

Interviewer: Kory Hardes (KH)
Interviewee: Jack Fieldes (JF)
Subject: Interviewee's World War II and Other Life Experiences
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Interview Place: Interviewee's Home in Ewen, Michigan
Interview For: Dr. Judy Demark's HS 380 Public History Class

KH: What is your full name?

JF: Jack Exline Fields.

KH: Where were you born?

JF: Cincinnati, Iowa.

KH: What Year?

JF: First month, the thirteenth day of '26.

KH: Okay, where did you grow up?

JF: Wheaton, Illinois.

KH: What was it like growing up in Wheaton?

JF: Well, we lived on a farm, and on 160 acres, and they grew corn, soybeans, oats, and wheat, and had a few cows, had a pasture in the back 40, and lots of pheasants down there at that time and cotton tail rabbits, and I went to school in to school in a one room country school, called Bonapart School in Glennallen, the out skirts of Glennallen, and I walked a mile to school every day. Did you have to do that?

KH: No, I didn't have to walk that far.

JF: What else do you want to know?

KH: What else... Well tell me a little more about your schooling then, a little bit more.

JF: Well... Well... The school was one room and they would teach first to eighth grade in it, and one teacher and about 25 kids or thirty kids or somewhere along there. And I got out of there and went to Wheaton High School in Wheaton, Illinois. And then I quit there and joined the Navy.

KH: Well, tell me a little about the... Tell me a little bit, did you, you enlisted right?

JF: Yes.

KH: Okay.

JF: I enlisted in Chicago.

KH: Alright, well tell me a little bit about that about...

JF: Well, when you enlist in the service you just go in to the office and talk to a Navy personal, and they give you a bunch of papers to fill out, and your parents had to sign because you were under, you know under age so...

KH: So you weren't 18 when you were... when you enlisted?

JF: No, I was 17 when I went in, so my folks had to sign for me. If you was 18 then you could went in by yourself. And I went to Baraga, Idaho for boot camp training, and there you, you took your training. Basic training was marching and drilling and rifle range and all that good stuff you know. And they had a lake there that they take you out on. You had to oar around the lake and then you'd go on all these marches you know about ten miles or and some of them were 20 mile marches, and your feet got real sore because the shoes never fit very good. And then you had every morning you got up and you had to go out on the drill field and they'd drill you, march you around, and then you'd go to these programs you know telling you what you going to do in the service you know, and then about they, give you all kind of shots and stuff in the arm you know.

KH: How long were you in basic training?

JF: Six weeks. I was in six weeks, went in October and I think I got out in November.

KH: Then where did you go from Idaho?

JF: Idaho... I came home for a week, and then I was shipped to Treasure Island, California.

KH: What did you do there?

JF: We went to gunnery school and we went to fire fighting school. All different kind of schools that they send you to. And then I was assigned to the General J. R. Brooks and we put her in commission, she was a brand new ship, so we had to carry the supplies aboard ship. Work you about 18 hours a day and when you got done you were really tired, carrying all that stuff up the gangplank and aboard ship you know.

KH: What, what rank or rate did you have during the Army? Er, I mean when you were in the Navy, excuse me.

JF: Well...

KH: During the War.

JF: Apprentice seaman at first, (subject leafs through some documents) yeah, right here, apprentice seaman, seaman second class, seaman first class, and then I went to fireman first class.

KH: What are the difference in those ranks?

JF: Well, these are all deck crew, the apprentice seaman, second class seaman, and first class seaman, work on the top side, fireman you work down in the engine room.

KH: What does the fireman do?

JF: Well, they go all kinds of different duties you know, all depends on what you were assigned, what part of it you know, you fire up the blowers, you watch all the sump pumps you

know, and all the equipment under in the engine room. You read all the gauges and writing down what they show on a chart you know, a piece of paper, that's what a fireman does. A deck, a seaman first class you know, they're more, they clean the ship you know, and take care of it, all the equipment they, take care of you know all the ropes, and then they handle all the lines when you tie up you know. They handle almost all the boats you know, that they use for going ashore in and stuff. Seaman.

KH: Did you move through the ranks rather quickly, was... how long were you at each one of these ranks, around?

JF: Well, the first three I went through, but I was a fireman for about one year after the war was over. I was a seaman during the whole war, but as soon as the war was over, I figured it was safer down below.

KH: What places were you stationed during the war?

JF: Places? You mean...

KH: Yeah, where was like your headquarters?

JF: Our home port? Well, our first home port was San Francisco. That was where we went out of, San Francisco, down to the South Pacific. Down to New Guinea and New Calidonian, and through there. And then we made two or three trips down there. I can't remember exactly, I can't remember exactly how many trips I made.

KH: Well, that's alright. What did you do on these trips basically?

JF: What did they do mostly?

KH: Yeah, what were you doing?

JF: Well, what we'd do mostly is we'd get up in the morning and wash the whole topside of the ship, sweep it and wash it you know. And then we'd have to take care of, clean up all the living quarters of all the troops you know, when they got off the ship and stuff, we had to quick go through and clean up all... that was a mess cause there was everything thrown around you know. So we had to clean all that up and then we had to, we had a lot of mail and stuff that we brought back and forth, and we had to go sort that and put that in the hole you know. There was always something to do, you never ran out of work you know. If you did they'd find something for you to do you know. And then you were on duty for four hours, and then you were off four, then on four, and off four, but if the four you were on duty was in daylight hours, then you would have to go on work detail too so actually put instead of 12 hours a day you put in 16 hours a day, and a lot of days you put in 18 hours, and get four hours sleep for the night. I don't think that was right you know. What was?

KH: What were the missions of the ships, were they transporting troops, or...

JF: I was troop transport. It takes the troops over you know, to different areas. And then they would bring back other personal you know, that were coming back to the States you know. But that was in the South Pacific, but over in the North Atlantic we brought back German prisoners on the way back.

KH: So after the South Pacific, then you went to the North Atlantic?

JF: We went down through the Panama Canal and then we came up to New York City, and we picked up troops, and I think the first troops we took was over to North Africa. And I think the second trip we made across there we went to Glasgow, Scotland, and then we'd, I think the next trip we went into Portland or Plymouth, England and dropped off troops. That was before the invasion and then after the invasion we picked up German prisoners and brought them back.

KH: Was that the D-day invasion?

JF: Yeah, and boy were they happy to be done with the war, and coming to America. But sometimes you wondered if they thought they were going to get treated like they treated ours you know, but we treated them pretty good, I'm pretty sure.

KH: Where you wounded or injured during the war? If so could you tell me a little about it?

JF: I don't know what you'd call wounded or injured? No.

KH: You didn't get any type of injury during the war at all?

JF: Well, not real bad ones.

KH: Not even any minor injuries?

JF: Well, just a, I Had trouble with my feet you know.

KH: Well, tell me a little about that.

JF: Well, I don't know how to actually explain it you know. I was in the hospital there, I can't even remember. I think it was in Charleston you know. For a little while you know. And they straightened them out.

KH: What was wrong with your feet?

JF: Well, I don't know exactly, they were kind of bruised you know.

KH: How did they get bruised?

JF: Well that's another story, we're on another ship now; this was on that training ship, the De Long, let's go back to the General J. R. Brooks.

KH: Okay, tell me about the General J. R. Brooks.

JF: In North Africa there we pulled in to Oran, North Africa and there was still quite a bit of damage the you could see you know, of ships and stuff that had been sunk you know, and I don't know... I can't even remember where we went from there. I know after D-day, after D-day we went. I can't remember where we went from there. I think we went back to New York and picked up more troops then we came back, we pulled into Le Havre one time, then we pulled into Cherbourg, France you know, most was in France, Cherbourg and Le Havre was in France. And picked up Germans prisoners and brought them back.

KH: So, did you participate in any famous events in the war, for example Pearl Harbor or D-day?

JF: Well D-day over there is pretty rough you know, but what could you see from the ship wasn't much, because you, the ship was three miles out and then the Higgins boats would bring troops ashore you know. You could hear the bullets going over you know. They's make a howling sound you know, the big shells when they came over they go wow wow wow wow you know. And I

don't know, I know one thing, it gives you nightmares just thinking about it. You wake up at night and you think you're back there you know, and its best not to even think about it you know. Even today I get nightmares about it and that was 50 years ago. So I don't know how that can effect you for so long a time eh.

KH: So you were talking about the Higgins boats that take the troops over, did you have, what were you doing during D-day, what were your duties mainly.

JF: Well, we just took troops in and turned around and came back and got more troops, but I only made one trip.

KH: Why did you only make one trip?

JF: The boat went down, it was here one minute and gone the next minute.

KH: Tell me a little about that.

JF: Well, there ain't much to say, its just wow and that's it you know. When you in the water and the waves are going up and down like this. The waves are six feet you know. You had instructions: pick nobody up on the way in. On the way back you could you know. But you couldn't pick anybody up on the way in. I got picked up on the way out. Another guy aboard ship picked me up, so I was pretty lucky.

KH: What happened to all the troops you were carrying?

JF: I don't know. I never seen them again. I never seen anything again. A lot of, a lot of boats were going back and forth though you know. Just in tat you could see lots of them you know. But you're lucky you got picked up, a lot of them

didn't. But you could see shore you know, and I knew I wasn't wanting to go there.

KH: What did you miss most about home while you were in the... while you were away from home?

JF: What did I miss most about home?

KH: Yeah.

JF: Oh, you could sleep all you wanted. In the Navy, you got so you slept sitting up any, any position any time you had five minutes you went to sleep because they worked you so many hours you know.

KH: How long were you in the service?

JF: I was in the service from where is, is it? The eighth month, the twenty-eighth day of '43 to where's the other? It's here someplace. Yeah, fourth month, first day of '46. It was two years, seven months, and four days. Right down to the day.

KH: How many ships did you serve on during the war?

JF: Two.

KH: What were their names?

JF: The General J. R. Brooks and the U.S.S. De Long. DE 684.

KH: Well, can you tell me a little about your service on each ship a little maybe, a little bit more? Do you have any stories maybe about either ship?

JF: Well the General J. R. Brooks, I know of two guys that committed suicide aboard ship you know. Would that be interesting?

KH: Oh, that would be very interesting, tell me a little bit about that.

JF: Well, we had a cook you know, we were on our way to the South Pacific, and he didn't like it very well, and he jumped overboard and drowned. Then we had another one that committed suicide by drinking torpedo juice. That's alcohol that's made to run torpedoes you know, and he was drinking it in his coffee you know. He must have been an alcoholic or something you know. And it killed him.

KH: That's interesting. Did anything else happen aboard the General Brooks?

JF: The General Brooks... Well, when we'd go on the North Atlantic used to get really rough you know and we used to be in convoys of maybe 50 ships or more you know, and we were going over, and it got real rough, and the ship's screw would come out of the water when it would go down the wave, and then it would come back in, and it would go up, and a wave the back end of the ship would come out of the water, and the screw would turn in the air you know, and the tankers and stuff, they had p-51's, mustangs on their decks and the waves were so rough that the waves took them right off, one day they were there, and the next day they were all gone, there wasn't no planes left on top of the tankers. And everybody was seasick you know, all them soldiers were all seasick you know.

KH: Do you have any interesting stories about the U.S.S. De Long?

JF: U.S.S. De Long was a training vessel for officers. They train them on the De Long for other ships you know. And then they'd do out and train you know. Go out and fire guns you know, and fire torpedoes and depth charges and all this for

training you know. And then after they had the training, they were transported to other ships. But the De Long we went into dry dock and we got I don't know how they put it, reserve, and we were on our way to the South Pacific when the war was over, and we turned around and came back. We were going to go down, and go through the Panama Canal, and go around to Japan you know for the invasion of Japan, but by that time we heard the war was over. They turned around and came back, then we took and put it in mothballs fleet down in Jacksonville, Florida. In the St. James River. But that was just a training vessel, a goofed up training vessel. Nobody knew what they were doing you know.

KH: No one ever knew what they were doing, were there some humorous screwups that happened with that ship?

JF: Oh, yeah, lots of them.

KH: Well, tell me a little bit about some of them.

JF: Well, we was out airplanes you know, carry a chute in the back of them you know, and they shoot a sleeve that they drag in the back of it. Well they shot and got too close to the airplane, so the airplane left and didn't come back.

KH: So what did you do aboard the De Long?

JF: I was a fireman down in the engine room. You made out reports you know, on all the gauges down there.

KH: Where were you when you heard the war was over? What was your reaction? You said you were aboard the De Long.

JF: Well every one was happy down there. Yeah, we turned around and came right back. We pulled into... where did we pull in

at? I don't even remember where we pulled in at. Fifty years ago you know. I know, I think we pulled in into Miami and then went to... no, oh dear, hum, I can't remember where we were.

KH: What did you do aboard ship in you spare time? What kind of hobbies did you have aboard ship?

JF: Well, mostly you know they would rewind all their own motors you know. If a motor burned or something they'd take it down and rewind it, and I got pretty interested in that stuff, watching them, and you know, and I also liked working the sail where they made sails you know, where they made different things you know, you could make sea bags and all kinds of good stuff in there. That's about all.

KH: Did you interact with any foreign soldiers, like Allies or German soldiers really?

JF: Just the Germans that we brought, brought back lots of them, we brought back 3,000 of them at a time.

KH: So, what did you think of the Germans?

JF: They were pretty nice guys after they were aboard ship. There were 300 crew, and 3,000 of them, they could have took over the ship any time they wanted to, but they didn't even want to.

KH: So you didn't come into contact with anybody anything else?

JF: Well, down in the South Pacific there when they was unloading the ship, they had them New Guineans natives come aboard and carry off a lot of gear off the ship and stuff, but you couldn't understand them you know. They never wore shoes,

their soles on their feet was about like that from walking on that hot stuff you know. You couldn't even walk with shoes on that deck and they'd walk around there bare footed. Like a hot foot.

KH: So did you get any kind of leave or anything in Europe? Did you get to look around Europe at all?

JF: We got leave in Marseille, France Three hours, I guess it was. What can you do in three hours hey?

KH: Yeah. What did you do in three hours?

JF: Went and bought a few souvenirs and stuff.

KH: What did you buy?

JF: Some post cards and stuff. They didn't have much to sell. In Oran, Africa I bought oh, a pocket book and a bracelet, different jewelry that they made out of shell casings.

KH: About how much money did the average sailor make, like in an hourly wage or for a year or what ever?

JF: Oh, I imagine for for a month the average soldier, sailor made probably anywhere from 80 to 100 dollars. And that ain't very much.

KH: About how much money did you make during the war, just a round figure you know, not anything specific?

JF: Twenty-five hundred dollars, 2,000, 500 dollars, I figured with everything.

KH: Everything? What there were different... you had the monthly salary and then what else?

JF: Well, when you, when you got out of the service I got \$300 mustering out pay. So, I never even made a \$1,000 a year you

know for... I figured it out one time, I think it was about three cents an hour for being on duty 24 hours a day.

KH: That wasn't very much. What did you do after the war?

JF: Went to work on a pipeline, putting in gas pipes into houses and running mains, and running heavy equipment, bulldozers, ditch machines, and stuff like that.

KH: Where did you... was that back in Wheaton?

JF: Back in Wheaton, yeah, for Midwest Construction Company and we'd travel all over different towns, and put in gas mains into houses, new settlements and stuff. We'd work seven days a week and work 12 hours a day for, I think I was getting a dollar forty-five an hour at that time. I thought that was big money after the war.

KH: Did you get married?

JF: Yeah, I got married.

KH: What is your wife's name?

JF: Virginia Fields. Her maiden name?

KH: Yeah.

JF: Oh, Virginia May Popps.

KH: How did you meet your wife?

JF: Well, I came up here deer hunting.

KH: You came up to Ewen, Michigan deer hunting?

JF: Paulding.

KH: Oh, up to Paulding.

JF: Paulding. And she was staying at the farm that I was staying at when I was deer hunting. And we hit it of pretty good, so I came back the next spring, and picked her up and we went and

got married.

KH: Well, tell me a little bit about that what did you do after you got married?

JF: Kept working on the pipeline. In them days when you got married you had to have a job and a place to live, I don't know what they do now days.

KH: Move back in with their parents, now days.

JF: Yeah, yeah.

KH: Alright, did you have any children?

JF: Three.

KH: Tell me a little bit about your kids. What are their names?

JF: Randy, Dianne, and Jacki.

KH: Tell me a little bit about your kids.

JF: Well, I don't know what can I say about them, they're all good kids. I ain't much for story telling I tell you.

KH: I know, but just tell me a little bit about your kids you know, what did they grow up to do?

JF: Randy's an engineer on the railroad, Dianne is a teacher, and Jacki she's a housewife.

KH: So what were your hobbies, what did you do for fun after you got out of the service?

JF: Well, I hunt and I fish. And most of the time I do both. I was out hunting today. I seen quite a few deer, but I didn't shoot any. Just waiting to see if I can get a good one and I walked around. I don't know why it's so hard to make stories.

KH: Well, it's okay.

JF: And now days they feed the deer you know, to get them to come

in and then you sit there and shoot them, where I like to go out and walk a lot and chase them up and see a lot of tails, but you don't see too many standing deer that way and...

KH: So, deer hunting's changed a lot since...

JF: It's changed a lot since I first you know, started hunting and when it's no snow it's a lot harder to hunt, then when there's snow on the ground, because you can't see them as good on the the bare ground as you can with the white background or white you know. And there's a lot of deer through this area you know, there's you can go out and see 30 deer a day if you walk around you know. Which is quite a few, but how many of them are bucks, I don't know, but you don't get that good a look at them when they're running through the woods especially when it's brushy, but oh, the most interesting thing in the woods is the other creatures in the woods you know. The red squirrels, the fishers, and the rabbits and stuff, and the partridge. Once in a while you see a partridge, they're almost an endangered species, the partridge in the woods any more, and the rabbit is an endangered species. I think I've travelled probably 25, 30 miles in the woods hunting season, and I haven't seen a rabbit yet. But you see a lot of fisher sign around, lots of fisher, and they kill everything, they eat anything in the woods they'll eat. They'll even tackle a skunk and eat it. Porcupines, red squirrels, rabbits, partridge, anything in the woods they can get their hands on they'll eat. And there is too many of them. I'd like to see them put a bounty on them and get them out of the woods, so

there's some other animals in the woods and I don't know what else you want.

KH: So, you've done a lot of hunting then?

JF: I've done a lot of hunting in my time all over, I think almost there isn't a square mile in this part of the country I haven't been over at one time or another. I used to travel on snowshoes 20 miles a day just looking over the country. I can't do that no more. I'm getting to old for that.

KH: So, what do you, so what do you hunt then, you hunt a lot of different animals or just deer?

JF: Well, you hunt just about anything that's in the woods, but the deer are the most plentiful. I haven't shot a partridge this year. I seen oh, maybe 25 or so, but haven't shot any. Because I figure they need them for seed, and I haven't seen any rabbits in the woods.

KH: Do you, do you hunt bear?

JF: No, I don't hunt bear. I used to, but there's lots of them they do nothing but damage.

KH: So how did you come to be in the Upper Peninsula? Where were you, came up from Wheaton or?

JF: Yeah, I came up from Wheaton, and went to work in the saw mills. Worked in the woods a little bit, and then when White Pine started up I went to work at White Pine, worked there.

KH: At the copper mine?

JF: At the copper mine, yeah, and then the copper mine went on strike and '57 or so, and we took off for Portland, Oregon. And ended up in Vancouver, Washington, and I worked in a paper

mill out there for three years, and then we came back to Ewen and I went to work for the school as a bus driver and an auto mechanic, and I done that for about ten years, and then I quit that, and the what did I do then, not much.

KH: Hunting.

JF: A lot of hunting and a lot of fishing, and I done some auto mechanicing on my own, and then I went back to work for the school driving bus, and I did that for about ten years until I retired. What else do you want to know?

KH: Well, you mentioned your work in the saw mill. Tell me a little about that. What did you do in the saw mill.

JF: Well, in the a saw mill you're almost a jack of all trades you know, they ship you around you know, from the mill pond to the green chain you know, to the trimmer, and you ride the carriage, all that good stuff.

KH: Well what are some of those things, like the green chain and the carriage? Kind of explain what those are.

JF: The green chain is where the green lumber comes off from the saw, and you handle it and pile it. And the edger edges the board, takes the bark and stuff off it, and cuts it to a certain length. Edger and trimmer, and I don't know what else.

KH: Alright, then you said you worked in a paper mill, when you were out in Vancouver.

JF: Yeah.

KH: What did you do at the paper mill?

JF: We worked where they chip, where they put the logs through the

chipper, and then they blow them into silos, then they take the chips from the silos that goes into the digesters. That goes into the digesters. That digests it, and makes paper out of it. Then it goes from the digesters into the paper machines that makes the paper.

KH: What did you do at the White Pine Copper Mine? What was your...

JF: I was a laborer at first then I went to CAT operating, then I went from CAT operating to driller/blaster.

KH: What does the CAT operator do?

JF: Well, he cleans the headings for the powder monkeys to powder and drill the headings so that the drillers could get in there and redrill it.

KH: What's a heading?

JF: A heading is the end of the tunnel you're drilling to blast.

KH: Okay, then you said, what did you say you were after you were a header, after what did you say you did after that? What was your next occupation?

JF: Driller/blaster.

KH: Yeah. What does a driller/blaster do?

JF: Well, he goes in and drills a hole and powders it, and then blasts it. To get the ore out.

KH: How long did you do that?

JF: I worked there about three years.

KH: Alright, you said you got into a little, you got into auto mechanics on the side. How did you get into that?

JF: Well, I used to buy old junker cars, and I had to rebuild the

motors, and stuff in them to get them going and stuff, and after awhile you get so you know pretty much about mechanic work, so the school needed a mechanic for their school buses so I asked for a job and I got it. And I done that for ten years, at the school, and you overhaul engines, rear ends change tires, work on the bodies, and do anything that went wrong. You fixed the lights or you know, the motor if it blow. A motor you took the motor out, and put another motor in or rebuild the motor, and put it back in, and it was quite a job, because it had to be on the road, and sometimes you worked day and night in order to get them on the road for the next day, because they didn't have that many spares, and I think the hardest part about mechanic work is getting the parts you need you know, quick you know. Sometimes you have to travel, like in Ewen here there's, you have to travel to Ironwood or Escanaba or somewhere big in order to the parts you know, to get the parts you need, and you did that after you got done work you know. Run after parts you know. And the only thing you got paid for was you mileage, you didn't get paid for your time you know, because you were on salary you know. You put in a lot of miles that you oh, going after parts and stuff, and I think the mechanic work, I don't know how to put it. It takes a lot of time to do it right you know, you can throw something together, but if you don't take your time, and do it right you know, you're back doing it again, so everything you do you have to do a perfect job on it, so it don't fall apart and I don't...

KH: So do you still do, do you still do mechanic work today?

JF: For my own and my relatives, but not anybody else.

KH: So you've done... have you done mechanic work on any newer cars?

JF: Some of these newer cars you can't work on. You can do some work on them, but you can't do any work on a lot of these cars without a computer, you have to plug it into a computer in order to fix it.

KH: So, auto mechanics has changed a lot from when you started.

JF: Auto mechanics... the backyard mechanic is done. You have to take it to a garage.

KH: Yeah, I suppose you can't just read the shop manuals any more you have to...

JF: No, you have to have a \$40,000 computer in order to plug it in, so you know what's wrong with it, and sometimes that don't work.