

Melvin Cohen

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Interviewed by Leah Cohen

Transcribed by Sonix with corrections by Leah Cohen

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[Cohen, Deborah: [00:00:00] Formal, with an introduction, because they're keeping it for their archives, so this is going to be the formal interview.] Cut

Cohen, Leah: [00:00:08] Thank you. Thank you. So today is October 29, 2021. My name is Leah Cohen, and I have the pleasure of interviewing technician Melvin Cohen. I don't know that we're related. Maybe we are. Who knows? [Laughter].

Cohen, Deborah: [00:00:26] Can you hear okay?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:00:29] Yeah.

Cohen, Leah: [00:00:29] With the 302nd Reconnaissance Troop Mechanized of the 1st Cavalry Division during the end of World War II in the Philippines, and after the war in Japan, he was later assigned to the 87th Battalion of the 2nd Armored Division at Fort Hood. Thank you for agreeing to speak today and we look forward to hearing your story. So we will begin at the beginning. Where and when were you born?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:01:04] I'm sorry,

Cohen, Deborah: [00:01:05] Where and when were you born?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:01:06] Oh, March 26, 1926, at Mount Sinai Hospital in the Old West Side of Chicago.

Cohen, Leah: [00:01:17] Did you grow up on the West Side?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:01:20] Yes, I did.

Cohen, Leah: [00:01:22] And what was it like?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:01:26] It was very interesting. You know, and Chicago has beautiful parks everywhere, and the West Side had Douglas Park, which was a beautiful place to play in. Went to school on the West Side. My [pause] mother had problems. I think she suffered from PTSD, from her trials and tribulations in Europe, from the pogroms, et cetera. And what she had to find food for my older sister, [Rose] who was born in 1910 in Poland. So she was a pretty sick woman, although she was a wonderful cook [expresses emotion] and baker. She used to send me apple strudels in the [US] Army. Everybody in my squad loved them.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:02:37] But. Is it okay if I interrupt?

Cohen, Leah: [00:02:41] Yeah.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:02:44] He...his mother, came over from Russia. She didn't get over here until after the [Russian] Revolution. She was stuck there. Tell her about how--

Cohen, Melvin: [00:02:59] Oh yeah, she was going to come. Finally. My father left 1910. He went to Detroit originally. Then came to Chicago. He was a carpenter and a builder. He had a friend, Harry [00:03:14] Comus, [00:03:15] and they built many buildings in the '20s and they were all leveraged by mortgages. And then 1929 came and the market crashed and there was, that was the beginning of the Great Depression that lasted all the way through 1941. And so they lost their buildings. But we were living in an apartment building at the time and the real estate company that took them over told them that if they perform maintenance on the buildings, they could live there for five years for nothing.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:04:06] This was a building that his father built but he lost ownership of.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:04:12] Yeah, and, finally, my father died young. He died at age fifty-nine of a heart attack. My mother died at eighty-seven. My oldest sister [Rose] died at ninety-three, and I'm the oldest [age-wise] one, I'm ninety-six.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:04:34] What year did she, did your mother finally make it over?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:04:38] Yeah, in 1922. Finally, she started going in 1914, but World War I started. And she had to go home. She didn't get her till 1922 with my older sister [Rose] who was eleven or twelve in 1922. My sister, Helen was born [in the US]. And unfortunately, she died at eighty-seven. I'm sorry, sixty-seven, from double pneumonia. Like my older sister died at ninety-three. I'll be ninety-seven. I expect to live...

Cohen, Deborah: [00:05:29] You'll be ninety-six.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:05:31] Ninety-six, right. But I would expect to live over 100.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:05:37] Knock on wood, his maternal grandparents were over a hundred when the Nazis killed them.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:05:46] My maternal grandparents that I never met were over about 102.

Cohen, Leah: [00:05:53] Wow.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:05:56] And were killed in the Holocaust.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:05:59] But his mother,

Cohen, Melvin: [00:06:01] Many people, of course, deny ever happened

Cohen, Leah: [00:06:06] Where--?

Cohen, Deborah: [00:06:06] His mother had to steal food during the World War I and the Revolution to feed herself and her [daughter], my father's oldest sister. And [as a result] she had a lot of mental issues.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:06:24] She had PTSD.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:06:26] And my father and his sister, Helen, actually were in foster care for quite a while because--

Cohen, Deborah: [00:06:36] Yeah. They couldn't take care of me. So we lived in foster homes, in different neighborhoods and in different homes over the years.

Cohen, Leah: [00:06:49] Where, where would you-- where were the homes, were they all on the West Side?

Cohen, Deborah: [00:06:55] [Repeats] Were they all on the West Side?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:06:58] Some were in the West Side. The last one was the nicest one, that was in Albany Park. And the peop[le], the Weisman family. Very nice people. They owned a bakery, so we [enjoyed] [laughter] One of the sons was a saxophone player and had his own band. And when I got married, I hired him, pardon me, to play my wedding. [says with emotion.]

Cohen, Leah: [00:07:37] Oh, wow. What were the other families also decent people or not so much?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:07:48] Oh, they were all fairly nice people, but sometimes they gave you food, I couldn't stand like cauliflower. Ugh. But you had to eat it. Cauliflower and broccoli. My nemesis.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:08:09] Yeah, but you said that he never felt comfortable enough in the foster home so he could just go open a refrigerator or a cabinet. Yeah, you know,

Cohen, Melvin: [00:08:20] Only with the Wisemans, the last home, whose son owned the bakery. [Laughter]

Cohen, Leah: [00:08:30] Multiple talents.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:08:33] And then the other son had a band...Who played at my wedding.

Cohen, Leah: [00:08:42] Would you visit your, your, your mother and your father? When you were in foster care? Would you go to your parents to visit for, you know, a few hours?

Cohen, Deborah: [00:08:55] Did you go visit them when you were living in the foster homes, did you go visit your parents?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:09:01] Oh yeah, yeah. My father died very young. He was fifty-nine.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:09:06] But you were out of foster care by then, weren't you?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:09:09] Yeah, I was living with him in an apartment on Wilson Avenue in Albany Park. And I got a call. He was in the hospital at the Lutheran Deaconess Hospital on Damon and Division, and I got a call at one o'clock in the morning. They called me to tell me my father died. Would I come and identify him? So, we didn't have a car, but in Chicago, the public transportation is great, not like the suburbs. So I just got on a Montrose streetcar to Damon, took a streetcar there, so I got to Lutheran to Division and went to the hospital and identified him.

Cohen, Leah: [00:10:09] Oh! How old were you when he passed away?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:10:14] Yeah. [Said with emotion]

Cohen, Deborah: [00:10:16] How old were you when he died?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:10:19] Seventeen, and I cried a lot because I was thinking of all the times, I loved him but I never told him my heart.

Cohen, Leah: [00:10:37] Aw. Well, maybe he knew it anyhow.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:10:40] He died in the hospital alone, he was there for what? Three months. And my father was the only one who ever came to visit him, and he came every day

and had to take like three different street cars to get there. And his mother didn't come and his sister didn't come.

Cohen, Leah: [00:10:58] Oh my goodness.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:10:59] Well, my sister Helen was in California,

Cohen, Deborah: [00:11:02] But Rose [00:11:02] never knew [00:11:03].

Cohen, Leah: [00:11:04] No.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:11:04] Yeah. So my father went and sat with him every day after school. And and then he died alone in the hospital, he was there for an operation and then there were complications--

Cohen, Melvin: [00:11:17] --From a gallbladder operation, and he died at age fifty-nine.

Cohen, Leah: [00:11:27] Well, it sounds like you were, he must have known you cared for him very much if you came every day with a lot of effort and you know.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:11:37] Yeah. Yeah. My father. All his jobs, he would give most of the earnings to him.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:11:45] Yeah, I had three different jobs. I worked after school at the Coca-Cola Bottling Company on Ravenswood. Loading and unloading trucks. Oh, and for sixty-five cents an hour. Which was more than my father was making as a cabinet maker and everything, he was making forty cents an hour. So sixty-five cents an hour was not bad. But on Saturday and Sunday night, one of my boyfriends told me to come work with him at the Chicago and halt and railroad loading and unloading boxcars. We worked six hours each of those nights for \$4.00 an hour. Unheard of in those days.

Cohen, Leah: [00:12:42] Yeah, right.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:12:47] Well, that was \$48.00 for the first. So I used to give my father the \$48.00, and I kept the .65 cents an hour I worked at the Coca-Cola Bottling Company.

Cohen, Leah: [00:13:02] Wow. And where was your mother and your sister Rose living at that time?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:13:10] In Albany Park on Sunnyside Avenue.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:13:15] But...your mother, was living with them, right? With Rose and her husband?

Cohen, Leah: [00:13:21] Oh, I see. Like taking helping take care of her and Helen was already in California, married.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:13:32] Helen was married here. And her husband moved to California.

Cohen, Leah: [00:13:41] Well, so how did you manage everything to study in school and do your homework and work at two, maybe three jobs? How did you juggle everything?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:13:56] How did I what?

Cohen, Deborah: [00:13:57] How did you manage to keep up with your studies in school and work all those hours and visit your father and?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:14:06] I didn't. I worked. I did what I had to do. I. I didn't. My grades weren't as good as they could have been if I had more time. When I graduated high school, I was about 25th in the class of 300. But I. If I had more time, I'm sure I could have been in the top five. Yeah. But.

Cohen, Leah: [00:14:37] But you still did well. I mean, you still were in the top.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:14:41] And I went to college, ugh after I got out of the Army at the University of Illinois, I proficiencied out of twenty hours of classes before I even got started.

Cohen, Leah: [00:14:59] Okay. Okay, well, that's good. Did you have a--

Cohen, Melvin: [00:15:04] And when I became a radio repairman with the highest grade ever made at the [United States Army] Cavalry School in Fort Riley, Kansas. That is the biggest camp in the country and have schools for everything, medical [pause] What was I going to say?

Cohen, Leah: [00:15:38] Radio Repair...?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:15:40] Radio repair, radio operator, which I also did on CW constant wave, sending Morse code and receiving it at high speed. And I was the highest grade ever made in the history of the school in radio repair. And yet when I went to the 1st Cavalry, they said, "We already have a radio operator." "Well send me somewhere else." "No, you're here." And I decided that, you know, sometimes people are arrested for driving while Black. Well, I concluded that I was accomplishing these high things while Jewish, and that was the mark against you.

Cohen, Leah: [00:16:38] Aha. So they wouldn't promote you as they would [others].

Cohen, Melvin: [00:16:41] You know, when I. I was discharged and I asked the captain when I was being discharged, "Do I have enough time to get the maximum benefit under the G.I. Bill of Rights?" So that if I went to college, everything would be paid for. He said, "No, you're a year short." He said, "Tell you what I'll do. I'm going to discharge you and you re-enlist for another year." And you go home and the first sixty days, you'll be on furlough and [for] the next 10 months, they'll send you to some camp and. You'll wherever it is, and then you'll have enough time for the maximum." So I did that and they sent me to Fort Hood, Texas. Fort Hood, which I couldn't believe was named after General Hood, who was a Confederate general in the Civil War, and those people haven't changed it. And that was the home of the 2nd Armored Division. So at the 2nd Armored Division, I, instead of doing anything with radio repair, anything...No, "So you know how to type?" "Yeah, I learned how to type in high school." So they made me a clerk typist. And supply surgeons from different battalions would send in requests for things, clothing, shoes, gas masks, other things that would be needed. So I would type it up. And send it in, and then I would drive this monstrous truck to the quartermaster about ten miles away,

pick up everything. Then [they] called different supply sergeants and the different companies to come and get it. And. They, they did that was that. The master sergeant's name --he was from Mexico. Ben Castaneda, he was also originally in the 1st Cavalry Division. You could tell, because when you change, usually the one year the division you're in. You wear the patch on your left arm when you move to a different division, that patch goes to your right arm and the decision you run goes to your left arm. I don't do sewing. They have women who show these patches are for you on every jacket, every shirt. You know a lot of things.

Cohen, Leah: [00:19:57] It's unfortunate, it sounds like although you were very skilled at the radio operations and the Morse code, and I think you called it constant wave that, unfortunately, these skills were not utilized during your service, I'm going to go back a little bit to the growing up years and ask you, did you and your family, your mother or the foster families or your friends? Did people talk about the rise of Nazism? Was your mother concerned about her parents in Europe? Like, were people talking about Nazism at home in the late thirties when you were still a kid?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:20:45] About what, narcissism?

Cohen, Deborah: [00:20:47] Nazism, Were people aware in your world about the rise of Hitler and what was going on in Europe and did you discuss it? Did people discuss it?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:21:00] Of course, because my maternal grandparents, like I say that I never met who were over 100 were killed by Hitler.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:21:10] But your mother, your mother must have been really worried about them, about their welfare when Hitler was rising to power. [Cohen, Melvin interjects, "Mmm hmm"] Did she ever talk about it? What kind of things did she say?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:21:27] Well, I don't know. I don't remember. But it was a major concern.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:21:33] She was aware. She was aware.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:21:37] Yeah, the... I would like to have a dime for every Holocaust denier there is in the world.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:21:48] I've asked him a lot about it, I used to ask my mother the same question that you just raised. I mean, what were you thinking when you, when it was happening, when, you know, before the war started, when Germany was turning [fascist] what Germany was turning into? And what did you, what did you say about it? What kind of discussions were there around that? And then afterward when the truth came out after the war? What was it like when you heard about that? And, and neither of them have ever been able to give me any kind of an in-depth answer. It's always just been, "I don't know" or "I don't remember" or, you know, and I don't know whether... I mean

Cohen, Melvin: [00:22:48] You know--

Cohen, Leah: [00:22:48] Maybe--

Cohen, Melvin: [00:22:52] --another interesting thing about in the Army. I was at Fort Hood. And I was getting ready to leave. Another soldier who was there who was also going to be discharged came up to me-- this is interesting-- He said, "You know, there are 15,000 men here in the division. He said, I'm in charge of personnel. So I know everybody. He says on their AGCT score, which is Army general classification like an IQ". He said, "My IQ", his IQ "was one hundred and eighty". Like a genius. He said, "And the only one that's close is you. You have one hundred and fifty. The other 15,000 men have ninety or below."

Cohen, Leah: [00:23:59] [Laughs] Was that hard on you? Did you feel in general throughout your service? Did you feel that... you were dealing with people who were not very bright?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:24:11] Right. So what he said to me was this would have changed my whole life and you would never have been born, Debbie [to daughter]. He said, "You and I could go to school, any Ivy League school you want. You want to go to Harvard, we'll go to Harvard, Yale, Princeton. I'll go to whatever school you want. We'll go through it together. But I thought about that, but "I can't afford to live in that surround[ing]". He says, "Don't worry about it. My father is worth 40 billion dollars. Don't worry about money." [Laughter] But I didn't do it. I said, "All

the people I went to high school with are going to the University of Illinois at Champaign, so that's where I'm going to go." But if I'd stayed there, God knows? Now, I could have been just as successful in the job that I did, I became a certified public accountant. But I could have done anything. Originally, I wanted to be an architect, but I didn't have enough money to take that much time. Well, with the guy whose father whose worth was - what did I say? \$60 billion? That wouldn't have been a problem. [He laughs] I could have been an architect.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:25:55] And you were always really good at very technical kinds of drawings.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:26:01] So. And that's where I would have gotten married.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:26:07] But yeah.

Cohen, Leah: [00:26:10] Well, that's okay. My father, Mr. Cohen, also was an accountant.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:26:17] Did you hear what she said?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:26:17] No.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:26:17] She said her father was also an accountant.

Cohen, Leah: [00:26:21] Oh. [Laughter and indistinct chatter].

Cohen, Deborah: [00:26:25] Another, another Mr. Cohen Accountant.

Cohen, Leah: [00:26:32] Well, so Deborah wrote that on your 18th birthday, March 26, you were already you were drafted and they said you would have to report for duty after you graduate. So do you want to tell us what happens at that [point]?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:26:55] What's the question?

Cohen, Deborah: [00:26:57] After you got your draft notice, how did you respond? Is that what your question is?

Cohen, Leah: [00:27:04] Yeah and where did you go and--.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:27:06] I accepted it and I reported for duty.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:27:10] So you graduated in June.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:27:12] I graduated in June, and then July, I was drafted.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:27:16] No, you were drafted [in March]. When you got your, when you had your birthday, you got your draft notice... When you were still in high school is what you told me. But you didn't have to report until after graduation.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:27:28] Right.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:27:29] Graduation was in June and I reported in July.

Cohen, Leah: [00:27:37] Okay. And did you? Did you go to a recruiting station in Chicago?

Cohen, Deborah: [00:27:49] Did you have to go to a recruiting station in Chicago or did your draft notice just tell you where to report?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:27:57] Right. I went I started out at Fort Sheridan for a short period of time and they sent me to Fort Riley, Kansas, which is the largest [post]. It's, by the way, the geographical center of the continental United States. It's the largest post of any Army military post anywhere. It has training for hospital work nurses, whether male or female, radio operator radio repair. They even had horse cavalry training, I don't know why, but they did.

Cohen, Leah: [00:28:52] Wow.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:28:53] You did that. [i.e. cavalry training]

Cohen, Melvin: [00:28:54] I became an expert horseman.

Cohen, Leah: [00:28:57] Oh my goodness. What was, what was basic training like when you started off there?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:29:07] Well, basic training is [pause] learning how to march, learning your general orders, ten general orders that you have to be aware of, how to fire an M-1 rifle, which was a far.... You know, originally they started using the old Springfield rifles from World War I, where you had to pull a bolt back and the M-, not the M1, the Springfield. The M1 rifle you put in a clip of five rounds of ammunition and you fire five in a row and then the clip jumps out. You put another one in and you can fire another five rounds in a row, much better and much better site. And I was an expert. Oh, shooter. But, you know, in the war, I didn't have to shoot too much. By the time I got to the first place, I went with to, the island of Luzon in the Philippines, the other islands, Leyte, Mindanao had already been taken...

Cohen, Leah: [00:30:37] Yes. Oh, all of a sudden we froze [referring to the computer screen].

Cohen, Melvin: [00:30:39] There's only cleaning up to do and we did that and the reconnaissance. Our troop had, they [had] one hundred and eighty men. And from the beginning of the war, they had three men killed and seven men wounded, which is amazing,

Cohen, Leah: [00:30:59] Yeah, yeah!

Cohen, Melvin: [00:31:00] Because in the Pacific, you're in jungles where the Kunai grass is twelve feet high. And nobody can see you if you're in the grass. And if the Japanese shoot, that doesn't mean they always hit you. It's not like in the movies, everybody hits what they shoot at. It doesn't happen that way. And then we got ready to invade Japan. We got all new equipment, new clothing, everything. And the invasion of Japan was expected to result in at least two million casualties on both the aggregate for both sides. But President Truman changed that so that on our side, there were no casualties. We had the new B-29 super bomber. And he ordered them to drop an atomic [bomb]. First of all, they dropped. They sent over a hundred bombers and they dropped napalm on every major city in Japan. [00:32:24] Dust [00:32:25] burning

everything and every one of those cities to the ground. If you saw Chicago like a big, burned-out empty lot.

Cohen, Leah: [00:32:35] Yeah, let's go back to that later. It is very important, but let's maybe go back.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:32:40] She wants to go in chronological order, okay.

Cohen, Leah: [00:32:44] But --

Cohen, Deborah: [00:32:46] How did you find basic training?

Cohen, Leah: [00:32:49] Basic in Fort Riley and--

Cohen, Deborah: [00:32:51] How did you? Was it hard for you? Was it easy for you?

Cohen, Leah: [00:32:57] How...Which other skills did you learn when you were there?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:33:04] The worst thing about basic training was... At five o'clock in the morning, somebody would come to the barracks and wake you up and say, "Tough shit, Kid. You're on KP. Go to the kitchen." And so it's five o'clock you and about ten other guys are there peeling about a thousand potatoes...

Cohen, Deborah: [00:33:37] But she asked you what other things you learned in basic training. One of the things you learned was--

Cohen, Melvin: [00:33:44] I learned was [were] the general orders. There were ten general orders you had to know. I don't remember them now. And obey and what you're supposed to do. What you're supposed to do on guard duty. And everybody was on guard duty at least once a week. And that's the funny thing. It's not so funny. It was funny to me.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:34:16] I thought it was funny

Cohen, Melvin: [00:34:18] When at most places when you're on guard duty, you don't carry ammunition. Fort Riley, you carry live ammunition and your rifle. And you see somebody. You're supposed to challenge them like. I was on guard duty near the horse stables and down the road comes this jeep and I holler out, "Halt, who goes there? Step in front of the jeep and put down your identification. He said, "I don't know who you are, Kid, but I'm Colonel So-and-So and I'm not doing anything." I say, "I don't know if Colonel So-and-So or you're a liar. And so put down your ID in front of the Jeep and I'll look at it." He said, "Go to hell." So I took my rifle and I fired a shot over his head. [Laughter] He that I was going to shoot him. So he said, "Never mind. Here it is. Someone look at it." No, but not all other camps, they didn't carry live ammunition. At Fort Riley, we did, but we didn't shoot him, just shot up in the air.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:35:48] He's always a stickler for the rules

Cohen, Melvin: [00:35:50] That gets their attention.

Cohen, Leah: [00:35:54] That's very funny. When did you learn to ride horses on at Fort Riley? ...Was that part of your basic training, or did that come later?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:36:06] No. But there were a bunch of officers who had been very old and were in the horse cavalry, and they insisted some of us did that and I did it and it was fun. I was an expert horseman, and when I got out of the Army, I had my children get lessons at a stable not from me, but from the people at the stable. I didn't [00:36:33] bother. [00:36:33] I remember when we saw we used to go out riding together and I think my daughter is sitting here said to the guy at this table, "My father was in..." When they were bringing the horses out, [she said] "My father was in the horse cavalry." And so he said, "Take this horse back and bring out Satan." It didn't make any difference.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:37:06] But they asked for volunteers to train in the horse cavalry, right? They asked for volunteers, and you volunteered.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:37:13] Yeah. I thought it would be fun!

Cohen, Leah: [00:37:15] And it was.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:37:17] And the other thing you learned was boxing.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:37:20] Oh yeah...There was a man, I don't know if you know the name Lou Jenkins. Lou Jenkins was the lightweight champion of the world for five years and I asked him, "Lou, you're the former or still are the lightweight champion of the world?" He said, "Yes." I said, "After dinner, could we go out for about five-six days and you teach me how to box?" And he did. Jenkins, by the way, after that, it's a long story. But he joined the Army and he stayed in the Army. And he became a hero in the Korean War...and spent his life in the Army. Yeah. His worst [sic] first wife, Katie, divorced him. But he married another woman, had a couple of children, and I never saw him after that. But he was really something.

Cohen, Leah: [00:38:38] You got, you got boxing lessons from the best.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:38:42] Yes. And when I was on the ship going overseas, they had things to do. We had a hillbilly band on the boat. They used to play great music like the *Wabash Cannonball* and the *Great Speckled Bird*. And then I had a friend that I used to play chess with. And then they said, "We're going to have a boxing tournament", whoever wants to volunteer. So, I and about six other people volunteered three two-minute rounds. And I used what I learned from Lou Jenkins and...in the first round... Oh, this young man, I forgot his name already. In the first two minutes, he never hit me, and I must have hit him forty times, not hard. I didn't want to hurt him. He obviously didn't know how to box. He threw the gloves under on the ground and ran away. And there was another boy, an Oriental boy, who also fought and won. And then other people were saying, "Why don't you two fight each other?" And we looked at each other and we both thought the same thing, 'So why don't you two fight each other? We're through.'

Cohen, Leah: [00:40:31] Wow, did that continue on? Were there other tournaments after that?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:40:38] Yeah. And another thing about that ship going overseas--

Cohen, Deborah: [00:40:43] She asked you a question.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:40:44] Oh what?

Cohen, Deborah: [00:40:44] She asked you, "Did you continue boxing after that?"

Cohen, Melvin: [00:40:48] No, no, that was not my. My interest was sixteen-inch softball played only in Chicago, tennis and golf. Golf was my favorite game.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:41:03] But that wasn't until much, much, much later.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:41:07] So the ship we were going on overseas was the SS Meridian, a captured German freighter. And the food, the only kind of equipment they had was boilers. And I hated boiled food. I ate breakfast. And the rest of the day, all I ate was apples, oranges, pears, but I hate boiled food. So I never ate it. I just ate fruit all day long.

Cohen, Leah: [00:41:46] [Laughs] Something else I was wondering about was when you were at Fort Riley or later on, were there? Did they offer any, let's say, services for the High Holidays or for Passover?

Cohen, Deborah: [00:42:06] Did they?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:42:08] No. No, never did.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:42:12] Did they offer Christian services, right?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:42:16] Yeah.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:42:17] But no Jewish services?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:42:19] Not that I remember. And my parents, of course, were really Shomer Shabbos. Especially my father. So we did that for many years, but since they're gone, I don't follow it because. I'm an atheist. There's no God. Given, looking back thousands of years, what goes on in the world: murder? wars? There could be no God if he would tolerate that. So, He, in my opinion, He doesn't exist.

Cohen, Leah: [00:43:06] Okay, so you were you wouldn't be on the lookout for it either type of thing? Yeah, yeah. When did you take the aptitude test? When did you take the aptitude tests in the Army? Was that at basic training or?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:43:27] Yeah.

Cohen, Leah: [00:43:28] Yeah. And did, did they tell did they send you to radio operator and repair school or was it your own preference or both?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:43:40] No, that's where they sent me there. And then they sent me to radio repair school. And when I graduated from Radio Repair School, they had me train radio repair people from other divisions. But when I actually got to join my own division, they had no room for me as a radio repairman. They already had a radio [repairman]. And like I said before, it was like being arrested while driving while Black. You couldn't, You can't be a radio repairman when repairing while Jewish. That's my opinion, nobody ever said it, but.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:44:37] So there weren't very many other Jews in in that you went through basic training or the Army with, right?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:44:45] Right. It was in basic training, there were only seven. And when I won the boxing match, the other six stood and cheered.

Cohen, Leah: [00:44:58] You represented the Jewish people.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:45:01] One kid from California. His name [00:45:04] was Oak, Merril Oak [00:45:04]. He was afraid of everything. When you had a fire mortar where you drop a shell down the tube and it comes out and flies for 60 and 81 millimeter mortar. He was afraid to do it. He would never do it. So I dropped his in for him.

Cohen, Leah: [00:45:28] You helped him out.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:45:29] It didn't bother me.

Cohen, Leah: [00:45:32] Did you or the six other Jewish guys experience antisemitism, you know, other than not being used as the radio operator and repair person?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:45:47] No, no. There was no overt antisemitism that I ever experienced. What people talked about privately, I don't know. They kept it to themselves. Nobody ever said anything to me.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:46:04] When was the Jeep accident? Was that when you were in the Philippines or during basic training?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:46:10] No, that's when we were in the Philippines.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:46:13] Ok, we haven't gotten to the Philippines yet, so hold that thought.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:46:16] We were going over a bridge.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:46:18] Wait until she gets there. She's doing. She's doing the order.

Cohen, Leah: [00:46:23] Oh, so sorry. I know it's not - in a way, it's contrary to human nature, so thank you for your patience. I will say you talked about it a bit earlier, but I don't think we recorded it then. What? What did you learn in terms of the radio operating in the Morse code? Could you describe you're training, what you learned to do?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:46:48] [00:46:48]Radio code [00:46:49] was, you know, the signal for every letter in the alphabet. Dot is A, dot-dot is B... and so on all the way to Z. And they were also names for them, like Able Baker, Charlie Dog, Easy, Fox, etc. So you did that. You had an armored car, you had an AM radio where you could send signals, signals and a voice radio, you know? And the tone of voice radio, you had to get what's called a zero beat¹ to buuu-reeep [makes noises of frequencies]. So it gets down to there and you know, you can talk. And the people who had been there doing this, never heard of it.

¹ Two radio frequencies produce beats between them and then they reduce frequencies to zero in order to minimize bandwidth.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:47:50] They never heard of it?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:47:50] [00:47:50][Unclear] about how to make a zero beat. So I'm just wondering what the hell is going on. So we did.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:48:06] Is this, is this where the radio was in there? [Shows photo on screen]

Cohen, Melvin: [00:48:09] Yeah, that's an armored car, M-8 armored car.

Cohen, Leah: [00:48:15] Oh, Okay...And, and oh.... Oh, okay! So the radio was within the armored car.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:48:25] Can't get it [photo] in the camera.

Cohen, Leah: [00:48:28] Oh, here we go. Yeah, here we go. I can see it now and we can also always make a copy of like a scan of it and...that'd be great. So, okay, so you're, so I think you said that you had scored the highest in the school that you, you came in first in the Radio Operator Repair School.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:48:57] You scored the highest.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:49:00] And in the radio repair, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, ever in that school. But it didn't do me any good.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:49:11] It kept you from being deployed for a long time, right? They held you back to teach.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:49:20] Yeah. But I mean, when I did get deployed, I couldn't get a job as a radio repairman. They would tell me they already have one. You know, so they'd send me somewhere else and they'd tell me, "No." And it was like, I said, You can get arrested for driving while Black. You can't be the best when doing it while Jew-ing, while Jewish.

Cohen, Leah: [00:49:53] That being said, they must have recognized you were the best because they made you an instructor at the school. Right, right. So what were your responsibilities as an instructor?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:50:09] As a what?

Cohen, Leah: [00:50:12] As an instructor.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:50:14] What were your responsibilities as an instructor?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:50:18] To teach other people from other divisions how to do radio repair work, how to read a schematic diagram, what to look for in the radio. Ninety percent of all errors are burned-out vacuum tubes. And you have to have a tube tester. That's even for civilians. You had to take every tube, take it to a tube tester somewhere until you found the one that was bad. Today, there's never a problem with the radio because it's a solid state. There are nothing but solid state [pause] items, what do they call them? I forgot already.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:51:17] I forget what they're called too.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:51:20] Yeah, but anything in your radio. Your radio lasts forever. Nothing ever burns out.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:51:28] Were you in a classroom setting? Did you teach the radio repair in a classroom?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:51:34] Yes.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:51:37] And so you used to write on a blackboard, a chalkboard?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:51:42] Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Cohen, Leah: [00:51:45] Did you have good students? Have good students?

Cohen, Deborah: [00:51:51] Were your students good? Did you have good students?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:51:54] Oh, yeah, yeah, they were attentive.

Cohen, Leah: [00:51:58] Yeah. Did you, did you also teach Morse code?

Cohen, Deborah: [00:52:06] Did you teach Morse code?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:52:10] Yeah, for those who wanted to learn it. Yeah.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:52:16] So the Morse code was if you're going to be a radio operator, right?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:52:20] Right.

Cohen, Deborah: [00:52:21] And radio repair was separate.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:52:23] Yeah.

Cohen, Leah: [00:52:24] So were you were you happy to be teaching in Fort Riley, or were you disappointed that you weren't being deployed?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:52:41] No, I wasn't unhappy. Listen, deployment, the sooner you're deployed, the sooner you might get killed...People used to ask me, "When you were in the war, were you afraid?" And I would say, "Of course, I was afraid. Every minute of every day. If anybody who says they weren't afraid is either a liar or mentally ill. How could you not be afraid? Nobody wants to die. That doesn't mean that you shirk your duties."

Cohen, Leah: [00:53:32] No, no, but the fear is always there.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:53:36] Yeah. So bravery is doing something in spite of being afraid.

Cohen, Leah: [00:53:45] Yes. Yes. Yeah. Yeah. Yes. After Fort Riley, did you go to Fort Ord, California?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:54:02] Did I do what?

Cohen, Leah: [00:54:03] Go to Fort Ord, California.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:54:05] Yeah, I went to Fort Ord, California before getting on a ship to go to the Pacific to fight the Japanese who were horrible people. Yeah.

Cohen, Leah: [00:54:24] And what would you talk a little bit about the time on the ship and it sounds like you spent it very well. Were there any storms, though? Did you get seasick?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:54:39] No, no, I never got seasick. The waves can be pretty rough. There were some storms. And the ship would bounce up and down. Some people got seasick, I didn't. Especially if you happen to be billeted in the bow of the ship. That's what really goes up and down, but I never got seasick, never sick to my stomach. Some people did. On the way home instead of this captured German freighter, we went, went home on a big, beautiful Navy APA ship where the food was fantastic and the ship didn't bounce around. It was a great ship. Well, we came to the first place, we stopped before we got to the Golden Gate Bridge was an island called Angel Island and we got off to eat dinner.

Cohen, Leah: [00:55:55] Oh my goodness.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:55:56] And what? What did we have? We had captured German soldiers from the Afrika Korps who had been sent to the United States, where they now want to stay and become citizens. And they [00:56:13] were dealing out [steaks][00:56:15] "How many steaks do you want?" [00:56:17] this money issue [00:56:18]. Well, we had a great, great meal. And he said, "Yeah, they want to stay here and become citizens!"

Cohen, Leah: [00:56:32] What did you think when you saw the German soldiers from the Afrika Korps?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:56:41] Nothing. They were very nice now.

Cohen, Leah: [00:56:45] Yeah, right, right.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:56:47] They wanted to stay here and become citizens of the U.S..

Cohen, Deborah: [00:56:51] You didn't think anything about how they were Nazis or, you know, whether they went along with Hitler's--?

Cohen, Melvin: [00:57:00] They did what they had to do or they'd be killed. That's like the Japanese soldiers I asked them when the war was over, "How did you do all the horrible things you did?" And it was interesting that they spoke perfect English.

Cohen, Leah: [00:57:21] Oh.

Cohen, Melvin: [00:57:23] Yes. And and they said, "Because if we didn't do them, they killed us. "Yeah, I thought, 'Well, that's a good reason'". I said, "I feel embarrassed." He said, "Why?" He says, "Here you are speaking perfect English, and I know... I only know one word in Japanese, Sayonara, which means hello or goodbye, depending on if you're coming or going to other Japanese. And here you are. You speak perfect English, but I'm not gonna ask you to teach me to speak Japanese".

Cohen, Leah: [00:58:07] Well, you seem to be a man of many other talents, though. So when you were on the I forget the name of it, but the the former German freighter was there a shellback ceremony when you crossed the equator? Or is that only a Navy custom? When the boat crosses the equator, the people do with little tricks or hazing or--

Cohen, Melvin: [00:58:40] Well. Well, I've crossed the equator, but I don't remember a ceremony. The longest trip I ever made for business was a trip to Australia. And you can't go much further than that. And you passed the international timeline or something. I did it for a client who had a [pause] an agent who did work for them. It was a fan company, fans, and blowers, from small axial fans to monstrous fans used in foundries, could be traveling at four hundred miles an hour and be 10 feet in diameter, and they had some of these, they used them

in the new Opera House in Australia, the one that looks like seven Sails. I was in there...to check whether they had to pay royalties for the use of the fans. You know, and they checked their books to make sure they were paying the right amount of royalties, you see, and they were, with no problem.

Cohen, Leah: [01:00:22] Okay, that's why--

Cohen, Melvin: [01:00:23] It was a very interesting place to be. And I don't remember the exact... I remember getting on a plane and leaving Australia at five p.m. and landing in Hawaii at five p.m.

Cohen, Leah: [01:00:43] Wow. Right, right, right, right. You really can feel it.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:00:46] My wife was supposed to meet me there, but she left the message that her mother had died and so she wasn't coming. So I took the plane and went home.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:01:00] But when, when you were on your way to the Philippines, did they make an announcement, "We've just crossed the equator?" Or did they say anything? Did they let you know?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:01:09] No...No.

Cohen, Leah: [01:01:13] So what point were you assigned to the 302nd Reconnaissance Troop of the 1st Cavalry Division? Like, were you still in the United States? Was this? When did you know that there was a change?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:01:29] You know what?

Cohen, Deborah: [01:01:31] When did you know where you were being assigned that you were being assigned to the 302nd Reconnaissance? Did you find out when you got to the Philippines or did you find out before you left?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:01:44] No. When we got to the Philippines, that's the first I knew.

Cohen, Leah: [01:01:51] Did you remember what time of year you, you arrived in the Philippines or what or which month?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:02:00] No, I don't remember that... I remember it was like a hundred and ten degrees. And very hot. And we marched five miles with seventy pounds on your back.

Cohen, Leah: [01:02:24] Oh God.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:02:25] And one hour and nobody fell out. You can do anything when you're nineteen or twenty.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:02:32] Was that from the ship to where your barracks were, your camp or whatever?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:02:37] Yeah, right? And we stayed there, and then we were given all new equipment, clothing, and everything to prepare for the invasion of Japan, which never happened thanks to President Truman. Because we had the new B-29 super bombers. And we had developed the atomic bomb. And he ordered it used. First of all, they ordered like 300 B-29s to fly over every major city in Japan, Japan dropping napalm, which set everything below on fire. The cities ended up looking like a big, empty lot burned to a crisp. And then to drop an atomic bomb, which they assumed would end a war, and they dropped one, the first one in Hiroshima which probably killed a hundred thousand or a million people. And Japan was still silent, so they dropped the bigger bomb. They killed [01:04:07] it, set man [01:04:09] on another plane in Nagasaki. And that killed a million people, for sure, then they surrendered.

Cohen, Leah: [01:04:20] Yeah, but while you were still planning while the U.S. was still planning for the ground invasion of the main islands [of Japan] and you were in the Philippines, what type of--First of all, where in the Philippines were you and what type of training were you doing then?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:04:40] Well, I'm training for foreign invasion, how it would work.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:04:45] But when the when the [01:04:47] billet, [01:04:48] when you got there, they were still fighting for the battle, for Luzon, right?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:04:53] Right.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:04:54] The battle wasn't quite over. So what did you do right when you got there?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:04:59] Well, there was a little fighting and that was it. The Japanese, we either killed or-- They never surrendered. You had to kill them.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:05:09] Yeah. But did you go out on combat missions?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:05:13] Yeah, but there wasn't much going on.

Cohen, Leah: [01:05:17] Was it like--.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:05:19] We were only there two days.

Cohen, Leah: [01:05:21] Two days. Okay? Yeah. So, so did you. Well, okay. You mentioned that the Japanese were butchers, they may be they had no choice, but they had to commit atrocities and indeed the commander of the Japanese forces, General Yamashita, was sentenced to death by an American military tribunal after the war. So I guess this is my question: Did you see atrocities or hear about atrocities from other American soldiers?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:06:01] Yes. And they did atrocities to even dead people. Yes, and I won't tell you what kind because you'll be sick to your stomach. So I'm not going to tell you.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:06:22] Did you actually talk to soldiers that had experienced atrocities from the Japanese firsthand? Did you talk to anybody who was a victim of the Japanese atrocities?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:06:37] No, because all such people would have been dead.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:06:43] Yeah. So you never met any anybody who had been a prisoner of the Japanese or--?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:06:50] We, I saw some victims lying in the road and what happened to them, but they couldn't have told you because they were always dead.

Cohen, Leah: [01:07:06] But you could see that there have been wounds inflicted on them.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:07:12] And I never tell anybody what exactly the atrocities were 'cause you'd be sick to your stomach.

Cohen, Leah: [01:07:25] Yeah, yeah. Oh. [Sighs]. So... excuse me, I'll start again. You're on Luzon for two days...you're involved in fighting, then it ends. So what happens after that?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:07:48] What happened after what?

Cohen, Deborah: [01:07:49] After the fighting ended?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:07:51] Oh, then we occupied Japan.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:07:55] No, but you were still in the Philippines for a while.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:07:58] Oh.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:07:58] Right?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:07:59] Just getting all new equipment, get ready for the invasion of Japan, which never happened.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:08:08] Did they? Did they put you through training exercises in preparation for the land invasion?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:08:14] Mmhm.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:08:15] What kind of training exercises did you have to do?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:08:21] I don't even remember, Debbie. [Cohen, Leah injects: That's okay.]. It's so long ago, but as it turns out, as they say, it never happened because President Truman ordered the dropping of right napalm on every major city in Japan--

Cohen, Deborah: [01:08:43] But you don't remember--

Cohen, Melvin: [01:08:43] --and the atomic bomb first on one city, which killed almost a million people and they still didn't surrender. Then a bigger bomb that killed over a million people in the second city, which was Nagasaki. Then they surrendered.

Cohen, Leah: [01:09:05] On a happier note, Deborah, sorry to interrupt, Deborah mentioned that you have some photos that you took of Filipino villagers and townspeople. Did you have a camera with you?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:09:25] I have pictures that I took.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:09:27] I have the pictures. She's asking if, did you have your own camera with you? Did you have your own camera there?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:09:34] Yeah, yeah. Some of the pictures are on the wall here.

Cohen, Leah: [01:09:39] Oh, wow. And did you have any time that you could just go and visit villages and towns? Did you have any downtime any time off, where you're allowed to--

Cohen, Melvin: [01:09:56] Yeah, we would visit--We were in Japan.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:09:58] No, but in the Philippines, did you? Were you able to spend downtime, visiting villages and sightseeing? You have pictures of villagers, though. So you must have been in the Filipino villages?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:10:13] It could be, I don't even remember. I mean, I remember being in the Philippines, on the main island of Luzon. But it was pretty well turned up.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:10:26] Where were you going when your Jeep turned over?

Cohen, Deborah: [01:10:30] Oh, that's--

Cohen, Melvin: [01:10:31] Where were we going?

Cohen, Deborah: [01:10:32] Yeah.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:10:34] To take it back from the Japanese, but they were practically gone.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:10:41] Oh, so it was a recovered Jeep that the Japanese had taken?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:10:46] Oh, with the Jeep?

Cohen, Deborah: [01:10:51] Okay, so where were you? Do you remember where you were going in the Jeep when it overturned?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:10:57] No, but what we didn't realize, shouldn't be more than four men in a jeep, we had six. And the bridges were like inverted V's up and down, and we were about 80 feet above a big rock pile below. And one of the guys was with me who was going to take care of me, he said, his name was John Allen. He had, he was working in the South Side of Chicago in the stockyards, killing cattle. And when I first came there, he was like twenty-three and I was nineteen. He said, "Listen, Jewish, I'm going to take care of you. Don't worry about a thing." Okay, so we're in this jeep and we didn't know the driver was drunk. And he hit by the bridge and the jeep flew up in the air. Fortunately, back toward the middle of the bridge instead of over the side, in which case we'd have all been dead. And when it landed, I was in the back. The rear tire is very high. I fell and took a few scrapes, but Jeep didn't fall on me because the tire kept it up higher and I could hear Allan hollering, "Hey, Jewish, where the fuck are you?" I said,

"I'm fine. And it's a good thing." He said, "What do you mean it's a good thing, of course." I mean, "It's a good thing because if I died, my mother would be pissed off." [Laughter]

Cohen, Leah: [01:13:07] Would you, would you write letters to your mother or to your sisters or friends?

Cohen, Deborah: [01:13:16] That record. There was a record. Tell her about recording. The record home, that little .45 record that we used to listen to and we lost. When did that happen?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:13:29] I don't remember.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:13:32] There was, they used to bring recording equipment and they would let people who wanted to record a letter home, on a record a little... And it was bright yellow. And when we were very small, we used to play it over and over again. It was nineteen-year-old Dad talking to his mother on the record. Do you remember recording it?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:14:04] No. I don't. But I remember when we set up a camp outside of, about five miles outside of Tokyo during the Occupation, and I had to make lights. And so I hooked up all the lights. I knew a lot about electricity and hooked up all the lights. And I also hooked up, I guess, the record player. And then I hit-- The area we were in a former Japanese army area, and so I got a big crate, wooden crate and I put a couple of Japanese rifles, a couple of silk Japanese flags, two samurai swords, two Japanese bayonets and I shipped it all home.

Cohen, Leah: [01:15:04] Huh? Where did you--?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:15:07] Yeah, I shipped it to my sister, Rose, I told them not to open it. And when I got home, I opened it. Ultimately, I kept it for myself, and I got tired of having tools of death around, so I gave it all to my son. I gave him the samurai swords. The rifles, I put an ad in the paper and sold it. I had no ammunition for it, but they could get them if they want. But the other things I gave to my son.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:15:46] But, Daddy, I hope you don't mind. I'm trying to trigger his memory on what he did in Japan. When you got there, you said you had to go on burial duty. You had to bury people. Tell her about that, yeah.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:16:08] What's to tell? You find people and you help dig graves, and you mark the graves and you put people in.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:16:16] Were those soldiers or were they civilians?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:16:19] Soldiers. We were only interested in American soldiers,

Cohen, Deborah: [01:16:23] So you were burying dead American soldiers that you found on former battlefields?

Cohen, Leah: [01:16:29] This is in Japan or in or in the Philippines?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:16:32] In Japan.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:16:35] How, how were there dead American soldiers in Japan when there was no invasion?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:16:42] You're right, you're right. It had to have been in the Philippines.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:16:46] It had to have been in the Philippines.

Cohen, Leah: [01:16:48] Where were they? Were there military cemeteries in the Philippines? Like, where would they be buried or would they be ever, be sent back to the United States for burial there?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:17:03] No, they didn't send them back. We made cemeteries. I mean, buried people and put up crosses, our Mogen Dovid's [Star of Davids], whatever the case may be. The vast majority were crosses.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:17:22] Yeah, and when, when were you throwing the flamethrowers into the caves?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:17:29] Whenever the Japanese didn't come out. And we never went in for them, we did one of two things: We threw a hand grenade down. And then we put a flamethrower and you could smell the flesh burning.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:17:48] How how did you know there were? How do you know where the Japanese were? What caves they were in?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:17:55] Who else would be in a hole?

Cohen, Leah: [01:17:58] So in other words, if you saw any cave or any hole, there was a good sense that there would be a Japanese soldier hiding in it. So you had to take action, basically. Is that is that correct?

Cohen, Deborah: [01:18:13] When, every time you saw a cave or any kind of a hole, you just assumed that there was Japanese hiding inside?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:18:25] Mmhma.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:18:25] And they would, would they ever come out running?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:18:28] Sometimes, and we shot and killed them? Why did we shoot and kill them? Because we learn from past. They had hand grenades wrapped around them and they didn't care if they died as long as they took you with them.

Cohen, Leah: [01:18:45] Mm hmm. Yeah.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:18:46] From the hand grenades. So the minute they came running out, we shot and killed them.

CUT

[Cohen, Leah: [01:18:52] Yeah. Was there [Interruption of voice mail call and phone ringing]

Cohen, Melvin: [01:19:12] [Hello. Good morning, Joseph, what's up? I'm fine. I think. Yes, I am. Right. Uh, well, I'd like to go about 12:30, why you want to go to. Oh, oh. Now. Well, maybe Debbie is going to take me. That'd be okay for me to walk her brother. She's right here. Well, OK, see you. Ok.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:20:04] Hi, Joe. We're actually doing the interview with the Pritzker Military Museum right now on Zoom. Okay, bye.]

End of Cut

Cohen, Leah: [01:20:13] Two, two questions. One question is do you remember where on Luzon you were burying the dead, the U.S. soldiers?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:20:28] Not particularly, no.

Cohen, Leah: [01:20:31] And the other question is, where did you find the Japanese swords and rifles? Or was it--

Cohen, Melvin: [01:20:42] In... Where after the war was over and we set up camp in what used to be a Japanese camp and all of these materials were there. And so different people took different things, and I took what I said and I put it in a big wooden crate and nailed it together and shipped it to my older sister and told them not to open it 'til I get home.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:21:14] Was that in the Philippines that you found it or in Japan?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:21:19] In Japan.

Cohen, Leah: [01:21:20] Okay, okay. And so we know that the 1st Cavalry Division accompanied MacArthur when he went to Japan, and Deborah wrote that you were on shore and you saw the surrender and the signing of the surrender on the USS Missouri. Could you describe that to us? Who, what you remember seeing, and what it was like?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:21:51] Yeah, I was there, I watched him. I was not on the [USS] Missouri but I was above it on a landing where they had landed all of our equipment and when the Japanese military hierarchy came to sign the documents, the surrender documents...and MacArthur was there. I didn't think much of McArthur, actually. He was an old World War I general, and was, how shall I say it? Had a little of Donald Trump in him, you know, self-important. Yeah, self-important guy. I didn't like him at all. And he also, he made a speech, ended the sentence with a preposition. [Laughter] I didn't criticize him. [Laughter] But oh no, great generals are like General Patton, General Eisenhower, you know, and a number of others in the Pacific, but MacArthur is not one of them. He was only interested in the Philippines because he had financial interests there. Anyhow, yeah, and I watched them sign the--

Cohen, Leah: [01:23:51] --the surrender

Cohen, Melvin: [01:23:53] The surrender terms,

Cohen, Deborah: [01:23:55] Was there a big ceremony? Did they make a big ceremony of it?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:24:00] Yeah. And after they signed it, 500 U.S. fighter planes flew by overhead, and that was the coup de grâce because Japan had not a single airplane left because everyone had been either bombed or strafed at the end of the war to make sure they had no airplane.

Cohen, Leah: [01:24:35] How did you feel knowing the war was finally over?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:24:41] Wonderful. [Laughs]

Cohen, Deborah: [01:24:42] Did everybody cheer, was everybody cheering and jumping up and down?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:24:47] They were cheering. I don't I don't remember anybody jumping up and down.

Cohen, Leah: [01:24:55] Were there any celebrations amongst you and your men?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:25:02] Yeah. And we were there for. I think I don't remember that, at least fourteen months in Japan, the occupation with close to a million men. We went through Thanksgiving, I remember. And our battalion which is about three thousand men at a Thanksgiving dinner made by all the cooks and bakers trained at Fort Riley. Fantastic.

Cohen, Leah: [01:25:44] Oh, my God.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:25:47] You know, turkey and cranberry sauce, whatever, all kinds of things. And when it was over, the former Japanese soldiers were eating out of our garbage cans.

Speaker1: [01:26:04] Wow, wow.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:26:07] They were so hungry.

Cohen, Leah: [01:26:08] Hungry, yeah, I forgot to ask you. But what were you eating in the Philippines? What were you eating? Like did you have rations? Was there cooked food in the Philippines?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:26:23] We had rations, K rations, C rations, you know, different things. If there was time you were in a camp and there was no fighting, then the cooks could make good meals, which they did.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:26:39] What's the difference between a C-ration and a K-ration?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:26:46] C-ration is a can of food, a K-ration is dry food. It's got chocolate bars on it and things like that.

Cohen, Leah: [01:26:55] Okay. And so what were your duties when during the occupation, the fourteen months in Japan? What were you doing?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:27:11] We were just patrolling up and down the streets. Make sure everything was peaceful. Finding things. We found caches of gold that had been there. We

didn't keep it. But they decided what to do with it, who would? Probably belong to the country and it was given to the country.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:27:42] I never heard that.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:27:44] Yeah. And lots of booze, lots of saki, Japanese saki.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:27:54] You can get drunk on.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:27:57] And you went and visited the Geisha houses?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:28:01] No Geisha girls were entertainers. They were not prostitutes.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:28:08] I know they weren't prostitutes, but you went to--

Cohen, Melvin: [01:28:13] Not to Geishas! Those are Gora girls.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:28:16] You visited them?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:28:16] Yeah, they're mostly in a town called Ikebukuro, up near Mount Fuji. But it was safe because just as you had Atabrine for Anopheles mosquitoes --take your Atabrine, every day, you never get malaria-- you had Pro-kits which protected you. After you had sex with a prostitute, you used your Pro-kits and you would never get sick.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:28:51] Oh my God. You used to tell me--

Cohen, Melvin: [01:28:55] The Army had films in basic training to show what would happen to you if you didn't use the Pro-kit and it was very gory.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:29:08] But speaking of malaria, you told me that when you were out on reconnaissance in the Philippines and it was so hot, you had to have your sleeves all the way down and your your pants legs tucked into your boots and you had to be completely covered up in the heat.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:29:27] You had a net over your helmet. You don't want, you don't want to be bitten, but by the same token, the atabrine protected you even if you were bitten. You wouldn't get malaria if you took your atabrine pill every day.

Cohen, Leah: [01:29:44] Did you get any tropical diseases or--

Cohen, Melvin: [01:29:47] Well, you got, from the heat, you would get.. Your arms would get very red and sore. And for that, you would put on tincture of [01:30:03] Mithila, [01:30:04] which was a red medication and it got better.

Cohen, Leah: [01:30:10] Wow. And gosh, so you're there fourteen months in Japan. Did you interact [with others]? Aside from the Gora Girls, did you interact with other Japanese civilians? Like, did you meet Japanese on the street and would they communicate with you or no?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:30:38] They were very personable. The ordinary citizens of Japan, and they all spoke English. "Like I said to the former soldiers, I'm embarrassed that you speak English personally."

Cohen, Deborah: [01:30:55] [Corrects] Perfectly, perfectly.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:30:59] Perfectly. And I don't speak any Japanese at all. It's not fair.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:31:04] But you did you ever go to tea rooms or restaurants or?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:31:09] No, we ate in our own mess halls.

Cohen, Leah: [01:31:12] Okay. Okay. And what were your impressions of Japan itself? Did you have a chance to to travel within Japan? Did you do to travel in Japan other than [in] Tokyo?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:31:33] In Japan? Yeah, yeah. You could go sightseeing if you wanted to.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:31:38] Did you? Did you go any?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:31:41] Yeah, I said, we went to the top of Mount Fuji. We looked at some of the big statues there of Buddha statues and things like that.

Cohen, Leah: [01:31:57] Hmm. What was your impression of it? What was your impression of the country itself?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:32:10] My... I thought it was a beautiful country, really. It is. It was more beautiful after they repaired everything we bombed. You know, it was, pretty well, torn apart.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:32:30] He does have some photographs of Japanese town people.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:32:33] There are, there's an area where the royal palace was. The Emperor Hirohito that. And that area reminds me of Michigan Avenue in Chicago, really. We never bombed it that because we felt if we killed the emperor, they would never surrender.

Cohen, Leah: [01:33:02] Yeah. Yeah. Do you remember hearing the emperor talk on the radio? Because I remember reading--

Cohen, Melvin: [01:33:14] Yeah. Not only that. After. You never saw him. The people never saw him, but after the atomic bomb, he came out and visited those cities and was among the people all the time.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:33:34] Oh, did you ever see him?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:33:36] Yeah.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:33:38] I didn't know you saw the emperor.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:33:40] Sure.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:33:42] Did you ever hear Tokyo Rose?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:33:46] No.

Cohen, Leah: [01:33:47] Oh, yeah, that's... When you were in the Philippines, did you ever get any propaganda over the radio like the Tokyo Rose?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:34:02] No. I guess the only thing I ever heard in the Philippines is when we were first marching in. A five-year-old boy ran out to the column and said, "Excuse my language, hey, Joe, for \$5.00 will you fuck my sister?" "Not now we're busy." [they replied]

Cohen, Leah: [01:34:38] Oh yeah. Well, when you were in Japan for fourteen months. And when did you hear that you would be going? You would be getting shipped back to the United States?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:34:58] Oh, after our occupation was over. Uh, we were shipped back, that's when we know, and that's when, as I say. Better than that old German freighter, we went back on Navy transport ships which were beautiful with beautiful facilities for sleeping and wonderful food.

Cohen, Leah: [01:35:24] What were the sleeping accommodations like, both going and coming? Were there, were there many people sharing a bunk? Like, how did it work?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:35:37] I don't understand.

Speaker1: [01:35:38] When you were on your way to the Philippines and on your way back from Japan, what were the accommodations like on the ship? Like what were your bunks like--

Cohen, Melvin: [01:35:49] On the ship going, the accommodations were awful. Going home on a Navy transport ship, they were marvelous.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:35:57] But describe where you slept, coming and going. Like what kind of sleeping arrangements, did they have?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:36:07] There were just beds. There were cots that were hung on poles, and that's where you slept on the ship going. On the ship coming home on a Navy ship, it was like on an expensive cruise ship.

Cohen, Leah: [01:36:27] And when you landed, first of all, where in the States, did you land? And were you able to go straight home to Chicago?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:36:38] You know, well, as I said, we first place we landed was Angel Island, where we got served a wonderful steak dinner by members of the Afrika Korps who were prisoners of war were sent here and were working on becoming citizens of the U.S. They didn't want to go back to Germany. The next place we landed was -- the greatest feeling coming back under the Golden Gate Bridge. [expressively] You know, when you left under it, you wondered if you would ever see it again. How would you feel? And we went to San Francisco. Again, we had a great dinner and then we didn't fly home. They didn't provide that. Depending on where you were going, you went on a special troop train. Different trains going to different parts of the country. So we had an exclusive troop train going back to Chicago which had very good food also.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:38:00] Did you have any time in San Francisco or did they send you right back?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:38:06] One day, that's all.

Cohen, Leah: [01:38:08] So what did you do when the train reached Chicago? Where did you go first?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:38:16] I went home. As I said I re-enlisted for one year and the first 60 days I was home on furlough and saw all my friends. And then they sent me to Fort Hood, named after a Confederate general, up to the 2nd Armored Division. And I told you about that today.

Cohen, Leah: [01:38:42] So what were you doing like, what were your duties at Fort Hood in the Armored Division?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:38:52] What were my duties? Well, I was a clerk typist for a supply sergeant to order things. Then I would drive this great big truck--

Cohen, Deborah: [01:39:05] That you had to teach yourself to drive, right?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:39:09] Right.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:39:10] He taught himself to drive.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:39:12] You had a double clutch. I had to learn how to do that. I learned from myself, that's all. I figured it out. And drove about twenty miles to the quartermaster. Loaded the truck made sure everything on the requisition was there, then drove back, then told all the supply sergeants to come in their vehicles and pick up the things that they ordered. And what I did do? I played football in Fort Hood, and I would go for a local team and we made up a team. The coach was Captain John Webber, who had been an assistant coach at the University of Michigan and we played. I played football and we won most of our games. There were other teams that were much too good. Because they had special division teams that were made up of former college, some college players, but mostly former professional players. We couldn't play them. They'd have killed us.

Cohen, Leah: [01:40:48] Did you like doing a lot of sports, like were you always athletic? Were you always athletic?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:40:58] Yes, yes, I played tennis. My favorite game was originally 16-inch softball, played only in the city of Chicago. But ultimately, my favorite game was golf.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:41:16] That wasn't until much, much later, though, not in the Army. In the Army, you played football, you boxed. And what else did you do when you were in the Army for sports?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:41:36] Eating. Only on the Navy ship, the ship going, the only thing I ate was fruit, orange juice, apples, pears, mostly oranges. I love oranges.

Cohen, Leah: [01:41:48] Oh my goodness. Did you receive any medals for your service?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:41:59] No. No medals.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:42:02] And were you surprised?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:42:03] No, no. I didn't do anything so outstanding.

Cohen, Leah: [01:42:10] Your daughter wrote that you're surprised that you never got the the medal for good conduct?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:42:19] Yes. Nobody could have had better conduct than me. I never got a good conduct medal and I.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:42:30] There wasn't a rule he didn't follow.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:42:32] Right.

Cohen, Leah: [01:42:34] It was a bureaucratic oversight.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:42:37] Forget about it. I got a victory medal thing on my uniform and some other medal, some other bar for something I don't know. But no, and I didn't care one way or the other.

Cohen, Leah: [01:43:06] Did you like being in Fort Hood, did you? Was it was it tedious?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:43:14] It was very nice being in Fort Hood, a lot of nice people, people. I played football with the people. Who was in charge was a master sergeant named Ben Castaneda, who had been from Mexico but was also a former member of the 1st Cavalry Division. I didn't know him there, but the big division at 24,000 men. I only know about five hundred. [Laughter]

Cohen, Leah: [01:43:53] It's quite amazing. So did you become friendly with Ben Castaneda at Fort Hood?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:44:03] Ah, yeah, I met him at Fort Hood.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:44:05] Yeah, yeah. Were you buddies?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:44:08] Yeah, once we got to know each other.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:44:10] Had he trained in the horse cavalry?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:44:13] No.

Cohen, Leah: [01:44:16] So when were you discharged? Like, how long were you at Fort Hood before you were discharged from the Army?

Cohen, Deborah: [01:44:28] How long were you at Fort Hood before you were discharged?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:44:32] Ten months. I had the year altogether, first sixty days I was home on furlough, the other ten months at Fort Hood. And then I was discharged and that's when I went to school at Illinois,

Cohen, Deborah: [01:44:52] When... Where were you? Were you still in basic training when Uncle Jerry stepped on the mine?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:45:06] He's not your uncle.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:45:07] We always called him Uncle Jerry when we were little.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:45:10] He was my best friend. He went to Europe and the 28th Pennsylvania Keystone Division. He was there one month. And he ended up unknowingly in a minefield. And he stepped on a shoe mine which blew off his left foot. So he had to have his leg amputated below the knee. When he fell, he tripped a bouncing Betty mine. A bouncing Betty

mine jumps up in the air and spreads shrapnel like a shotgun, [01:45:55] so, it got him in [01:45:57] his head.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:45:58] Oh, but were you?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:46:01] The doctors removed it and there was no damage.

Cohen, Leah: [01:46:05] Oh my god.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:46:07] He got a.. First, he walked with crutches and then they gave him a [unclear word] official leg. And he learned to walk with that. He didn't need crutches anymore.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:46:19] But were you still at Fort Riley when he was injured?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:46:25] No, I was at Fort Ord, getting ready to leave and I got a letter. [Cohen interjects: Oh yeah, yeah]. Well, he was, he was my best friend.

Cohen, Leah: [01:46:43] Wow. When you came back to the States or certainly after you returned from Fort Hood, did you meet friends who had been injured by the war or had you lost friends, you know, who were killed in World War II? Like, like after you return to Fort Hood, to the Chicago area or at least to Champaign, did you meet up with your old buddies and were other friends injured as well?

Cohen, Deborah: [01:47:20] Did you know anybody after you got back stateside, did you have any friends that were injured or killed?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:47:32] Other than Jerry? No, no one. None of my other friends, they were in the Army, but none of them were injured.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:47:43] That's amazing.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:47:44] Yeah. What is amazing is how many of them died young. Yeah. The longest among them was Jack Levant and he died at age fifty of a heart attack.

Cohen, Leah: [01:47:58] Oh, so very young.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:48:01] Yeah. You know, there were twenty-six in our club.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:48:07] Tell her the name of your club.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:48:13] 'The Cadavers'. I'm the only one that's alive.

Cohen, Leah: [01:48:16] Yeah, yeah. You do think. I mean, do you think.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:48:25] Pardon. They were bright, people. Hy Mackler was a medical doctor. Bernie Rubin was a psychiatrist. Mm-hmm. Hmm. There were a lot of very bright [guys], but they're all dead. I'm the only one alive.

Cohen, Leah: [01:48:58] ...I think that's what's hard. You know, and then, yeah. But but I am also surprised that so many of them passed away under the age of fifty. I mean, that sounds very young. Do you think they had PTSD and that affected their physical health?

Cohen, Deborah: [01:49:25] Did any of your friends have PTSD and, did any of them suffer?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:49:30] Not that I'm aware of .

Cohen, Deborah: [01:49:32] Lasting effects from the war. Not even, Jerry?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:49:45] Not that I know.

Cohen, Leah: [01:49:49] You would also, I think... Deborah, you mentioned that your father, that you [addressing Mr. Cohen] had hearing loss as a result of the mortars.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:50:00] Yeah. Your hearing loss.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:50:02] Yeah, yeah, that was from going on the rifle range without ear protection. And you're there over a week. You've fired maybe five hundred rounds of the ammunition and your ears are ringing like crazy. They call it tinnitus. And nowadays they give you something, they cover your ears, so it doesn't happen. So that's why I have like \$5000 hearing aids for nothing from the Veterans Administration.

Cohen, Leah: [01:50:44] Did the V.A. recognize that the hearing loss was due to the service or--

Cohen, Melvin: [01:50:52] Yeah. [Cohen interjects: Oh, good, good]. I get many medications like I have a breathing medication. I had. I lost part of a lung. I had lung cancer that's from smoking too many cigarettes. When I was in high school, other people smoke and drank. I never smoked and drank. Only in the Army. They gave you cigarettes for nothing. They gave you a beer and booze for nothing. You know, and so everybody did it, so you did. So I had lung cancer and lost part of this right lung. And I have an inhaler, a [01:51:41] kyoto respromat [01:51:43] used to be called Spiriva. I get a month's worth, every month for nine dollars. At the drugstore, it would cost seven hundred and fifty dollars.

Cohen, Leah: [01:51:59] Wow, huge. You know. So how did you decide to study accounting?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:52:14] Because it was something that I could do more quickly than anything else. And I felt it was important to be able to do something at which I could ultimately make a good amount of money rather than studying architecture, which would or anything else in engineering, which would take much longer.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:52:44] Did you feel pressure to start earning money to help support your mother?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:52:50] Yeah, that and when you get married, I wanted to be earning money...to live on.

Cohen, Leah: [01:53:03] When did you meet the woman who became your wife?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:53:08] When or where?

Cohen, Leah: [01:53:10] Both.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:53:11] ... At a dance at the Drake Avenue Synagogue in Albany Park. And Harold Alswang who was a favorite guy, but he had TB all of his life, and he died at age forty. But your mother was at the dance. And Harold said to me, "Don't take her home, she lives on the South Side." But I took her home anyhow.

Cohen, Leah: [01:53:50] You were a gentleman here.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:53:54] And I was on the stairs. They lived. Her father had a hardware store, Ross Hardware, and they lived above the store. And so I was on the stairs making love to your mother--

Cohen, Deborah: [01:54:12] Making out not--

Cohen, Leah: [01:54:14] Yeah.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:54:16] Her father walked around us. I could hear him giggling [laughter] as if to say, "We're going to get rid of the kid." And they did, they got rid of her.

Cohen, Leah: [01:54:30] Oh, that's nice, that's nice.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:54:35] [To Deborah] You had a wonderful mother, didn't you?

Cohen, Deborah: [01:54:37] Yeah, I had a wonderful mother.

Cohen, Leah: [01:54:42] Yeah, yeah, that's lovely.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:54:43] We lost her a few years ago...

Cohen, Melvin: [01:54:48] June 20th, 2018 at 6:05 pm. She died of nephritis- that's poisoned kidneys.

Cohen, Leah: [01:55:02] Poisoned kidneys. Well, thank God, you had many, many years together.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:55:07] Yes, we did. At least what, sixty-four years...

Cohen, Leah: [01:55:14] So so there's three? There were three children, all in all or are my [calculations off]?

Cohen, Deborah: [01:55:19] Four, there's four children.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:55:21] Four. Yeah, a son and three girls. One lives in California. Debbie lives in Skokie.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:55:32] Skokie-Evanston, Skevanston.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:55:37] And Rebecca lives in Chicago.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:55:39] Yep. And Joe's in Buffalo Grove.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:55:43] And Robin lives in Salinas, California.

Cohen, Leah: [01:55:47] Well, that's nice. Nice. The majority are in the Chicago area. That's great. To what extent did being in the Army help you with the rest of your life? Like, were there skills or behaviors that you learned that carried over to your civilian life?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:56:12] Well. It's. It's annoying. People always asking about it, and I don't even want to talk about it. [Cohen interjects: Sorry!] It's certainly done with and I'm alive and lucky. You gotta be lucky...

Cohen, Deborah: [01:56:36] But is there anything you learned in the Army or any of the training that you had from the Army that stood you in good stead in civilian life?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:56:49] Yeah, how to discipline yourself.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:56:55] But you always had good self-discipline. Because he used to tell us that when he was in the foster homes, nobody really, um, nobody ever really was on his case about getting his schoolwork done or getting good grades or anything, and he always had the self-discipline to--

Cohen, Melvin: [01:57:32] [01:57:32]--achieve?. Why would they care?

Cohen, Deborah: [01:57:34] But I can tell you, I don't know if this had anything to do with the Army, but it was always a running joke in our family that if you opened up his sock drawer, all his socks were rolled up in neat little rolls, like a platoon, like it's standing at attention. And I always wondered if that was that was from the Army.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:57:56] I don't know.

Cohen, Leah: [01:57:57] You don't know. It certainly seems like [you are a] very disciplined, man, you know, right? And perhaps even more so from the Army, but it was there before, obviously. Is there, is there a moment from your military life of which you are most proud?

Cohen, Deborah: [01:58:22] Is there anything, any moment when you were in the military that you're most proud of?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:58:34] No. No.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:58:36] Nothing stands out?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:58:37] Nothing stands out. Well, I was lucky that I didn't have to, we didn't have to invade Japan because the odds of getting killed were enormous. It was at least between both sides, at least a million people would have been killed.

Cohen, Leah: [01:59:05] Yeah, I just...I didn't realize until I began to prepare for your interview that how high the estimates were for casualties.

Cohen, Melvin: [01:59:15] We got to leave.

Cohen, Leah: [01:59:21] Yeah, we got to leave. Okay, so is there any anything that you would like to add before we wrap things up? Anything you would like to say or that we did that we did not talk about?

Cohen, Melvin: [01:59:36] You know, I can't think of a thing.

Cohen, Leah: [01:59:39] Okay. And just finally, there's one thing that surprises me is that it seems that you and your family talked about your military service over the years. I say this because I've met veterans that only began to speak after seventy or seventy-five years.

Cohen, Deborah: [01:59:59] That is true. That is very true of him. It's only in the last few years that he's talked about it at all.

Cohen, Leah: [02:00:06] Oh, I see. So also relatively recent.

Cohen, Deborah: [02:00:09] Yes.

Cohen, Leah: [02:00:10] Yeah, yeah, it's interesting. And do you think I'll just ask you this because our museum and library [Pritzker Military Museum & Library] is dedicated to the study of what we call the citizen, the citizen soldier? Does this term mean anything to you? There's no right or wrong answer.

Cohen, Deborah: [02:00:33] Does not does the term Citizen Soldier mean anything to you?

Cohen, Melvin: [02:00:39] No, no.

Cohen, Deborah: [02:00:43] Can I show you something?

Cohen, Leah: [02:00:45] Yes.

Cohen, Deborah: [02:00:49] Do you see that pin?

Cohen, Leah: [02:00:50] First Cavalry Division.

Cohen, Deborah: [02:00:53] And it says on the sash, it says "Reconnaissance." So when my father was when we knew he was going on the Honor Flight, I scoured the internet for weeks and found--

Cohen, Melvin: [02:01:10] That's the 1st Cavalry Patch.

Cohen, Deborah: [02:01:12] Yeah, it says 302 on top for the 302nd division.

Cohen, Melvin: [02:01:18] No.

Cohen, Deborah: [02:01:18] Three-hundred and second what?

Cohen, Melvin: [02:01:18] Troop.

Cohen, Deborah: [02:01:22] Three hundred and second troop.

Cohen, Melvin: [02:01:23] Troop in the cavalry is like a company in the infantry.

Cohen, Deborah: [02:01:28] And I found that pin [Cohen interrupts amazing] and put it on one of his World War II hats, and a lot of times when my father goes out to eat, he goes to pay the bill and finds out that somebody's paid it for him.

Cohen, Leah: [02:01:42] No kidding. So, people, they want to honor your service. Did you did you find that happened after the war itself? Like, let's say, in the 1950s or late 40s?

Cohen, Melvin: [02:01:58] Yeah, it happens very often.

Cohen, Leah: [02:02:01] Very often.

Cohen, Deborah: [02:02:02] Not in the '40s and '50s, though. She asked in the 1940s and '50s.

Cohen, Melvin: [02:02:08] No, no.

Cohen, Deborah: [02:02:08] I think it only happens when he wears the hat. I didn't find him...

Cohen, Melvin: [02:02:12] When I go to Portillo's, there is one of the waiters, he always pays my bill. I can't make him stop because his father was killed in the war...After he sees a veteran, he insists on paying their bill.

Cohen, Leah: [02:02:42] Yeah. Wants to make up. Well, I really thank you so much for talking about it, even though you may not want to talk about it so much. Thank you for explaining and sharing, and thank you, Deborah, very much for rephrasing questions and following up. And I appreciate it and thank you for your service. We will send you a challenge coin in the mail as a token of our thanks.

Cohen, Melvin: [02:03:08] You're welcome.

Cohen, Deborah: [02:03:10] Would you like me to scan some photos and send them along?

Cohen, Leah: [02:03:14] Yes. Yes, please. And if we could sign a deed of gift for the digital copies of the photos. Ultimately, we will post your interview on the website. Certainly, the biography and the photos and the link to the interview transcript. And yeah, and the recording we can I can send you a recording now, you know, from the Zoom [account], and the other one will certainly be kept in the museum and library archives.

Cohen, Deborah: [02:03:47] Wonderful. Thank you.

Cohen, Melvin: [02:03:48] Thanks.

Cohen, Leah: [02:03:49] Thank you so much.

Cohen, Deborah: [02:03:51] Thank you. Take care. Bye bye.

