

Meyer Widrevitz

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Interviewed by Leah Cohen

Transcribed by Adam Cieply

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Cohen: Hi! Good Morning, my name is Leah Cohen, today is April 19th, 2018, and on behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, I'd like to interview Sergeant Meyer Widrevitz. He was one of seven men specializing in Communication equipment in the Ar...

Widrevitz: And the maintenance of the equipment

Cohen: And the maintenance of aircraft equipment for the B-29's. He was part of the 73rd Bomber [sic] Wing, of the 20th Army Air Force in Saipan, during WWII. So we're looking forward to hearing your story.

Widrevitz: Incidentally, the 73rd Bomb Wing was one of five wings. 73rd was one of the five wings. The five wings operated out of a group of islands close to each other: Guam, Tinian, and Saipan. But the 73rd Wing that I was in was based on Saipan.

Cohen: So we will go back to the very beginning. When and where were you born?

Widrevitz: I was born in Chicago, Illinois, on June the 9th, 1920, approximately ninety-eight years ago.

Cohen: And what was your neighborhood like growing up?

Widrevitz: I lived in a very unusual neighborhood, in my opinion. We had, at that time, three, four, or five ethnic group enclaves in the city. There were Italian groups, Polish groups, German, Swedish and Norwegian groups, and uh to a certain extent, people from Latin America. And I lived in a group that was not actually from a country but were considered, a semi-religious group, the Jewish people. And we lived on the West Side, and that was the center of the Jewish Community.

Cohen: And what did your parents do for a living?

Widrevitz: My father came here without a nickel. Well, maybe he had a couple of nickels, and he, uh, had a very limited formal education because you couldn't go into a school in Russia unless you were a believer of the Russian Orthodox Church and you had to be a member of that particular religion, and you were considered just as a member of an ethnic group so. He worked as a small boy as a sort of— he was not an indentured servant, but he served... His family had thirteen children,

he was one of thirteen and he was sent by his parents to live and help work for one of the relatives in a small nearby community. So, from the time he was about, I should say twelve years old, till he was twenty-one, he worked in this small grocery store. So, he didn't have any profession, and no education as a formal one, but he did have a religious education and he belonged to a religious group, which is very famous nowadays. Which is based in New York City called the Lubavitcher movement.

Cohen: He was a Lubavitcher?

Widrevitz: Yes he was. The family was very fervent Orthodox Jews. Now my mother on the other hand, unfortunately, her father and mother were people who were born shortly after a massacre that had occurred in Romania. It was called the Kishinev Massacre, and her father decided that they would move to Chicago, where they had some relatives prior to this happening. So my grandfather, on my mother's side, came. He came here in 1903, and in 1905, he had enough money to get his wife- my grandmother- and three small daughters, but [their] one son had died before they came. When they arrived in 1905, in Milwaukee, he was selling pop off of a horse wagon, a wagon and horse, and again he had a limited education. His wife and the three children were here only six months, none of them could speak English, and he suddenly got a stroke, they tell me, and he died at a hospital because he didn't have any money to pay for service. I imagine he was in the emergency and just died and left his widow with three little semi-orphans. And so, at that time my mother and her two sisters, who were somewhere between the ages eight and twelve years old, had to wait till about thirteen or fourteen years old to go to work. At that time there were labor laws that allowed factories to have little children working in there. So my mother and her two sisters, I don't know what they did to exist. The old lady must have got two or three dollars a week, support from her relatives that were here in Milwaukee, Wisconsin already. One of my aunts married a Greek fellow when she got to be about seventeen or eighteen. My other aunt married an Irish fellow and had one child. The one that was married to the Greek had twins. Then my mother decided, when she... She went to work at fourteen. She worked in a factory called Ambrosia Chocolate Factory and she got injured by a piece of machinery and she got thrown out. No compensation, no nothing. And she applied for a job in a cigar roll... making cigar's by hand.

Cohen: Was she still in Milwaukee at the time?

Widrevitz: Yeah, then when she got to be seventeen or eighteen or nineteen years old, I don't know exactly when, she came to Chicago by herself. And later on, her sisters came here, and she got the job in cigar making or whatnot. And she was at a wedding... a wedding, in a small home, [with] a lot of poor people, and that's where she met my father, who was from Russia; Russian Ukraine. She was from

Romania. From the time she was a little girl, she only had one or two years in a public school, and then she had to go to work, but she worked with children, girls, boys, who were already here, primarily from Germany and from Ireland, and she— by being with them, they spoke only English; she became very, very fluent in the English language. She spoke beautiful English, and she did wonderful. She learned to read and write and all that. So she, in my opinion, was very accomplished, and my father learned the hard way, by being in his business. He went from peddling pots and pans with a horse and wagon, to finally opening up a little store, and he developed a route to sell pots and pans in hardware stores. From that he branched out, and he eventually wound up in the floor covering business for many, many years, where I worked with him.

Cohen: And how many siblings did you have?

Widrevitz: I had only one person, my sister. She was three years younger than me. She was born in 1923. She, uh... When she was nineteen years-old the war had broken out- she and a girlfriend went to a dance at Fort Sheridan during the war. And she became enamored with a man twice her age from Tennessee, and she ran away and eloped with him. She was nineteen and he was thirty-six or thirty-eight years old. He wound up in the heavy artillery unit during the war. He came back alive, and she lived with him until she passed away from cancer when she was fifty-two.

Cohen: Was there any military background in your family, I mean I suspect not, but you never know, so I'd like to ask.

Widrevitz: I have, I haven't got it with me now, but I have pictures of people in my grandmother's family who came, they must have been living in Italy or Austria and they were dressed up in military [uniforms]. I don't know what their rank was but they were either officers or non-coms in the troops. In Russia, on my father's side of the family, in 1825 the Russian Tsar said that the Jews in in the Ukraine must convert to the Russian Orthodox Religion, and if they're not gonna do it voluntarily, they're gonna be kidnapped in the streets at eleven or twelve years old and put in the Russian Army, no contact with their parents forever and they had to serve twenty-five years. Not two or three years, twenty-five years! And because of that, with that... In my father's time already now, not 1825, we were talking about when the war broke out, the First World War in 1914; my Father decided a year or two before that he cannot stand to live in Russia because of Anti-Semitism. So he asked his parents' permission to leave Russia. He's gonna go to live in a either a territory called Palestine, or he'd go to live in the United States, and my Grandfather and my Grandmother, on my father's side told him, "Don't leave Russia. You shouldn't. We're gonna stay here, don't go." And he was insistent upon going so they told him, "You go and get the opinion of the so called Lubavitcher Rabbi from a town called Lubov and he'll tell you what

his opinion is; whether you should go or you should leave. And then, whatever it is, you go to the United States or Palestine. You ask him for a letter to give to m"e -His father- what his opinion was. And he did get there and he got permission to speak to the rabbi. And like I said, he was very well known around all of Russia, this rabbi, and the Rabbi said, "You may be in Palestine, it's not Israel, but it's Palestine. You'll be living among Muslims, who are not Jewish. You'll go to the United States, you'll be with people also who you meet up with, who are also not Jewish, and in either country, you're gonna be living in a community where there aren't many Jewish people, God knows what's gonna happen to you. You might disappear out of the people, among the people here." But he said "Even if I don't want you to go to either place, go to the United States." So he went to the United States, he came in Chicago. And here he met up with some of his old neighbors who had come prior to that. And he got a job on Division Street here in a small grocery store. [It] didn't work out satisfactorily. He was twenty-one years old. He was all alone, with no family. The end result was that he went to work in a leather factory. He was by no means adept at working with machinery and all that so he quit that too. So he went into the coal and ice business, and now this is not a fancy business. In the summertime, he hauled ice on his back up to second or third floors and put them in ice boxes and in wintertime he hauled sacks of coal on his back to put into stoves. And, that's the type of beginning he had in this country before he got married. At the same time, when he met up with my mother somewhere around 1919 he decided to go into business with this pots and pans business, but some of his experiences with the the coal and ice is quite interesting to me. And I won't go into details about it, but he noticed how people would connive that went in to buy coal in the coal yards. [They would] put stones on the wagon before they came in. There would be four or five-hundred pounds of stones covered with a canvas. Then they would put them on a scale. So if the scale said that the coal... With the stones and the horse and wagon, it weighed let's say fifteen-hundred pounds. So they would write out that. Then somewhere along the line- these old timers that were buying coal- told them [his father] to throw all the stones off the wagon in a corner of the coal yard where the owner isn't using, and throw on coal and if you put on five-hundred pounds of coal and it was five-hundred pounds of stones they threw out they could say they didn't buy any coal at all. And he'd have a whole five-hundred pounds and march away with the coal. So that's the kind of stuff that was going on. Then of course, a year or two later I was born, in 1920.

Cohen: So what was your life growing up in the West Side of Chicago when it was a Jewish immigrant neighborhood, and what was your education like?

Widrevitz: Well, as I told you, because I came from a very religious family, I was sent to a religious school after school, after public school. I didn't go to parochial school. And I, at that time, on the corner of Independence and Douglas Boulevard there

was a large synagogue and in the back of it was a small room, like a meeting room and I was put in that class with about eight or nine little boys with a rabbi and studied the Bible for about eight or ten years. And later on they built a— the community built a small educational school and I went in there for a couple of years. And when I was fourteen years old, I was at the business of being confirmed called a bar mitzvah. However, I was sent, I wasn't asked, I was sent by my parents to go to a school that was called a yeshiva. It's an upper class education at the corner of St. Louis and Douglas Boulevard, where I stayed for a year. And then, I was about fourteen or fifteen, I said that's enough; I don't want too much religion already. I gotta be out of it. Although I do remember one particular rabbi, very, very, fine man, Rabbi Mordecai Schultz, and uh, later on he became a rabbi at Lawn Manor Synagogue on 67th and Kedzie, and I got a pretty good education in religion and all that. But as it turns out, I am not considered to myself, even by anybody else, as an Orthodox Jewish believer, but I do believe that there must be some being, whether you call him a God or whatever you wanna call him, that exists and nobody can explain me to me or anybody else, truly that there is no so such thing as a power of some kind. Because as I sometimes think to myself, that if you are born, and it, and that you come out, and you weigh, I'll give me an example, two-hundred pounds. And you got this belief in you, and you lose 100 pounds, you're still the same person, but your one-hundred pounds have disappeared. It's gone, but the spirit the soul, whatever you want to call it still exists. And then if you go still further, and you finally lost fifty pounds, another fifty pounds, you get to the size of a molecule, or an atom, there is something in there that nobody can explain other than being a piece of so called physical material. Spiritually something must exist. Nobody can explain it. So you can't just say... fella says, "I'm an Atheist." You just, it's just blowing air, because he can't explain it either. But he doesn't want to explain it because he just says I am, but I am what I am. I'm just like Popeye.

Cohen: Yeah. So what was the public school like? And you mentioned that the religious education was important for your parents.

Widrevitz: I enjoyed the public school tremendously. Both my parents were not familiar with the library system. So I didn't... When I got to public school and I was in 2nd grade, I was introduced to the library system by a teacher in the public school. And I spent a tremendous amount to time in taking books out of the library, and you could only take two out at a time for two weeks. The public school teachers I had were primarily either of German or Irish or of American Protestant backgrounds. They were very, very, very fine people, very tremendous. I enjoyed my school years tremendously, and I went through grammar school without any problems. I wound up in the high school. [I] Took courses that I wanted to, which were in science. There again I met up with people, who some of them were from Europe, some were not. The teachers, they were terrific. And I been all my life

with meeting people from all kinds of countries, and they're all a great experience.

Cohen: You mentioned in the questionnaire that when you were in high school in 1937, you took an adult education course in radio transmission electronics.

Widrevitz: Do you want me to say something about that?

Cohen: Yes, so I was wondering what motivated you?

Widrevitz: All right, as I told you the teachers in the school, in the high school, did a fine job. I said I took courses in science. I took courses in zoology, something in biology, chemistry, mathematics, and then I took associate courses that had nothing to do with it. I took courses in typing, and in drafting, and one of the teachers I had in the physics class introduced us to an organization that he was a member of. It was called Propaganda Analysis. And so I got into that club, and from 1936 or '37, I became aware of what was going on in Europe and I was very interested. So I wasn't going around blindly and saying, "Well, well, that's all a surprise to me with the war and all that." Of course, the war started out with the Civil War in Spain in 1936. And in 1937/38, Italy went and bombed the people in Abyssinia, which is now Ethiopia; Halie Selassie. And among the boys that I had, one of my best friends, mentioned to me in 1937, that was in my third year in high school, that he was interested in studying electronic theory especially as it is applied to the radio and televis... not the television, the radio field. And that he can't afford to go to school at night that was offered to adults at Crane High School, on Jackson Boulevard and Oakley. And he said, "Meyer, would you like to go with me if you can get your father to let you drive the car." The old car my father had. I says, "I'll ask my father." So I ask my father if it's okay if I could have the car for a class either once or twice a week at Crane High School at night, all with adults, not boys from my school. And he said okay. So I and my friend Louie, we both signed into this class; they let us sign in. And I spent almost a year or two's time, taking night classes with adults on electronic theory. Little did I realize we also made rad... we made... we also manufactured our own radio. We also learned a little about transmitters. Little did I realize the effect that would have on my future life, even to this day. But that particular experience in that class had a great profound influence on what happened to me during the war.

Cohen: It sound like you were very aware of world events in the thirties, and what were your sources of information?

Widrevitz: I would... the... Whatever little money I had, I would write to foreign countries; to Italy or Germany or France or England, to their officials. Presidents or whatever it was, or to their chamber of commerce and ask them, "Would you send me bulletins about what's going on in your country from your own

opinion." And all through my life I've done that. I've been in contact with various political groups, newspapers, embassies, even to this day.

Cohen: So back in the thirties, did you receive back bulletins, or information, or letters?

Widrevitz: I did. I did. Sometimes I would get, depending on what I said; I would get some bitter letters. I recall specifically after the war, I wrote some bitter letters to the, record or whatever they were called, the deans of the schools in Heidelberg and Leipzig or Berlin, about what's going on, and also to the embassies about rocket scientists of Germany working in Egypt and I quoted the constitution, the German constitution to them; that it's not permitted according to the constitution, and sometimes I would get bitter letters back from the school heads that I was accusing them of such activities when they had nothing to do with it. They claimed that they're not involved in anything and that they're all innocent. Oddly enough, even during the war I wrote letters to the Russian Embassy, the so called ally of the United States at the time, and I wanted to know what they had to say about the war. And every week they would send me their own propaganda. And oddly enough, even when I was in the Army, I used to get mail from them. Nobody said anything to me.

Cohen: Funny. So back in the United States, were you concerned with the rise of Hitler, were you concerned as an American or as a Jew or both?

Widrevitz: Whatever information we got out of Germany, was not as pronounced as we have it today, access to this information, but I had contact, not personally that I asked for, in the early years before the United States got into the war with Germany, Japan, and Italy. When I was working with in our business, I'm talking about 1938, 1937, 1939, I had people coming who were sent looking for work from Europe, who had escaped out of Germany, and some of them were pitiful situations. We didn't have, necessarily employment for all of them, but a few of them we did put to work for us. One in particular, I'll never forget, poor guy, he was a law student in Germany, and he came in looking for work, and I said, "Okay." And so, every day for instance, I myself, I'm not afraid of work, I'd sweep the floor, clean up the place, or arrange merchandise, so I said to him, "You want to be like a stock boy" and he says "Okay." Then I says, "Would you help me clean up the place?" and he says, "With what?" And I said, "With a broom." So he says he'd never worked with a broom. So I says, "I'll show you with a broom." And I get the broom and I'm sweeping the way you do with a broom, but he'd use it like a shovel, and I say, "You can't use it like a shovel, it's gotta be swept this way, back and back and forth." Eventually, we couldn't hold on to him. Another fellow, we hired him, and he happened to step on a tack from some carpet that we had, in the sole of his shoe, and I said... he said he got a tack in his foot, and I says, "All right come on, get in my car, we're taking you right to the clinic, a doctor's clinic." He says, "Aw no, I'm not going to the clinic." I says,

"Listen, don't talk back to me, you're working here, you'll do what I tell ya. Get in the car." And I took him down to a clinic at Lake St. and Ashland, and I stood with him and the doctor there, [the doctor] had him put his foot in a bucket, a bucket of warm water with some antiseptic material in there. And I says, "How do you feel?" He says "Nothing bothering me." But five minutes later he says it's beginning to bother him already and I says, "See, I told you, don't talk back and keep that foot where they tell ya." And he turned out okay. So it's the experiences I had with people from Europe. And then I also... For some reason or another, I don't know why, but it was a Polish-American neighborhood we were in.

Cohen: The store?

Widrevitz: Yeah, And uh, people would come in asking for work, and from time to time, if we had openings, I'd hire 'em. So I found, although I had American guys working from time to time with me, I even had convicts from Columbus, Ohio work for me. I had American Indians work for me. I had Negroes work for me. But I hired, many, many times, I hired Polish men. Not Polish-Americans, although I did have Polish-Americans, but I'd hire Polish, the real McCoy, right from Europe, and they came from the southern part of Poland. And it was called Galicia and they came from a city and a nearby community of Tarnow. And it and it was near the Carpathian Mountains, they called the Carpath. So I learned a great deal of Polish from them. And when I used to kid around with one of them and I said "Are you really Polish?" And this fella says to me, "Proudly." he says, "Czysty Polak." Now Chzysty in Polish means to clean. But he says, "Czysty Polak" or "I'm a clean Polish" it's like a person saying, "*lo tengo sangue puro*," or "I am pure blood." Or if a fella says, "I am a pure so and so" so Aryan and all that stuff. So I told him, I told them I'm a pure American Indian. [Chuckles]

Cohen: So after high school, it sounds like you worked at your fathers' store.

Widrevitz: So after high school, I wanted to be a chemist and they had just opened up a community college called Herzl Community College. They had just opened it up. It was just two blocks from where I lived. The tuition fee was very cheap, six dollars. Not \$500 or \$1000. And so I signed in, and I was standing in line to decide, to sign in for a course in Chemistry, because I had a science background in that too. I did have... In high school I took chemistry classes, but some of the boys I talked to said, "Meyer, you know you're not gonna be able to get a job because of Anti-Semitism. We think that you shouldn't do that," and in five minutes I changed my mind. So I thought to myself, well, we're in business, we got a small business. I'll take a course in accounting. So I took a course in accounting, it was... the teacher was a professor who was working during the day time during that year at Northwestern University on Chicago Ave. And he finally decided to take a job with the City of Chicago at the community college,

and he was a very, very, very, fine professor, and, Hendricks was his name. So I studied accounting for two years there, and then, one of my eyes began to give out on me. So it required steady work with a pen and all that so, I decided after finishing, I finished. I got the two years, of what you call it, the introductory college training. At that time you could get into a law school with only two years of college background. So I went to DePaul University out here on Lake St. in downtown. And I signed into the law school. And this is already somewhere between 1938 and 1939. I was eighteen, nineteen years old, or twenty years old. And I had finished one year at law school, and then they had the draft. The draft at that time was for one years' service. So already, I was faced with the draft. I was told you were not, you're gonna... They have a set of deferments and all that, but people who were taking classes in law were not gonna get deferred unless they were people studying to be doctors or chemists, or something in that field, which I was not in. So here I am faced with a choice, should I sign in for the year, do it, get it over with or not. So I waited for a while. When I say wait for a while... I dropped out of the law school for just about six or seven months, and before I dropped out, an Army Officer was introduced to the entire law class, with the agreement of the dean of the law school and he said that there, they were gonna start a program called the Army Specialized Training Program. And in that program, if you were accepted, if you passed a certain IQ test, and you passed your background science, the background in the field you want to be in the Army, and if you agree that you'll be in, like reserve capacity for nine months and every, you go to... we'll put you in a private... in a school, a college/university in the field that you're accepted in and you study there. And you'll get a test every Saturday, and you'll go to class every single day. We'll pay you six dollars a month... no, no six dollars a week. And if you finish all that successfully, we'll make you a 2nd Lieutenant. [It] sounded pretty good to me' after all, I'll get through the year of service and all that. So I decided to sign it. First thing I had, was the IQ test. In order... at that time, they were very strict, the rules. In the signal core, the average soldier that was inducted had an IQ supposedly of one-hundred, if he was normal. And then to be an officer you had to pass an IQ test with a score of 110, then it was wound up to an IQ of 115 to be an officer. They gave me the IQ test, well whatever it was, it was much higher. Well, I know what it was, and I passed the test, and I passed all their preliminary electric theory tests and all that. And I was inducted into these so called reserves. Later on they extended the draft, not only for one year you had an extra year and a half, so you had to serve two and a half years.

Cohen: So just to recap a little bit. After you heard about this program, you decided to enlist and you were accepted since you met all the requirements, and when would that have been?

Widrevitz: When did that be?

Cohen: Yeah.

Widrevitz: Let's put it this way, it was in 1942. Remember, December 7th, of 1941; America was in the war already, and during December... you got January of '42 is where we just beginning going. In that year of 1942, somebody in the Army, a planning group, decided that they were gonna make up a program called the Army Specialized Training Program [ASTP]. And when this lieutenant had come in our school, our law school, at that period of time, that period of time, the program had just started. It had, it had officially started on September of 1942. And I enlisted in the program in August of 1942. So I was one of the first people to be in the program for the whole country. So I signed into the program, and I was then sent to a small institute, a scientific institute called [the] Armor Institute at Damen and Madison, now it's the Illinois Institute of Technology. And there, he said, "Nine months and you'll be a 2nd Lieutenant." We took tests every week. Every day we went to classes. We didn't march. We weren't in uniform. Later on they tapped guys in uniform to march to class and all that kind of jazz. But I was in the course only three months, and one day, all of the class, 100 of us, we're put on trains, and sent to Philadelphia, why or what we don't know.

Cohen: While you were taking the course at the Armor institute, where you living, and were you required to follow some kind of military discipline?

Widrevitz: No, no, no military discipline, my own personal discipline, no military discipline, although later on they did have that. I lived at home. I had my own clothes. After three months we were sent to Philadelphia. They gave us six dollars a day from the government and we were told to get a room in a hotel or in a private home, and we were to report every day to a Philco Manufacturing plant on Broad and Summerset Street in Philadelphia where they were manufacturing Army transmitters and receivers and become acquainted with Army equipment. So we were in Philadelphia for ten weeks. And after the ten weeks, again we don't know what's going on. On a Friday afternoon, about five and a half months into the course, everybody got an immediate telegram or telephone, "Report immediately to Fort Sheridan in Illinois this next Monday." They gave us money to get on a train and we shot off to Fort Sheridan, where we were inducted as privates. No 2nd Lieutenant business at all. And they interviewed each one of us. They're corporals or sergeants that are interviewing us and which, what, and where are you going in the Army, what were you doing, this and that. And the fellow I had contact with to ask me questions, he says, "What did you do?" I says, "Well I was a student." "What did you do besides that, did you ever work?" I says, "Yeah, I worked in a carpet work room." He says "What else? Do you know how to drive a car?" I says, "Sure." He says "I'll write you down as a truck driver." I says "No, no you're not gonna do that, they promised me to be in the Signal Core. And that's where I got my training, you know, in Philadelphia and at the Armor institute." He says "Okay, okay, I'll let you through." And so, within three

days at Fort Sheridan, I was sent to a place called Leesburg, Florida. At Leesburg, Florida, there was not an Army Base, but outside of the town, they erected a tent city, like a jungle camp. There was an AAFTac[?] training, American Air Force tactical training operation there. And we lived in tents in a sort of semi-jungle atmosphere. And we were waiting to hear what was gonna happen to us.

Cohen: Okay before we move forward, can we rewind a little bit? Were you with the same group of men from the Army Specialized Training Program who continued on to Philadelphia?

Widrevitz: No, we were split up. I was sent— When they decided to send people, let's say in my case to Florida, they tied a sheet with about 100 names of the men in the field and they cut two or three or four names out in little pieces out, and on the back of the sheet pieces of paper they wrote Fort Knox, Fort Bragg, Fort Dicks. Whatever kind of fort you can think of. So I had, with my last initial W, I and three others were sent, haphazardly, to Leesburg, Florida. Some fellows wound up in Panama, other fellas wound up in Alaska, other fellows wound up God knows where; they went in the Infantry. Others went into tanks. Everybody scattered. It was helter skelter; nobody knew one from the other. The whole thing was a whole mishmash.

Cohen: I think you answered my next question.

Widrevitz: Go ahead.

Cohen: Which was, I was wondering if you were sent to this place in Florida because they intended to send you to the Pacific, but it sounds like no it was more haphazard.

Widrevitz: No— The point is that when I was in Leesburg, Florida, in that small camp, I was, I and two other fellas, I was in a platoon, called the 26th Signal Platoon. Somebody chose us three, to go to a special, secret class in secret Army Equipment, in Orlando, Florida, another base, for a month. And there I and the three other... two other fellas, who were not officers, I wasn't an officer, absolutely. I was a private. I sat with, in a class with about twenty or thirty majors and captains, and some colonel's studying this equipment, and we took a test after every week for a month. And all three of us, came out with high scores. They posted the scores on a board at the end of the course, and an officer was looking at it and he comes over to me and says, you know, he says, "Would want to be in my pursuit squadron?" I says, "Okay, I don't care." What do I know, pursuit squadron, airplanes? So he says, "What's the name of your captain in the Signal Core?" And I told him and he called him up and he says he'd like to get me in his group and the captain says, "What was the result of the class that you're in? Well how did he make out?" "Well, he did well." He says "Well then, you

can't have him." So I went back to my original captain, and when I got back... I was hospitalized during the war three times and I wasn't wounded in combat, although I had serious things happen to me. One is I had a blood clot in the leg; in the interior of my right leg, and after examination, they didn't know what to do with me, should they take my leg off?

Cohen: Did you have the blood clot in Leesburg, Florida?

Widrevitz: Yeah I think it was in Florida. [I got injured] Another time, during an obstacle course that I was on. I was going hand over hand on poles. I climbed up a ladder of logs and then I went hand over hand for about thirty feet and then dropped to the ground. And I don't know if I did or didn't fracture one of my vertebra in my spine or if it was just a shock. Well I wound up in a hospital semi-paralyzed for about three weeks. And then another time I got infected by coral in the Pacific and I wound up in the hospital again. But none of these incidents were due to combat. They were accidents.

Cohen: So I think you wrote in the questionnaire, that after this special training in Florida, in I think Leesburg and then later in Orlando, you were sent to Fort Benning in Georgia. Was that another assignment?

Widrevitz: That's where I... that was one place where I was, from Fort Benning I was sent to the hospital. But because of my background, I traveled. They kept records of where I am because of my experience in all that I had. They cut special orders that I was not to be put in a replacement pool and dropped out of group. Where ever my unit was, where ever it was destined to be in the United States, no matter where I am, if I'm sick, and when I'm discharged, not discharged from the Army, but discharged from the hospital, I was to be sent specially. So when... from Fort Benning hospital, it was at Warner field in Georgia, but anyway I was sent to Oklahoma City, where my unit was originally. And there we went on the maneuvers in the hills of Tulsa, Oklahoma, again with the same unit. And when we forwarded to Oklahoma, and if anything happened... I wound up sick or another, my unit went forward to California, and I still was kept with it. And I met up with them at Camp Anza in California.

Cohen: So what were the Army maneuvers like? You were part of the Signal Core; could you describe a typical exercise that you had when you were doing the Army maneuvers there?

Widrevitz: When you say difficult exercise, I experienced things I would have never have done in civilian life. And what may seem as simple to somebody else, to be told, with a 1,000 men lined up on a field, and they had a wooden wall that went up three stories, it was about seventy-five feet wide, a wooden wall, and on the top of it there was a little platform as wide as my hands are here, and then there was

a wooden wall going down three stories. They dropped a chain ladder, chain. That dropped three stories down from the top of that wall to the ground. We're all lined up about ten or fifteen men across, and loaded with packs, and an order went out, "Every one of you climb up that wall, on the chain, get up on a platform, and then you're going over down again." It was to practice getting on a ship at sea and getting off a ship. Whether it's if we were attacked or we were at a pier. They don't always have exits, taking off of stairs. Well, I did go up that, and you were going with people with their feet right above your head. If you got stepped on, you're dropped, tough luck; that's part of the campaign. And we went over the top, and at the top there's guys screaming at you "Get off, get off. Come on, get on there" And you get a kick in the can, and you went over the other side. So that was, that's... you talk about what things that can happen to ya. I was... overseas on the island, I was once called out to reattach an attendant... an antenna to the rudder of a B-29 with the top of the rudder was twenty-seven feet from the top to the ground, and they had a ladder mounted on a little platform, a wooden platform, with four wheels, and no side-rails and you climbed up the ladder like this, and I'm swaying back and forth like that and finally, and you can't touch the ladder to the rudder, and here I am hanging on with one hand here trying to tie up the antenna, and so if you told me I would do it today, I would tell ya, impossible. But I came out of it without dropping off. So these were some things that you did. In Tulsa, Oklahoma we went on maneuvers before we went overseas, and we were in the hills and we had an obstacle course. And uh, we went through it, and uh, one fella at one point said, "You can all crawl on your stomachs for distance, but flat. You're going to be put under machine gun fire," actual machine guns, and he says "You fellas are pretty lucky this week" I says, "Why?" He says, "The machine gun broke from its platform and killed some fellas the week before, got strafed on the ground." So it's just a matter of luck what's gonna happen to you, you don't know. We were also told at one time "Here. Here are shovels. How many of you fellas wanna dig a hole?" So some of the guys says, "Eh, we'll do it." I says to myself, "You're crazy. If they give you a volunteer [to] dig a hole it's one thing. If they tell you, you gotta dig the hole, that's another thing." Well I stood on the side, and these guys, six or seven of them, got in, and they dig, dig, dig and they dig about that wide, and they get about eight feet down. I don't know how in the hell they did it. And so they turn and they say "What do we do now?" He says, "Well, we're gonna send tanks over it. We wanna prove to you fellas, that if you dig a hole deep enough that the tank will not kill you." So another crazy thing was exposure to gas. I was supposed to go on a furlough once in Florida, at twelve o'clock during the day. And they say, "Widrevitz, did you have to go to gas training at all?" I says, "No." He says, "Well, you can't go on the furlough until you go through gas training, today." So I says, "Okay." They march you into a tent, and they holler "Gas! Gas!" and you're supposed to have your gas mask on. You put it on your face or whatever, and then they threw gas in there. And so then they open it up a little bit, take a sniff, and then you put it [the gas mask] back on again and quickly run

out. Me, like a dummy would, the first time they did it, they says, "Did you sniff enough" and I says, "No." "Go back again." I was real dumb and I says, "Hell with it." I did go through it. They finally let me go on my furlough. See these are funny things, but there were all accidents that could happen to you.

Cohen: Did you find that the blood clot and the other health issues you had made the training harder on you?

Widrevitz: No. Look, I volunteered. And I am not a super patriot, I don't wrap myself up in the American flag, but I'm saying, I did what I did. I volunteered, and the way I felt about it, and no matter what happened, I wasn't gonna look for any kind of excuse to get out of the Army. One of the interesting things that I found, when I dropped in that obstacle course in Florida, and we were in a tent, and for three hours I was lying on a cot, and I couldn't move. I couldn't move my spine, I could my legs and my arms, but I couldn't get up from the cot, so the fellas in the tent after three hours say, "Mike, we're gonna call an ambulance for you, you gotta get to see a doctor. So I finally agreed. So two fellas came in with a stretcher and told me to roll off the bed, the cot, onto the stretcher. So I rolled off but, I must have weighed about 200 pounds, and I crashed to the floor, with the stretcher, and with the guys. They called in four men to lift me up. They put me in an ambulance and they hauled me away about a half a mile, to a little tent with two cots in it, in a so called medical emergency tent and a young doctor came in, and I told him I can't move my spine, and he didn't know what the hell to do with me. So he rolled up a blanket, and put it underneath my back he says, "An older doctor will come in tomorrow morning. Tell him the problem; maybe, he'll know what to do." He was one of these fast graduates of medical. The next morning a fella came in, about forty years old, a doctor, and he looks at me... they had an idea, I think they had an idea, the doctors, that these, there are people that wanted to get out of the army and making off that they're sick, and that he had come to the conclusion that I was trying to pull a fast one. So he stands over me and I'm lying in the cot, and he says to me, "I'm giving you an order, stand up." And I says, "I can't. I can move my arms and legs but I can't stand up." So then he gets madder than hell and then he says, "I'll give you one more time. An order. Stand Up." And I says, "I told you, I can't stand up." So, I'm getting mad right now when I think about it. I says, "I can't stand up." So what does he do, he puts his foot against the cot like this. One leg down here and says, "Give me your hands" and I gave him my hands and pulls me out of the bed, the cot, and I'm standing like this here. And he says, "This the last time I'm talking to you, the absolute last. Straighten up." Then I got mad. Now he's a captain, and I'm a private. So I says to him, "God should strike you in the condition that I've got here and I should stand over you and tell you to straighten up." And then he really got madder than hell. So then he finally decided to send me to a hospital, forty or fifty miles away, but out of sheer meanness, he didn't call up an ambulance, he put me in a truck, and they pulled me up, [and] put me on a chair next to the

driver. And when we get to the hospital, I had a medical paper with me in an envelope and they look at it at the Emergency Room. They put me on a gurney and they wheeled me in to the surgery ward, and I'm going through a ward and I'm lying in a cot gurney and the guys in the rooms were hollering fresh meat, fresh meat like I'm gonna be chopped up. Well, they did save my leg, and they saved my spine and all that. But that was some of the things that happened. It's just things that they never talk about. In this program that you got at this Pritzker Museum, it may be that you'll hear stories about heroic business, all kinds of stuff, combat, and all that. But the tremendous amount of casualties, and wounded, not wounded from combat, that fellas encountered during the war, and they do still even to this day, that you don't hear about. You don't get this Ra, Ra, Ra stuff. But the guys don't talk about it, you don't hear about it. Now remember, I was active in the veterans group between forty and fifty years, and I volunteered to push wheel chairs for a year at a veteran's hospital once a week at Lake Side, here in Chicago. And every month or so, we'd go in and we'd have Bingo nights for the soldiers, the veterans, patients, and all that. I had a lot of experience with the fellas in the Army that were wounded, and what's causing all that there stuff. It's life.

Cohen: So going back to California when you were in Camp Anza, was this the point where you were preparing to be deployed like, to leave to the Pacific?

Widrevitz: We didn't know where, and I once got a letter from a fella after the war, a few years later. It was a few years ago. He said "Are you Widrevitz that on January 6th, of 1946 got discharged in Camp Grant." I says, "Yeah." In a letter, he says "I remember you." And I'm reading a letter and I says, "What did I do?" He says "I remember you jumped over a counter and hit a German POW for what he said to you. And I don't recall this, but if that's what the guy says, that I attacked a German Prisoner of war who was a prisoner in a camp. From Camp Anza, we got on the boat, and the boat was not a navy cruiser.

Cohen: What type of boat was it?

Widrevitz: It was a boat that was leased from the Dutch Government and had been in the Merchant Marine service in the Indonesian Islands that, at that time, were under Dutch control. And it was a banana boat of some sort. They had converted it into a troop ship, and they put in posts where the cargo was and all that, that it didn't have before. And they put in little cots, five or six high and you lied down, one on top of the other. You saw pictures of the people in concentration camps? This was like that. We were all sitting like sardines, thousands of us. And that was a hell of a trip. We zigzagged across the Pacific for quite a few weeks to avoid Japanese submarines. We had no cannons, no ammunition, nothing.

Cohen: So there was no ammunition on the boat?

Widrevitz: Not that I know of. There were no cannons, what would need ammunition for? You can't throw bullets at somebody. We didn't know where we were going. The captain of the ship knew where we were going, but I didn't know. We touched down in Pearl Harbor for two days, didn't off the boats and kept going, and this was in July, early August or so of 1944.

Cohen: Were you aware that the boat was zig-zagging, were people, like yourself, aware as to what was going on?

Widrevitz: We didn't know nothing, and I did know that we had one chaplain on the boat. The Catholic Chaplain, who originally was the chaplain at fort—prison, in a regular federal prison. And he on Sunday's would make speeches, "You boys stop gambling, God is watching you!" I'll tell you. I don't know how the hell we... we just lined up 500 men on this side of the boat, and 500 on the other side of the boat, and they gave us a cookie, and a glass of water, or I don't know what the hell it was, and that was your lunch, but we managed to survive. No showers.

Cohen: So very little food on the boat, as well?

Widrevitz: So they claimed. I uh, I had a run in with somebody on the boat. I noticed that the 1st Sergeant of our group and some of his friends were walking around with Coca-Cola bottles. And I'm wondering to myself, "What the hell is this, where did you get Coca-Cola bottles on an old banana boat?" Later I found out that he and some of his friends, four or five of them, were given the allotment for fifty men, of the platoon, and they took it all for themselves. So I got a hold of a 2nd Lieutenant or a 1st Lieutenant on the boat, and I says. "There's some lucky mucky business going on the boat. There are the guys in our group that are getting Coca-Cola and we don't see a single bottle." So he made an investigation, and he comes over to me, and at that time I was already a sergeant, and he says "Are you Sergeant Widrevitz?" "Yeah" "Here's a list of a roster, and here's a pass. You are the only person that's gonna get the bottles, and you're gonna be in charge of distributing them." So that's what happened. So I get down to the commissary, wherever they got the Coca-Cola, and they give me fifty bottle of Coca-Cola for our men, and I brought them back up on deck, and this 1st Sergeant comes along. He says, "Where'd you get those bottles?" I says "Here's a sheet from the captain. Signed the paper tells me to do it. I don't know. I gotta take orders." He says, "God damn it, you stole my job." It's his job. He's stealing the Coca-Cola bottles, I stole his job. But if I get a hold of the guy that did that, I'll fix his clock. Funny thing about him, when we were getting bombed by the Japanese on the Island, the headquarters of our group, where he was the 1st Sergeant, and he paid a couple of the guys, whether they were Marines or where ever they were from, to blast a hole in the coral that he'd fit into, and they did blast a hole and he paid them off. And whenever we'd get bombed, he'd run into

the hole. We couldn't run to the hole because we couldn't go through the coral. So we had sandbags around us, little enclave placements. One day when they finally stopped bombing us, some of the guys that had some paint and what not with a board, up at the headquarters they hung a big sign that said, "Welcome Home Serge" When he saw that, he tore the whole thing off of his tent. He was madder than all hell. But that was humor.

Cohen: When had you become a sergeant and how many men were under you?

Widrevitz: I don't really recall this. It's very confusing in my mind I know I was a private a very short time, yeah, a year or two. A short time, but I was a sergeant— what they did is they froze enlistments, and promotions of any kind. Let me tell you again, I think I said I sent you a letter about the experience of the ASTP program. Everybody in the program was told that they would become officers. In 1944, they started the program in late '42, two years later; they had about 200,000 men in the Army in these programs all over the country. And why were they in the program without being in the Army yet? They were mostly boys who went to college already, for one year or so. And the small colleges that they attended got very bitter over the fact that they lost a lot of students that were being drafted. So they made a deal with the Army; that the army should continue with the program and not take all their men away, so a lot of fellow's remained in the program till 1944 and every three or four months they'd graduate a certain number of them. In, let's see 1944, 1945, yeah, this October, November, or December of 1944 or 1945, I don't recall, there was the Battle of the Bulge. Army Officers at the top became very bitter at the program. They said, "We have too many casualties among the men. We want you to get these here fellas out of the program and ship 'em into the replacement into the Army to fight the Germans. And they did get to get the program shot to pieces. Many of the fellas never finished the course, and they wound up in what they called Replacement Depots in Europe. And when the Battle of the Bulge broke out, one particular division, an infantry division called the 100th American Division, lost three-thousand men out of fifteen-thousand, and they put in a request. Immediately, they must have three-thousand replacements from the replacement depots. They took these here fellas who don't even know one end of a rifle from the other; [they] never handled a gun, had no training at all, and shot them into the Infantry, and they got chopped to pieces at the Battle of the Bulge; tremendous casualties out of this particular unit, the 100th Division. So that's a part of the experience that fellas in the ASTP probably don't want to talk about or the Army doesn't want to talk about it. I got it officially on the internet, the history of what went on. And one general said that the whole thing was a farce, the whole program, absolutely a waste of time. They shouldn't have put the guys into schooling at all. Who the hell needed them? And actually these fellas for the most part were some of the most intelligent boys that were in the Army. It didn't mean anything, they got shot.

Cohen: In your own case, did you find that the course, and it was only a few months that the courses you took were helpful in your work in the Signal Core?

Widrevitz: I'm not saying I led a charmed life. I'm not saying that I led a charmed life, but what happened to me during the entire war, was the fact is that I, although I had been hospitalized, I came out without a so called wound. I came back with a sound mind; I didn't go off the rocker. We didn't have dope in our outfit at that time so I wasn't addicted. I didn't become a drunkard. I learned how to swear though. My experience was that, I did whatever they said. I obeyed orders. Toward the end of the war, and before Japan had surrendered, we were running so short of men, that they went through our unit, repair units, guys who worked on engines, guys that worked on fuel, on the outer structures of planes, guys that worked on radar, guys that worked on and ran the radio equipment. Guys that worked on machine guns, all that type of stuff, instruments on the planes, all these men found that they were gonna be subject to call to be gunners on planes because of our losses. And there I was in the category of one of the guys gonna be picked out. I missed being in on the invasion of Iwo Jima. We had three top men in our little radio group, transmission group; three top men. There was one man, the top man, by the name of Paul Ness. Then there was another guy, Jensen, second man. I was the third man. An order went out that every second man of every group was to go in on the invasion of Iwo Jima. So Jensen went. He came back alive, but I'm just saying, that's the fortunes of war. When the war ended and they didn't know what to do with the men, I told you I wound up on an island where we were supposed to go in for occupation.

Cohen: Can we go back?

Widrevitz: Let me tell you this about this guy, Van Melsen, I'll never forget him. I was a sergeant then, [and] Van Melsen was a private in my unit. The war had ended, Japan had surrendered, and our B-29's were given the job of dropping medicine, food supplies and clothes on PoW camps from... the Japanese has these prisoner of war camps strewn either in Japan Proper or in Manchuria, so our B-29's would fly over there and drop the stuff for these prison of war camps. They said anybody that were from ground crews, any of us, we could volunteer to go on a trip, a vacation trip you know; see what's going on over there. Now I had seen so many crashes and shot up planes, I said, "Up the bucket, I'm not gonna go flying around. Who knows what can happen flying around in a plane." Now Van Melsen, who was about eighteen years old, who was a private, I recall him vividly. He went around crying. He can't get on a plane because he's a private. They're discriminating against him, he wants to go and drop food. He's hollering for weeks, so finally, they says, "Okay, Van Melsen, you're going on the next trip." So he went on the next trip. That particular plane crashed in a mountain. Everybody on the plane got killed including Van Melsen. That was another

example of fate. You never know what's going to happen to you. But as I say, my experience with things, all kind of odd things could have happened.

Cohen: So going back a little chronologically, you were on the former banana boat, going to Saipan, and then you were on Saipan for about a year, and I believe you would have arrived about two months after the Americans would have invaded Saipan?

Widrevitz: We went shortly after the invasion was so called secure. It wasn't true. We were shot at from the [sugar] cane fields by some Japanese that still hadn't surrendered, and uh, if you came out alive, you came out alive. You may have some guys were looking for trouble. They'd pick up a grenade, a mine, get blown up. Some fellas tied on ropes to trees on the side of a cliff and they would slide down the ropes. There were caves in the side of the cliff and they had their carbines and they wanted to shoot the bats that were flying around. But instead of shooting the bats, there were Japanese snipers inside the caves shooting at them. And they were hanging by a rope now that's damn foolishness. But that's what happens. You look for trouble, you get it.

Cohen: So what was your work with the air fields and the B-29's?

Widrevitz: Whenever there was a complaint about something we had spare parts. We put in the spare parts into the plane. It was called modular. There would be a unit in a box and everything was inside, and if something broke down in the box, then you just slipped another box in. If you didn't have the box, you had to go out and get a hold of a wreck plane, tear it apart, and put the pieces together again. You supposedly were supposed to know how to do that. Now the average fella couldn't do that because he had no experience with it. We did. So that's what we did. Fortunately, we had a tremendous amount of spare parts, and we didn't have a great deal of repair work, but occasionally something would happen. I had one case, where, a repair... They complained that the entire communication system in the plane didn't work; from the gunners to the pilots to the radio operators to the tail gun. And I went into there, and found that some fella that was on the crew, on the flight crew, had taken a clip, a metal clip, and clipped it on to a bunch of cabled wires, and he shorted out everything. In an emergency, he got excited, and they couldn't communicate with each other. So just, odd things had happened.

Cohen: Were you kept very busy?

Widrevitz: No I wouldn't say we were kept very busy. Most of the time was, in the Army in general, was wait. Wait, when things were tough. You got an invasion, you did it.

Cohen: You mentioned before that Saipan was not really secure, and there were Japanese snipers.

Widrevitz: There were 15,000 Japanese civilians on the Island. They were locked up in a Camp, men, women, and children, civilians, called Camp Susupe. It was on the island. One mountain, called Mount Tapochau, and they couldn't... they were like, put in a concentration camp. They were not mistreated. A lot of men, women, and children jumped off one of the cliffs in suicide; five-hundred of them to the rocks. Then we had, before that, we had the Marines, the 2nd and 4th Marine divisions, and they were attacked in what they called Banzai attacks, suicide attacks, so we had all kinds of things happening. You could get bombed; knocked off at any time.

Cohen: I think I was reading that there had been a low level attack on the air field in November after you would have arrived.

Widrevitz: There was an attack on the field; they blew up some B-29's. From what I understand, I didn't see it, but we heard reports that one of the Japanese planes crashed into a hospital tent unit, killed a bunch of guys that were patients in the hospital. So like I say, we had a wonderful defense force around, with Anti-Aircraft batteries, and a lot of attempts that were made from Iwo Jima to attack us, were fended off by the Anti-Aircraft units. [1:17:34] We did it. One plane, in fact, oddly enough, an American plane, the equipment on the plane malfunctioned, the transmitter and it had on it IFF equipment; called Identification Friend or Foe. A signal would come up from our airbase to the plane. If it was our plane, it'd say, "Identify yourself." And then the transmitter on the plane would automatically reply this is an American Plane. This particular plane, the equipment malfunctioned, so they told this guy he's gonna get shot down. And he pleaded with them, and he asked them to give him the exact instructions of how to land. If he's— And he's not to fire or do anything, if he gets surrounded by American planes, and if he doesn't land they'll knock him off, and he managed to convince them that he was an American plane, and he saved his life that way. But that's because the equipment didn't work.

Cohen: And did you personally have any guns with you or any ammunition?

Widrevitz: We were not issued any ammunition. I don't know why, I really can't understand it. It may be that they figured we might be shooting at each other. We were not Marines, we were not, we weren't trained as real combat infantryman, and any stupid thing could happen. I had one fella sitting in our tent one day. I don't know where in the hell he got it. We had carbine rifles but no ammunition. And he must have got some ammunition somewhere and he says "Watch this" and he pointing up at the bulb in the tent and pulls the trigger and blew the hell out of the bulb. And I says, "You crazy, Dean, what the hell's the matter with you? Did you look and see that there was ammunition in your rifle, I don't where the

hell you got it." He didn't tell us where he got it, but it was not officially given to him.

That's another one, in Florida, in this imitation jungle terrain we had, one day the guys in our outfit including I, made a bunker out of sand and logs. Uh, as big as this room and we were told that we were gonna have practice guard duty outside of the bunker. One, two guys together would be issued one gun; [it was] a gun not a rifle, a .45, with ammunition in it. And the clip was put in with the ammunition, and we were told, "You, each one of you take a turn. four hours on for sleep, four hours off for duty, for twenty-four hours, you'll alternate every four hours. four hours to sleep, another 4four hours you do guard duty." and I says to this guy, Carpenter "Alright, Carpenter, what do you wanna do? You wanna go to sleep first and I'll be guard, and should I go to sleep, and you'll be guard?" So he's a goofy guy and I didn't realize it. And he says, "You go to sleep, I'll take the duty." So I lay down in the sand, now I didn't have a pillow, and I went to sleep. About an hour while I'm asleep and I feel something in my back. And I woke up, and uh, this guy Carpenter with the gun in my back, and I says, "Carpenter I'm gonna get up slowly. Don't move." And he did, he pulled away the gun, and then I stood up, and he's standing and I says, "Carpenter, why did you put the gun on my back?" And he says "I heard that if you push on the barrel of the gun while it's in your back that I won't be able to pull the trigger." I says "That's right? You won't be able to pull the trigger?" "Yeah" "All right Carpenter, I like what you said." And I put my hand out. I says "Carpenter, slowly, put the gun in my hand." And I'll tell ya, the guy was slow intellect, and did, he put it in my hand and I put the gun in my belt. I says "Now, do you know what you did?" He says "Yeah. I just wanted to see what would happen." I says, "I'll tell you what's gonna happen." We had a phone with a crank on it. I call up the officer in charge of the guards and all that, for the whole camp. I says, "I got a madman." He says, "What happened?" I says "The guy put a gun to my back with ammunition in it and he wanted to pull the trigger." So about five seconds later a jeep rolls up with the officer and two guards, MP's, Military Police, and they grab this guy Carpenter and then he disappeared. I don't know what the hell they did with him. They must have put him in an insane asylum.

Cohen: Okay, that was more of an unusual person, but where were the relations like between, let's say, the enlisted men, the drafted men, or the Marines and the Signal Core, or the Army Air Force and the Signal Core. Like, how did people generally get along?

Widrevitz: Generally, if you didn't get along in the Army, they put you in a Punishment Battalion. You'd get the works. You gotta do your duty. The relations between the men, occasionally if a man got drunk, get into fights with somebody, or if they were insane, you were insane. Animosity would develop between people too. I had an incident which I'll never forget. It was lunch time on this island, and

we're waiting to go back to the air field and what happened was that, we're all sitting on our cots or lying down. There are six men in a tent. One of the fellas by the name of Sorenson, was lying on his stomach on his cot with a dagger in his hand and he was digging holes in the wooden floors of the tent and he's telling us a story of his experiences in the civilian life. And uh, he says, he found out that his sister had gone out with a guy and that she was a date, and that she was gonna come back at eleven o'clock, and his parents mentioned to him that she'd gone out with a Jewish fella. And Sorenson, who was anti-Semitic, I didn't know that, said, "She did, huh?" So he says he's sitting up till 11 o'clock. So, he's telling his story, and I and four others are listening to him, when his sister came back at eleven o'clock at night and the guys bringing her into her home, he says he went over to the door and as the guy approached the door, without saying a word he smashed him, and he says "I smashed that son of a b***hin' Jew right in the face. And he fell down all the stairs." So here he... He knows I'm Jewish, also the other fellas know it to. So they're lookin' at me. What am I going to do? So I get madder than hell and I says, "What did you just say about that guy?" He says "Son of a ***** Jew" and I says, "I'm gonna tell ya something sergeant, you might not of heard of it" he says "What?" I says "You're a son of a *****." So, then he grabs his rifle above his head and he gets ahold of the barrel and he's coming out of his cot at me to he me with the rifle in the head, and I got my rifle out like this here so I can fend him off, and the four guys jumped him. Within five minutes, I got transferred from the tent, not him. But you talk what goes on, of course, not everybody was like him. I had wonderful relations with every... We had the most wonderful guys in my group that you could imagine. Every one of us were great guys, they all worked together. We had... fortunately, many of us, I say most of us, but none of us got killed so uh, I think it is an experience. It's not the most pleasant experience, but it was a good experience and I did, in my case I did what I thought was my duty.

Cohen: Did you stay in touch with you men from your unit after the war?

Widrevitz: Later on some of the fellas came to Chicago and they come and visit it me at my business. The Lieutenant that I had, I uh, met up with him, took him out for supper. That was quite a nice fella, we ended up buying pipes. And I had, I worked with guys that were American Indians, we had and Alaskan Indian, from Ketchikan, Alaska, all kinds of wonderful guys. And it was a great, what you call it, a melting pot of Americanism. We met people that you would never have ordinarily met, under such conditions.

Cohen: So people developed an interest or an affinity with each other?

Widrevitz: What was that?

Cohen: People like, developed an affinity to each other, like you'd meet people from different backgrounds and you began to like them?

Widrevitz: Well I wouldn't know exactly. I didn't get exactly what you were driving at there.

Cohen: Oh okay, That's okay. So going back to Saipan, did you have any contact with the Japanese Prisoners on the Island at the time?

Widrevitz: Absolutely none. I met up with some Koreans who wanted to learn English, so I practiced English with them. But the Japanese were... For the most part, if I saw one or two Japanese, I don't know, they'd be on the loose somewhere, but they were all dead.

Cohen: So who were the Koreans on the Island who wanted to learn English?

Widrevitz: They were prisoners of the Japanese. They were like, civilian. That's another thing people don't realize that when a country is occupied, like Korea, or the Germans occupied Poland or something, and they took prisoners. The prisoners weren't necessarily, for some of them, were not killed immediately, they were used in the front lines to go forward ahead of the troops to get killed by minefields. That's another thing, minefields. When I went up on Iwo Jima, and I was there for two or three months, I would, I had access to a jeep. I could ride around through the island. It was a small island, two miles by five miles, and I could walk around. Nobody said anything, you just had to be with your unit or just, if you had spare time. A few years ago, not at that time, but a few years ago, there was an article in paper that I read, that the Japanese had been given the Island back by the Americans, and they stationed Japanese troops on the island. There's nothing there, it's just ashes, and a bit of scrubby plants. The Japanese gave instructions to their troops on that Island, this is after the war; do not go out of the perimeter of the island camp, the camp, the Japanese Camp, because there are still thousands of mines. You never know when you're going to get hit by an anti-personnel mine. Well, actually, the Germans and the Japanese all used mines, we used mines. In a— in the case of Iwo Jima, the majority of the mines that were placed by the Japanese were not personnel mines, small little mines, they were put on the shore line where they expected the invasion to take place and the Japanese Commander, his name was General Kuribayashi, he said "We gotta try to knock off as many tanks as we can first." So they planted landing tank mines, and they called AT Tanks, eh AT mines and I looked that up, "What does AT mean?" Anti-Tank. And, the tanks were blown up by these mines; they were very powerful, now Anti-personnel Mines, that's something else again. They're small. Some of them were planted in the ground, and you'd step on them and *psh* they'd jump up and blow your legs off. However, because of the metal minerals in the island, the word Iwo Jima means Sulfur Island, Sulfur. However, there was a metallic constant... contents in the island soil itself that

even with mine detectors, you couldn't get detection of a mine that was made out of metal because the metal soil. So later on, they didn't have at that time, the Japanese, they made mines out of plastic, made out of wood, but that was, they can't have everything yet, and every, supplies that has to do with logistics. That was another factor.

Cohen: Why were you sent, though, from Saipan to Iwo Jima and when would that have been?

Widrevitz: What was that?

Cohen: Why were you sent from Saipan to Iwo Jima and at what point in time?

Widrevitz: First thing... we didn't get through... sent... Iwo Jima was invaded in February of 1945, it took to the end of March to clean up the island there were thousands, we lost thousands of men and they lost thousands of men. They did not know what to do with us. Truman, President Truman said, he does not want to demobilize the Army, rapidly. He suggested to the War Department that, try to keep the fellas who were in the Army as long as possible. We don't wanna get lost and they won't have an Army, but there were such incessant demands by the men who were in for three, four, and, five years already, and who some of them had been sent to the Pacific after being in the Army in Europe for four years. They were gonna fight the Japanese; they says, "What the hell, I'm sick and tired of the war." Although I had never heard of it, there must have been a lot of mutinies, or talk of mutiny. And consequently, the War Department sort of went along with the public population that demanded that the troops be brought back home under a point system. The ones who had been in the longest would get discharged first. So that's the way that worked. On my case, I was almost in for almost four years. They sent me up to Iwo Jima, what for, I don't know, they don't know themselves. What should they do with me? Should I be in a squadron that just came over, was I supposed to stay another two years in the Army or a year or three, who the hell knows what? So that was haphazard.

Cohen: You mentioned that from Iwo Jima, I think, you and maybe you and the group that you had gone to Tinian, so how did that come about?

Widrevitz: That came about when they didn't know. I'll tell ya about it. There was no fixed plan what to do with the men. It's either go one place or go another place. They didn't know if they had shipping to take you anywhere. Could they take you from this island to that island, or should they take you or leave you where you were at? Or should you got home or should you go to Japan? They didn't... there was absolutely... there had never been a decision which, what to do. It's in every war, and you're a part of like pawn in the game. You can push this way or that way, you have nothing to say about it.

Cohen: So how did you eventually go home?

Widrevitz: I finally managed... I was on an island with a bunch of guys, about one-thousand of us on an open field, and they said, "We're waiting for a navy cruiser to come into port, on the island, and we're all gonna go back home. Nobody is allowed to leave that field, not a single one of you, no don't move, for twenty-four hours, completely." I, meanwhile, am looking for trouble. I talk to one of the fellas that I met up there. And I says, "Hey, let's go up, we'll go out... I can get ahold of a jeep. You wanna see a view from the mountain, from the top?" He says "I don't wanna go." I says, "Come on, don't be foolish. It's your one chance in a lifetime." So I finally convince him, I got the jeep, and I throw him in the jeep, and we were on that field see, and I drive up to the top of the mountain, where I could have gotten knocked off for two by a Jap. So when I get to the top of the mountain, we look around. "What do you see? You see water out there, trees and all that? He says, "Yeah, yeah, beautiful scene," tourists. And then we come back, and when we get back, everybody in the field is gone, except fifty men; thirty or forty or fifty guys. And a sergeant is in charge there and he says, "You God damn guys" and he's swearing like hell he says, "Didn't we tell you to stay here in the field, and you disappeared, what the hells the matter, you crazy? We ought to fix your clock, but I'll let you get away with it." And they called us, they drove us over to a C-47, an old transport plane, and they threw us on the plane, and we flew from this island, and I remembered to put on the lifesaving jacket. We were going to be flying over the water. I don't know how many 100 miles we went, and they flew us over to another Island to the head of the ship and we met up with the ship at another Island.

Cohen: So which Island did the ship leave from?

Widrevitz: So, then, on the other Island, we went on another field, and we're waiting to get on the ship. On that island they put up posts, with little signs on it, cardboard posts, each sign had a sign, number one, number two, number three, number four, and each of these posts meant which camp you were gonna be discharged to in the United States. I was in a camp forty-nine, the last camp to sit under that post. So the last truck came up, and put us on the truck. When we got on the ship, from the truck, all the cots had been taken, and places to sleep, so they threw us all in, under the deck with the navy men, in the kitchen, to work in the kitchen for the trip back home. Oh, then everybody got angry, "Why us? Why should we be on the ship and working as, sweeping the floors, mopping the stuff, washing the pots pans and all that, no matter what your rank was, sergeant, private, corporal, or whatever the hell." And uh, I don't know how the hell it happened, what they gave me as a job, my job was to hand out pots of coffee, and turkey, roast beef, and chicken, and I had lost about sixty or seventy pounds for not eating a lot of the garbage food that they got. So I had a good time,

eating. So the first meal I had, I ate a tremendous amount of food and then I vomited it all. So then I decided that you know the job that they gave me for the whole trip, I'm gonna try to stay with it, because I won't have to wait in line with the guys for an hour.

Cohen: You're close to the food.

Widrevitz: Yeah, right on top of the food. So, the end result was that, I talked to the mess sergeant. The guys in the navy [I asked] "Where do you get white under shorts clothes, undershirts and aprons?" The Army had brown stuff, but you're dressed up in the uniform, the clothes of a navy man, so they told me where to go, and I had a couple bucks, I mean, I paid off the guys and they gave me some white clothes. So I sat at the back of the counter with my white clothes and everybody assumed I was in the navy, nobody asked me questions. And then I had my moment of what they call revenge. On the boat going across, if you were a Staff Sargent or a Tec Sargent or a 1st Sargent, you didn't have to wait in line. You went right to the beginning of the line. The minute you got it you could go right to the front of the line and wait and wait. You had five-hundred men or a thousand men in a line; you could wait for two hours to get to eat. So they used to burn me up. I was a sergeant then, but because... as a sergeant you still had to wait in line. So when I got, the war was over and we were going back, and I'm in this white uniform, every time I saw a guy, a staff sergeant, whatever you call it, and he wanted something that was there among the stuff, chicken, you get chicken bones. [Chuckling] Short change them on coffee. I'll tell ya, all part of the experience.

Cohen: Where did you land? Which base did you go back to?

Widrevitz: What was that?

Cohen: Where did the boat land and which base did you go to when you returned?

Widrevitz: I eh, I only remember... One thing I do remember, I remember I'd seen movies of troops coming back and cheering and with flags flying and bugle's running and all that parades and all that. And here I get off the boat, no parades, no nothing. Just here, here's a ticket to get on the train to Camp Grant, Go. All by myself. That reminds me of another one. Overseas, if the Red Cross handed out drinks, or something to eat, I and another guy at one point, on Iwo itself, were refused anything from the Red Cross unless we paid for it. So I says "To hell with the Red Cross." The Salvation Army had a truck with donuts and coffee that drove up on the field in Saipan and they were giving us coffee and donuts no charge. And they chased, and the officers chased them away and they says, "That food is for the officers, not for the men. So that's a part of my experience with what the world is like. Great.

Cohen: What is a message that you would like to impart to the young or to future generation that you learned having been part of the military?

Widrevitz: What I'll say to this, first thing, it's sad that patriotism— we got an all voluntary military now, that's patriotic. Patriotism in this country is shot to hell. The fact that people refer to the Latino group or the Black Power group or the White Aryan/Neo-Nazi groups are at odds with each other in this country, and it all thinks, it reminds me of what went on in Europe with the Nazi's and what they did to the Socialists and the Communists and to the ordinary people. That this country is heading, if this continues, this fighting around, especially with this guy Trump, we are gonna have a civil war in this country. Now Trump has got the idea that the police for should get access to military equipment; tanks, artillery, we're talking about the police. He would like to have a police state. What? Are they gonna kill people, because you don't agree with him? He hates everybody. So what are we heading for? I think that, anybody that's in this country, that's born here, doesn't have to go crazy with patriotism, or wrap themselves up with an American flag, but you've got a great country, and it's the fact that Trump uses the expression, "I'll make America greater." He's talking about the idea of what's greater in his ideas, what great is. My idea is the old-fashioned being great. We got a great country; don't let it get destroyed by people like him. So I do whatever I can to pass along my ideas in that matter.

Cohen: Is there anything that we did not discuss that you'd like to discuss. What's the unasked question?

Widrevitz: If there's anything, unfortunately, this building I'm in, has about one hundred residents. They're all, for the most part, between seventy-five and ninety years of age. Talking to them about something in the future is, in a certain sense, useless, because they say they're out of the picture. Another thing that they have in the mind, which has nothing to do with age, it says, "What can I do? What can I do? I'm only— nobody will listen to me" That's what they'll say, and on the other hand I say to them, "There was on television, a program, showing a protest at a parade in Peking [Beijing] China. A tank was rolling across this plaza, and one man stood up and his arms spread out in front of a tank to stop it. And I think that, eventually he must have [been] either put in prison or he was shot up. But he had the tank stopped, and when I think of that, I think of individuals like Stalin, Mao Zedong, Hitler, Mussolini, Churchill, FDR, Truman. They, each one of them, no matter they were good or bad, was only one man, one man. And they get power over thousands or millions of people, and even with all their power they have, they themselves, each one, is afraid of one person speaking up against them." So as much, as one person, as long as you're alive I tell the people here, even if I'm talking to people that don't even hear me, they're asleep, or if I

talk to a young person I meet, and they come up with a statement, what can I do. "You see, it's forty-nine cents." And they say, "What do you mean about forty-nine cents?" And I says, "For forty-nine cents you can buy a stamp. You get an envelope and a piece of paper, and force your opinion, whether it's good or bad. Whatever your opinion is, send it to a person that's in politics who may have some effect on their future actions. And send it to them with your message, and if you haven't got a forty-nine cent stamp, if you've got a cell phone or a telephone, at 230 South Dearborn Street, it's a federal building. It has in it the offices of Senator Durbin and the Senator Duckworth, the lady senator, and in some cases in the city here, you have in this district, we're the nine congressional district, there's a lady, who's the congress lady, Schakowsky, I says "You get on the telephone and whether you're talking to somebody on the staff or not they'll listen to ya, and tell them what you think. If you keep your mouth shut, whatever happens to you is your own fault. You didn't make an effort to pass along your opinion. I tell ya, whether it's good or bad or indifferent, that's your duty. You don't have to have a gun, you don't have to have a rifle, you don't have to have a uniform, but they'll listen to you." Because, what's his name today, Trump say's I will run again for reelection, and then it said that the Republican Party some of them, don't know whether they'll endorse him or not. Okay, why is that? He's worried about it. He wants to be president again, who knows if he'll even make it, make even the first term. Like I say, that's what I think is the duty of a good patriot.

Cohen: Would you say that's the duty of the Citizen Soldier in a way?

Widrevitz: Oh yes. You remember the thing I said about citizens. I saw that question, a citizen soldier, in that questionnaire that you sent me. I had never heard that expression before, and recently, as recent as last night, I looked up the name of a man who I haven't thought of for years, but I recall, something about and he wound up, and his name was John Monash, M-O-N-A-S-H. He was a child born in Australia, and in Australia, his parents and grandparents originally came from Prussia, in German. That's their background. He went into Civil Engineering, and he was successful in it, and when he was twenty-two years old, he decided that he'd like to get some military experience, so he enlisted in the Australian army, when he was twenty-two years old. He was born in 1865. Now it's 1885, he participated in war, the World War One, before that, he wound up being a captain, then a major, then a colonel. And he wound up eventually in World War One as a Commander-in-Chief, get this, the Commander-in-Chief of the Australian Army in the campaign in World War One, and he fought in an area called Gallipoli, along the Turkish Coast, and he fought in the entire Mediterranean, and he came out with the Top Command position. Now because of that, he himself, oh yeah, the units were called ANZAC units, ANZAC the word, ANZAC, A is Australia, NZ is New Zealand, and AC is Army Command. He was in Command of the whole group, and he, during most of his life decided that the

Jewish people, he was descended from a Jewish family, but a secular one. He decided that, it would be a good idea for people to get assimilated. And so when people said, some people said, "We should have a country called Israel", he was against it. He considered it as being... You could be loyal to one country; you couldn't be loyal for two countries. So he himself was against the formation of a state of Israel. However in 1929, I tell you he was born in 1865, about sixty-five years old, in 1929, in the Hebron, Palestine, there was an anti-Semitic attack, and a lot of Jewish boys that were in school there were killed by the Arabs, and a whole hullabaloo arose. That's 1929. In 1918, eleven years before that, Lord Balfour said he'd like to have a homeland, a Jewish homeland in Palestine, he'd recommended. He didn't say a country, he said a homeland. When they attacked all these people, and with his prior commitment to the idea that the Jews don't need a homeland, I'm talking Monash, Monash changed his mind, and he became very ardent as a Zionist supporter. He completely changed his mind; turned it around. And he was voted in as the honorary chairman of the Zionist Organization in Australia, and he was already getting sick, and I said in 1929. He, unfortunately, died when he was about sixty-six years old in 1931, and when people asked him how did he get along with any kind of Jewish problem, he said he never ran into it except once. And they asked him "What, by once?" He said, "One of the most prestigious business organizations in Melbourne Australia told him they would like him to become a member of their group though they were anti-Semitic, but they said they would make an exception in his case because he was a great general, he was the greatest general in Australian history." And he turned them down; he says "You didn't want me before. You can't have me now." And he passed away, and at his funeral in his honor three-hundred thousand people attended his funeral.

Cohen: Well, it seems very fitting, in light of the fact that today we are celebrating seventy years to the establishment of the State of Israel, so maybe we'll end with this question so you can eat lunch. I noticed that you're wearing a cap from the Jewish War Veterans, would you like to tell us about that and your involvement in it?

Widrevitz: Now the ordinary cap that you see on somebody from the American Legion or the Veterans of Foreign Wars, what not, they're generally blue, everybody for membership, including the Jewish War Veterans, or the Catholic War veterans, or Italian, or the Polish Legion; Blue. In the Jewish War Veteran Organization, if you are a member on a national level, the cap you get is white, so that's why that's white. And so, that's why that's white. That's number one. Secondly, I was elected for one year to be the commander of the Jewish War Veterans Organization in Illinois. I didn't say the country of the United States, I said the Department Commander for the State of Illinois, representing Jewish war veterans of the United States. And so, if I had any occasion to appear before any public officials or an occasion, that's what I represented. And at the same time I

was a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, because I did attend a foreign war, and I was a member of the American Legion, and my wife, incidentally who was born in Canada, and she came here when she was three years old, she was not a citizen, and her parents were from Europe and didn't know anything about it. When she grew up, nobody ever asked her about being a citizen, until she got married to me, and one day, when my little boy was about ten years old, I had a little girl, seven, we decided to make a trip, with or without the kids, to Canada. And on the way in, nobody asked us any questions going into Canada. Coming out, the immigration authority for the United States at Windsor, Canada, said, "Where you from?" to me and I said "I'm from Chicago" he said, "Okay" then he says to my wife "Where you from?" She says "Chicago." He says, "Where were you born?" She says, "Toronto, Canada." So he says "Where's your citizen papers?" She says "I am a citizen" He says, "Where's the papers?" She says "I don't need no papers." So he says "You don't need the papers? You're not getting into the United States." Her mother and father had taken from Europe, they'd been to Canada for a few years, in the years, somewhere between 1918 and 1921, and that's where she was born, in Canada. But they never entered her at all as a citizen here, and I don't know if they ever became citizens themselves. So he says "Where you from? Where do you work? Do you work?" So then she said where she worked, and uh, they called up and they says, "That's true." And then she said she was in the American Navy, and all of a sudden the American Immigration Officer tucked up his ears and he says, "American Navy, when?" So she says she served in the American Navy for three years, at this here air base, Glenview Air Base, as a flight statistician in the WAVES. And so they says, "Do you mind if we take your finger prints?" She says okay. So they finger printed her and they sent the information to Washington, and we were still stuck in Canada, and they verified the fact that she was a Navy WAVE, so they told her, "We're gonna let you into the country with your husband for ninety days, and we'll give you, if you want to, you won't have to wait five years to be a citizen, within ninety days you'll be an American citizen. Now if in ninety days, you decide you don't want to be an American citizen, you're gonna get deported. But while you're in the United States during the next ninety days, your husband is gonna be the guard over you because he's born here." So she signed the relief and says okay and we got into the United States, and ninety days later they checked her all out and she became a citizen. Now, about five years later, I'm in Canada again with her, and she's got her citizen's papers. She works in a place, at a company with a consumer magazine, where she has access to a copy machine. So she took her naturalization papers and made a copy of them to put in her purse, now her originals she had in a safety box in a bank. And we drove to Canada and I drove up the St. Lawrence, up to Montreal, and I entered the United States, not in Windsor, near Detroit, Michigan, but I entered the United States in the Adirondack Mountains in the forests of Maine, and right in the middle of the forest they have and Immigration Authority. And again the guy asks her, "Where's your papers?" and she pulls this out. So he says, "Did you take a look at

the paper?" She says, "Yeah, it's my papers. It's a copy." He says, "Did you look at the bottom?" And she says, "What's at the bottom?" It says over there "Copy of this Naturalization Paper is a five year jail sentence or a five thousand dollar fine and imprisonment." So she starts to cry. So finally he says, "We gotta check you out." and I'm in the mountains over there in the forest. They call up Chicago to check where she works. Does she have access to a copy machine? Does she have permission from the owner of the business to use the copy machine? Does she use it make personal copies? Did he ever say yes she can use it? Blah, blah, blah. So she verified that everything she said was true. So then he says "Okay. I'm letting you in, but if you ever come back to Canada, you better carry your original paper with you or you're gonna get yourself in big trouble."

Cohen: So, I think I want to thank you, Uncle Meyer, thank you on behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library for your time.

Widrevitz: But also, the fact that we have Brad and Angel over here with us.

Cohen: Absolutely, yes, and thanks to them it's happening.

Widrevitz: Now that he's heard all this I don't know if I can sign them both into the Army.

Cohen: Well it sounds like Angel already did his bit.

Widrevitz: What do you make of it Brad?

Brad: What do I make of?

Widrevitz: What I said

Brad: Oh it was great, yeah, thank you for your service.

Widrevitz: These are the honest facts, some of you would say "Oh this guy is just a bellyacher complaining and all that," I'm not complaining, and I'm glad I did what I did and I also feel, I absolutely feel, that World War Two was justified in attacking. Naturally, Japan for what they did at Pearl Harbor and justified for going into the Nazi's because of what they did. They didn't only do it to Jews; they did it to French fellas, Dutch people, Belgian people, and Polish people. By the way, there was an uprising, not only in Warsaw of the Jewish Ghetto. In 1944, there was a vast uprising of the Polish Christian population in Warsaw. They lost thousands and thousands of men. And the Russians stood on the river there at the Vistula there, and they didn't help them. They wanted to see the Polish people destroyed. So they gladly let the Germans shoot up the Polish People. The Polish Army, by the way, was one of the finest armies that stood up to the Nazi's; of everybody else, they were the only ones that stood up in revolt,

that I know of, of that amount, and died by the thousands in defense of their country. At one time, Poland had been divided into three different countries by Russia and Austria, and Germany. The people didn't want any trouble with anybody, but everybody's picking on them. And that's life.

Cohen: Should we show the picture? Should I bring the pictures over? I think there is one over here and one on the wall.