

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

#280

JOHN E. SLINZAK & ENID I. SLINZAK

9TH SIGNAL CO., FORT SHAFTER

**INTERVIEWED ON
DECEMBER 8, 1998
BY JEFF PAPPAS**

TRANSCRIBED BY:

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Jeff Pappas (JP): ...do as many as we possibly can.

John Slinzak (JS): Yeah.

JP: So this project is funded through the *Arizona*, for the memorial.

JS: They announced today this morning at the business meeting, there's 9,505 of us left.

JP: That's it. So it's gone down considerably just in a few years.

JS: That's right.

JP: That's why we need to do this.

JS: Yeah. I say in three years, we'll be down to about 500, I think, five, 600, something like that, because...

JP: But you've got sons and daughters though.

JS: Yeah.

JP: That's the organization that you have to...

Enid Slinzak (ES): Yes.

JP: ...spend a lot of time with now. It's much like the Daughters of the American Revolution that are still very, very strong because they are committed to perpetuation of the organization.

Okay. The following oral history interview was conducted by Jeff Pappas for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial, at the Imperial Palace Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada on December 8, 1998 at 3:30 p.m. The persons being interviewed are Edna and John Slinzak.

ES: Enid.

JP: Enid, sorry, thank you. Who were actually in Honolulu on December 7, 1941? And as a script, as a preface, I had interviewed Enid this morning and she would like to correct a mistake.

ES: Yes. I said that John had come back from Saipan in '43, '44 and thinking about it later, I realized he came back in November of '45.

JP: Okay. Well, thank you for that.

(Taping stops, then resumes)

JP: Now since I had interviewed Enid this morning, unfortunately we didn't get beyond World War II. We basically had stopped almost in 1943, 1944. At this time, you had been living in, was it New Jersey, if I remember correctly, or back in Pennsylvania?

ES: Yes. And this was in forty—well, early '45 is when I went back to Pennsylvania and then New Jersey.

JP: Now, John, at this time, you were...

JS: See, I was stationed at Saipan at the time and I was the most-ranking person to leave first. And I was supposed to leave in May of 1945.

JP: Mm-hm.

JS: And we had not completed our complete—see, I was in charge of telephone, Teletype communications on the island. We had not established all of that stuff so I told them that I would stay on until it's finished, providing I have two weeks off in December to go home and see my newborn daughter in Honolulu.

JP: Who you hadn't seen yet?

JS: Hadn't seen yet, no. (Chuckles)

JP: Very good. Now, Enid and I spoke this morning at length about her childhood and where she grew up and about her parents, so we hadn't talked

so much about you, though Enid did mention your folks because she had lived with them for some time in Pennsylvania. Tell me a little bit about your childhood growing up in Pennsylvania.

JS: Well, I'm from a coal-mining town. I was sixteen and my father wanted me to go into the coalmines. I says, "No, I'm going to finish my high school." I did. After I graduated from high school, I went into the coalmines. About five months later, I saw the light and I quit! (Chuckles)

JP: Literally saw the light, not a metaphorically.

JS: Yeah. That's right. And then I went and I went to New York, thinking I might be able to get a job. I couldn't find anything. I went to the recruiting station; I was going to join the army. They said, "No, you have to go back home."

I went back home and being a high school graduate, I was prime candidate. They said, "We will get you assigned right away. We got one vacancy, in infantry Panama, but don't worry about it. We'll get you into the signal corps."

So I was in the infantry for about seven days and they transferred me to Signal Corps. Then I spent a year, almost two years at Fort Monmouth. And the last year and a half, I was an instructor there. Now keep in mind, I was a private. And a private, well, they spit on 'em at that time! (Laughs)

And then about a week before I left for Hawaii, the sergeant called me in, he says, "John, we have to send you to Hawaii because they are calling for you."

See, at that time, we didn't have an open field of selection—people all over the place, pools and all that kind of stuff. They trained people to fill certain assignments.

JP: John, why don't you tell me briefly about where you served at Hawaii and so we can get on to some of the other things that I'd like to talk about.

JS: Okay, when we arrived in Hawaii I was a private and I really come in. I started my job there, it was to install and take care of the Teletype systems for all of the military on the island of Oahu. I was assigned to the Ninth Signal Company and during this period, there was some trouble developed with the civilian Teletype people and didn't have any, so they contacted the signal office, which was my boss, and asked them for help. He says, "Yes, he can help you, providing it's on his own time."

Now keep in mind, this is back in the time when they only worked three hours a day, 'cause that's all we did. So then I went to work for them and I met this young lady and I was making twenty-one dollars a month in the military, but I was making \$160 a month in the civilian sector. So I was really rich! So that...

JP: Let's talk about your family. This is what I'm most interested in you. Enid and I had talked this morning about raising children during the war and Enid, you had two children during the war. Then you had, I believe...

ES: A son.

JP: ...a son...

ES: Later, in 1946.

JP: So after the war now, you had had a tremendous amount of military experience. Enid had been stateside now for most of the war. Tell me about raising your three children and how you taught them about your experiences during the war.

JS: Well, you gotta keep in mind, being in the assignments that I was in, I was in what we call the maneuver type unit. I went to the signal battalion, which was for the purpose of controlling maneuvers that were being conducted all over the United States. And during this period, we moved about three times a year and we were the type that always took our kids with us and everywhere.

JP: So you stayed in the military after?

JS: Oh definitely. I stayed in there. And then after—and so every time we had to move, and this happened for about four years, I guess. And so then I was assigned to—we were going to conduct the maneuvers at, oh, Camp Drum, New York. And while I was there, I was ordered to go to the conventional staff college. And this is on Christmas Eve! And speaking of moving, Christmas Eve we got the orders. I had to be at Fort Leaven, Kansas on the first of January! And I moved her from Camp Drum to Gallup, New Mexico and then I went back, went there. And then after that, I was assigned to the mission, the MAG (*Military Advisory Group*) mission in Formosa, which was unaccompanied. So in 1953, I went over there. In 1954, they changed it. So in 1954, she joined me with the kids.

JP: Now, Enid, how did you adjust to all this moving? What did you really—what did you think about all these moves?

ES: Well, just when are we going to move again? It got so that my oldest daughter, she was quite young then, but we were going to go to New York to visit people. She said, “Should I pack my winter clothes?” ‘cause we moved so much and so many times. And you just went along with it, I mean. And I ended up...

JP: What was it like raising children during all this? You had to uproot them. They had to be put in new schools.

ES: Right and they adapted to that very well. They did. In fact, our oldest daughter was kind of strange. We were stationed in Massachusetts at Fort AIR, Massachusetts.

JP: Mm-hm.

ES: And she picked up that...

JP: Accent?

ES: ...accent so quick, you couldn't believe it. You thought she...

JP: “Pahk the cah,” accent? “Pahk the cah” accent?

ES: Yes, she—you'd have thought she was born and raised there. And then shortly after that, we were transferred to Georgia. She picked that up like you thought she'd been born and raised in Georgia. And it is just amazing. And later on, in later years, when she was married, she lived in Texas and she picked up that Texas drawl and...

JS: And we were, maybe we were a family of the station. We had one point in mind and that was to educate our children. All of our children, all three of them, are extremely well educated.

JP: Well, speaking of education, I don't mean to cut you, John. Speaking of education, when did you start, when did you first start telling them stories about Pearl Harbor and about your involvement and your life, as a couple, in Hawaii?

JS: Oh...

ES: Oh, just...

JS: Almost immediately. Just so they understood because we had slides and all this kind of stuff. And we had a policy that we never watched TV [*television*] or anything like that during the dinner hours. And we always had a formal dinner. The four or five of us would sit down and drink and discuss everything and so on. And then the kids would get their schoolwork done and so on. And then possibly we might spend an hour or so watching the TV.

JP: Did you two as a couple ever sit down and talk about how you were going to approach the issue of your involvement at Pearl Harbor with your children? Or did you two tell separate stories about your...

ES: No, we just...

JS: Everything just seemed to come out, just...

JP: I'm sorry.

(Taping stops, then resumes)

JP: Okay, Enid.

ES: We never planned anything. I mean, the kids just took to it naturally because we always took them with us. Later on, he was in Eniwetok and at Christmas Island, and this was after he was out of the service, after he was retired. And when I'd sit down to meals with the kids, I had a tape recorder on the table. And we'd just talk about everyday things and what we'd do and we'd just...

JP: You had a tape recorder?

ES: And then I would—a cassette recorder. And then we'd, I'd mail the cassettes to John.

JP: So you'd hear the children's voices.

ES: Sure and what they were doing.

JS: I'd do the same thing sending one back to them, see. But we were, I would say we were very close, I think. We never had any trouble with our children until it became of the age where they thought they knew everything.
(Laughs)

But getting back to Honolulu and so on, at the time the war started and so on, I had, I was very active in getting all the communications all set up because we were moving into the command post at that time. People think that we weren't prepared and all that, but we were! Because we had plans and we were moving into the command post. I had—it took me three days to move from our normal operations at Fort Shafter to the Ala Moana command post. It took me three days, twenty-four hours a day, with eleven men and we got it all moved, which we had planned to do in a year! But that's how fast we got it done, so we were prepared. But we weren't prepared for an actual strike because we didn't think it was going to happen, see. We had people on maneuvers, the people out there training all the time. As a matter of fact, that week, there was all kinds of anti-aircraft stuff going on and her father said, "What are they doing? Out there playing again with the pea shooters and what have you?"

And he mentioned the same thing on December 7, when he woke us up.

JP: Now Enid had explained to me, told me today about your wedding, about planning the wedding in Honolulu. She said that you had done most of the planning.

JS: Uh-huh.

JP: Is that...

JS: That's correct. You got to remember, see, I had money. I had—because I was making a lot of money and I had 2,000 or 3,000 dollars in the bank, which was a lot of money at that time.

JP: Well, incidentally, she said she was very impressed, your first date, that you threw down a twenty dollar bill.

JS: (Chuckles)

JP: To pay for dinner.

JS: Yeah. Well then, that did it, that particular meal, I happened to wear tails. And see we used to go out, well, three or four nights a week. And about two of those nights were always formal type of operations. So she had a lot of formal gowns and I had a lot of formal attire. But back in Hawaii at that time, if you went out after seven o'clock at night to a function, I don't care what it was, you wore a white dinner jacket and so on. That was just standard attire at that time.

ES: And then, at the Post Theater, at Fort Shafter, when we went to the theater during the week, he had to wear a uniform to go into the theater. And only the sergeants could sit in these green seats, plush seats. And you were ushered to your seat, enlisted people and officers and all. But that was my dream, to be able to sit in those green seats when John became a sergeant. (Chuckles)

JS: And you got to remember, back in those days, an enlisted man could not get married without permission of the commanding officer. The commanding officer would not give you permission unless you could afford to raise a wife. And the only way you could do that is you had to be a senior non-commissioned officer or an officer. So I took it upon myself to become an officer. So I was commissioned a Second Lieutenant on the first of September. I was ordered to active duty the same day. Eleventh of October, we got married. But I couldn't marry without permission then because I was...

JP: This is 1941?

JS: Nineteen forty-one, before the war started. This is October 11 of '41. And at our particular ceremony, my boss happened to be the boss in charge of the officers' club. So I was able to get the officers' club to put the dinner, dance and so on. But I also got permission from the commanding general to allow enlisted men to associate. And that did not happen. That's fraternization, see.

JP: Mm-hm.

JS: And so I said, "Well, I've got all of these enlisted friends," and so on, "that I've been with and now I've only been away from them thirty days since I've been commissioned."

They said okay. So I had, at that particular social function, which was one of the biggest of the season because the whole club was ours. And I had, oh, I'd say twenty or thirty enlisted people there.

JP: Back to your children, later on, as you're raising them, did any of your children ever become particularly interested in your involvement, or your life, during the Pearl Harbor attack? Anyone show a particular propensity?

ES: Well, you want to remember they were just babies when the attack—in fact...

JP: But later on though, when they became adults, when they could look back objectively or analytically at their parents and did they begin to ask questions about what had happened?

ES: Well...

JS: Well, let me put it another way. We have four grandchildren.

ES: Five.

JS: Five, yeah. All right, five, but we had four then. We had four grandchildren. Three of them went into the service. Two of them are now in the service. One's, both of them are captains. The other one that came out of the service is now a police sergeant or something thereabouts, in the police department. So speaking of that, they were militarily inclined and that stayed from the mothers to the children, see. So to answer you whether they're inclined, yeah, they definitely were inclined to be military pros.

JP: See, from the mother and the father.

JS: That's right, see.

JP: To the children.

JS: So we always have honored the military family. We have always honored because that's the family that we're from. What we can't understand is the lack of neglect of the military today. We just can't understand that.

JP: I think we're going to stop there because we're almost out of time. And I like to thank you both for this brief interview. Unfortunately, we have to, we only have so much time to do this today, but thank you for coming and sharing your...

JS: Very happy to do it.

JP: Very good.

END OF INTERVIEW