

Leonard E. Amborski, Narrator

New York State Military Museum
Interviewers Mike Russert and Wayne Clark

Interviewed on May 6, 2008 at Canisius College, Buffalo, NY

INT: Could you give me your full name, date of birth and place birth, please.

LA: Leonard Amborski, August 23, 1921, Buffalo, New York.

INT: What was your educational background prior to the beginning of World War II?

LA: I went to Public School 11, then East High School, then Canisius College, graduated there in 1943.

INT: Do you remember where you were and how you heard about Pearl Harbor?

LA: I was at my date's house on a Sunday afternoon, we had the radio on and we got the message then.

INT: What were your feelings when you heard this?

LA: I never heard about Pearl Harbor until then, didn't know where it was.

INT: Most people didn't.

LA: It didn't take long to find out what happened and so on, further comments on the radio filled us in on the details.

INT: Where were you working at the time the war started?

LA: I was still a student at Canisius College.

INT: What did you do after you graduated from Canisius?

LA: I graduated March 1943 and started teaching Army Air Corps cadets who were stationed at the college. They had just started the program, the college training detachment, at that time so I taught them physics and I also taught the civilian classes in physics at Canisius starting in May 1943. The Air Corps students had just arrived that month, there were two hundred of them in the original group. They were taking a five-month course, four months were class work and one month they spent learning how to fly.

INT: The course you were teaching, was that supposed to be an accelerated course?

LA: No, it was an abbreviated course. We taught them pertinent physics subjects that might be important for them to know as flyers in combat.

INT: Did you have to design this course or did the Defense Department give it to you?

LA: No, we designed the course. We selected the parts that we thought were important for them to know.

INT: What were some of the things you taught?

LA: We tried to teach them some of the mechanics of airplanes, why they fly, the Bernoulli Principle, what kept the plane up in air. We taught them things on computer, computing distances and time so they would have some idea of instrumentation. We taught them things like electricity, a little bit of meteorology, too.

INT: In 1944 you worked with the Carnegie Institute?

LA: In May 1944 they were ending the college training detachment program for the Army Air Corps. At that time they had a need for scientists at the Department of Terrestrial Magnetism which is the Carnegie Institute in Washington. There were eight of us on the faculty who went to Washington, DC to work at the Carnegie Institute. We were assigned to various activities, I was doing work on magnetism, studying the magnetic effects of the earth. I also worked on magnetic compasses and compasses for the Air Force, the Navy, and Coast Guard. Of those eight people many of them were sent overseas because we were compiling data on the ionosphere which is related to radio transmission. People were sent as far as Baffin Bay, Alaska, Christmas Island, Trinidad, and they were at these stations where we were compiling magnetic data as well as ionospheric data. Fortunately I happened to be staying in Washington where I worked on the compass work and also on detecting and deactivating mines. We were anticipating invasion of Japan at that time so they brought in a lot of Japanese mines and we were doing research on how to deactivate these particular mines to protect our troops if they were going to invade Japan.

INT: Could you go into a little more detail about some of the things you did while you were there?

LA: We designed compasses specifically, one of the most detailed ones was for the Air Corps. These compasses were designed to make sure pilots would get to their destination and get back. We also were designing compasses for the Coast Guard and were actually on a Coast Guard ship in Glen Burnie near Baltimore where we were testing these compasses.

INT: How were they different than previous compasses?

LA: They were automated and they would be recording the data as you went along. Rather than just looking at a compass they would have recording devices.

INT: Kind of computerized.

LA: Yes, the early stages of computerization.

INT: What was your work day or work week like?

LA: We worked five and a half days, Monday through Friday and then half a day on Saturday. It was a beautiful setting in Rock Creek Park. The buildings I worked in primarily were non-magnetic buildings because we didn't want the outside influence of the building having any steel or magnetic material. The building that I worked in was a rather unique building in that it was all wood and they used copper nails to put it together. We studied compass deviations and how they might be affected by the outside influences.

INT: The job you were doing was probably highly classified and you had a high security clearance?

LA: Yes, we were essentially qualified by the War Manpower Commission. They looked at our credentials in terms of training and knowledge and experience so they gave us an exemption from being military people. At one time they considered putting us into the military but they said what's the point, we're doing the same work anyhow, so the War Manpower Commission kept us as civilians.

INT: Were you briefed on who you could talk to and who you couldn't as far as what you were doing?

LA: We were not allowed to discuss the nature of our work.

INT: When you lived in Washington where did you live? Did they provide housing?

LA: No, I worked in Rock Creek Park which was northwest Washington but I lived right across the street from the U.S. Capitol building. I got married when I was there and we lived in an apartment directly across the street. If you were in our bathroom on the pot you could look out the window and see the dome of the Capitol. [laughs]

INT: Did you have a car?

LA: No, we didn't have a car, we used public transportation. For \$1.25 we had a pass, you could go anywhere in the city on a trolley or a bus. I also taught night school there. I taught chemistry in one of the public high schools, Theodore Roosevelt High School. So I lived at the other end of town. We had a lot of exciting days because we lived right across from the Capitol and any dignitaries coming in, we'd get a chance to see them. One of the most notable things I remember is seeing President Roosevelt the day he left the White House to go to Warm Springs, Georgia, before he died. He was in an open car with his fedora and I took a picture of him. That was the last time I saw President Roosevelt.

INT: How did you feel when you heard about his death?

LA: To me he was a hero. I felt very badly about that. We also enjoyed the parades they had when Eisenhower came to Washington and General Wainwright, there was great celebration. We also had a daughter born that year and when the Japanese war ended in August 1945 my wife and I were pushing the baby carriage down Pennsylvania Avenue rejoicing with everybody else. My two-month old daughter was sound asleep in the carriage, she didn't hear anything.

INT: With you being in physics and with us dropping the atomic bombs, were you aware that there was research like that going on?

LA: No, we knew nothing about it.

INT: What did you think when you heard about these weapons?

LA: When it happened, having been alerted to the possibility that we might have to invade Japan, knowing the consequences of our people being killed, I was very happy to see that we saved a lot of our own lives. Probably tens of thousands of American lives were saved as a result.

INT: Living in Washington during the war, did you have the blackout curtains and all of that?

LA: I don't recall any blackout at all.

INT: Were your food items rationed?

LA: Definitely. My wife used to go to the local store and he'd give her a package. You didn't know what it was you came home with, probably hamburger so you never knew what you got. Butter and meat were very scarce, hard to come by.

INT: You said a staple was Spam?

LA: We had a lot of Spam. [laughs]

INT: Do you still eat it today?

LA: No, I don't like it. [laughs]

INT: What did you do for entertainment?

LA: My wife was pregnant so we did a lot of walking, a lot of sightseeing. We got to see many things in Washington, Glen Echo Park, we went to the Franciscan Monastery, so we got around the town to see what was there. Of course the Lincoln Memorial, we walked around the Tidal Basin, we always enjoyed the cherry blossoms there. So we did a lot of sightseeing around the town, that was our major effort. I don't think we even went to movies in those days, we just did sightseeing.

INT: Did you get to meet any dignitaries?

LA: On the way to work one day I met, coming out of the apartment building, on Connecticut Avenue, President Truman, the day he took over the office. He lived in an apartment, I saw him come out of his building that morning after Roosevelt died. I also remember seeing General Charles de Gaulle, he was on the street one day. Those are the two dignitaries other than Eisenhower and Wainwright whom I saw in parades. But I got pretty close to President Truman at the time and de Gaulle.

INT: You had a brother that served in the Merchant Marine?

LA: My brother and I started school together at Cleveland and went through every class together through freshman year at Canisius College.

INT: How old was he?

LA: He was eleven months older than I was so we were almost like twins. He spent one year at Canisius and then went in the Coast Guard and ultimately went to the Merchant Marine Academy on Long Island. Part of their training was to be on a merchant vessel. He was assigned to a merchant vessel which went to England. On the way back they were torpedoed and that's where he lost his life. I spent four years researching this in recent years and published a book. [*The Last Voyage – Maritime Heroes of WWII*]

INT: Which you donated to our museum, thank you.

INT: How did your family feel, especially you being so close to him?

LA: That was the most tragic event in my life. I still recall my mother when she screamed when she got the message. All we learned at that time was that he was missing in action. It wasn't until about three months later that my mother got a letter from the mother of one of the survivors of the ship, giving us the details of how it happened. My mother was in a bad state of mind for a long time after that. It did affect the family very strongly.

INT: Was your father living at that time?

LA: Yes, he was. He kept writing letters trying to find out more information. I still have copies. It was a real tragic event for the whole family.

INT: You had a very close cousin that also died in the war?

LA: I had a cousin, Arthur Amborski, whose mother and my mother were sisters and our fathers were brothers. They were married in a double wedding. He was like a brother to me. He went to Bergen High School, he was a four star athlete, he was in football and basketball, he was class president, he was honor student. He had an offer to play professional baseball with the Cleveland Indians but when he graduated in 1943, he joined the Air Force and ultimately wound up in Italy and he was a gunner on a plane. They were shot down over Vienna, Austria and he was killed. He was buried in a cemetery in Austria and four or five years later they exhumed his body and he's now buried in Ardennes, Belgium. So I basically lost two brothers in the war.

INT: To change the topic a little bit, you said that you surprised some of your cadets one night moonlighting?

LA: I was moonlighting at a local tavern and they had attended a dance down the street at Elmira Memorial Hospital, which is now ECMC (Erie County Medical Center), and lo and behold I was behind the bar and all these young fellas came in—my students. They were as surprised as I was. So it was quite interesting. [laughs]

INT: Are there any other things you remember about that time period that you want to mention?

LA: I remember that we had two basically different groups of cadets there, a group from New York City and a group from Boston. They were very competitive and they would kid each other back and forth which is the better city, Boston or New York City. It was quite a rivalry so we had a lot of fun with them. I used to spend a lot of time in the evenings at their facilities which is now Canisius High School. It was a consistory then. They were housed there, they had their barracks there, and we used to go there and help them with their homework at night. It was rather interesting because they used to march every morning from Delaware Avenue Consistory down Delaware Avenue to Delavan and they'd be marching to the school for classes and of course all the way down the street they'd be singing so it was quite a spectacle to see these young fellas all hepped up going to school. I recall many days going to the Consistory there where we could help the students.

INT: Did you ever maintain contact with any of them or run into them after the war?

LA: One of them married a local girl. Paul Vlasevich, he changed his name to Rogers when he got married. I saw him occasionally but he passed away a few years after the war.

INT: Since you're a graduate of Canisius College and you taught there, and we're there now, what changes have you seen in the university?

LA: I've seen tremendous growth of the school and I have fond affection for the school to see how it's progressed. I have great admiration now with the courses they have and the student body. They've done such a great job in developing a faculty. Canisius has come a long way in the fields of business and even science now.

INT: After the war you furthered your education?

LA: After the war I joined DuPont where I worked forty-four years. During the course of my career at DuPont I went to night school at UB (University of Buffalo) and got my Master's and PhD at night school. I was the first student to do that. I got my PhD in chemistry and worked for DuPont in research and I got to do environmental work. I got to do fitness work and got to be an industrial hygienist. I had to take a training program and pass a certification exam and I was the first certified hygienist in western New York.

That entailed my efforts to look after the health of our workers. We tested the area for toxic material, noise, radiation, stress, mechanical stress. I got to be an industrial hygienist as well as a research chemist.

INT: How do you think working during WWII in research and development had an effect on your career or life?

LA: It's just an inherent interest I had in research, I still have that same interest. Now I do my research in genealogy. [laughs] I'm still researching all the time, I guess that's my nature. I started out that way and I maintained that same interest in looking into new things.

INT: Thank you very much for your interview.

LA: OK. Enjoyed it.