deck?

Jaeger: Oh, yes. That happened, probably about December or January, after the invasion. We invaded in June, and, when we were coming back to make a load to France—I don't know if we're hauling boxcars yet or not. I don't think so—But, I had the deck—that is, I was the officer at the con—and we went into one hell of a storm. It was head on.

The effect, that I mentioned to you before here, was, you ride a wave; the bow goes way high. When you come down, there's another wave rolling in. You don't slice through it like a cruiser, You hit it like your fist hitting a wall. It makes the deck creep. We could see the deck move. But I had the con this night, and we had such control of the channel that we were able to put some lighted buoys out there.

I remember passing this one buoy at 0100 or something. I had the mid-watch. And, about the time my relief came up to relieve me of the watch, I passed the same buoy again. I didn't make a damn thing in two and a half hours, you know. (laughter)

We got back to Southampton. I was walking on the deck, and we were just pulling into the port. I looked up, and I could see daylight in the main deck. I was standing on the tank deck, and I look up. There's a crack running from side to side. I reported it, and, as I mentioned, I thought, well, boy, this is going to give us a little time in dry dock and a trip to London maybe.

What happened was, they took us alongside the dock in Southampton and drove a welding truck on board, with a whole load of flat steel plates, laid on top of the crack, welded the plates into position, and we were gone in an hour and a half, you know. That was our repair, and that stayed that way. That was never changed. I've noticed, other LSTs that I've been on before or since, most of them are cracked across the middle, like that.

DePue: Do you know of any that split in half and sank?

- Jaeger: No, and I don't know why, either.
- DePue: I know a couple of the Liberty ships split in half and sank.
- Jaeger: Did they? I know of some destroyers that rolled over and sank. But, breaking up—you know, that has a lot to do with the right kind of loading. You can see, if you had a ship heavily loaded, fore or aft and nothing in the middle. It would get on top of a wave. The center would be supported and both ends loaded. It could break right open. I bet that's what happened.
- DePue: Was the job of the loadmaster an important one, then?
- Jaeger: Damn right.
- DePue: Was that an enlisted man or an officer?
- Jaeger: Well, I don't think he was a crew member.
- DePue: Oh, somebody would come on with the...?
- Jaeger: I think somebody would load it. But, I can't remember we made a big fuss about that. We must've been aware of it, but I don't recall much now.
- DePue: Well, you know, you're getting there D-Day landing, and then, there's the Army that moves very quickly—after they did the breakout at Saint-Lô, the Army moved very quickly. Then, you get to the winter, and things really bogged down.
- I guess my question is, the Battle of the Bulge—Did that surprise you and everybody else when that occurred...when the Germans had enough strength left to do that?
- Jaeger: It certainly did, and it disappointed us. We thought we were moving toward Berlin at that point. I don't know if we had crossed the bridge at Remagen yet or not.
- DePue: No, that happened about three months later.
- Jaeger: Okay. But, anyway, we passed Paris, and we were on our way. The German army was being routed,—this was our view of it—and we were all going to get home by Christmas, you know. Hell yes, that was a real setback.
- DePue: Were you able to follow the news pretty carefully?
- Jaeger: No. We got *Stars and Stripes*. We got that, but that was only a weekly, and that wasn't a newspaper, strictly speaking. I don't remember getting an English newspaper at all. Most of everything that we heard was word of mouth, I guess. There might've been some stuff coming in the radio shack.

We had what we called the *AI Nav*, a letter that came out from Washington every day. Our radioman would listen to it through his headphones and type it down.

DePue: In the book, you mentioned crossing the Rhine River at Remagen, which is a fairly memorable event. That was in March. You also mentioned April twelfth, the day that FDR died. Do you remember that day?

Jaeger: Yes, I remember it clearly. That had quite an effect on the troops. You must remember, most of these young men were seven, eight years old when Roosevelt took office. Now they were twenty, and they'd never heard of another president. I don't know if it was so much a personal admiration for FDR or the fact that we're in this thing. We're in a hell of a fight; we're winning, and this is our leader. And, all of a sudden, our leader's gone. That's a setback.

I guess I thought, well, we put another guy in there, and he'll do just as good a job, which happened, I guess. But it was a disappointment. We didn't hear much about it. I think I quoted one young guy there, wanted to have Mrs. Roosevelt carry out the war because he had confidence in the name Roosevelt.

DePue: Well, this must've been about the same time you lost your skipper.

Jaeger: Yeah, the skipper—again, when I'm talking about is the way men felt, or I perceive they felt. There wasn't a lot put into words, certainly, nothing in writing. But, one morning—The war was damn near at an end, and our skipper—At eight o'clock we had an assembly, 0800, and he very abruptly announced that he'd been relieved, and he was leaving the ship that afternoon. And that was it. Just silence. Some sailor picked up his bag, and he walked down the dock. There was a staff car waiting for him, and that's the last we ever saw of him.

This was quite an achievement. See, we were talking about getting into the war and having no way of landing our equipment onto German territory without going over beaches. We had to invent a ship that could land on beaches. But then, we had to get people who could run them. They did that, almost by a hit or miss thing. They put young guys out there. If they weren't doing very good, they'd relieve them, put somebody else in there.

Well, this young fellow was able to take over a ship, at the age of twenty-six. He learned how to run it, how to beach it, how to operate in the harbor, how to handle it in a storm. He did the whole thing, and we made fifty landings there, maybe eighty landings altogether. [We] Put a tremendous amount of war materials right up his nose—I'm talking about Hitler now—and never lost a man. That was a hell of an achievement. We all felt it, although I never saw anybody write a word about it. Never heard of him again.

DePue: What was his name again?

Jaeger: Charles Lyden, L-y-d-e-n. He was a mining engineer.

DePue: As far as you're concerned, one of the heroes of World War II?

Jaeger: I would think so, and Guys who did what he did because it wasn't glamorous; it didn't get a lot of attention. But just think of a guy being held personally responsible for landing x-hundred thousand tons of material right in the enemy's face, you know. That mattered.

DePue: V-E Day was May eighth. Do you remember that day?

Jaeger: Yeah, and it wasn't quite all that shocking because it had been talked about. Actually, there had been a false one, hadn't there, a couple of days before?

DePue: I think so, yeah.

Jaeger: So, we knew the war was over. Hell, the Russians were in Berlin and...It still was nice to know that the thing was over or not. I don't know, we must've left almost immediately after that. We came back to the States. I don't think we were there after V-E Day, and we may even have been out of there before V-E Day.

DePue: Had you been on the ship on V-E Day?

Jaeger: Yeah, I'm sure I was.

DePue: Was there any alcohol to celebrate with on the ship?

Jaeger: No, nothing like that. There might've been plenty ashore, but I think we had... The pharmacist's mate was pretty well out of material by then. (laughter)

DePue: (laughter) The other thing I wanted to ask you about... It wasn't too much after that, or maybe you'd already heard some of the news that was coming out about the discoveries in Germany, once it was being liberated, these concentration camps and death camps.

Jaeger: Nothing, absolutely nothing, until I was out of uniform and back to the United States in 1946 or '47.

DePue: That's the first time you heard about any of that?

Jaeger: Right, right.

DePue: When you did hear about it, what did you think?

Jaeger: I was shocked by them. But, god, did you see those pictures? What they did to those poor people? One [clears his throat] One of the most touching pictures I

ever saw in my life was a crowd of these people going to the concentration camp, and there is an eight year old girl going across a plowed field. She's got her four-year-old, little brother by the hand, leading to God knows what, you know. The human race...

DePue: Did that—maybe by that time...Well, let me ask it this way...Did that change your view about how important it was that you were involved in this?

Jaeger: That's right, because there wasn't much cynicism. One officer got me kind of angry one day, and he said, "Why are we doing all this?" you know. I got into a little argument, and I told him, "You know, you've been eating the queen's bread. You got the officer's uniform, and you're living up here as a leader of men, and you don't talk like that, for god's sake, not in front of the crew." But, there wasn't much of that. Most everybody was aware that we had been attacked, and when you're attacked, even if it's remote, like a place like Pearl Harbor, you feel your people are threatened, you know. That's the way most soldiers felt, without any florid prose that you hear about, we're fighting for freedom and all that. Guys never talk like that. But, we were challenged, and we fought, and that's about the size of it. That is concrete. That's what happened. And the other stuff, I don't like to think about.

DePue: Well, V-E Day, again, is May eighth. But that's a long shot away from the end of World War II.

Jaeger: Oh, yeah.

DePue: Did you have a sense that you guys were just going to ship to the Pacific and continue the war there?

Jaeger: A very strong sense of that. We were beginning to lose men. The BUPERS, Navy Bureau of Personnel, was picking off our men, about three or four a month, and sending them back to the States. We knew where they were going. They were going to new crews. They would be the nucleus of new crews of LSTs, heading for Japan.

There was also kind of a feeling—you know, this was a fourth encounter for us, Normandy was, and sailing up the Seine. And all of us were feeling you can't play this game too long, you know. You're going to get your lumps. That's the way we felt about Japan; it's going to be worse than what we've seen so far.

DePue: You had heard enough about the nature of combat in Japan to be concerned?

Jaeger: In a general way, yes. They were fanatic fighters, and defending—They were fighting with a religious fervor to protect the emperor, and what they...

DePue: Had you heard about things like kamikaze pilots?

Jaeger: Not at that point, no.

DePue: Okay. Well, you got the news to head back to the United States, you said, pretty quickly after, about this timeframe?

Jaeger: Yeah. We left within a week or two or had left already by V-E Day. I'm not sure. It was right in there.

DePue: Did you have anything on board on the return trip?

Jaeger: We had a bunch of flyboys, US Army Air Force. They were getting people back to the United States any way they could do it. So, yeah, we hauled some passengers. They would've much preferred to have flown home, but they had to ride home on an LST.

DePue: (laughter) Yeah, that's not glamorous at all, is it? Well, you had mentioned Dutch Marines. Maybe this wasn't the timeframe that you encountered the Dutch Marines.

Jaeger: Yes, you mentioned it. We did, when we were ready to pull out of Plymouth, I think, on our way back to Chesapeake Bay, just before we left, a contingent of Dutch Marines come aboard. I don't know where these men had been. It didn't look to me like they had been in combat before. They were kind of young and untrained. But we took them with us across the Atlantic, and, by the time we got to Chesapeake Bay, I think, our medics had radioed ahead that you had some suspicious symptoms on there. They suspected some disease. I can't think of the name of it right now.

When we pulled into Chesapeake Bay, the patrol boat came out and stopped us and gave us the word that we had been refused pratique. I'd never heard that word before, but that's clear health passage to go into a harbor. We anchored out with the Dutch Marines until they found out that we were not threatened with an epidemic of anything. They all went off, but we didn't. We didn't get off the ship at Norfolk. We went to New York.

DePue: Why were Dutch Marines going to the United States at the end of the war?

Jaeger: Probably for the same reason we were...they were going to go down to Texas and train. They'd get shipped out to Japan. That would be...

DePue: Okay. Well, do you remember spending any time in New York City?

Jaeger: I don't guess I... VOC?

DePue: No, New York City.

Jaeger: Oh. We didn't spend much time there. We went back there, and, of course, that rounded out our trip. But actually, our European experience began in New

York Harbor, and it ended in New York Harbor. I imagine a big event for me was, I went up to Jack Dempsey's Restaurant, of all places, and picked up a phone. My father answered the phone. After two and a half years, I was back in touch with my family.

DePue: You were able to make a phone call at home.

Jaeger: That's right.

DePue: A lot of guys who came back into New York City Harbor remember seeing the Statue of Liberty. Do you remember that?

Jaeger: Absolutely, and that was a moving sight. That's one of the few of the patriotic symbols that really was moving. I don't know why, but that was... When we get to the inner harbor, and we could see it up there, very moved. It's also nice to know that, a couple hours later, we'd be moored on the Hudson River at Pier 48 or whatever it was, and get off the ship and walk on American land. Yeah, that was an emotional experience.

DePue: Okay. But it sounds like you didn't stay in New York City very long. Where'd you go to next?

Jaeger: New Orleans. We got our orders. By this time, we had the new skipper. I forget the guy's name. But I was doing most of the navigating and ship handling. We took off in New York. There was no convoy. We went out in the open Atlantic and headed down to Florida, sailed around Key West. What's that island out there that Dr. Mudd was sent to?

DePue: Dry Tortuga? Is that what you're talking about?

Jaeger: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: What a colorful name that is.

Jaeger: Yeah. (laughter) What's Tortuga, turtle?

DePue: Pardon me?

Jaeger: Tortuga, is that a turtle?

DePue: Yeah, maybe it is. I don't know.

Jaeger: Yeah, I don't either. But we sailed around that and headed for the mouth of the Mississippi River.

Underway, we got a railroad message. It told me—they were to me, from Washington, saying that, when we landed, I would be relieved. I was to

take thirty days leave and report to Great Lakes for reassignment. Of course, we're still fighting Japan.

But we went up to New Orleans. God, that was nice. I really love that town. I've been back there twelve times.

DePue: Well, the thing that you mentioned that surprises a lot of people, New Orleans isn't exactly on the ocean.

Jaeger: That's right, a hundred miles.

DePue: Hundred miles.

Jaeger: A hundred miles up the Mississippi. Also, the Mississippi is one long, narrow seaport. It goes all the way up to Baton Rouge, and they got the ships' docks. Matter of fact, below New Orleans, there are no docks. It's mostly mud and silt that had washed down over the centuries and a bunch of little ghost trees. But, from New Orleans, north, it's almost all docks.

DePue: So, do you have any stories to tell about some time in New Orleans?

Jaeger: Getting there, I told the story. We picked up a pilot at South Pass, and, coming up the river, he's making the moves. I was standing on the bridge, and he called for left ten degree rudder. The helmsman called back, "Left ten degree rudder, sir." He puts it over, and the pilot says, "Rudder amid-ship." And the kid says, "Rudder amid-ship." Then he called up, and he said, "The rudder is still left, sir." And the guy told him to turn it back. He said, "It won't come back." Well, what happened?

Our wheel, in the wheelhouse, operated a hydraulic system, which ran the rudder. I don't know why they had it that way, but hydraulic systems are subject to airlock. That's what happened. He's steaming up the river, and he puts his rudder over ten degrees left, and it stays there. You know what's going to happen? He's going to hit the bank damn soon.

That was kind of an odd story, then, because we had some new seamen we took on, kids just out of boot camp we picked up in New York. One of them was wearing the phones up forward, when the skipper sees us with a jammed rudder, heading for the beach. He called for all engines back to stop her forward motion. He also called "let go of the bow anchor." With the anchor down, we can check our speed into the... The kid wasn't hearing right, and he kept saying, "What?" And the speaker, up in the conning tower, would say, "Let go of the bow anchor." And the kid would give him some dopey answer.

Finally, the bo'sun's, up in the bow, he knew something was wrong, and he grabbed the phone and talked to the bridge, "What do you want?" The bridge said, "Drop that goddamn bow anchor!" (laughter) He called for the

bow anchor to be dropped. They let go the pelican hook and the anchor dropped, just as we hit the beach, dropped the anchor in a tree, which must be some kind of a record, I think. There we were with our bow up in a mud bank and our anchor in a little tree there. But no big deal, we picked it out of the tree and sailed on up the river.

Nothing more was said of it. I think I mentioned in the book, in peacetime that probably would've called for an inspection or a hearing of some kind, but not there. We just got on with the war.

DePue: No damage to the ship then?

Jaeger: Not much. The damage to the tree...(laughter) It only dropped about five feet.

DePue: Okay. So, you get to New Orleans. Then, do you head up north, after that?

Jaeger: No, we came back and took the ship down to Houston. That is where it was assigned to get refit to go to Japan. I imagine they put new or more modern guns on. Where we had 20 millimeter single mounts, they put in double mounts. I don't know what else they're going to do to the thing because I followed my orders.

We were in Houston about a day or two, and I managed to get an airplane. First time I'd ever flown commercial. I got an airplane to Chicago. And, the last week of July, I was home with my parents.

On the sixth of August they dropped the bomb.

DePue: Do you remember the reunion with your parents in Geneva?

Jaeger: Yeah, my sister—I came from a big family—they knew I was at the Great Lakes, and they were wondering when I get off the train, you know, when I was coming out and whether I'd call in advance. I didn't. So, she just took a chance I was coming in on the Chicago train that night, and she was down there waiting for me. That was quite a thrill.

DePue: This is the second to the last chapter. Here's how this chapter ends in the book: [reading] "I killed a little time at Chicago's Midway Airport and then took the El downtown. A short walk brought me to the Northwestern station, and I boarded a train to Geneva. Ithaca."

Jaeger: That's right.

DePue: Ithaca. What's the significance for you?

Jaeger: Oh, yeah, the name of the book, *Flat-Bottom Odyssey*.

DePue: Okay.

- Jaeger: *Odyssey*...Ulysses ended up his trip at Ithaca, didn't he? Isn't that where Penelope was?
- DePue: Yes. I'm sure you're right, but I was a little bit curious about that, and—
- Jaeger: I threw it in there for the laughs, to see who would pick up on it.
- DePue: Okay.
- Jaeger: Some people have commented on it. "Ithaca, yeah." They probably think I'm talking about Ithaca, New York or Cornell University or something like that.
- DePue: Well, I knew that it had the Greek connection. Beautiful place. So it's an old salt's touching the core of the classic roots, I guess. Okay. You were at home, then, when the A-bomb dropped?
- Jaeger: Yes, I was. I can't tell you my relief at that thing. There was a general feeling of everybody in the service, and even the high ranking officers. They didn't want to hit those Jap beaches. I've read some terrible estimates of the damage that would've been done, and the losses that we would have suffered on both sides, if we hadn't done that. They're talking about hundreds of thousands of casualties for the United States alone, and maybe a million for Japan. Every one of them is worth it.
- DePue: By that time, I'm assuming, you had heard about all of the kamikaze attacks at Okinawa and places like that?
- Jaeger: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Damn right. By that time I'd heard. Ever since we hit New York, I was able to get information on that. We heard a lot about it.
- DePue: That's got to put a little chill on the spine, when you're thinking about going over to Japan.
- Jaeger: I didn't want to do it. (laughter) If I had my druthers, I don't think I'd have gone.
- DePue: Okay. When did you ship out next, and why did you ship out next?
- Jaeger: Well, I wasn't alert. I finished my thirty-day leave at home, and I went up to Great Lakes for reassignment.
- DePue: Wasn't the war over by that time? Because the Japanese surrendered on the fifteenth.
- Jaeger: I don't think Japan had signed—no. Or maybe they had by the time I went up there. I couldn't be sure of that. But the usual thing to do, with a guy like me, who'd had, say, two years of hard time in, was find him a soft berth somewhere. One of my shipmates rode on in kind of an exhibition tour of the

East Coast. They'd call on different ports, and that's the kind of thing I expected. But they surprised me with orders to report to a ship called the *Sidonia*. The *USS Sidonia* was a cargo ship. Well, Jesus, I didn't want to serve on a cargo ship, but I had orders to report to the commandant of the ex-Naval District in San Francisco, and that's where I went.

DePue: In your mind, was a cargo ship even less romantic than an LST?

Jaeger: Oh, hell yes. (laughter) Cargo hatches and stuff like that... Mr. Roberts, huh?

DePue: I wanted to ask you—this is the appropriate time, I think—to tell us about the way the point system was supposed to work, and the way the point system worked in your case.

Jaeger: It didn't work too well for me. They tried to be as fair as they could. I've never seen one, but suppose you're a twenty-five year old guy who'd spent two years in Europe on a ship. Well, you get some points for being twenty-five; you get some points for sea duty, and you get some points for being in a combat area, and you get points for being married. They wanted to get the married guys out fast. So, you add up the points—I don't think they gave you a hell of a lot for combat because I had about four stars under my belt—but I should've been given an easy job because of my points. I can't argue with the point system. It was as fair as it could be. Those things are always inequitable.

DePue: But you had arrived in theater mid-to-late 1943. That's a year before a lot of the guys actually got there.

Jaeger: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I was one of the early guys. I'd been there a long time. But, I was single, and I was still pretty young. Let's see, in '45, I was twenty-four years old. But anyway, hell, if I had my head on my shoulders, I would've gone in there and raised hell with those guys, and tell them to rewrite it. But I didn't do anything about it because I was having a good time going around everywhere, and let the Navy take care of this.

When I get to San Francisco, I went to the commandant of the ex-whatever number Naval District that is and told him I was supposed to board the *Sidonia*. Of course, I didn't talk to the commander; I talked to the lieutenant at the desk. He said, "The *Sidonia* isn't in here." And I said, "Well, where the hell is it? I've got orders to report to the commanding officer of the *Sidonia*?"

He looked at my record and said, "I found it. It's on its way to the Philippines right now." They gave me orders on another cargo ship, Moore-McCormick shipping line out there. It was a beat up old hulk, and I was put on that thing in San Francisco. I was sailed across the Pacific for three weeks. God, that was dull. I landed in Guiuan, which is on Samar, and there was a small base there.

I reported to the commanding officer there, and I said, "I've got orders for the *Sidonia*." He said, "We don't know what the *Sidonia* is. We never heard of it." So, that probably was the first of October, let's say, November, along in there. I was given some quarters to live in, and every few days I go down to the officer of the deck and I ask him, "Have you heard from the *Sidonia* yet?" And he'd say, "No." This went on until the middle of February.

Finally, I went in one morning, and the guy says, "I found the *Sidonia*." I said, "Jeez, that's great. Where is it?" He said, "It's in San Francisco." And I said, "Great, I'd love to go. Send me right back." He said, "Well, I can't. I can't send you out of this Naval District without permission of the commandant of the Eighth Naval District in Shanghai." "For Christ's sake, do I have to go up to Shanghai now?" They said, "Yeah. We've got a destroyer going up there tomorrow, if you'd like to ride to Shanghai." By God, they put me on a destroyer to Shanghai. And—

DePue: (laughter) You're seeing the world just chasing after this elusive ship!

Jaeger: That's right. I don't even know if there ever was a ship called the *Sidonia*. (laughter) The Flying Dutchman! But, Admiral—I don't know, Hewitt or somebody like that—was the commander of the Eighth Fleet. That was the Eighth Fleet up there, not a Naval District, but a fleet. He was on the *St. Paul*.

I went up there. Well, to make a long story short, I wound up with the quickest way home. My points had run out. Now I could get out, but I'm not in Europe. I'm in Asia. I said, "Get me home the fastest way you can." He said, "I've got an ARL leaving this afternoon. You can get on it." Oh, jeez, I thought, that's great. I figured an ARL would be like a cruiser or some sleek little ship that would get me the hell out of there. I went on board the ARL. It was a converted LST, made over into a machine shop.

Well, damned if I didn't ride an ARL—Landing Craft Repair Ship—all the way back to Hawaii. I got to Hawaii, and the skipper of the ARL—he's a good old guy—he's an old Mustang. I said, "I want to get the hell out of here." He said, "If you can make a connection to San Diego, I'll sign you up." So, I did. I went over. There was a destroyer leaving for Long Beach, and I got on that, took a ride to there, said goodbye to the LST for the last time.

DePue: Well, that was an inglorious way to end your naval career, then.

Jaeger: Yeah. (laughter) I didn't get a parade in San Francisco, like McArthur, if that's what you're—

DePue: (laughter) But I imagine you're just as happy to be home anyway.

Jaeger: Yeah, I sure was. Matter of fact, I rode one of the new—streamlined trains, we used to call them back then—the first diesels that came out. There were damn

good ones: the city of Los Angeles , the city of San Francisco, the Burlington Zephyr and all that. I took the City of Los Angeles all the way from Los Angeles to Chicago. I did the same thing I did the year before, you know, grabbed the train out to Geneva.

DePue: Well, that was in the glamorous days of railroad travel, wasn't it?

Jaeger: Yeah.

DePue: Well, you spent a little bit of time in the Pacific, then, in both the Philippines and in China. Your impressions of what you saw in Asia?

Jaeger: In the Philippines, I was in the jungle. I didn't see a town at all. We had this clearing in the jungle, had a wooden barracks that they threw up. They had a bunch of barracks on one side, and they had a headquarters, and then, they had a small place where the officers stayed. Very careful distinction: the officers and enlisted men do not sleep in the same barracks. They also had a baseball field down there, which was great. I played baseball every day for four months...can't kick about that. Every night I went to the officers' club and drank beer. So, I guess it wasn't a very tough existence at that, was it?

DePue: Did you celebrate Christmas while you were there?

Jaeger: I must have, (laughter) but I don't recall anything special. I'll tell you another thing, we went to the hospital—There was a hospital there, and every afternoon—a friend of mine from college, he was in there for some reason, I don't know—we'd go into his room and sit around his bed, and we'd play poker. Now, that was a routine, wasn't it? A late breakfast, and I'd get over to the baseball field about ten o'clock, come in for a long lunch; go to the hospital and play poker for an hour or two; come home, take a shower, and put on a clean uniform; go to the officers' club and drink beer all night, huh? (laughter) It was a tough existence then.

DePue: But it sounds a little bit on the boring side, after you've done that every day.

Jaeger: After a while, yeah. I wanted to get out.

DePue: Did you get any mail, any connection with the real world while you were there?

Jaeger: Just personal mail from my folks. I'm lucky to get that, being in an outpost like that.

DePue: So, they at least knew where you were.

Jaeger: No, I don't think they did. They were probably writing "care of the *Sidonia*."

DePue: (laughter) How about Shanghai; any memories about the condition Shanghai was in at that time?

Jaeger: Now, that I can remember quite well because that was a very depressing scene. For one thing, I think that they were short on power. I've seen a picture of Shanghai lately, and it's one of the most glamorous cities in the world. You may have heard of the famous Bund, which is a big clearing, a boulevard, that lies along the wharf or the docks in the Yang Po River. It is the Yang Po, I think.

And yes, we saw some very poor people there. I went to a very fancy restaurant. One of the best restaurants I've ever been to was in Shanghai. We spent about three hours in there. I was only there a week.

I did see a rickshaw race. I don't know if you've ever heard of such a thing. The transportation was largely by rickshaw. A coolie, with the traditional straw hat, would pick up his two customers or one in the rickshaw and run. That's the way you traveled about town.

But, this one night, it was getting time for all the bars to close. It was pretty late. I see two rickshaws coming down the Bund at top speed. I looked closely, and they weren't coolies. The coolies were sitting in the rickshaw, and the sailors were in the shafts. They were having a race to see who could...I don't know how the hell that came out, but the coolies really looked puzzled.

DePue: Okay. What then happened after you got back home for the second time?

Jaeger: Well, I had a lot of accumulated leave, and I got a good payoff from the Navy, discharge pay you might call it. I didn't get discharged, by the way. Being in the Naval Reserve, as I was, I didn't get released from the Navy until I was about forty-two years old.

I stayed in as a reserve. They could've called me up at any time. I'm glad they didn't. But, what I just told you was the long story of my military life. But, at heart, I'm a civilian.

DePue: (laughter) Well, I understand you even got per diem during this whole stretch, where you were twiddling your thumbs and playing poker and playing baseball.

Jaeger: That's a strange story. I was riding on this ARL, and I got to know the supply officer pretty well. He wasn't just a ship's officer, assigned to supply; he was actually a member of the supply corps, but he happened to be traveling on that ship. I was telling him that I had got my orders in Chicago, and I didn't get my assignment carried out until I landed in Shanghai, a matter of several months. He said, "Boy, you must have come up with some per diem on that." I said, "What's per diem?" (laughter) It turned out that an officer traveling gets a certain amount of money for meals, his hotel room, and everything.

Back then, I think it came to about eight or nine dollars a month. But anyway, when he told me about it, I told him to put in for it. He didn't want to. He thought it was a fluke. But I insisted. I put in for a per diem. And when I got discharged at Great Lakes, there it was, fifteen hundred bucks. Big dough! You know, guy worked six months for fifteen hundred bucks back then. So, yeah, I was fixed. I got my two brothers and take off for Minnesota, go fishing, a wonderful life.

DePue: But that doesn't cost fifteen hundred dollars. What'd you do with that money?

Jaeger: I think it lasted me the better part of a year. I traveled around and went to Quebec. I just had a ball.

DePue: Well, I wanted to ask you—and maybe you just told me—at the time you knew you were going to be done with the military, at least in the full time capacity, what did you intend to do with your life?

Jaeger: I had no idea, and the fifteen hundred bucks must've had a lot to do with that. I didn't have to do anything, see, so I didn't do anything. And plans? Well, hell, I had a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. I suppose all you can do with that is teach, but I never had that in mind. I don't know. I say that, with fifteen hundred bucks, it was no problem. So, eventually I got married and went out and got a job.

DePue: Well, what happened after the money did run out? Which came first, getting the job or getting married?

Jaeger: It was pretty close. Let me see, what the...The first job I got was probably in '47.

DePue: Well, you got back in early 1946?

Jaeger: Yeah, May. So, I probably ran out of money in a year. I went to work for Dun and Bradstreet for a while.

DePue: What was it?

Jaeger: Dun and Bradstreet. Did you ever hear of them?

DePue: Unh-uh.

Jaeger: They're a credit outfit. Back then, they used to issue credit ratings. You were a B1 or an A1 or a AAA1, that kind of thing. But that didn't last very long. And I worked...I did all kinds of things. I worked in the construction business.

DePue: Well, tell us about meeting your future wife.

Jaeger: Hometown girl. I was a friend of her brother's, and I went to his wedding. Of course, she was there. We started going together and wound up getting married in 1950. By that time, I got a serious job. I went to work for a stone company in Chicago, which supplied road builders. I was an officer with that company. I was treasurer or something. I don't know why treasurer. That was an honorary because I'm not a bookkeeper.



Florence & Gene Jaeger, 1967.

DePue: What is your wife's name?

Jaeger: Florence.

DePue: Her maiden name?

Jaeger: Nelson.

DePue: Okay. Well, you weren't, obviously, recalled for the Korean War, even though you were in the reserves. Were you worried about that?

Jaeger: Somewhat. I didn't want to go back to Korea. To answer your question, yes, I was worried, but I've never been terribly worried about anything. But, I didn't want to go back there.

DePue: Did you have some children by that time? Well, that was 1950, by the time you got married.

Jaeger: Well, let's see... When did the Korean War end? Fifty...?

DePue: Nineteen fifty-three, it ended.

Jaeger: Yes, I had two children by that time.

DePue: Okay. Did you ever use the GI Bill benefits?

Jaeger: Huh?

DePue: The GI Bill, did you use that at all?

Jaeger: Yeah. I learned to fly. Yeah, it was available to me, and I took it and learned how to fly. I flew light planes. You ever see a Cessna 150?

DePue: Yeah.

Jaeger: I flew one of those. I had a hell of a time. You know, there's a lot of difference between a light plane and a heavy plane. I was reading about Captain Sullenberger landing in the Hudson, you know. He had to come down like a streak, but where, in the light planes, you could cut the engine off and

glide all over before you put it down. One of the pleasantest sensations was landing a light plane. You land them dead stick. Do you fly then?

DePue: No.

Jaeger: I got a hundred hours and then a private license.

DePue: Were you the kind of guy who joined the local VFW or American Legion, anything like that?

Jaeger: Sure haven't. I understand about half of us didn't. As I say, I was a civilian all the way.

DePue: But, I believe, in 2007—this was a long time after the end of the war—you did get a chance to kind of touch base again with the LST experience. Can you tell us about that?

Jaeger: Are you talking about the 325 that's running up and down the river here at—

DePue: Yeah.

Jaeger: —at...Well, here—see, I'm in Springfield now. I was thinking I was in Peoria. Yeah, there was a group of guys in Northern Illinois who



Gene Jaeger aboard the USS LST-325, 2002

heard of an LST that was still floating. It had been given to the Greek navy, and it was over on Cypress. They, somehow or other, acquired it from the Greek navy and brought it back here. And they sailed it across the Atlantic. (laughter) The average age of the crew was seventy-four or something like that. But they got it all the way back to Mobile, and I went down there. I wanted to see it. They brought it up here, and I've been on it a couple of times. It's tied up at Evansville, Indiana, and it cruises the rivers every summer. It's the only one left.

DePue: What was the experience like, going down to Mobile and finding all these other former LST crewmen down there?

Jaeger: Yeah, these guys are all paunchy, bald guys with gray hair. (laughter)

DePue: Well, not like you at all!

Jaeger: Not a bit! (laughter)

DePue: Was it fun, though?

Jaeger: Oh yeah, it was fun. I enjoyed talking to those guys. But there's not many left. When I'm there now, I talk to guys who rode LSTs in Korea and Vietnam. They rode them there, but they were just cargo ships. I don't think anybody was shooting at them or anything.

DePue: Well, let's finish with a couple questions here. The first one I wanted to ask you, is the experience about writing the book. Why did you write a book?

Jaeger: I know how it came about. For about fifty years after I left the LST, I never had any contact whatsoever with a crew member. Well, I read a letter, and I don't know where. One of the crew member's name was on it. It might've been in a magazine, or he wrote a letter to the editor or something like that. I got in touch with him. He's a policeman in Los Angeles. He gave me a few other names, and, pretty soon, there were six or seven of us swapping letters, old guys now, in their early eighties.

One of them sent me a large section of the ship's log. Now, did you ever see a log? Every four hours, the officer of the deck writes what has happened over the last four hours and signs it. They're pretty inclusive. If you're at sea, it will tell you what course the ship was on, what speed it was making, and if they sighted another ship. If you were in port, it would tell you what your position was at anchorage or what berth you were in, who came aboard, who left.

With all of this information in front of me, I got the urge to write about it. I can't think of any motivation other than that. I'm not a guy who went through life with a lot of purpose. I did pretty much what I wanted.

DePue: Well, it's such an excellent book, though. It's so much fun, and it's so informative to read it. The publishing date is 2010. Can you tell us about getting it published? Was that a challenge?

Jaeger: It's self-published. I had a friend who was making a living as a writer—magazine articles, anything he can get—and he encouraged me. We took an early copy of the thing to the, then-editor of the *Peoria Journal Star* or *Star Journal*, whichever, a guy by the name of Jack Brimeyer. Jack published the damn thing in his paper, gave me a whole spread.

Then, I came up with some pictures, and my niece, my brother's daughter, is an artist. She does arrange pictures in books, and she did all that. And, incidentally, all those pictures you see in the book, you had to get

permission to use them, and she did that. I think I acknowledge her in the front of the book.

Then I paid for the first printing. That's a big thing with self-publishing. You don't get your money back. Well, I did, quite easily. So, as self-publishers go, normally, you're lucky to sell forty, fifty of your books. Well, I've sold close to a thousand. So, I got my money back and enough to take a vacation trip in—what the hell was the name of that place? Puerto Vallarta. So, I'm ahead of the game.

DePue: Wow, very good! Well, again—

Jaeger: I'm still pushing, and I enjoy it. Now, I have a grandson who has a... You might be interested in this. The new generation, they do things by the internet, don't they? The way to promote something like that is what you call a blog. I write a blog. I've got a blog now, going regularly on the internet, being published out of Atlanta, where he lives. I refer to myself as the Frigate Bird.

DePue: The Frigate Bird?

Jaeger: You ever see one?

DePue: No, I don't think so.

Jaeger: Yeah, they're an impressive bird. They have a severely figured, gull-type wing. I don't know if I have any in here or not. I'll put you on my list. In it, I write a blog—and why the hell am I writing? You ask me why I do this, and I can't tell you. I just like to do it, I guess.

I write fifteen lines, twice a week, about life in the 1940s, what people were like, exemplified by a brief anecdote or episode. It might have to do with somebody who was working in the defense plants. It might have to do with— one second has to do with a close friend of mine who was shot down over Germany in a B-17. What's it like to jump out of a plane like that and to land with a bunch of hostile people down there waiting to kill you when you hit the ground, you know? A lot of stuff went on there, you know. And he wrote a good item. That's one of them.

One of them is what I consider a humorous article in there about GIs. We were taking them to the second landing in Sicily and decided that their buddies needed fresh meat. They killed a cow and hid it under the tarpaulin on the truck, and our bosun was very annoyed that they would do a thing like that to his ship.

And what else? I'm writing four of us: my experiences, the B-17 guy, and my brother-in-law, who was an ambulance driver in Italy, and I got a guy out in San Francisco. If you can imagine this, he was in the peacetime Navy

before World War II. He's no kid is he? That means he was in the Navy in 1939. You had to be nineteen years old, so he's in his nineties.

I'm trying to expand this blog now, and, at the end of the blog, I refer the reader to my website, tell them to go out and buy that book.

DePue: Well there you go. I would certainly encourage anybody who has the opportunity to go and buy the book and enjoy the read.

Jaeger: See if you can...I have your card here. Do I have your e-mail address?

DePue: Yeah, you've got the e-mail address on there.

Jaeger: All right, okay.

DePue: Anybody who reads this on our internet site is going to find out about this, as well. It would be easy to find on—

Jaeger: Yeah, right at the end it says, "Does this interest you? If you like it, click on so-and-so," and you're onto the blog. We'll take care of you every two weeks or every week.

DePue: You're like an awful lot of the World War II generation, where you kind of reached back and touched that experience rather late in your life. I've talked to others who saw *Saving Private Ryan* and became much more interested in going back and experiencing those things again. You've made it clear a couple times that you don't particularly care for the guys who try to glamorize it or get real patriotic or things like that. But, are you proud of your service in World War II?

Jaeger: It had to be done, yeah, and I'm pleased. And you're right, I don't go much for this stars and stripes forever stuff. I go where these are guys talking about seeing their homeland invaded and are concerned about their land, their family, and themselves and went out and fought a war and won it. And yeah, I'm proud of that.

Well, when the Legion guys go to a funeral and hold all the flags and fire off a gun, I don't know, that doesn't reach me. You ever see that, with the firing squad at a burial? I don't knock it. Of course, I won't tell anybody else how they've got to feel, but—

DePue: In the last few years, there's been this program called the Honor Flight, taking World War II veterans out to the memorial out in Washington, D.C. Have you had an opportunity to do that? Can you tell us about that experience?

Jaeger: Well, two of my friends or three of my friends have done it. They get up at five o'clock in the morning and go up to the Quad City Airport and fly into Washington, D.C. about nine o'clock, talk to a few politicians, go out to the

Unknown Soldier, get a lunch, get home that night about midnight or two in the morning, dead tired.

DePue: That doesn't appeal to you?

Jaeger: Unh-uh.

DePue: Okay.

Jaeger: And you know, I don't think I'm alone in this, either. You hear a lot of noise about the guys who like to go to Legion meetings and wear their clothes. My feeling is, when you get an old guy dressed up in a military uniform, he looks ridiculous. But they love it.

DePue: (laughter) Well, a couple more questions here for you. You got into this after you got through college. Then you started your adventure with the Navy at that time. Did all of that experience change you, make you into a different person?

Jaeger: Well, I suppose so. I went from the age of—let's see, I got out of college in '42, and I got out of the Navy. I went from... The early part of my twenties, that part of my life was military, wasn't it? I'm talking about this civilian, up until he was twenty years old, a military man until he's twenty-four, and he's a civilian again, from there on. That's pretty much the way I feel about it. But...

DePue: Looking back at your life, how would you say it changed you?

Jaeger: (pause) I don't know, except to repeat that I've never been a guy with much purpose, except *carpe diem*, huh? So, I don't know what way I would've gone. I had no plan.

DePue: Glad you did it, though? Are you glad you did it?

Jaeger: Oh yeah, yeah. I wouldn't do anything different.

DePue: Any final words of wisdom for anybody who listens to this?

Jaeger: Well, maybe what I just said, live the day, huh? That's...

DePue: Live the day.

Jaeger: And particularly, I would say that to people of the year 2012 because we don't know what the hell is coming up. So, you better enjoy what's going on today. What it's going to be like five years from now, I would have no way of guessing.

I'm seeing things, like a guy aiming a drone in Afghanistan and killing the enemy, and the guy running the thing is sitting in Omaha or something. How the hell do they do it, you know? This is what we're coming into. But, we're going to see more and more of this drone stuff, which is only part of it.

The police are applying for surveillance. I read this article yesterday. But, this is all new stuff to me. I see what's happening in communications, and I can easily talk to a guy in Moscow, if I wanted to, you know. Just click that.

What's it going to be like in ten years? This stuff is not finished, by any means. We may be in the very early stages of this revolution in communication and stuff like that. So, live the day.

DePue: The world's come a long way since those days back in World War II, then.

Jaeger: Damn right.

DePue: Thanks very much, Gene. It's been a fascinating trip with you. Appreciate it.

Jaeger: I've enjoyed it. I didn't know that I would, but I did. (laughter)

DePue: Thank you.

(end of interview)