

Oral History Interview

POFC Walter Stohler

“Flying Circus #11”

U.S. Navy

World War II

Aleutian Islands, Alaska

January 9, 2014

Boise, ID

Contents

Transcript of January 9, 2014 Interview

CD: 1) Transcript of January 9, 2014 Interview
2) Audio of January 9, 2014 Interview

Interview with POFC Walter Stohler

**Aleutian World War II National Historic Area
Oral History Program**

January 9, 2014 Boise, ID

Interviewed by Joshua Bell, Volunteer Oral Historian and Researcher,
National Park Service

This interview is part of the Aleutian World War II National Historic Area Oral History Project. The interview with Walter Stohler was recorded with his permission on a digital recorder. Copies of the audio file are preserved in mp3, wav and wma formats and are on file at the offices of the National Park Service in Anchorage, Alaska.

The transcript has been lightly edited.

Joshua Bell: [Today is January 9th, 2014. My name is] Joshua Bell, Volunteer Oral Historian and Researcher for the Aleutian World War II National Historic Area. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for the project, Walter.

Walter Stohler: You're welcome.

Joshua Bell: For the record, could I have you say your full name, please?

Walter Stohler: Walter John Stohler.

Joshua Bell: And when and where were you born?

Walter Stohler: In Boise here, Boise, Idaho.

Joshua Bell: Boise, Idaho. And when was that?

Walter Stohler: In 1921.

Joshua Bell: 1921. What were your parents' names?

Walter Stohler: John and Helen.

Joshua Bell: John and Helen. What did they do?

Walter Stohler: Farming. They farmed here. They farmed here in the valley.

Joshua Bell: Oh, I'm sorry. What was that?

Walter Stohler: Well, no. No, they were farmers.

Joshua Bell: And did you have any other siblings?

Walter Stohler: One sister.

Joshua Bell: One sister.

Walter Stohler: Yeah.

Joshua Bell: What was it like growing up in the 20s and the 30s?

Walter Stohler: Well, a lot different than it was now. [Laughs] It's uh, you know-, of course those years nobody had any money. That was more or less Depression years. And you could buy a hamburger for a nickel or a milkshake for a dime and all that good stuff. But, uh, buy a new car for around seven-eight hundred dollars. And there's all kinds of stuff that was awful cheap compared to today's-today's prices.

Joshua Bell: And what did you do when you were younger? How did you spend your days?

Walter Stohler: Well, after high school I went to work at a dry cleaning plant. And then when the Japanese hit Pearl Harbor it wasn't long before I got one of those letters that says "Greetings from the President." So I joined the Navy. I didn't want to be in the Army so I joined the Navy. And that was in 1942.

Joshua Bell: Where were you when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

Walter Stohler: Well, I was still home here, I guess on December 7th.

Joshua Bell: What do you remember thinking when you learned that Pearl Harbor had been attacked?

Walter Stohler: Well, of course everybody was all upset of course. The whole nation was upset of that sneak attack. And everybody was pretty patriotic. They were doing all kinds of things for the betterment of the country. And I think they-, a lot of people signed up in the service, of course, and I was one of them.

Joshua Bell: How did your parents feel about that?

Walter Stohler: Well, my mother didn't like it but she knew I can't do anything about it because if I didn't sign up I'd have been drafted. Yeah, she didn't like it at all.

Joshua Bell: Where did you go for basic training?

Walter Stohler: San Diego. I went six weeks of boot camp in San Diego.

Joshua Bell: Had you ever left home before?

Walter Stohler: No, that's the first time.

Joshua Bell: What was that like?

Walter Stohler: Well, kind of scary. [Laughs] But, uh, they shipped us down to San Diego in a train, from here. And after I'd done boot camp then they sent me to eight weeks of torpedo school. And I learned to be a torpedo mechanic.

Joshua Bell: What was a typical day at basic training like?

Walter Stohler: Oh, I don't know, the usual. You know, march and, uh-, well, that's about it; just marching and taking orders, whatever the drill sergeant wanted. Trying to make you feel you was in the Army.

Joshua Bell: What about being at boot-, at basic training sticks with ya'?

Walter Stohler: Oh, I don't remember too much about it. Living here in Idaho it was pretty cold weather yet. And I shipped to San Diego. Well, of course, that's nice, warm weather. I got kind of sunburned on my nose and ears down there. Them little sailor hats didn't offer much protection.

Joshua Bell: No, I don't imagine they did.

Walter Stohler: No, not a bit.

Joshua Bell: Who would've been... let's see, you were in the Navy so you would've have had a chief petty officer or a petty officer as your drill instructor?

Walter Stohler: Well, yeah, I guess it was. Yeah.

Joshua Bell: Do you remember anything about him?

Walter Stohler: Well, not really. I didn't like him, I don't think. But [laughs] I put up with it.

Joshua Bell: How as the chow?

Walter Stohler: Well, chow wasn't too bad. A lot of beans. But, uh, it was okay. I can't complain on the food a bit. It was about the best stuff I think, more or less.

Joshua Bell: Now, you said you were sent to torpedo school.

Walter Stohler: Yeah.

Joshua Bell: Is that where you wanted to go?

Walter Stohler: Well, that's where they sent me. I [laughs]... that was also in San Diego. And that was a eight weeks course; learn how to fix torpedoes, or hang them on PT boats or TVFs or something like that. And that-, I got through that. I was shipped out to the Aleutians. First I went to, uh, Dutch Harbor on an old flat bottom boat. Then from Dutch Harbor they put us on a fishing boat to go to Adak. And that was pretty primitive at that time. They didn't have any docks or anything. When we got there they shipped us ashore on the barge 'cause there weren't any docks or anything. But the Army had set up Quonset huts for us to live in. And-, but I don't know. Ask what you want.

Joshua Bell: You're doing alright. Did you know the Japanese had invaded the Aleutian Islands?

Walter Stohler: Oh, sure. They were on the Kiska when I-, when we were there.

Joshua Bell: When did you learn that you were going to the Aleutians?

Walter Stohler: Oh, gosh, I don't know, sometime when I was in torpedo school I think. They were going to send us to a squad like, three torpedomen, two motor mechs and three strikers. They called us traveling circus. I don't know why, but that's what it was.

Joshua Bell: What was the trip to the Aleutians like?

Walter Stohler: Well, that fishing boat was pretty scary. It was pretty slow and that Bering Sea is often rough. And I got pretty much scared. That thing popped you up, up and down. When you was in the trough you could look way up, see the water, and then after you go on top there, then you looked down on a thing. We had one guy there, he got so sick he was vomiting green stuff.

Joshua Bell: Ugh.

Walter Stohler: Uh, I didn't get seasick but pretty close.

Joshua Bell: What did you do to pass the time on that trip?

Walter Stohler: Oh, on the fishing boat, you mean? Well, just-, just hanging on. That's about all. Being bounced around like a cork. And, uh, there's nothing to do pass time, just hang on and hope you get to land okay.

Joshua Bell: Did any of your friends get assigned to the Aleutians with you?

Walter Stohler: No. No, they were all new people that I was sent up with. Got to know 'em pretty well. We was all pretty good friends after awhile.

Joshua Bell: You remember any of their names?

Walter Stohler: Now they're all dead, every one of 'em.

Joshua Bell: Oh, no. I'm very sorry to hear that.

Walter Stohler: Yeah, well, I was too but I guess I just live too long.

Joshua Bell: What were their names?

Walter Stohler: Well, the guy that got really sick was Joe Schmuck. He was a banker before he got drafted. And Ed Cootney, he was a auto mechanic I think. Bob Torrance, he was a fireman. And I forget what the other people done now.

Joshua Bell: Seems like quite the collection of people.

Walter Stohler: Yeah. Yeah. Well, the service, you see-, there are all kinds. But, uh, yeah, I enjoyed-, I kind of enjoyed my stay up there in a way. The Japanese didn't bother us outside sending a scout plane over every morning just about, to see what we were doing I guess. And we used to shot at it with 20 millimeters which wasn't a very big gun but it's all we had.

Joshua Bell: What were your first impression of Alaska?

Walter Stohler: Pretty barren place. It's windy up there and nothing grows. Just constant wind. It isn't cold. It isn't really cold. Those Aleutians are on the Japanese current. Kind of keeps it fairly warm.

Joshua Bell: Now which islands were you assigned to again?

Walter Stohler: Adak was the first one.

Joshua Bell: Adak.

Walter Stohler: Then after awhile they transferred us to Umnak Island which is a much bigger island. Why they did that I don't know. We just done what we were told.

Joshua Bell: Mm-hmm. What was your living situation like?

Walter Stohler: Living situation? Well, not too bad. Uh, we-, we had good lodging in the Quonset huts. They had oil stoves there to keep warm. And the rest of it was alright. We had a kind of bunch of torpedoes that we maintained in case they needed them. They thought the Japanese gonna hit up there so they was getting ready for that. But they was gonna send up some, uh, PT boats.

But I think the Bering Sea was too rough for 'em, so they gave that up and just waited. In case they needed a plane, they'd send the torpedo planes in. There was a pretty good sized airfield there on Umnak. The landing strips-, and landing strips were all those metal things that just popped together kind of like.

Joshua Bell: Oh. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. What-, what was the, uh, unit you were assigned to?

Walter Stohler: Well, they're called a Traveling Circus Number 11.

Joshua Bell: Number 11.

Walter Stohler: We had an ensign as our boss, a shaved tail ensign.

Joshua Bell: A shaved tail?

Walter Stohler: Yeah. His name was-, let's see. What was it? God, I can't even think of it now. That might come to me later.

Joshua Bell: What'd you think of him?

Walter Stohler: What, the lieutenant? Well, he was just kind of a young kid. He just got permission. He was younger than most of us. No experience. He was just the boss.

Joshua Bell: How did you and your friends pass the time on the Islands?

Walter Stohler: Well, playing cards a lot-, lot of it. That's where I learned to smoke cigarettes and got hooked on 'em. Drank lots of coffee and played cards.

Joshua Bell: What did you like to play?

Walter Stohler: I liked cribbage. I used to play a lot of cribbage.

Joshua Bell: My grandfather played a lot of cribbage when he was up in the Aleutians too.

Walter Stohler: Yeah. It's a good pastime. Makes you think a little bit.

Joshua Bell: It definitely does.

Walter Stohler: Yeah.

Joshua Bell: Did you write your family while you were on the Islands?

Walter Stohler: Oh, sure. Yeah.

Joshua Bell: What did you write about?

Walter Stohler: I must-, I must tell you, my-, going back a little ways, I, uh-, my girlfriend-, my high school girlfriend, she wanted to get married so she met me in Seattle just before we shipped out. And we got married and I got shipped out the next day. And after I was at the Aleutians for about a year I got one of those "dear John" letters. [Laughs]

Joshua Bell: Oh, no.

Walter Stohler: Yeah. Well, that was alright. Uh, I ended up with a little better female. She's kind of bossy but I get along with her pretty good.

Joshua Bell: Well, there you go. They've got to keep us in line every now and again.

Walter Stohler: Yeah. Yeah, you have to-, you have to keep at it.

Joshua Bell: What about your time on the Island stands out?

Walter Stohler: How'd the time go?

Joshua Bell: What-, what about your time on the Island really sticks with you?

Walter Stohler: Oh, gosh, I don't know, the-, just the kind of rough living. We got fed good and washed dishes. We was fed in a tent up there. And then washing dishes, well, we didn't have dishes. You had trays, metal trays. And to wash 'em they had some garbage cans set up outside with soap in one of 'em and a rinse in the other one. And you run you thing through the brushes on the garbage cans. But nobody got sick. I guess it was okay.

Joshua Bell: What was a typical day like for you, doing your job?

Walter Stohler: Oh, gosh, it's hard to say. Uh, whatever they kind of told us to do. We had maintenance on the torpedoes. We had about 12 torpedoes there I think it was, something like that. Mark 13 torpedoes which they don't make anymore. And, uh, they needed maintenance. We had to keep exercising them a little bit to keep the oil moving. And, uh, they were all sitting outside so they was kind of in the weather too. We had lousy torpedoes actually. They-, the hit wasn't very good with 'em. Even the-, let's see. I think it was, uh, George Bush, our ex-President, was a-, was a SBD flyer. Torpedoes. He got shot down somewhere near Marshalls I think. That's all I know about him. He wasn't a very good president anyway.

Joshua Bell: What did you think-, speaking of president, what'd you think of FDR?

Walter Stohler: Oh, he was okay, FDR. And Truman and-, I don't like what we got now, to be honest with you. But we stuck with him.

Joshua Bell: Speaking of being stuck, did you ever feel like you were gonna be on the Islands forever?

Walter Stohler: Well, it seemed like a long time. I really forget how long I was up there. Around-, it was over two years I know.

Joshua Bell: Wow.

Walter Stohler: Maybe more than that. Three. Or was it four years? Yeah, it could be. Yeah, that was pretty lonely existence up there. Some people kind of went a little nutty up there. They'd drink some of that torpedo juice, which is straight alcohol and got pretty sick and they was nutty. We had one post guy was a postal carrier and he's a nice guy. He lived in the same barracks with us. But he went nuttier than a fruitcake. They sent him back of course. But he was taking some of that sneaky Pete.

Joshua Bell: What's sneaky Pete?

Walter Stohler: That's the alcohol on the that they used in the torpedoes. We had-, we had barrels of that alcohol. Well, not very many but some. That's what they used. They burned alcohol.

Joshua Bell: Did they have, um, enlisted and-, and officers, uh, clubs?

Walter Stohler: Well, they had an officer's club. Of course, us swabbies, we weren't allowed there. The officers had it pretty nice. They had a real fancy Quonset hut.

Joshua Bell: How as your Quonset hut laid out?

Walter Stohler: Well, they was all about half down to the ground. You know, they was dug in, in case of bombs. You know, they're-, they're-, they were low in the ground about three, four feet I guess; something like that. You know what a Quonset hut is? Them metal huts?

Joshua Bell: Mm-hmm.

Walter Stohler: Yeah. A lot of 'em up there. That's all they had for quarters. Even the Army was using 'em up there.

Joshua Bell: Did you ever have a USO show come to the Island?

Walter Stohler: No. No, we never got that lucky. We thought Bob Hope was gonna come up once but he didn't-, he didn't do it.

Joshua Bell: So you had to come up with your own entertainment.

Walter Stohler: No, not really. Well, we had radio. No, no, no movies. No, we didn't know what a movie was.

Joshua Bell: Did you ever wish that you'd been assigned somewhere else?

Walter Stohler: Well, I didn't understand. I'm-, I'm kind of hard of hearing. I hate to say that.

Joshua Bell: Oh, it's okay. Let me try again. Did you ever wish that you'd been assigned somewhere else, other than the Aleutians?

Walter Stohler: Well, yeah, I think so. But on the other hand, that was a much safer place to be than some of the islands down in the Pacific.

Joshua Bell: That's for sure.

Walter Stohler: Yeah, I'm not, uh-, I'm not sure. They sent us up there. That was a pretty good place to send us, even though it was boring and windy and lonesome. But, but at least we didn't get any real action outside of just the jet planes flying over once in awhile, observation planes.

Joshua Bell: What was that like having the planes fly so close?

Walter Stohler: Well, they were up pretty high. They were the little seaplanes with the pontoon on the bottom. Yeah. They just sent about one over every day to look at us I think. And we all popped off that 20 millimeter which is-, wasn't big enough. You might as well take a 22 while you're doing it. But it-, but it was something to shoot at.

Joshua Bell: Mm-hmm. Uh, what sorts of aircraft would you put those torpedoes on? Or would you put them on ships?

Walter Stohler: Well, no. They were-, they were strictly aircraft. Or PT boats. But the Bering Sea is too rough for those PT boats. But of course there's a landing field there and (next thing you know?) I suppose they could land their torpedo planes there if they needed.

Joshua Bell: Do you remember where you were when you learned about, um, peace in Europe? VE Day?

Walter Stohler: Well, let's see. Where was I anyway? After my stint up there they sent me-, us down to Whidbey Island, Washington. And there was a torpedo shop there which they housed it for, oh, about a year I guess. And, uh, think that's where I heard that D Day I think, or, no, what do you call it?

Joshua Bell: Victory Europe?

Walter Stohler: Victory, yeah. Yeah.

Joshua Bell: At that point were you optimistic about, uh, Japan's surrender?

Walter Stohler: Well, not really until they dropped on Hiroshima with the A-Bomb. That got their attention and they surrendered pretty fast. After they killed hundreds of thousands of people. But that was the best thing Truman ever done. Tell 'em to-, tell 'em to use the A-Bomb because, I don't know, we'd have lost thousands of troops if we tried to invade Japan. We lost a lot of 'em at Iwo Jima anyway, and some in the Philippines. We lost a lot of troops down there.

Joshua Bell: Where were you, uh, when you learned that Japan had surrendered?

Walter Stohler: I think I was in Hawaii. After, uh, we hit the Island they shipped over to, uh, Ford Field there in-, in Hawaii. On Oahu. On Oahu, actually. I think that's where I heard it, the surrender and stuff.

Joshua Bell: What a neat place to be, uh, and-, and to learn about the surrender of Japan.

Walter Stohler: Yeah, I guess.

Joshua Bell: To be where it all started.

Walter Stohler: Yeah.

Joshua Bell: What happened?

Walter Stohler: Well, I was only over in, uh, Hawaii for about six months and then I got my discharge. They shipped-, shipped us back to San Diego and where we entered and gave us a ruptured duck. They call-, they called that-, when you got your discharge, you got a-, uh, a ruptured duck pin on your uniform.

Joshua Bell: What was the highest rank you achieved?

Walter Stohler: First Class.

Joshua Bell: Petty officer?

Walter Stohler: Yeah. Yeah, First Class. The next step after First Class is Chief but I never made Chief. And I think, as I remember, I was getting \$114 a month.

Joshua Bell: Hey now.

Walter Stohler: I think that was the pay for us First Classes at the time. But that was quite a bit of money.

Joshua Bell: Yeah. Sure was.

Walter Stohler: Not bad.

Joshua Bell: What did you do when did you left the service?

Walter Stohler: Oh, let's see, 1946. I think it was. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I came right back to Boise, my hometown here. Then I done several jobs around here.

Joshua Bell: What'd you do?

Walter Stohler: Well, I went back to dry cleaning. And I didn't see much future in that. And then I joined the Police Department here in Boise. And I was on that for about 26 years. Then I retired from there. Then after that I just done odd things and now I just carry the garbage out.

Joshua Bell: There you go. I want to ask, do you think it's important that places like the Aleutian World War II National Historic Area, to commemorate the sacrifice and the service that was made by my military personnel and civilians while they were assigned there?

Walter Stohler: I don't know. I guess I really don't understand your question.

Joshua Bell: Do you think it's important that those places exist, as historic areas and national parks?

Walter Stohler: Well, I think so, yeah.

Joshua Bell: Why is that?

Walter Stohler: Well, I don't know it's part of the whole thing really. I don't... it's just one of those things. It's part of it. That's pretty important. That's a pretty important thing I think we done up there. I'm not sure. Because we thought the Japs were gonna land there. But they didn't. They hit the Marshalls. So we got spared of that. A lot of people were thinking they could land (out/up?) there and then come on down, you know, to the States there.

Joshua Bell: For sure.

Walter Stohler: That didn't happen.

Joshua Bell: And, we're approaching the seven-, seventieth anniversary of the peace that ended World War II.

Walter Stohler: Oh, yeah.

Joshua Bell: And I wanted to ask you if you think it's important that oral histories are collected by people who were involved in World War II.

Walter Stohler: Oh, sure. Yeah. The info you get, the better.

Joshua Bell: That's how I look at it. Well, I appreciate your participation in the Aleutian World War II National Historic Areas Oral History Program. And thank you for your contribution to the project. And thank you for your contribution leading to victory in the Second World War.

Walter Stohler: Well-, well, thank you. And I don't know if I helped you very much or not but we had a nice chat. Now offhand I'll probably think of something later but I don't think of anything now.

[End of recorded material]