

## Interview with Jonathon Fischer

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Interviewer: Rozanne Flatt

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Flatt: Good afternoon. My name is Rozanne Flatt. I'm a volunteer with the oral history program at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm here in the home of Jon Fischer—Jonathon Fischer—to discuss his military experience for our *Veterans Remember* program. Jon, thanks for your time—

Fischer: That's all right.

Flatt: —with us today. We appreciate it very much.

Fischer: It's okay.

Flatt: Okay, let's start at the beginning. Tell us where you were born, and when.

Fischer: I was born in Quincy, Illinois, June 19, 1924.

Flatt: Okay. Just a young fellow. (laughter) Good. And did you grow up in Quincy, then,

Fischer: I was in Quincy all my life. I graduated in 1943 from Quincy High School.

Flatt: High school, okay. Tell me just briefly about your family—parents, brothers, sisters.

Fischer: Well, my dad, he was head of the painter's union. And of course my mother was a homemaker; she didn't work. I had six of us in our family, and there's

only myself and my younger brother is the only ones that's left out of all of our family.

Flatt: Were you, what, next to the last?

Fischer: I beg your pardon?

Flatt: Were you next to the last in the brothers?

Fischer: No, there was two underneath me.

Flatt: Oh, okay. Well, you graduated from high school in 1943, probably June, I suppose.

Fischer: Mm-hmm, June.

Flatt: What happened from there?

Fischer: Well, when we graduated, our whole class of guys—mostly us football players (laughs)—we all went up to Chicago to the draft board. And they examined us, go through the routine, examine you and see if you're fit and find out where you're going to go, and from then on, you'd go to some base for training.

Flatt: Sure. Well, you mentioned football. I should back up and ask you—because I know that you were quite an athlete in high school—what were the athletics you engaged in?

Fischer: Well, I was a four-letter man at Quincy High School. I played football, basketball, track, and baseball. And I was captain of the first baseball team the Quincy Blue Devils had.

Flatt: Oh, very good. We'll talk about some of your other exploits during the service and since retirement.

Fischer: I should have added on, I could have been the only five-letter man to come out of high school. In 1943, we got a swimming pool underneath the girls' rec room, and it was all finished. And I thought, Well, I'm on the swimming team down at the YMCA for two years—that would make me a five-letter man, and nobody can do that. They just covered it up for some reason.

Flatt: Hm, that's interesting. Well, that's too bad; that would have been a distinction.

Fischer: Yeah, it was.

Flatt: But you distinguished yourself in lots of other ways.

Fischer: Oh, yes.

- Flatt: Okay, so now you went to Chicago. Were you drafted, or...?
- Fischer: We was all drafted, yes.
- Flatt: You were all drafted, right out of school, probably.
- Fischer: Right out of school, yeah.
- Flatt: Because '43 would have been right in the middle of World War II, of course. Okay. What was going on in the world right at that time? Do you remember? (Fischer laughs) This would have been a year and a half after Pearl Harbor.
- Fischer: Well, we had rationing, you know, cars and... So in 1943, they asked everybody that's got a car if we could have some of their stamps to get gas to go on our baseball trips; we couldn't get any stamps, so they canceled baseball out entirely, so that put me into track so I could run.
- Flatt: (laughs) Well, you made good use of it anyway. That's interesting. Yeah, that's right. What else was rationed? Now, the stamps you referred to: everybody was assigned a certain number of gallons worth of gas, and that was based on the stamps, so many...
- Fischer: And food stamps, too.
- Flatt: And food stamps, and do you remember any other things? Did you have a victory garden, or...?
- Fischer: We had a small one, but I think most the people in Quincy, if they had a yard, they had a garden in there somehow. (laughs) Tomatoes.
- Flatt: Tomatoes. Oh, and everybody loves the Illinois tomatoes.
- Fischer: Yeah, everybody loves tomatoes.
- Flatt: Do you remember any other things, like collecting stuff to turn in for the war effort?
- Fischer: Not really. I was so wrapped up, I guess, in my sports and going down to the YMCA that I was so busy in sports and that.
- Flatt: Well, that would be pretty typical for a young guy that age. Okay. So you went to Chicago to the draft board. Tell us a little bit more about that and what happened.
- Fischer: Well, at the draft board, there was Army guys. There was the one that was signing you up for wherever you went—the Navy, Air Force, or Army or Marines or what, wherever they needed you. I had a first class sergeant that was interviewing me, and he said, "You know what? You'd make a nice Navy

guy.” (Flatt laughs) And I thought, what’s he up to? Here’s an Army guy, and I knew there’d be a little friction there, you know. And I said, “No,” I says, “All my buddies are going in the Army, and they already signed in ahead of me.” So I said, “I just want to go and then I’ll be with them, because the whole football team, you know, we’d be all together.” So I got up, and says, “Okay,” and he stamped it. And I got up and I turned around, and I says, “Could you change that? I think I will take the Navy.” And he said, “I sure can,” and he erased it and stamped it over to the Navy.

Flatt: (laughs) What made you change your mind?

Fischer: Well, something told me. I cannot explain it, but it was the best thing in my life, I guess—the reason I changed—because I’m here today, and if I’d have went with them, some of them got killed. I’m a gung-ho guy, (laughs) and so it would have been pretty rough.

Flatt: For a guy from central Illinois, central part of the country, was there any appeal to a new experience, being out on a ship or something? Did that have anything to do with it?

Fischer: No. (laughs)

Flatt: No, no? Just that feeling that came down.

Fischer: Just had a funny feeling, and I’m glad I did.

Flatt: Well, once he stamped your card for you, how long was it before you were actually inducted?

Fischer: Some of them went in right away, but I was told by an expert that was in the Navy before the war, “Jon,” he says, “don’t believe what they tell you, a lot of things, but if they tell you to take a leave, just take it, because they could change their mind.” I said to them, “I got things to do back in Quincy to get ready for this trip and everything.” So I got a week. And I was told that if you take that week ahead of time, when you got out of boot camp you didn’t get it. Well, I had a chance to take it, so I thought I’d take it. Well, I did, and straightened off all my affairs, tell all my buddies goodbye and everything, and after boot camp, I still got my seven days’ leave. (laughs)

Flatt: Well, that worked out well for you, didn’t it? So where did you go for boot camp?

Fischer: At Great Lakes Naval Base up there.

- Flatt: Naval Training Station,<sup>1</sup> I believe it's called.
- Fischer: Training Station, that's what they called it, a training station.
- Flatt: Great Lakes Naval Training Station, right. Okay. How long did that last?
- Fischer: That's six weeks. They cut it short on account of the war.
- Flatt: Yeah, well, there was a lot of pressure right in the middle of the war. They needed lots of replacement people.
- Fischer: They needed us.
- Flatt: Sure. And tell me about boot camp in the Navy. What did they have you do?
- Fischer: Well, most the time we're marching and drilling to get us used to when you get orders and everything, build our esteem up, I guess you could call it. It was a change in our life, where we had to do what he says and marching and everything.
- Flatt: Like discipline? (laughs)
- Fischer: Discipline, yeah. (clears throat) Excuse me.
- Flatt: So did they have barracks there; what were the quarters like?
- Fischer: We had two-story barracks. Some companies was up above us, and our company was down below. I can't remember offhand how many slept, but it's quite a few, because we had triple bunks.
- Flatt: They were getting used to being on a ship, right? (laughter) Okay. Then boot camp was over in six weeks, and you say you got that other week off.
- Fischer: Seven days' leave.
- Flatt: Pretty nice, yeah. How did you get home in those days, on a train or...?
- Fischer: A train, mm-hmm. You had to stand up, though, because all the seats are taken.
- Flatt: Just so many troops being—
- Fischer: Everybody.
- Flatt: —moved around.

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<sup>1</sup> Great Lakes Naval Training Station is located on the shore of Lake Michigan north of Chicago near the Wisconsin border. (*Editor*)

- Fischer: Because the buses I don't think were running, on account of the gasoline.
- Flatt: True. And, of course, flying was not a big deal.
- Fischer: Not a big deal, then, no.
- Flatt: Very little commercial flying going on, and the military flying was all aimed at the war effort. Well, did they send you back to Great Lakes to be dispersed elsewhere, or did they send you with your orders to go to your next place?
- Fischer: I had my orders, and got them through the mail, I think it was, and I went down to St. Louis to catch—let me see, did I go fly down there?—went to catch a train. During World War II, most any time you had a troop train or you went somewhere, it was always in the night, one or two o'clock in the morning. It never was, say, at six o'clock daylight. Any time you went some place, for some reason—for safety reasons, I guess—it was during the night.
- Flatt: That's interesting.
- Fischer: And so I went down to Norfolk, Virginia, the gunnery school, and I was down there about a month and a half, using all kinds of guns.
- Flatt: Okay, now this is for the Navy, of course, so this is not small arms, this is big stuff—
- Fischer: This is bigger stuff, yes.
- Flatt: —that they'd use only on a ship. What were some of those weapons?
- Fischer: I was a first loader. I threw the shells in the guns, and I was the first loader. Had three-inch fifty and had a four-inch fifty, and we had a five-inch thirty-eight. A five-inch thirty-eight is separate shells, projector is real big and heavy, about twenty-five pounds; then I got a guy in back of me that's got the powder, and he throws it in at the same time I get the shell.
- Flatt: Okay. Jon held up his arms and showed me a lock about eighteen inches, maybe, for this thing.
- Fischer: Yeah, it's a big...
- Flatt: And that was for the thirty-eight, you say?
- Fischer: Five-inch thirty-eight, yes.
- Flatt: Any other smaller caliber weapons that you had training in?
- Fischer: Well, in boot camp we fired rifles and pistols for a short time, just to get used to the guns.

- Flatt: Okay. Now, were these three kinds of gun that you described, were these all flat-trajectory guns, or were any of them like Howitzers?
- Fischer: No, three-inch fifty is aircraft or surface, and the four-inch fifty is just surface; you can't elevate it or anything. And the five-inch thirty-eights, which is on our destroyers, you can aircraft and—both.
- Flatt: Oh, okay. Yeah, you see pictures of them tilting and swiveling.
- Fischer: The ships at first, when they put the four-inch fifty on, and they came back in and they took the four-inch fifty off and switched that three-fifty because we'd use it against aircraft and submarines.
- Flatt: Okay, that's interesting. I learn something new every day. So gunnery school was about a month and a half, you said, and then what happened?
- Fischer: Well, then I went to Brooklyn, New York, Armed Guard Center. The Armed Guard Center is like a big armory like National Guard has. They got a balcony in it with seats and everything like this, and then they got buildings around this where you sleep at night, and you wait there to get on a ship. They assign you to ships as they're being built.
- Flatt: Okay. Was that strictly a holding place, or did you have any additional duties?
- Fischer: No, I'd say it's a holding place.
- Flatt: Okay. What did they call that?
- Fischer: Well, just the name of it was Armed Guard Center.
- Flatt: Armed Guard Center, okay. Then what was the next move? How long were you there, by the way?
- Fischer: Oh, I was there almost till December, from July—I'd say July–December. I was getting my teeth fixed, and they had a little problem. So they had to fix my teeth before I could go out, so you can (laughs) chew your food.
- Flatt: Well, you already had three months—or, I'm sorry, three weeks, and then about another six weeks at Norfolk, so—
- Fischer: That'd be about August, I'd say, to December.
- Flatt: So the rest of the time, then, you were just holding. Why do you think it took that long for them to ship you out?
- Fischer: I have to go off-base—
- Flatt: Oh, you said your teeth, I'm sorry.

Fischer: Yeah, my teeth. I have to go off-base to get my teeth fixed. They didn't have a dentist on the base. I'd have to catch a subway, (laughs) and it takes time, and he can't do everything at once.

Flatt: Sure. Well, so some of the buddies that you went there with originally, then, probably were gone before you were, weren't they?

Fischer: Right, right.

Flatt: What was the next thing that happened, your next move?

Fischer: Well, so in December, I got assigned to a ship. I got my teeth fixed and everything was over with, so I got out the next day. We left during the night again; we went to Staten Island by bus and then took the ferry over to Staten Island, and at Staten Island the *Joseph S. Emery* was sitting there for us. And we went aboard that—

Flatt: Now, what kind of ship is that?

Fischer: That's a Liberty ship.

Flatt: Liberty ship, okay. Who operates the Liberty ships?

Fischer: Merchant crew.

Flatt: So that's a Merchant Marine vessel, not a Navy vessel.

Fischer: It's a Merchant Marine, and we're Navy Armed Guard that's gunners on those ships, in case we see any planes or anything, to protect the merchant crew.

Flatt: That's interesting. Recently on the Military Channel, they had a whole program about the German submarines that were off our east coast, basically going after the supply ships, the Merchant Marine ships.

Fischer: They usually tried to get the tankers first. The tankers was on the outside of the convoy, every time, so they're away from us when they get hit, so they don't—

Flatt: They don't run up the risk...

Fischer: —get to blow up our ships.

Flatt: So you got on the *Emery* and went where?

Fischer: Went through the Mediterranean Sea and down the Suez Canal—

Flatt: Didn't you load up first?

Fischer: Beg your pardon?



- Flatt: From Staten Island, I think you went to—
- Fischer: Oh, excuse me. We went to Philadelphia Navy Base, and we loaded up with blockbuster bombs and four train engines. We didn't know at the time 'til we hit the Mediterranean that this stuff was going to Russia.
- Flatt: To Russia. They were "Allies" during World War II, weren't they? So these were just the engines?
- Fischer: Just four engine and blockbusters. The bombs would blow up a whole block.
- Flatt: And this Liberty ship, the *Emery*, could get four big engines—
- Fischer: No, they're not large. The European trains are smaller tracks than ours, so they don't have as big of engines like we do.
- Flatt: Oh, okay. Well, that's interesting.
- Fischer: Otherwise we couldn't have hauled any big engines at all.
- Flatt: Were these like what they called donkey engines?
- Fischer: I think so. It's small.
- Flatt: It's just small, for moving stuff around—
- Fischer: Yeah, just to pull small trains.
- Flatt: Okay, all right. And the blockbusters were bombs?
- Fischer: Yeah. One bomb would blow a square block.
- Flatt: Oh, boy. Now, these are clearly bombs that would have been dropped from an airplane?
- Fischer: Yeah.
- Flatt: Okay. You talked about the convoy. How many ships were in that convoy?
- Fischer: I found out later that we had 150-plus ships in our convoy, including landing craft—which we didn't know at the time why they was with us. We had 150-plus ships in this convoy, and they said it was the biggest convoy to cross the Atlantic. We got to the Mediterranean, all that landing craft—we didn't know anything about the Normandy or anything at this time—and all these landing craft pulled away from our convoy and went to England.
- Flatt: Oh, they were getting ready for Normandy, weren't they? Sure.
- Fischer: When we was going through the Mediterranean.

Flatt: Now, this would have been when, about? This would have been what time of year?

Fischer: This would have been about a month before Normandy was invaded.

Flatt: Oh, okay, that makes sense. Now, these landing craft, of course, are quite small compared to even a merchant ship.

Fischer: Right.

Flatt: So they were plowing across the Atlantic right with the convoy?

Fischer: Yeah, and the Atlantic was pretty rough at that time, so we know a lot of them people that was on board there were sick.

Flatt: How about on your ship?

Fischer: Well, a few of us got sick, too.

Flatt: Yeah. Lots of people, from other interviews I've done, seem to have run into bad weather going across either one of the oceans. Up and down, up and down. (laughs) Not easy, is it?

So you were headed for Russia. The landing craft peeled off where? What was the first port where you made?

Fischer: I'd say they peeled off about a day before we saw Gibraltar at the opening of the Mediterranean. Of course, we didn't know where they was going at the time, understand, because we wasn't allowed to have no diary or nothing, or maps to find out where we're at.

Flatt: Oh, that's interesting. There was an old saying that the Navy had—

Fischer: Just had to go by mouth. (laughs)

Flatt: Yeah. Well, they said, "Loose lips sink ships"—remember that motto?

Fischer: Yes, mm-hmm.

Flatt: So you got to the Mediterranean; the waters were a little calmer at that point, weren't they?

Fischer: Yeah, we didn't have no storms through the Mediterranean.

Flatt: Did you make any stops at ports along the way?

Fischer: No, we went right to the Suez Canal. Well, of course, the convoy all broke up in the Mediterranean, going to different ports. I think about three of our ships, we went down through the Suez Canal. You go down the Suez Canal and you

got the Great Bitter Lake, they call it, and Little Bitter Lake. Well, our ships pull away from the canal and go to these lakes and drop anchor and wait to go to our next port. Wherever these other two ships went, I don't know.

Flatt: Now, give me some idea on a map of where this Great Bitter Lake is.

Fischer: It's right at the end of Suez Canal, off to the right—if you're going through the canal, it's off to the right. Then from the Great Bitter Lake we had to wait, because only one ship could go up the Tigris–Euphrates River and one ship come back, because the dock up by Iran could only hold one ship. So these other two ships left us, and, of course, I don't know where they went to—India or anyplace. But anyway, so we went up to the Tigris–Euphrates River and tied up the dock at Iran.

The Russians came with their engine pushing some open-aired cars. The Russian lieutenant stood down at our gangway, the submachine gun over his arm, with his finger on the trigger, and we had orders not to talk to him. I couldn't figure out why he was doing that. I thought they were supposed to be our allies, and I don't know why he was guarding our ship at that time. Iran closed down the whole town, and there wasn't even a dog on the street as long as we was there.

So the merchant crew unloaded the bombs down to the trains, and the Russian soldiers placed these bombs where they're supposed to. We only had liberty for a couple of hours. There wasn't no place to go because the town was closed down, and we was right there within two or three blocks of it. So once we got unloaded, we headed back down the Tigris–Euphrates River again with a pilot on board, you know, because it's a river, and you've got to stay right in the middle or you'd ground your ship.

Flatt: So you need a pilot to get you through safely.

Fischer: You need a pilot, yeah.

Flatt: That's pretty standard procedure on ships.

Fischer: So we went back down and we anchored off of Ethiopia—I think it was—and we waited there for one or two days.<sup>2</sup> Then we went back up the canal, and then we went into Port Sudan. Our ship was empty and we went into Port Sudan, and tied up next to two other Liberty ships at the same dock. We had to wait there because ships coming down the canal are going back up, so we have to wait to what we're going to do, get orders to where our ships were supposed to go.

Flatt: Were there locks on the canal? Fischer: Yes, yes, yes.

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<sup>2</sup> On a National Geographic map the major port seems to be Mersa Fatma, which is, as this time, part of Eritrea.

- Flatt: So, that's one reason for the one at a time.
- Fischer: They got locks, yes. Go up, you know, and then drop you down. Yes.
- Flatt: Okay. Now you're empty.
- Fischer: We're empty.
- Flatt: The boat's a little different, isn't it?
- Fischer: Yes. And we went back up the canal. We was behind schedule, and according to what I heard rumored from the merchant crew, if we could catch a convoy once we got out of the Suez Canal, we could go back to the United States even though we was empty. And of course we roll and toss like a cork. So we put it full speed ahead, about nine knots or ten knots.<sup>3</sup> A fog rolled in, and we couldn't see our hand in front of our face, so we had orders to stop. We pulled into Arzew, Africa and we took on a little ballast. It wasn't enough, though—our screw<sup>4</sup> was still out of the water. When our ship would go up and down, the screw would go around and shake the whole ship. And so finally we got in a convoy. Because we was one month over the limit—every six months, we got to go back to the States—and we was in our seventh month, and so the guys was kind of irritated because, you know, taking this extra month. So we caught the convoy all right. Then about two weeks out of New York we was in a great big storm. Since we didn't have enough ballast on our ship to keep it level, hold it down, we was rolling forty-five degrees, which we could almost turn over—possibility of turning over.
- Flatt: When you say rolling forty-five degrees, you mean side-to-side, not front-to-back.
- Fischer: Yeah, it was like this.
- Flatt: That gets pretty dicey.
- Fischer: The Atlantic has some pretty bad storms. I got off watch at twelve o'clock one night, and I thought, Well, I can't sleep with this ship pitching forty-five degrees. I'm going to just go out here and stand by this life raft, and if anything happens, I'm going overboard with it. As I was out there and I looked up, our ship was at forty-five degrees and another ship was ready to come right down on the side of us. They blew the whistles, flashed the lights, and as we went down, that ship went down, and they missed us.
- Flatt: How much did they miss you by?
- Fischer: Oh, probably like this.

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<sup>3</sup> Approximately 10 to 11-1/2 miles per hour

<sup>4</sup> Screw is slang for propeller.

- Flatt: Oh my goodness, almost touching.
- Fischer: Almost touching. If they'd have hit us, I probably wouldn't be here talking to you.
- Flatt: Oh my goodness.
- Fischer: Because the sea was so rough and black we couldn't see our hand in front of our face. It was that dark. You couldn't...
- Flatt: You mentioned the ballast and that you didn't really have enough. What was the ballast you picked up—that was in the Mediterranean.
- Fischer: Oh, some kind of powder they mix with brass and copper—bauxite. And so we didn't really have enough, and I guess the captain wanted to get back to the United States—you know, six months out. They're not used to being out over six months because barnacles form on a merchant ship, and it cuts their speed down to five, which we are subject to a submarine. We can't outrun them or anything because submarines could do about nine knots at that time underneath the water, or eight, and if we was doing just five knots, they could catch us real quick; we'd be sitting ducks. So that's why we've got to come back every six months and get the barnacles scraped off the bottom and repainted.
- Flatt: Interesting. In fact, in the Navy, you see a lot of seamen scraping the barnacles. But this is a merchant ship. Who did the...?
- Fischer: They was a regular—guys in New York. Pulled into New York to drydock, and of course they're just workers from New York; they just had to do that. The Navy necessarily don't—
- Flatt: So you didn't have to do any barnacle work? (laughs)
- Fischer: No. The only thing we did was stood watch and go off the ship to eat because we didn't have nothing to eat on the ship or anything. So we had to go off and eat along the docks.
- Flatt: Well, let's back up just a little bit. Now you're working with the merchant crew, but you're the Navy guys defending the civilians, basically.
- Fischer: Mm-hmm.
- Flatt: How did that work?
- Fischer: Well, for some reason, we had orders not to get acquainted with the merchant guys. Of course, they made three or four more times a month—maybe more—thousands more than we did in pay. I thought about it; it's probably that there'd be some friction there if we associated with them. The Merchant

Marine officers were not allowed to talk to us, and we wasn't allowed to talk to them.

Flatt: No fraternization rules—that usually applies to the natives or to girls, doesn't it? (laughs)

Fischer: Yeah. So it was so separated that even... I lived mid-ships, where the officers lived above us and everything, in mid-ship all the time. Even some of the Navy crew that lived on the stern of the ship, I just hardly knew them by name because they was in a different watch than I was, and when on Liberty, we was separated, you know, and didn't go at once. So we still wasn't close. And just like we pulled up to three ships there in Port Sudan—I never even got a chance to talk to any of the armed guard on either one of their ships. We didn't do it. They didn't associate. Didn't come over on our ship; we didn't go over to their ships and talk to each other.

Flatt: Now, were all the guys who were bunking with you, were they all gunners, or were there—

Fischer: Yeah, they were all Navy—four of us to each quarters, I think it was. Had double bunks.

Flatt: You only had double?

Fischer: Yeah.

Flatt: Well, you missed out on those six highs.

Fischer: No, we just had double bunks on a merchant ship.

Flatt: (laughs) You were living the life.

Fischer: And our mattresses was five inches thick. (laughs) You get a clean sheet a week. You hand in a sheet, you get a clean sheet. Every week. After we was out a while—after we entered the Mediterranean, I think it was—then you opened up the stores, and you could get a carton of cigarettes for fifty cents (laughter) if you smoked.

Flatt: Yeah, I'll bet you didn't smoke.

Fischer: But I used to get them and give them to the guys that smoked, you know. They'd give me the fifty cents back.

Flatt: Were the gunners the only people, or did the Navy have like a radio man or...?

Fischer: No, merchant had their own radioman. We had two signalmen, that's all—for flags—in our Navy crew. They lived in a separate place than our gun crew,

(laughs) so we was a little strangers to them, too, because they was up on the bridge all the time, see.

Flatt: Well, they would be, yes.

Fischer: And we was on our guns or else in our quarters, so we never saw them too much either.

Flatt: So what about mess?

Fischer: About what?

Flatt: Mess, you know, food.

Fischer: Food? Well, the merchant crew had their mess hall, and off to the side there was about, I'd say, a six-foot gap in between their mess hall and our mess hall. In the six-foot gap that's in between the mess halls, they had a scullery man, they called him. He wasn't a cook. But anyway, he took all our dirty dishes and everything and the food and threw it in this barrel and everything. So we was separated. They ate with themselves, and we ate by ourselves.

Flatt: That's interesting, that there was... And you're all Americans, but you're very much separated. Interesting. Well, different duty and so forth.

Fischer: It was odd.

Flatt: Back a minute, you said you were mid-ships. I'm sure you realize how lucky you were, because in a light-ballast boat, you're tipping front and back as well as side-to-side, and the smallest amount of tipping front-to-back, certainly, comes mid-ship, so that was probably a good place to be.

Fischer: For both ships, I slept mid-ships.

Flatt: Well, they must have been arranged that way.

Fischer: And some of the guys, I guess the old salts, you know, that had been in longer than me, a lot of them preferred the back or the stern, because you know why? I found out. If your ship gets hit by a torpedo, it's always mid-ship.

Flatt: Oh. That's what they would aim for, sure.

Fischer: But on the back, the stern, that's where our ammunition was stored, extra ammunition. We had ammunition on our guns, but the extra ammunition was stored right underneath their sleeping quarters. I got off a watch at twelve o'clock and I was half-asleep when I hit that bunk. My gunnery officer comes and says, "Jon, we need somebody to come back. The ammunition broke loose in the stern of the ship." And I was so sleepy and everything, and I said, "Well, what about the guys living back there? They could have got up and

helped you. Why did you come to me?" But of course I was stripping as a gunner's mate, and I could lift heavy—I was used to loading shells. But I went back to sleep. (laughter) The guy told me ahead of time, he says, "Whatever you do, don't volunteer." (laughter) Well, I was too sleepy, otherwise I'd have went. And it was after twelve o'clock at night.

Flatt: How long were the crossings? Was it a couple of weeks to get across when you went back to the States? What kind of duty did you have then?

Fischer: Much longer than two weeks. Well, in the merchant crew, of course, they got to oil their machinery down and wipe things off and hose the decks. We didn't do that; they did all that. The only thing we did is, we might take our guns and clean them one at a time—not all at once, you know—because we had to have guns ready.

Flatt: Ready, sure.

Fischer: But we'd clean maybe one gun and then go to the next gun the next day or something, because it wouldn't take us long to do it. Then we had to clean the foc'sles [forecastle] out where we slept; we had to sweep them out and mop them out, and then we had to wash our clothes. And with clothes that we washed we didn't have no dryers or anything, so what we did is they had clotheslines hanging over the engine room. In the engine room, you opened up the door and there's clotheslines, so we—(laughter) if you're going in there and find an empty one, you're lucky. (laughs)

Flatt: I suppose it was warm there.

Fischer: Yeah, the heat from the engines and everything, it was always warm in there, and it'd dry our clothes.

Flatt: Well, you talked about cleaning your guns regularly. In that salt air, that would be very important, wouldn't it?

Fischer: Yeah. The salt air is harder. That's why you—

Flatt: You clean them, and do you oil them, or...?

Fischer: We oil them, yeah, put oil on them—lightly, lightly.

Flatt: It's a good thing barnacles grow only in the water. Can you imagine having barnacles inside your gun? I think that would gum up the works!

Fischer: And we also had covers over our guns in case we was in a squall where the water would come up over the ship or the rain. We had our guns covered up with canvas, pretty well protected in that way.

Flatt: Just loose canvas covers?



- Fischer: No, they was canvas that fitted the gun. Like a big barrel is sticking out—you'd slide the opening over it and slide it back to the—like that. It wasn't a regular canvas where you tied it down or anything.
- Flatt: Did you have any drill while you were aboard ship?
- Fischer: Yeah, we had GQ, they'd call them, general quarters. They'd ring the ship's alarm, and you'd run up to the guns. If you were in bed or anything, you didn't bother to put your clothes on or anything like that; you just slipped into your shoes and ran. And then they'd time you to see how quickly you could get to them.
- Flatt: Yeah. That's because if you had a need for it as opposed to a drill, like—
- Fischer: Yeah, if it was real—
- Flatt: —you don't worry about whether you have on your best clothes.
- Fischer: We was in Naples, Italy and had general quarters. It was at night. A German plane come over, and we could hear it. The Army let loose with every gun they had. But we couldn't fire our guns, because they said if we fired our guns, that plane would know where our ships were.
- Flatt: It would give you away.
- Fischer: It was a German spotter, and that's all it was. And all the Army guns, all around Mt. Vesuvius, they was just shooting up there all kinds, just like a Fourth of July with all these tracers and everything going up there. (laughs)
- Flatt: That had to be a little scary, though, at that.
- Fischer: It was. And Italians, they was shooting out all the lights on the dock. So I hid behind a ship's armor when I went out to see what was going on. I hid behind it because, you know, them rifle bullets flying all over and blowing these lights off that dock—I didn't want one of them to come over where I was. (laughs) It was quite an experience.
- Flatt: I'll bet. Did you see any other action during that particular run in the Atlantic?
- Fischer: No. When we went through the Mediterranean the first time, I think they call it a JU-88—it's a twin-engine German bomber.
- Flatt: Junkers?
- Fischer: No, not the Junker. And anyway, we could see that up there, and when we was going through the Mediterranean, it was up pretty high, and we could see it. And of course you ran up on our guns. We got orders not to fire at it because they couldn't do anything. It came off of Sicily, I think, where the Germans

still are, but they didn't bother Sicily because they didn't have no aircraft or anything to hurt anybody, so they left them alone there for a while. So we had orders not to fire. We could have knocked this plane down—I'm pretty sure we could have—but they said leave it go. When it was up there flying straight, it went down like this to get down closer to photograph our ships, probably, and then it went back up. Because if it had come down, I think we'd have had orders to knock it down.

Flatt: Okay. Well, let's see. (pause) So after you left Arzew, Africa, and so forth, and headed to New York City, is that where you next stopped, after you got through the Mediterranean and Gibraltar?

Fischer: Yeah, that's where the ship was all scraped and painted and everything. People that lived within a certain mileage that could go home, they was allowed first off the ship. Some of them lived in New Jersey and New York; they could go home first because these guys are right there; they could go on liberty and go home. So the ones that lived further away from the ship got a chance within so many days—I forget how many days—a week, about a week, because our ship would be done by then, see. So when we got back on it, then we headed back across again.

Flatt: Okay. What was your load when you went back?

Fischer: When we went back, I think they loaded us down with ammunition, small arms, and whatever the Army food is, rations, they call them—

Flatt: C-rations?

Fischer: C-rations, whatever they call them, we was loaded down with them. And we had a couple Jeeps on board; of course, they was sitting on the deck. And I think we had medicine. I think that second trip we had just about everything that ship could hold, you know, to help the soldiers.

Flatt: And where did you take that, on that second trip?

Fischer: Like I say, all the ships split up when we go in the Mediterranean, and so we went up to Naples, Italy. We didn't know it at the time. Then we unloaded this stuff and everything, and then we loaded down with small-arms ammunition and medical supplies. The battleship *Texas* was up there, and our merchant crew ships never run into any big Navy ships of any sort. We'd just have destroyers that escort us or DEs. Of course, no questions, you didn't ask nobody or nobody said anything, but anyway we got loaded. This battleship *Texas* went with the convoy to invade southern France. So the *Texas* bombarded ahead like they always do, because about that time, the Germans didn't have a big, tough army at southern France, and of course that one battleship was all they needed to bombard their fortifications that the French made. You know, those out of concrete. So then we was on second wave, and

we could see the guns—I could see them flashing—and they said it’s about twenty-three miles where our troops was engaging the Germans.

Flatt: Very interesting. What cities were those?

Fischer: That’s St. Tropez. And that was a good little story, St. Tropez. Every port we’d go to, we’d get a liberty, but this time we didn’t get it. And everybody’s coming to me for some reason to find out and says, Would you go up and ask him, or things like this, why we wasn’t getting liberty? Well, I thought to myself, that’s hindering me too, because the town was just about a couple blocks, so we didn’t have to hitchhike or nothing—it was right there, and the battle was twenty-three, twenty-five miles away this way. And so I went up and talked to him, and I said, “Is it true that we don’t get any liberty? The town’s right there, and anything that happens, we could run right back to our ship.” He says, “Well, Jon, “there’s an accident that happened. One of our Americans raped one of the French women, and so the French hung him.” That’s what he said, “They hung him, and that’s why we couldn’t go ashore.”

But I got off watch and was going to my quarters, and one of the guys come in, and he says, “Shh, come on, Jon, we want you to go with us.” I says, “Go where?” And he says, “We’re going to go ashore.” And I says, “Well, you can’t go ashore. You heard what the lieutenant said—we can’t go.” He says, “Well, what we’re going to do, we’re going to crawl down...” We was tied up to the dock, and they didn’t have these big metal things that stop rats from coming aboard.<sup>5</sup> We didn’t have one, so you just climbed the rope down to the dock. And of course, being athletic as I was, I guess that’s why they asked me to go. There was a couple from the back half and one from where I lived on the other side, and there was four of us. One of the guys happened to be a buddy that I run around with. He was from New Jersey, a Jewish boy. I had a Jewish friend back home, and that’s why I kind of catered to him. So he went ahead of me down this rope—or line, I should say. It’s not a rope in the Navy; it’s a line. And it’s about this big around.

Flatt: About three or four inches.

Fischer: And so I’m going down like this with my feet up, and pretty soon his feet drop, and he says, “Jon,” he says, “I can’t hold on any longer.” I said, “Don’t you drop.” I thought, Boy, if he drops in that water, why, we’d all be in trouble. So I said, “Now, you hang on with your arms. I’m coming up, and I’m going to wrap my legs around your waist.” So I walked down the rope to the dock. So anyway, we had our flashlights, and so we was following a path. And on the side of that path was German signs: “Achtung.” Well, I knew what they meant—mines. We was walking through a minefield. And so we was

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<sup>5</sup> A rat excluder is a large funnel with a hole at the narrow end; it fits over the dockline, narrow end toward the ship, snugly enough to keep rats from the ship. Rats are curious explorers and create havoc inside a ship, hence the need to exclude them. (*Editor*)

walking, and I said, “Don’t anybody get off this path because these are mines off the side.”

So we come up on a fortification, one of these cement ones. So we went in there—of course we had our flashlights—and it was a mess, because our army used flamethrowers on these Germans, and one of them was still there. And this one guy picked up something—I don’t know what it was. There wasn’t no souvenirs left that we could get. I said, “Let’s get out of here. Let’s get out of here.” So we got back on a path and walked about a half a block or so, and pretty soon I could hear, *click, click, click*. You know.

Flatt: Jon’s making a motion like pulling a trigger.

Fischer: I says, “Hit the decks, fellas, hit the deck,” and we all fell on our stomachs. The guy in front of me lived on the stern of our ship. He reached in his back pocket and pulled out an Italian Beretta, which is a pistol. And I thought, where in the heck...? At that time, I was thinking quick. I said, “You get that back in your pants right now. All four of us are going to be shot.” And he put it back underneath his waist like this here. So I heard somebody hollering, and I says, “Americanos—we’re Americans, we’re Americans!” And he says, “Well, come on in.” So we stood up and we walked in.

It was a French garrison, and so happened the lieutenant lived in New York before the war. So when the Germans invaded France and started an army, he came back. And so he talked to me, and I talked to him. I’d lived in New York for a few months and all this stuff. So that kind of quieted things down. He had four wagons over there, farm wagons, going up in a V, and it was all full of German uniforms. And boy, I said to him, “Do you mind if I go over and yank a coat or something out of there? I don’t care what size it is, you know—just yank it for a souvenir.” He says, “No, you come back in the morning; you can take all you want.” And I thought, We can’t get back in the morning.

Oh, here comes my wife and my grandson, great-grandson.

[male]: (unintelligible).

Fischer: Hi. She’s interviewing me, Donald.

Fischer: We’re still good yet?

Flatt: Oh, we have lots of time, yeah.

Fischer: Well, anyway, so we came directly back, followed a path back direct to the ship. Well, I knew this guy couldn’t climb that rope, so I said, “You stay here. I’ll go back up, and I’ll see who’s on guard duty.” You know, because we got a Navy guy with a .45. So I climbed the rope back up and went down, and I knew who it was. And I said, “Would you do me a favor?” And they knew me

pretty well because I'd boxed. They knew me pretty well. And I said, "Would you take a walk right here back toward the stern a little bit and don't turn around?" And so this guy came up the gangplank (laughs) and got on board. (laughs)

Flatt: It worked.

Fischer: So after I thought this all over, then I knew why they took me.

Flatt: Yeah.

Fischer: And anyway, everything turned out all right.

Flatt: That was—yeah, fortunately, all's well that ended well.

Fischer: Yeah, that was a close call.

Flatt: All right, so now you're in the south of France, where people go for vacation time. (laughter) It wasn't vacation then, was it?

Fischer: Yeah, I like to have got off there into that town.

Flatt: Now, about what would be the timeframe there, Jon?

Fischer: Oh, gosh.

Flatt: Was this after Normandy, or still before?

Fischer: Well, this is after Normandy, because we was in Iran—or did you say Oran?—when Normandy was invaded.

Flatt: Okay, there we go. So after you left St. Tropez, then did you go...where?

Fischer: Well, after we left there, we loaded up, went to...St. Tropez...went to another port right there; I forget where it was.

Flatt: Marseilles, maybe?

Fischer: Another French port. St. Tropez, St....

Flatt: Marseilles, maybe? That's a port city.

Fischer: What?

Flatt: Marseilles? Marseilles?

Fischer: Well, we went to Marseilles. You had to go down around the boot of Italy to get back up to Marseilles. We took something to Marseilles from this one other French town that was down the coast a ways. It wasn't in on invasion. I

forget what it was. It wasn't very much stuff. So we went to Marseilles, and then we shuttled back and forth. We went to Iran and shuttled back and forth several times right there. We didn't go back up to Naples. Well, six months comes around pretty fast when you're doing a lot of this shuttling, you know, back and forth war goods from one port to another.

The first time we went to Marseilles, there was no electricity—no electricity—so our liberty was cut short to about I think seven o'clock at night. You know us Navy guys. Of course, I went into town and looked around at a lot of buildings. And we wasn't allowed in restaurants. We wasn't allowed to go in a restaurant to eat or anything. At the head of Marseilles there's Notre Dame Cathedral, and it's got a gold dome on top, and it just **shines**. They painted it gold, and it just **shines** in the daytime. And I wanted to go there awful bad, so the third time we went up there, the electricity came on, so they started the trolleys—you know, electric trolleys like we used to have—and it's like in San Francisco. I had somebody to go with me to show me the way. Anyway, you had to stand up on the trolley, naturally, because it's hanging out the windows or on a side. We went clear out there, and we went up there and went through the Notre Dame Cathedral, went inside of it, and massive and everything, and came back out and got on the trolley—because that was the end of the trolley line, at the entrance to the harbor—and got on this trolley and came back.

Her uncle run a tavern and a restaurant right where our ship was, right on the dock, and that's how I got acquainted. I asked her to show me around the town. She just worked part-time because she was too young to serve liquor. I guess they got a law same as we had, even though the war was on. You'd order something, and she couldn't serve you; it'd have to be one of the older people.

Flatt: Now, this "she" is the somebody you said who took you around.

Fischer: Yeah, a girl. She was seventeen.

Flatt: And, let's see, how old were you then, about nineteen?

Fischer: I was nineteen, twenty. (laughter)

Flatt: No trouble for a good-looking young GI to find a lady, I expect, (Fischer laughs) in those days, was it? (laughs)

Fischer: Well, I think when they found out that I didn't drink or smoke, that they'd cater to me more than... You know, because there's nothing like a soldier or a Navy drunk to slobber all over you.

Flatt: Yeah, you're right about that. Okay, how long were you there? You said that you had offloaded stuff. We got on so many subjects...

- Fischer: We've run around six months again.
- Flatt: Well, you offloaded stuff onto what? Did you offload onto that big Navy ship you talked about, or who did you offload to in the Mediterranean at that point?
- Fischer: We just went to docks, country, like Marseille and Oran.
- Flatt: All right, okay, I misunderstood.
- Fischer: See it was like all finished in Africa—you know, Rommel was driven out—and so we was bringing all the supplies and guns up to Marseilles. Of course where they went, the Army trucks took them, you know. We didn't have no troops—we didn't haul any troops all the time as in the Atlantic.
- Flatt: Okay. Now, some of the Liberty ships did hold troops, didn't they?
- Fischer: Yes, they did.
- Flatt: But yours was always a...
- Fischer: Mostly supplies.
- Flatt: A supply ship, yeah.
- Fischer: We didn't have quarters for troops.
- Flatt: Oh, well, that would make the difference, sure. So there were different kinds of merchant ships or Liberty ships, is what you're telling me.
- Fischer: Yeah, they were different, but they was still merchant ships.
- Flatt: All right, now, let's leave Marseilles and St. Tropez, and you then head back to the U.S. Were you empty and without ballast again?
- Fischer: No, we took on—I forget what was in the hold—we took on ballast somewhere; I don't know what it was. And, of course, when we leave, we take all our food out of our lockers and give it to the people that's still over there, the ships that's still over there. We only take enough food—like, we ate turkey all the way back to the United States. (laughter) He tried to cook—I know he'd fix it a lot of different ways, but he could fix it.
- Flatt: But it was still turkey, huh? (laughs)
- Fischer: It was still turkey.
- Flatt: Okay. So how was the trip coming back? Was it another rough one?
- Fischer: This was the **roughest** one. We was two weeks out of New York, and our ship was pitching and everything. I got off watch, and the next morning, I get up, I

says, "What's that Navy ship doing to that flag? It's half-mast." And he says, "Well, one of the crew died of appendicitis." So, instead of burying him at sea, which normally would have happened, our merchant ships had empty freezers. You know, they took the food out. So they transferred him to one of the merchant ships so they wouldn't have to bury him at sea. He got buried in the United States. Well, either the next day or the next after that, when I went on watch again, I thought, That destroyer can't be flying that flag at half-mast yet; that was a couple, three days ago. Then somebody says, "The president died."

Flatt: Ah. Roosevelt.

Fischer: Roosevelt. Then we came back in the harbor at New York, and if you can recall the *Normandy*—the French liner *Normandy*—it was the biggest in the world—

Flatt: Yes.

Fischer: You know, they was welding or something; they burnt the ship up. Well, we went right by it. It was tied up to a dock, but the superstructure was all taken off. And we went right by it.

I had a brand-new German helmet that I traded some cigarettes for, and I went up to the merchant crew's foc'sle. I was going to build myself a box or find a box to put it in, ship it home. I laid it down right where the anchor is, and when I raised the foc'sle thing up, the lid, I hit this helmet with my arm and knocked it right down where the anchor goes down, and it went *ding, ding, ding, ding—splash*. New York harbor. Brand new German helmet. I felt bad.

Flatt: Oh, yeah. Well, that was going to be a nice souvenir, wasn't it?

Fischer: Yeah, it was. It was brand new. (pause) Anyway, there was a merchant crew: a merchant crew is not allowed to have any contraband whatsoever—guns or nothing like this, ammunition. They can't have nothing, but us guys can. So this one merchant crew I knew real well, a young one, and he traded cigarettes or something for a twin-barrel German machine gun. Had a single trigger—air-cooled. You could lay it across your arm, and it wouldn't burn you. So I told him when he got near port, I said, "Tell you what I'll do. I'll give you fifty dollars for that machine gun." "Oh, no. No, no, no, no, no." I said, "They're going to take it away from you." "Oh, naw..." I said, "Now, last chance." I said, "I'm willing to give you fifty dollars for it so you wouldn't be out any money." "No, no, no." Well, I don't know if I was coming aboard ship from eating, and here comes the inspectors—what do you call them, the...?

Flatt: Customs?



- Fischer: Customs. Had that machine gun underneath his arm. (laughs) Took it away from him.
- Flatt: He forgot the rule; he forgot that people monitor the rules.
- Fischer: Yeah. They searched them, see. When the merchant crew would go ashore, like in New York when you was dry-docked or something, they'd search them. But us Navy guys—we all had to go off to eat. See, we had no food. The only thing we did is sleep. So when we get off, there's always somebody right there, merchant, you know...
- Flatt: Checking.
- Fischer: Checking, feeling you, but none of us.
- Flatt: Where did they feed you? Did they give you money to go to a restaurant, or...?
- Fischer: No, it was our own. It was our own money.
- Flatt: Your own money, and...!
- Fischer: You used your own money.
- Flatt: Oh, for goodness sake. Well, they should have reimbursed you for that, that's for sure.
- Fischer: Of course, I'll tell you, we ate lightly. (laughs)
- Flatt: Okay, so you're back there for drydock and more barnacle-scraping duty.
- Fischer: So we all went on leave. The whole crew went on leave, because we didn't have to guard the ship or anything because it was in drydock. So we all went home on leave, and then we got our orders. I had to go down to St. Louis and then get on a troop train, (laughs) and went out to Stockton, California, to get on my second ship.
- Flatt: What was the name of that ship?
- Fischer: *James A. Wilder—SS James A. Wilder.*
- Flatt: Okay, SS *James A. Wilder.*
- Fischer: We loaded up in Stockton with ammunition and bombing fluid and hardtack again for the troops, and that was about it. I think we had a couple Jeeps. Yeah, we had a couple Jeeps on there again.
- Flatt: Who did the loading?

- Fischer: German prisoners.
- Flatt: German prisoners who'd been brought to United States to do work? That's interesting.
- Fischer: Yeah, they was living there, Stockton... By rumor, what I heard, was they wasn't mean like the Nazis, you know, Nazis; they was **German**. And of course probably they had families back there. And they was pretty free. They could be trusted. I asked the guy, and he said they could trust them.
- Flatt: That's interesting. You know, I had heard many years ago—in fact, at the time—that some Germans were brought back to help farm because a lot of farmers had been inducted, of course.
- Fischer: That's right, they did.
- Flatt: But that's the first time I've heard about doing this kind of duty where they were near military people, so that's interesting.
- Fischer: I asked a lot of questions. And of course there was Army guys on our ship while these guys were loading this up and everything; they said that these German had girlfriends yet. This building that was right next to us was about, well, as high as that ship was, so that'd be three to four stories. And, like, secretaries—and you could see in the windows—secretaries and everything like that, and they told me that these German prisoners, some of them had—
- Flatt: Had girlfriends, huh. Well.
- Fischer: That's how well they could be trusted.
- Flatt: *Vive la difference*, as they say in French.
- Fischer: Well, we was over there with their girlfriends. (laughs)
- Flatt: Yeah, right. There you are. Turnabout is fair play, huh? (laughs) Okay, so how long were you in Stockton, then?
- Fischer: Well, I think I was there a week.
- Flatt: What's the name of the base there, by the way?
- Fischer: It wasn't a base, just a dock where we were unloading.
- Flatt: Oh, commercial dock? Okay.
- Fischer: Yeah, merchant—it wasn't no Army or Navy or anything like that.
- Flatt: All right. That's California, of course. So after you were loaded, what was the next destination?

- Fischer: Well, we headed for—let me see, we didn't go... We headed for Manila.
- Flatt: In the Philippines, okay.
- Fischer: Mm-hmm, in the Philippines. And then we unloaded there. Then, of course, from Manila to New Guinea is not very far; we did take some stuff—not very much or anything. And, of course, the sea was calm. And then we'd run to New Guinea and take a load of stuff, like ammunition and things like this, back out to Manila for the troops, you know, that was driving the Japs back. So we'd unload up there. The last trip we went up—this takes a little time, you know, because there's other ships that got to be unloaded, too, and you got to take your turn. You just can't get up there and get unloaded and go. So the last trip I was on there, we took up Australian soldiers.
- Flatt: Okay, so you actually had troops.
- Fischer: That's the only time. Well, it's only a short distance.
- Flatt: Like one day—
- Fischer: They didn't have to sleep.
- Flatt: Okay. Well, that would make the difference, wouldn't it? Yeah. Australians? Okay. They were certainly good allies during the war, weren't they?
- Fischer: Yes. I talked to them, and you know how they talk. I felt sorry for them and so I asked the cook—and I was a friend of the cook—but we're not allowed to give them any food. If we give anybody—even American troops, if we'd have had somebody out there—we couldn't go through the porthole that was open and give them a pork chop or something that we was eating. We couldn't do that; otherwise, you're going to be reprimanded. And I don't know the penalty, but I thought I heard that you missed a couple meals.

So anyway, so I went in to the head guy, and him and I are just like this anyway, and I says, "You got a lot of tea bags, haven't you?" And he said, "Yeah." I said, "You know yourself, nobody drinks tea, none of us." They've got the coffee going all the time, see—get coffee anytime you want it, going off watch and on. I said, "You got a lot of them, haven't you? Now, would it be okay if you could slip me some of them teabags and I'd give them to these Australian troops, because they don't have any." So he got a sack or a hat or something—I don't know what it was—and he had a whole mess of them. I said, "Thank you," and of course, I hid it so nobody could see it. So I went out there right next to where we was eating, out on the outside. Some of them guys standing there, I said, "Do you guys like to have some tea?" (imitates Australian accent) "You got some tea?" And I said, "Yes, I got some tea." I said, "Shh, don't say nothing. Shh, Let's walk back away from here." So when we got back, I handed it to him. Of course, they got their own burners and

things. So they went back on the stern, and I guess they had a good time with that tea. (laughs)

Flatt: Well, that was nice. It didn't hurt anybody and made some friends.

Fischer: Well, we didn't drink it. We had plenty of it, anyway. None of us guys would drink it.

Flatt: Well, how many times did you shuttle between Manila and New Guinea?

Fischer: Oh, I'd say—(counting under his breath) one, two, three—about four. When we first went up there, now, they didn't have electricity. The streets are dirty, you know, and Army trucks, they're only allowed to do thirty miles an hour; that's about as fast as they can go because of dust. So I went up there, and, of course, I went on liberty, and I met a guy from Quincy, Illinois. When we got to Manila the first couple times, we could wear any kind of clothes we wanted to because it was too dirty for our whites.<sup>6</sup>

Flatt: Oh, yeah.

Fischer: If we'd have went ashore with our whites, we'd have come back black. I gave a soldier that was unloading the ship, I gave him a carton of cigarettes, and I said, "You get me a khaki uniform, I'll get you a carton of cigarettes." The cigarettes were worth about thirty to thirty-five dollars, wherever you're at, some places. And, of course, they didn't get cigarettes. So he brought the pants and the shirt back to me, and he even gave me a hat like the mailman or mail people wear at the post office. They gave me one of them green hats, jungle hats. So I printed on the back, "Quincy, Illinois, U.S. Navy." (laughs)

So I'm down on the dock when we got off. They have to bring us to the dock by boats, Navy boats or boats off our ship. A lot of times they had Navy boats. If there was a Navy ship in there, they had Navy boats scuttling back and forth. So they all posed right there. The merchant crews were the only ones that could have a camera, and we couldn't. So I knew this guy real good, this merchant guy, and I said, "Line up right there, I'll take your picture" and had a couple of the guys off my gun crew. So I was taking their picture, and I heard somebody, "**Hey, Quincy!**" And, who? I'm thousands of miles from home. Who...? (laughter) You know, it's unexpected. And I turned around, and here was a guy that went to Notre Dame high school and he was a competitor of mine in football when I was going to Quincy High School. He and his brother run Shell oil stations in Quincy. He was with a couple guys, so I stood there and talked to him for a while because, you know, he couldn't leave his friends and I couldn't leave mine. So after a while, I got

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<sup>6</sup> The enlisted men's dress uniforms were known in a song of the era as *Bell-Bottom Trousers, Coat of Navy Blue*. The summer uniform was the same style but white, and would have been worn in the tropics. The cap was always white, as in Fischer's pictures and was worn with fatigues as well when working. (*Ed.*)

back to the States, and when I was in the Senior Olympics, I had my picture in the paper. He cut it out and sent it to me, and he wrote a note. He says, "Where have I seen this guy before? Oh, I remember, it was in the Philippines. Good going, Jon. Keep going."

Flatt: Well, that was nice, wasn't it?

Fischer: Yeah, it was nice of him to say that. Gene Hutter(?).

Flatt: Well, very interesting. Did you ever have any interaction with Red Cross people anywhere?

Fischer: Red Cross?

Flatt: Mm-hmm.

Fischer: Well, on our last trip to Manila, they had electricity, the electricity was on. So what they did, they opened up this big theater. I don't think it was a movie theater to start with; it was probably an opera house or something. Great big. Usually movie theaters are not that big. So that's where they're showing the five Sullivan brothers. So by me taking this film and getting it developed, there was two high school girls that worked there. They went, took me across to their high school, and their high school was wide open. There's no doors; they don't need air conditioning or nothing. They don't need it shut up like we do in the United States. So they took me around and showed me the way classes... And they was both intelligent. Both of them was A students, both of them. So the show opened up, and I said to them, "Do you want to go to the show? I'll take you to the show." And they looked at each other—well, I was getting wised up what was going on, you know—and said, "Could you get a Jeep?" Then I knew what it was, and I says, "I'm sorry, I can't get a Jeep. If you don't want to go, that's all right with me, but I can't get a Jeep." The tallest one was Esther, and she said to the short one—she's more Philippine; this other one had Spanish blood in her—and she says, "I can't go because I got to do such-and-such for Antonio," which is the uncle that run this photo place. She says, "I can't go because I already promised him I got to do..." She says, "Why don't you go?" And she goes, "No, I..." I said, "Well, she doesn't have to go." I said she didn't have to go, because I understood; I knew what was going on. So she goes, "Okay, I'll go." So she walked back here, you know.

Flatt: Behind you?

Fischer: Right here. Yeah. Not behind me.

Flatt: Like she was not with you but just walking in the same direction.

Fischer: But anyway, it was a full block and a half we had to stand in line. The Red Cross had a donut and coffee on the other side of the line. We couldn't get out

of the line, because some of these guys who was up in front was getting coffee and donuts, but all the officers, they didn't have to get in our line for that show. They went right up and got coffee and donuts right now while all of us is waiting.

Flatt: Now, these were Army guys or Navy or...?

Fischer: Army and Navy both, and they didn't like it one bit. They was growling, but they couldn't do nothing about it. We packed that whole theater. It was full. Some people were standing. And when that show got done, when I looked around, there wasn't a dry eye. The Filipinos had tears in their eyes just like us guys. So I walked her back to the—it wasn't too far back, three or four blocks, something like this, five blocks—back to where she worked. But she really liked it. I had their pictures, but I can't find them. So that was one episode.

Flatt: Okay. Well, from your last stop in Manila, where did you go next?

Fischer: We went to Noumea, New Caledonia. It was a French port. While we was there, we put on something—I don't know what it was. But anyway, while we was there, the war was ended. The war ended while we was there. And so this—

Flatt: Now, which part of it, the war in Europe or the—

Fischer: No, the Japanese.

Flatt: The Japan war also.

Fischer: Yeah, Japanese.

Flatt: So they had dropped the atom bomb and...

Fischer: Yeah, the war in the Pacific was over. So of course (laughs) let everybody go ashore. This guy had a barnand(?), it was just wine. It wasn't any hard liquor, just wine. And it was all free.

Flatt: Everyone was celebrating the end of the war.

Fischer: The French guy, he just gave it to them free.

Flatt: Was there a lot of celebration? Were people cheering and jumping around like they did—

Fischer: Yeah, hollering, jumping up and down.

- Flatt: Yeah, sure. Well, what kind of news came over about this atom bomb, because nobody knew about it ahead of time except the people who were involved with it?
- Fischer: Yeah. That's all we heard. Of course, we didn't know what it was all about either until we saw it on TV, so we didn't know about it either, what it was.
- Flatt: You saw a TV?
- Fischer: No, we didn't have no TV. I mean, back in the States.
- Flatt: You saw the Movietone News.<sup>7</sup> Oh, yeah, sure.
- Fischer: Back in the States, it was. Of course, you can show it today, you know.
- Flatt: Did you see newsreels<sup>8</sup> about it over there?
- Fischer: Yeah.
- Flatt: So you got an idea.
- Fischer: And some of the Army guys said, Thank God, because a lot of these Army guys was going over to Japan. And according to statistics, if we'd have invaded Japan, we'd have lost over a million Americans.
- Flatt: Of our troops, uh-huh.
- Fischer: Because every Japanese would have been armed with a gun, because they was told—we learned later, after the war—they was told that us Americans would kill them, you know, like they killed our people, but we wouldn't have done that. That's why you saw them jumping off that one cliff. You know, when we took over that island, they all jumped over the cliff. They shouldn't have done it, because they was not treated that way.
- Flatt: Well, now that the war was over, what happened then? Did they send you back to the States?
- Fischer: (laughs) I took a test for a gunner's mate, and I passed at a third class. Well, I didn't want to get off at Pearl Harbor, (laughs) you know, because I had to take a test back, but if they'd have dropped me off—just me—dropped me off at Pearl Harbor, because I was a gunner mate striker, I would have been in—I understood a year later—they was asking all gunner's mates, they had automatic, was going to stay one more year. And I didn't want that. What we were going to do with all our Navy ships and anything that had guns on it,

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<sup>7</sup> With no TV yet, the theaters all played condensed news clips of important happenings before showing the featured movie. Some of the narrators of the news went on to become news anchors on TV.

<sup>8</sup> "Reels" refers to the way the moving picture films were stored. News was always in black and white, as color films required elaborate studio equipment.

well, that's what all these gunnery people are doing: they was putting them in mothballs.<sup>9</sup> I mean, there wouldn't have been anything rough about it or anything, but it was the idea of staying another year. I mean, I had enough. So I went to Alameda, California, on the base there—it's an Air base and a Navy.

I was waiting there for a discharge, and as we went through the mess hall, why, there was a warrant officer standing there. These guys, I felt sorry for these—all of us was veterans—all of us—just come back. Some of these guys didn't eat all their food on their plate, so he gave them a rifle, and they had to stand guard duty. If you took a shower, you had to take the rifle in the shower, and if somebody took that rifle away from you, you got an extra day duty. And I thought, All the time I was in the Navy for three years, I didn't ever put up with a guy like that. So I went up to headquarters—I think it was lieutenant or commander was right there—and I told him who I was and everything. I said, "Would you mind checking and seeing how many points I got?" Because I didn't want to run into trouble with this guy because I never had any trouble all the time I was in the Navy.

So anyway, he called the yeoman, and he said, "Could you open Jonathon H. Fischer, Seaman First Class? Could you get his folder out?" So he'd come down and he'd look at it. He says, "What are you **doing** here?" I says, "What do you mean?" He said, "You **shouldn't** have been here. You've got **way** over the points. You shouldn't have been here. How soon can you get your sea bag and everything all packed up?" I says, "I'll go run right back to the barracks, and I'll be back up here in fifteen to twenty minutes. (Flatt laughs) And boy, I got everything together and run up there, and they put me on a train for Great Lakes.

Flatt: You've been a track star; you could run fast, right? (laughter) So you came back to Great Lakes to be mustered out.

Fischer: And that's where I got discharged. I took a train from Chicago to Quincy.

Flatt: Now, did you join the Reserve after you were discharged?

Fischer: Well, after I was out a while, after things kind of settled down, I joined a Reserve. They used to build landing craft right down in our riverfront, and right where this building emplanes they built a Quonset hut for the Navy Reserve to drill and things like that. So that's when I joined when they got this finished. I was in the Navy Reserve. In 1951, I think it was, we all got recalled—the **whole** unit got recalled—just took us with—this one guy was in the Reserve with us. He was an alderman, and he had nine kids, and they took him. We all went. They didn't tell us to get prepared for it or nothing; it says you're going.

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<sup>9</sup> Putting military equipment in "mothballs" became a convenient term for preparing equipment of all kinds for long-term storage.



Flatt: You're going, okay.

Fischer: So when we got where we was going, oh, about, let's see, about six months after this—yeah, about six months—and then they started weeding these people out, because there wasn't any benefits. We didn't have no benefits when we was called, but when they started feeding benefits, here's this guy who's got nine kids; the money—

Flatt: It adds up, sure.

Fischer: Yeah, it adds up.

Flatt: Let's back up just a little before we get to your recall. I sort of advanced things when I talked about the Reserve. Was this active Reserve where you drilled on a regular basis, that sort of thing, or were you in the inactive?

Fischer: No, we had certain drill nights. At least once a week we had to, you know, just like the National Guard.

Flatt: Okay, sure. Was this all Navy, or was it mixed services?

Fischer: No, it was all Navy.

Flatt: All Navy. Okay. Well, before you did that, I imagine you got back to Quincy and had a few buddies there, especially among your...

Fischer: Yeah, a few of them come back about the same time I did. They was Army.

Flatt: So did you do a little celebrating when you got back?

Fischer: Well, we actually didn't—even though the other two guys, they weren't heavy drinkers to get drunk or anything like that; they wasn't like that. But, I mean, they'd take a drink. So we went down to Hannibal to a nightclub down there. (laughs) And one guy, his dad would get a new car about every two years—he had the money—and so he drove his dad's car down there. And he was at the place.

And then it just so happens on the way back from Hannibal, they was grading a two-lane road, and they was going to make it a four-lane—which, which it is now—of cement. And so they had it all graded out for a four-lane. We was coming up here, and I was sitting in the middle of the front seat. It was a two-door Ford, and I was sitting in the middle of the seat, and I said to Bill, I said, "Bill, Something's wrong with that guy up there. He's driving like he's drunk." He was over here, he was over there, he's over here, he's over there. So Bill kind of stopped, and then he started up again. Bill could have avoided this accident if he'd have pulled **w**ay over to the side and just turned his motor off—he probably would have avoided this. I mean, and I was

thinking this. So anyway, we pull over, and this guy comes from the other side of the road and hit us head on.

Flatt: Oh, boy.

Fischer: So I just brought up my legs like this and relaxed. Bill, he hit the steering wheel with his arm, and the guy that was with me hit the dashboard and got a cut there, but nothing happened to me at all. (laughs) So anyway, we survived, and we didn't go down there anymore. (laughs) And Bill got in trouble with his dad. (laughs)

Flatt: Well, that's too bad. Now, this was '45 when you were discharged, correct?

Fischer: Yeah, '46. I was discharged in '46.

Flatt: The war was over in '45, so you were in for a while afterward?

Fischer: Oh, yeah, mm-hmm.

Flatt: Okay, all right. So '46, and then it was a little while before Korea. What did you do in between, Jon? Did you take advantage of the GI Bill or anything like that?

Fischer: I did later, but when I first got out, the St. Louis Browns had a piece in the paper, on the radio or something, about try-out camp down in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. So my two buddies, this Bill and this other guy that was in this car with us—he's taller than us, and he was the first baseman—and he says, "Well, why don't we go down there?" So Bill got one of his dad's cars, and we went down in his car down to Pine Bluff.

It was a five-day camp. The first day I was down there, I was playing shortstop, and I had a toe plate on because I pitched once in a while. When they saw me playing shortstop, he come out and said, "Jon, would you please take that toe plate off? You're not going to use it." I was throwing real hard and almost knocking that guy off of first base. So he said, "Well, Jon, go out in left field." So I went out. There's 150 of us at this camp. And so they start hitting me balls, and I'd throw them in on a fly right to the catcher. Well, I was throwing them in pretty hard, and he says, "Go out to center field." So no matter what ball they hit, I was off and running. I'd run really and go and dive for them, and I'd run back and catch them over my head. When I started throwing them in, I threw them right, like you're supposed to, have two bounces.

So it wasn't even done, and he said, "Jon, go over to the hotel"—where we stayed at, you know, a cheap one. So I thought, "Yeah, must not have made it." You know, first day. So I go to the motel, and here's a baseball scout, and another guy with him. And he said, "Jon, you must have a motor up your..."—you know, I'm not going to say what. But anyway, that's what he

said to me, because I could outrun any of these 150 guys; I was faster than any of them. He said, "Now, Jon, don't tell anybody, and don't go back to practice when we get done in here." He says, "You ready to sign a contract?"

Flatt: Oh, boy. (laughs)

Fischer: Right now. And they specified, "Jon, you're not married or nothing." "No," I said. "Well, you don't want to get married, you're playing starting out." So I signed the contract. I didn't go back to the ball field, and so I went down by the swimming pool—it was closed, of course, at that time—and I met a girl. (laughs) Anyway, she showed me around, and I think we stopped by and got something to eat someplace, but I stayed away from the ball field. I got our pictures in that book. I got done with my story too quick. They said, "Jon, is so-and-so and so-and-so with you that come down from Quincy, these other two guys, third baseman and a first baseman?" And I said, "Yeah." He says, "Them's the laziest two guys that we've ever seen in our life."

Flatt: Oh, my.

Fischer: Because I knew about this third basemen. He could have been a good ballplayer, but he wouldn't move; he was lazy. When you hit a ball down to him and he kind of missed it, he wouldn't jump on it and throw it, just walk over to it and pick it up. See, you don't do that.

Flatt: Yeah. you go after it, yeah.

Fischer: So I knew what he was talking about, but I didn't tell them guys. So we went back to Quincy. I reported down to Belleville, Illinois, and played down there. But see, I was just starting out in pro ball. After the war, you was entitled to get your jobs back, so all the guys that was over there three and four years, was fighting; they was not good enough to be in AAA because they hadn't played ball for three or four years, and they're not as good as them guys up in AAA. So they sent them all the way down here to Class D, where I was at. But I could outrun them, I could out-throw them, but I couldn't hit the fence. I couldn't hit the fence.

Flatt: Well, that's one of those things.

Fischer: It's one of them things that happened to me.

Flatt: Well, at least we were taking care of our GIs when they came back.

Fischer: But I had a good life. So anyway, I think it was two of us—another buddy of mine that was in the Army—and he got out, and so we went up to Culver–Stockton. I was over here, and I played football as a freshman.

Flatt: That's the famous military school, isn't it, is Culver–Stockton?

Fischer: No, no.

Flatt: Oh.

Fischer: And anyway, they had a real good running back, and I knew that I couldn't take his place because he was a senior and he had that shift. And him and I got along real good. So I just got in the game once in a while, not very often, being a freshman. We was getting beat real bad by one of the schools that won the league, and so the last five minutes, they put me in. It was muddy—oh, it was muddy—and so when they gave me the ball, I just dove across the line and put my arms out like this. The referees raised their hand up, and that was the only touchdown we made.

Flatt: Well, that was good, wasn't it?

Fischer: But then in practice later on, I was on the opposite side—I was on the second string—and I was running through the line, and this big guy tackled me right there, and one of the guys come way around like this, and I was falling down, and he **hit** me from behind. (makes wincing pained noise)

Flatt: Oh, boy.

Fischer: Anyway, blood clot on my kidney.

Flatt: Oh, so that's no good. Well, when you went to Culver–Stockton, were you there on the GI Bill?

Fischer: Yes, mm-hmm.

Flatt: I'll bet you were going to be a physical ed major, weren't you?

Fischer: Yes, that's what I was going to be. (laughter) We had quite a few GIs. GIs never joined any sororities—fraternity houses, I should say—because nobody's going to tell us, you know, we had this for three or four years.

Flatt: Yeah, you know, you're a lot older than those kids coming out of high school.

Fischer: We didn't believe in that kid stuff, you know.

Flatt: Sure. Well, what did you do after that? Did that take care of your football career?

Fischer: Well, after I got out of the hospital and got cured and everything, the New York Yankees had a tryout at our stadium. I knew I was too old, but I thought, Well, I'll just go out there. So anyway, I went out there, and I was throwing and hitting and running, and one of the scouts come up, and he says, "How old are you?" And I told him. And I knew, I knew. "Oh," he says, "I wish you was younger." Anyway, the guy that was playing my position, I

could outrun him, and I could out-hit him—and he smoked. He was a wise guy. Anyway, they signed him, and he went up to the majors, played I think one year with the White Sox. But he died later on. He was smoking, got cancer.

Flatt: Oh, boy. Well, you did go to work then, in between, didn't you?

Fischer: I went to work at E Best Plumbing and Heating Wholesale Company. I filled orders for the plumbers that would call in their orders and everything, and I would get all the fittings and the water heaters, tubs, or whatever they ordered, I went and got them all ready for when they'd come to get them, while, they'd be all out and we'd check them again to make sure they got everything.

Flatt: Well, now you're back home in Quincy, right?

Fischer: Mm-hmm.

Flatt: And did you meet any particular lady along the way?

Fischer: I went skating. I was skating in the service. When I was skating in the service in New York and places like that when I could—and roller skating. We had what they called Baldwin Park in Quincy. He had a cage out there, he had monkeys in it and things like that. The trolley went out there and went up on his property, and it had a big U-turn and then it would go back down and around. And then they built this skating rink up there, and of course they cut the trolley out and started in on these buses. He got rid of his monkeys in the cage and everything. And they had a track around it, too—used to run cars around and bicycle races, and even the high school had track out there. They closed all that down and built a great big skating rink. So I went out there, and that's where I met my wife, and we skated all the time.

Flatt: And her name was?

Fischer: Mary.

Flatt: Mary...? What was her maiden name?

Fischer: Agnes. She'd just go by Mary A.

Flatt: Mary A?

Fischer: Agnes was her middle name.

Flatt: And her last name?

Fischer: Was Gallagher.

Flatt: Okay.

Fischer: She was a farmer's daughter.

Flatt: Good. So did you work at E Best until the Korean thing happened?

Fischer: Yes. The Korea war started, and, being in the Reserve, of course, I got recalled to that. I got orders to report to Green Cove, Florida.

Flatt: That's on the St. Johns River, isn't it?

Fischer: I think so. But anyway, what I was going to do, I was going to put all these guns that were on these here landing craft; I was going to clean them up and get them ready for whatever they was going to use them for. I went to Charleston, South Carolina, to stopover I guess or to get us all together to go down to Green Cove—besides me, there'd be other guys going too—they had a *USS Tidewater* there that five hundred sailors slept on. We'd go off working at these destroyers and things that's right around the area and clean them up and everything, get them ready for the Korean War. So while I was waiting, I was out playing softball on the field, and I was pitching; we played and played and played. And a guy come up and says, "Could you get a team here out of these guys to play us tonight underneath the lights?" He was from the base team. He said, "The team that was supposed to play us tonight canceled out. Could you get enough players here to come and play us?" And I said, "Yeah, I think I can." So I got just ten players, that's all. Of course I didn't know who was the best or anything.

Flatt: Sure. Well, it's for fun anyway.

Fischer: And what I was scared of—I didn't have a catcher to catch me, you know, because I have an upshoot ball. And that's what I was worried about. But anyway, we beat them. So the guy comes up to me—he was one of the petty officers—and he says, "John, where are you stationed at?" And I says, "I'm on the *USS Tidewater*, and I'm supposed to go down to Green Cove, Florida." And he says, "How would you like to stay here?" You know, I got a wife and two kids. And I says, "Oh, boy, yes, I'll want to stay. I got the experience of World War II, and I sure would." He said, "I'll tell you what. I can stop you from going to Green Cove, but I can't get you off the *Tidewater*." I said, "Well, that's fine."

Flatt: Now, were you married to Mary at this point?

Fischer: Yes, we had two children.

Flatt: You said, two kids. And where were they living? Were they in Green Cove?

Fischer: No, they was at home in Quincy at the time.

Flatt: Oh, okay, all right.

Fischer: But when I was on the *Tidewater* after a while, over the loudspeaker, they says, “Anybody that’s married and got a couple kids that you want to put in for a discharge, report up here.” This is about six months after I was in. So I went up there, and this officer—him and I was just like this. He’s a full commander, and we were just like this. And he says, “John, I can’t stop you from filling out an application, but, I don’t think you’ll get it with two kids.” So anyway, I filled it out and everything.

I was making twenty-eight points for the basketball team. This base team didn’t ask me if I’d play basketball, (Flatt laughs) because I’m only five foot nine. But anyway, so we played in the wild league, and I was making twenty-eight points a game. So the base team called the officer; I got another call over the loudspeaker: “Jonathon H. Fischer, Seaman First Class, report to headquarters.” So I went up, and I thought, “What’s going on now?” The commander said to me, “Jon, the base team called, and they want you to go with them out of town”—which the base team did travel, you know, go out of town—and he says, “and I told them no. The reason I told them no, I ordered basketball suits for you guys, the warm-ups and everything. I ordered, and the only thing they gave me was a shirt and a pair of pants.” Well, I understood him, and he’s my boss, you know what I mean?

Flatt: Yeah, I know what you mean.

Fischer: I can’t say, “Hey, I want to go with them” or anything. I said, “Well, that’s okay.” So anyway, playing, and I was making twenty-eight points a game. And we played off the base too, a couple times; played Citadel’s freshman team one night, one time. So I got another call up there, and he says, “Jon, you guys are going to play the base team tonight, and they tell me they’re going to stop you.” And I said to him, “Well, yes, it could happen. The best basketball players have a night off.” And anyway I scored eighteen points again, and they only beat us by one.

Flatt: (laughs) Well, so when were you discharged, then, finally?

Fischer: Let’s see, January... In March.

Flatt: So you were in about six months or so.

Fischer: Six months, yeah.

Flatt: Okay. And at that point, to kind of wrap up—because I want to get to some other things that you’ve done since, especially the most recent big event—did you come back to E Best?

Fischer: Yes, I came back to E Best. Then I knew a couple fellows that worked for the CIPS [Central Illinois Power System] because they was in softball the same as I was. And they told me, “Jon, there’s going to be an opening up in there if you want a job.” And so I went up there, and of course they hired a couple of

guys from E Best, but they was younger than me. So when I got up there, the office manager—him and I got along real good—and he says, “Jon, I’m afraid you’re a little bit too old. How’s your legs?” I said, “George, I play three softball games a week, I play all day Sunday. There’s nothing wrong with my legs. Nobody can keep up with me.” And he said, “Well, let’s go up and see the superintendent.” The superintendent’s up on the second floor. So we go in there, and he looked at me, and he says, “Hello, Jon.” (Flatt laughs) And old George’s eyes popped out like this. He says, “Do you know each other?” He says, “Well, I knew Jon back in high school. I used to watch him play football and basketball. What’s the problem?” He said, “Well, he wants a job with us.” He says, “**Give** it to him.”

Flatt: (laughs) Well, that was nice. That was a nice endorsement, wasn’t it?

Fischer: Yes. And then all the way downstairs, George was really in shock. He says, “I didn’t know he knew you that well.” (laughter)

Flatt: It’s a good thing he didn’t send you away and then find out later, wasn’t it?

Fischer: Yeah.

Flatt: Okay. So you worked—

Fischer: Spent thirty-three years there.

Flatt: Thirty-three years. Retired from there, I suppose, then.

Fischer: Mm-hmm.

Flatt: Well, that was a good record. I would like to move on, because I know that a very interesting and important event happened—I think it was just a couple of weeks ago, wasn’t it, Jon?

Fischer: Oh, I got on the flight to Washington, DC.

Flatt: The Honor Flight.

Fischer: Honor Flight.

Flatt: That was a really wonderful event.

Fischer: It was.

Flatt: Tell us how that came about, and tell us a little bit about the trip, and then we’ll wind up.

Fischer: Well, they’re flying World War II veterans to Washington, DC to see the World War II monument before they die, if they can. Because I understand there’s either a thousand or twelve hundred veterans of World War II that’s



dying a day. And on one Honor Flight, the one before I went, they had one veteran that was 101.

Flatt: Oh my goodness.

Fischer: They got wheelchairs for you and everything, but you got to be able to climb on the bus and get off the bus. So that's the only requirement. The ones that's ailing, and they can make the trip, they come first. We fill out applications. But if the one's ailing or something and it might be his last time, why, they take them first.

Flatt: Sure. Well that's good, isn't it?

Fischer: Yes. That's really nice of them. But anyway, so I filled out the application from the vets—I belong to the vets organization on South Ninth Street—I got the application there, and I filled it out. There's a guy out of St. Louis that's the head of this. I just happened to see him one time at the Vet Center, and he was giving a speech, and I saw his shirt, there's a name on his shirt about the place where he lived. So I said to him, "Hey, I want to ask you a question. I saw that on your shirt. Where are you from?" And he told me down on the outside of St. Louis, St. Ann. And I said, "Well, you know, I was in the Senior Olympics down there at Pacific High School." "Oh, I know where that is." And I said, "And that's what some of them had on their shirts, the same thing, and I thought, well, maybe you was from around there." I told him I was in the Senior Olympics down there and everything. So it helped. (laughs)

Flatt: Well, we'll talk about the Senior Olympics in just a minute. Tell us more about the Honor Flight, though.

Fischer: The Honor Flight. We left Springfield here at 3:15 in the morning from Route 66 motel on South Sixth Street. We had a big bus there. So we went to St. Louis, and when we went to St. Louis, the Army band was there to greet us and played music for us, and we ate breakfast. Everything was free. Everything was furnished to us—everything. They told us, "You could just leave your wallet at home because you won't need it."

Flatt: Well-deserved, Jon, well-deserved.

Fischer: So anyway, when we was lined up to go on the plane, the crew was rushing wheelchairs up the ramp; they couldn't do enough for us. And they announced over the loudspeaker in the airport who we were, and the people all applauded us.

Flatt: Isn't that wonderful.

Fischer: And some of the kids even come up and shook our hands. When we boarded the plane, we all sit up in the front; there was thirty-five veterans and I think eighteen guardians. We all had a guardian that takes care of two of us, makes

sure that in case something happens or something they can look after us real quick. They was well-trained and really polite, and they really helped us out a lot. When we got to Washington, there was another group of people from the veterans' clubs met and greeted the ones who got off the plane at the airport. And then we ate again, dinnertime, and we ate a dinner, and then we got on the big buses and started going around to the different monuments. There was two other groups that came up to Washington at the same time. And we was really busy; Washington was really busy then, and they had all these buses and all these people. Out to the monument we went first, two women had their school kids—about ten years old I'd say they were—and when they saw us walking together and going towards the World War II monument, they all come over and shook our hands and patted us on the arm, and the women and teachers did too, saying thanks to us. We really felt good. I mean, like we was wanted.

We went around the World War II monument, and it was really beautiful. And then later on, we went to Lincoln's monument, which I had been there before, and then the Korea monument, these eight live-looking figures, Army guys, standing there in this field. One of the guys told me, he says, "Jon, you ought to see these at night. They're really scary."

Flatt: I'll bet.

Fischer: Because they had their guns and everything, and he says they was **lifelike**. And I agreed with him, that it would look scary out there, like it was on a battlefield. And then we got back, and we went by the Capitol, and we went by the Washington Monument. Hardly anybody knew about it, and a lot of people still don't know about it, but when that Washington Monument was built, they only built it halfway, and they didn't have enough money. So when the time they got the money and started building it again, the stones right there were a different color.

Flatt: So you can see where it changes.

Fischer: And that's why he was explaining. And then we went by the Capitol, when that plane hit the Capitol and damaged it, he said, "Now, you notice the same things on this stones? See them stones, how different?" And you could see it; they was different color where they remodeled it. And then we got on our bus, and we came back to Springfield. At Springfield, at the motel, they had four big husky guys that had World War II uniforms on with the steel helmets and everything. And they also had somebody else there greeting us and everything. I says, "It was really nice." And then I went home after twelve o'clock.

Flatt: Well, that was a wonderful thing that was being done for our World War II people. I know when we look in the obituaries every day, there are one or two veterans, and most of them are World War II.

Fischer: Yeah, they are. Got the flag next to...

Flatt: So I'm glad that we're doing this now. Who pays for this? You said everything was free. There must be some group that does this.

Fischer: Well, for breakfast, Burger King for breakfast had, in lunchboxes, separate little lunchboxes, they had us with two different kinds of sandwiches if you wanted them. Then Arby's for lunch, they had little boxes, too, and they had their chicken salad sandwiches in those. Then for supper, we didn't have any more boxes, so we ate right at the airport at Arby's, (laughs) and it was paid for by...

Flatt: What about the bus and the plane? Were those provided free by the transportation companies?

Fischer: The planes—he collects money, whoever this fellow is that's the head of us, and—Weed(?), his name, I think—I think that's what it is. And anyway, they collect enough money for each one of the passengers for World War II, and their guardians have to pay their own way, four hundred dollars. And I understand, the guardians, if they go four trips, then they can go free like we do. But—

Flatt: Well, that's a wonderful thing, it really is.

Fischer: It was. It's really nice. These guys and women that started this and got us together... But I understand, as soon as they get all the World War II guys to Washington, they're going to start in on Korea and Vietnam.

Flatt: Well, that's good, too.

Fischer: Because, you know, they're younger than we are.

Flatt: Sure, right. Well, I think that's just absolutely a wonderful thing, and for those who follow this program on the website, they can see pictures of you in Washington with your Honor Flight sweatshirt, and there you are in a couple of places in the memorial.

Fischer: Yeah, we had blue hats and blue t-shirts so we wouldn't get lost.

Flatt: Yeah, that was a good idea. (Fischer laughs) Another picture that's important, and which you alluded to before, is the picture of you with a very large number of medals from the Senior Olympics. So you've been very busy keeping yourself in shape and probably having a good time doing it, aren't you, Jon?

Fischer: I retired in '86 from the CIPS, but I started out in the Senior Olympics about 1983. I used to come to Springfield here and just swim the fifty yard freestyle and fifty yard backstroke, and I was only getting two medals. And I thought,

Well, I'm coming all this way and everything, spending this money. I was a four-letter man in high school, in running, in football, in baseball... So I started getting—in one weekend, the most I ever got, I got twenty-three medals in Friday, Saturday, and Sunday in one weekend by running and swimming and things like this.

Flatt: Oh, that's terrific, yeah.

Fischer: Of course, I never did drink or smoke, and I skipped rope all the time like a boxer, and I kept myself in shape. So I collected about 165 medals, and I got 150 ribbons —Macomb, they do not give medals, they just give ribbons, so the entry fee is down. So I got about 150 ribbons. Then I got about nineteen trophies, which I started out YMCA league and playing on a fast-pitch baseball team.

Flatt: Well, those are certainly things to be proud of, Jon, but I think maybe more important than those medals is that all that kind of stuff kept you in very good shape, as our listeners and readers will be able to tell from your pictures. And at your age—now you're...

Fischer: Eighty-five.

Flatt: Eighty-five, and I don't think many people would guess that. So keeping in shape and not drinking and not smoking have probably helped you live—

Fischer: Yeah, that really helped me.

Flatt: —live to a very healthy old age—and your memory's wonderful, too. And on that note, I'd like to say that I appreciate your memory of all this—

Fischer: Thank you.

Flatt: —and appreciate that you've shared it with us for history. And we certainly thank you for your service to America.

Fischer: Well, thank you for interviewing me.

Flatt: So thanks for the time, Jon.

Fischer: Okay, thank you. God bless you.

(end of interview)