

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

#428

JOHN STANLEY LOPINSKY

HICKAM FIELD, SURVIVOR

**INTERVIEWED ON
DECEMBER 6, 2001
BY BOB CHENOWETH**

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

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**USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

Bob Chenoweth (BC): The following oral history interview was conducted by Bob Chenoweth for the National Park Service on December 6, 2001 at 10:00 pm. The person being interviewed is John Stanley Lopinsky, and he was a private first class, first class specialist at Hickam Field. He was with the 12th Signal Platoon, which was attached to the 17th Air Base Group. He was a signal corps, he was in the army signal corps, not in the army air force. John, for the record, please state your full name, place of birth and date of birth.

John Lopinsky (JL): John Stanley Lopinsky. Date of birth, 8 March 1919, Cranberry, West Virginia.

BC: What did you consider your hometown in 1941?

JL: Wait a minute. You got me _____ go back. Summerlee, West Virginia.

BC: Summerlee, West Virginia. Okay. What were your parents' names?

JL: Stanley is my father and Victoria was my mother.

BC: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

JL: Three brothers—three sisters, one brother.

BC: Where did you go to high school?

JL: Oak Hill, West Virginia.

BC: Did you attend any college prior to your military service?

JL: No.

BC: Where and when did you enlist in the army?

JL: I enlisted, I guess I enlisted in Martinsburg, West Virginia in October '40, '41. I don't remember. Wait a minute, I got it. I have it on my discharge here. I got a little discharge _____ . I don't remember the

small stuff! Let's see. I think I might—I know I did I have it. I got so much junk in there. Here it is. I can't see it. Can you see if you can?

BC: Oh my goodness. No, you're going to have better eyes than I've got.

?: I'll look.

BC: Okay.

JL: There we go.

?: In this bright light, boy, oh boy.

JL: Martinsburg I know where...

BC: Well, it sounded like when you were talking to me before, you must have come in in 1940.

JL: Forty.

?: Five, August 1940.

BC: Five, August 1940.

JL: Oh, 5 August, yeah. Mm-hmm.

BC: Okay.

JL: Yeah, I remember that now. Now, after you tell me. Yeah.

BC: Okay, when you, after you enlisted, tell me a little bit about your service, prior to coming to Hawaii, your training and everything.

JL: Yeah. Before getting in the army?

BC: No, after you joined.

JL: After, after.

BC: Yeah.

JL: Well, as I said, they enlisted in Martinsburg, West Virginia. They in turn shipped me to Baltimore, when I was sworn in in Baltimore. And then in turn they sent me up the river, so to speak, to Fort Slocum, New York. And from Fort Slocum, I came over here.

BC: What did, what kind of training did you have at Fort Slocum?

JL: Well, about a week of little drill. Not _____, just drill.

BC: So you actually took your basic training once you came to Hawaii, is that right?

JL: Well, you might say that, but we never—that little bit up in Hickam—not Hickam—New York was about all I had. When I come here, went right to work. Yeah. They put me with the Buck Hoffmeyer, a sergeant.

BC: Tell me about your coming over to Hawaii. How did you actually come?

JL: USAT *Republic*, army transport.

BC: Army transport. And did you leave out of San Francisco?

JL: Frisco, yeah.

BC: Yeah.

JL: Well, no, we left New York. We come down the river and went through the canal into Frisco and then to Hawaii.

BC: Oh, I see. I see.

JL: Yeah. The scenic route.

BC: Uh-huh. So when you got here...

(Taping stops, then resumes)

BC: Okay, when you got to Hawaii, you were telling me before about how you ended up at Hickam Field.

JL: Uh-huh.

BC: Could you tell me that again? How was that?

JL: Well, like I said, the greenhorn over there, and then the guys hollering, “Football players, basketball players and baseball players.”

And so I naturally played baseball and I got in that line. And like I told you before, I thought I was going to Shafter, but I wound up at Hickam.

BC: Why did you think you were going to Fort Shafter?

JL: Because that’s what I was told at the recruiting station. That’s what they told me. And when...

BC: Your watch. The watch is clicking on the...

JL: Oh. Okay, I'm tough.

(Laughter)

JL: Okay. Anything you say. I'm just one of the boys!

BC: All right. Just that technical stuff again.

So actually when you enlisted then, you enlisted expecting that you would be sent to Hawaii to Fort Shafter?

JL: Yeah, that is correct.

BC: Did you have an idea when you enlisted what kind of duty you wanted?

JL: No, not really. Not really. I just, I tell you why I wanted Hawaii. My brother was in Hawaii. He spent three years—no, back then, two years, double time, and he was at Fort DeRussy.

BC: I see.

JL: And that's, so he told me all these fine stories about Hawaii.

BC: So was he in the coast artillery? At Fort DeRussy, was he in the coast artillery?

JL: Yes.

BC: I see.

JL: He was in coast artillery at Fort DeRussy. And he kinda sold me on Hawaii.

BC: So you get down to Hickam and they told you your primary duty was going to be playing baseball. Could you tell me about that?

JL: Well, they—not in so many words.

BC: I see.

JL: They, like I said, I was working on the phone, telephone, to install ‘em and all that, but I was free to play baseball. That was, let’s say they wouldn’t bitch if I played baseball.

BC: Right.

JL: That’s what it was.

BC: Tell me a little bit about the actual telephone work that you were doing.
What did that involve?

JL: Well, we installed and we shot trouble. And you have trouble, we’d go in the morning, get the trouble tickets, if I was working, repair. Get the trouble tickets and go all over the base. Fix _____. Or if someone

wants some coming in, new phone, they'd let them in. So worked, installed 'em, troubleshooting. And I did, I wired—there was quite a job. They wanted to wire the Hawaiian Air depot. They had one at twelve _____ . But they wanted about 100 phones. I said, “Well, wait a minute, now something's wrong.”

Well, the guy was good. He, the foreman or whatever, said, “What you need?”

I said, “I need a hole in this wall and a box of say,” how many pairs I don't remember. Fifty pair, forty pair.

He said, “Don't _____.”

Then they wired every—they ran the wire and I put the phones in and helped my men, my crew. Yeah. That was the job.

BC: You also mentioned that there was a big switchboard, a new switching board, yeah?

JL: Well, no. Yeah, I said that the switchboard—not the switchboard, the mainframe, all the phones...

BC: The mainframe.

JL: ...that was the first and latest out at that time. At Hickam they got it, the first one. I think whether Western Electric or Bell, whoever. Yeah, that was the radio, that's the first one, that new model, that's where it went.

BC: Whereabouts was that mainframe put? What building?

JL: Headquarters. Headquarters, they had, where you go in the main _____, in the back. It wasn't a big place. The mainframe room was pretty good size, but the switchboard was, oh, just a little place. And we had operators that take the overseas calls. And well, matter of fact, I worked 'em a little while 'cause you got ten dollars a month added to twenty-one made thirty-one!

BC: Mm-hmm.

JL: Yeah. So...

BC: So tell me a little bit about your baseball.

JL: Baseball. That's my game, I'll tell you. Well, like I said, I went down there and tried out. George Bush, he was a catcher and Hopalong Anderson, I guess, he was master sergeant, was the manager. So Bush, Warrant Officer Bush in my outfit said, "Go down and if you want to try out," like I told you, two of us, Herman Chapman and I. I made the team as a pitcher. Herman didn't make it. And we had a pretty good ball team.

BC: You were telling me that you, the team often traveled to the outer islands to play games.

JL: Oh yes. Well, like I said, that's the way I got to see all the islands, through baseball. _____ playing _____, big

luau. All the *okole hao* you could drink! And I'll tell you, that was a good trip! Yeah. We made about all of 'em.

BC: Could you tell me the story about going out to Fort Shafter when all the trucks were down?

JL: Pardon?

BC: You had told me before about going up to—I'm sorry—to Schofield Barracks to play.

JL: Uh-huh. Oh yeah.

BC: When all the trucks were down.

JL: Oh yeah. They grounded all the trucks. And there was no transportation that day, so Major Swanski, I think, he said, "Well, they didn't ground the airplanes."

So we—“Go down to the field, load the team up there and fly to Wheeler Field and walk from Wheeler to 11th Signal Barracks at Schofield.”

BC: And what type of aircraft did you fly up there in?

JL: I think it's a C-33. The one with the sharp nose. Yeah, sat on the floor actually. Bucket seats, I don't remember. But yeah we put on the gear and then away we went. Walked from Wheeler up there.

BC: Where were you billeted at Hickam?

JL: Where. Well, at first we had, they had four-man huts, oh, where the parade ground is there, where the consolidated barracks is now. They had four-man huts over there. They had, I guess, about twenty-five of 'em and four men manned, stayed in those huts. Then they moved us down to the old—they had a schoolhouse down by the water tower and they moved us down in that, that area. And then we went up to consolidated barracks, some of us. For a while, I don't remember. And I think that's where I was—no, I was down there when the bombs hit. But we, in three places there, I know. In

consolidated barracks, which now is, I guess, headquarters for all the 7th Air Force.

BC: Right, right. Hale Makai. Tell me what you were doing on December 7, on Sunday morning and what happened to you that day.

JL: Well, like I say, I dreamed about it. I had a dream that planes were dropping bombs, so I got up early, showered, shaved, and I was ready to go. And when they hit—we had practiced this. We knew what our duty station was. So I went up to headquarters and worked 'til nine o'clock that night, fixing phones, stringing field wire and things.

BC: When you got ready to go, did you see the attack as it was happening?

JL: Well...

BC: What made you aware that there was an attack?

JL: Well, you see that plane going down the hangar line with that big meatball on, I know damn well that was no—well, see the navy would bomb us, flour bombs. We had, I assume, our people bombed them. So back and forth on Sunday, but when I saw that meatball, I said, “That’s no navy!” and I knew it was the real thing.

BC: Mm-hmm. And you immediately went to the headquarters?

JL: Went to headquarters where our duty station.

BC: Now, was the communication system, was the telephone system damaged at all in the attack?

JL: Some. Not in total. But we had a few calls that they didn’t have it, but that was people that lived near the hangar line, around there, for stray bombs, I guess, and everything. But not as much as you, one would think. But we did, I remember the bomb, at the bomb dump, they had a problem. I don’t know whether, what, but they didn’t hit the bomb dump. They didn’t blow it, anyway. And...

BC: But they lost communications.

JL: But they lost their—yeah. It could've been, because it's out in the boonies. You know, out in the boondocks and they're way out and probably maybe tore a line down somewhere. Uh-huh.

BC: What did you think? What did you think about this?

JL: Well, I guess go back, the *Clipper* used to come into Pearl there, land. And I'd read in the paper _____, Honolulu paper about Nomura coming over. And as I told you earlier, I had that little telephone truck that I could go anywhere I wanted. I had a pass, I go anywhere. So I said, "Well, shit, I'll go down there and see what he's going to see."

And I was close to him as, you know, we _____.

They're going to straighten this all out. Nothing going to happen. But it did. Went to Washington and talked to one and broke off the same way.

Yeah. Never can—I'll remember him.

BC: So you saw him when he came in on the *Clipper*?

JL: The *Clipper*, yeah. And I was, like I said, within six feet of him. He's grinning with them big buckteeth. Yeah. Yeah.

BC: So after the attack was over, how long did you stay at Hickam and what did you do after the attack?

JL: Well, back pretty much to normal after they—well, see at first, they thought that they were going to have another attack and they were going to land. You heard all the rumors in the world. That they were landing on the North Shore, that they're here and everything. But like I said, there's only just rumors. And so we—well, naturally you know everybody's shook up, they're going to kind of remember, but hoping they're not true. And they never did bother us any more. So things pretty much went back to normal, as far as work and things.

BC: Now, at some point...

(Taping stops, then resumes)

BC: Okay. Eventually you left Hawaii.

JL: Right.

BC: When was that?

JL: Oh, let's see. About—no, 'cause I was, as I told you out there, I was on the transport at Christmas, so it must've been December. Yeah, I was on the transport in the middle of the ocean in there.

BC: And that was in December of 1942?

JL: True.

BC: So you stayed another year at...

JL: About a year or so. Uh-huh.

BC: And very briefly, tell me what you did when you went back to the Mainland?

JL: Well, went to Santa Ana, California, at the cadet pre-flight school, which is about, I don't know, ten weeks or so. Then they sent me to TO-LA-REE Field for primary training in flying.

BC: Mm-hmm.

JL: Well, as I said, solo, took my cross-country solo, all that and then they washed me. Washed out. As I told you back there again, I think they were getting filled up and better people, better qualified maybe than I, but I—so I said, well, they asked me, “What do you want to do?”

I said, “I'll go back to my outfit, 12th Signal.”

“No, you're Air Force.”

That's how I got in the Air Force. So then I went from, then I went and took phase training in Wyoming and went to Italy as a radioman on the B-24. Flew twenty-nine or thirty-four missions over there.

BC: Tell me how, why there's this distinction between whether you flew twenty-nine missions or thirty-four missions.

JL: Well, made twenty-nine or thirty-four?

BC: Uh-huh.

JL: Well, I don't know. I told the chief, "How come there's a little discrepancy?"

He said, "Well, you, they need a radio operator, you'll go."

So, and as I told you, I told him the same thing, as soon as I got my thirty in or thirty-four, whatever it is, I'll go home. So I flew _____ greenhorns, scared the poop out of me!

BC: Okay. Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW