

John F. McAlevey
Veteran

Robert von Hasseln
Interviewer

Wayne Clarke
Videographer

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New York, New York

RvH: This is an interview of Mr. John F. McAlevey on 22 May, 2001, Lexington Avenue Armory, New York City. Interviewer is Lieutenant Colonel Robert von Hasseln and the videographer is Mr. Wayne Clarke. Tell me about where you were born and raised.

JFM: Born in the house my mother was born in, in Brooklyn, New York, January 1923.

RvH: What part of Brooklyn?

JFM: Well, we didn't think we had a name then. It's now called Sunset Park. It was within a block of Sunset Park, and we used to describe ourselves as halfway between South Brooklyn and Bay Ridge, but overlooking the harbor in what was then a largely Scandinavian enclave around Central Park where there were cooperative apartments. Swedes and Finns that had moved in and wanted that cooperative lifestyle.

RvH: Tell us about your family.

JFM: Well, my father was in WWI courtesy of the Kaiser. He met my mother because he was stationed at Fort Hamilton as a sergeant farrier and he likes to think he did all the chewing for the horses and mules on all the posts in New York. He met her at some USO dance or whatever the comparable thing was at the time. She was the youngest daughter, so he stayed in Brooklyn and lived in that house, and that's where I was born and raised until post-war when I left and got married. My whole life was in that house until I moved to a temporary housing project after the war called Camp Shanks in Rockland County. At that time, I was in law school.

RvH: Where did you go to school before the war?

JFM: I went to Manhattan College and at that time Manhattan College had a Staten Island division that had been open for the purpose of servicing young men in Bay Ridge and in Staten Island who would find it difficult to get up to the campus at 242nd St. It didn't last, and it's not there any longer, but it was an

experiment because the Dean of the Clergy on Staten Island was a Manhattan alumnus, and on the board or something, and he wanted this facility there. It was for people from Bayonne too, they would come over. It was a day-hop school; it was a poor man's college. But my father, who had only had a 6th grade education but did very well at his trade, just knew I had to have an education; whatever it was, he didn't know, but an education was a wonderful thing and I was going to go to college. So, I went to college, and lived at home and day-hopped over. Seven and half dollars a credit or something. I was there when the war broke out.

RvH: You remember where you were when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

JFM: I think I was home. It came over the radio. Kind of dramatic.

RvH: Do you remember what you were thinking at the time?

JFM: Not really, except that I'm a young man, we go. But the brothers at Manhattan called us altogether and gave us a big lecture about it, not to rush off, and gave us all these horror stories about the guy who interrupted his education and wound up standing guard at a local reservoir for the poor and what was the point of that, stay here, get your... They really had a strategy. They knew we would be better off the more college credits we had before we went in, so they persuaded us to stay there and wait. Well, I stayed and waited for a while. August of '42 I went down to Whitehall Street and enlisted. I wanted to be a flyer, I wanted specifically to join the Aviation Cadets. By that time, of course, the pipeline was so full, that they took me in and I passed all the appropriate physicals and so on and they said, "Okay, you're in the Army, now go home and we'll tell you when to come."

RvH: And when was that?

JFM: August of '42. What happened at the beginning of WWII, the Army and Navy both knew they were in for a long haul, and they also knew they were very understaffed. They needed an officer corps, they needed people for technical services, and they went into a recruiting frenzy of competition to sign up the greatest and the best for them, before the other side got them. The other side being the Navy in the case of the Army or vice versa, and they had all these programs for college people. I wasn't in one of those, although a very good friend of mine, John Larkin, joined the Marines and we kept in touch throughout the war. The funnier side of the story doesn't have anything to do with this. I just enlisted to go right into the Air Force and pilot training, but I was told to wait. They had signed up so many people that they couldn't use me, but they weren't going to waste me on something else because I was a prime physical specimen in terms of passing every acuity test and manual dexterity test and so on and so, stay, and they'll tell you when to come. So, it wasn't until January of '43 that I was actually told to report to Penn Station and get on a train. That started the active portion of my military career, but even then... They had a thing called the College Training Detachment. Now the College Training Detachment, in all

honesty, I think was a big waste of time, but it was a politically necessary thing to do. The theory was—the rationalization for it was—that they were going to take all these chaps—before the war you had to have at least two years of college to become an aviation cadet. This was of course dropped. All you needed to be was in top physical condition and so on, and be a volunteer. The theory was that they were taking chaps from all different kinds of backgrounds and they were going to equalize the education by putting them into these College Training Detachments. The fact of the matter is that it was probably a scandal that guys like me were still at home when we should have been off doing something. We're walking around, we're still in school and everybody wants to know, "What's with him?"

So, they put us in these College Training Detachments for two or three or four months. In my case, I think it was like four months after basic training in Atlantic City, and our training was at the University of Vermont in Burlington. Up there we were going to classes and so on, but it was really kind of a fill-in until there was room in the pipeline. So, we were at the University of Vermont for three or four months—I don't remember precisely—and time came, okay, on a train, go to Nashville, Tennessee for classification. We used to do everything by classification. I got my choice of being assigned for pilot training and there was no delay after Nashville. Once they brought you to Nashville for classification you should be off [unclear] navigator or if you flunked that one, gunnery or whatever. Then you were in the cadet program. From Nashville—Maxwell, Alabama for pre-flight for two months and each stage of the training program at that point was a two-month segment, so two months of pre-flight intensive cadet training, learning everything they wanted you to know, scholarly, school-wise, book-wise, Morse code and this and that and the other thing. Then on to primary flying school for two months, and again the Army had a system for coping with their lack of skilled people. For primary flying, the Army had contract flying schools staffed by a cadre of Army officers who supervised. One was a commandant, but all the instructors except for the check riders were civilian pilots that signed on, contract pilots, that signed on for the duration effectively. They were very good and they taught us primary flying; so did the instructors working for the Army. I was at Lodwick Military Aviation Academy in Avon Park, Florida. Two months there, to basic training in Macon, Georgia and the primary training was in Stearman's, the biplane PT-17's; the Navy called them the Yellow Perils. After that, there were 200-horsepower, open-cockpit, very narrow landing gear, easy to [unclear], very good trainers, better I think than the Ryan's and the Fairchild's and some of the other primary flying schools because they had wide gear and I don't think you learned as much about landing tail draggers on those, but everybody did, sooner or later. Basic training was where you were introduced to rudimentary instrument flying and night flying and that was a low-wing plane, the BT-13, and that was like a 400-horsepower engine and also two place [unclear]. Two months there and at that point there were other classifications and cutoffs; some people from basic were shipped off to multi-engine. I was

lucky and kept getting my choices and I went on to single engine advanced. I could have been sent to twin engine advanced and then I would have been headed to the bombers. With my yen all my life to be a fighter pilot—they always asked us at each stage of training before you were shipped out of whatever, or when you came in, “What would you like to do of these assignments?” So, I always put down dive bomber first choice, single engine pilot second choice, twin engine pilot third choice and actually that’s an alternate paradox, too. I really was serious about dive bomber. I was impressed with the work of the Stukas and so on and I thought ground support was the thing that the Army really had to do to capitalize on what the Germans had showed us the advance air support could do for the troops. Of course, by the time I got out, we had no dive bomber squads. They were experimented with for a little while, but they were unnecessary. If we needed dive bombing, we used fighters. But at any rate, those were my choices. I wound up in Dothan, Alabama at Napier Field for advanced flying training for two months, now with a six hundred horsepower, still twin-engine retractable gear at this point, trainer. Interestingly, well the old P-40’s were all that we had for front-line fighters even though there were, obviously, when WWII began, the pipeline for production had moved along so that now they were able to release P-40’s because they were being replaced everywhere with either 47’s, 38’s or 51’s. So, P-40’s were coming back into training command and they gave us ten hours of flying P-40’s in advanced flying school before we even got our wings, and that of course is an experience, because at this point you’ve been with an instructor to get checked out on every airplane. But fighters circa WWII did not have—there was no such thing as a two-place fighter. When the Army gave you a 1044, I think it was, Military Occupational Classification, you were a single engine pilot and it was presumed that you could fly any single engine plane the Army had in its inventory. That’s it—you’re classified, go do it. All you have to do is know the numbers. The same thing, here are P-40s, used to be a front-line fighter, and you get in the thing after you’ve read the book to tell yourself how it flies, and you take a cockpit check and you study the book and you sit in the cockpit for a few hours or as much time as you felt you needed. Then somebody—this is a routine checkout for any fighter in WWII—some senior guy who was authorized to go and do so, in this case, advanced training, one of the instructors blindfolds you, sits in the cockpit, “Touch, this, touch that, where’s this, where’s that?” because you had to know everything without looking for it. I passed the cockpit check and told them what the numbers were, you know when do you rotate, what speed you take off, whether you need the flaps down and so on. “Okay, take it up.” [Laughs] That’s true, now you have like a twelve hundred horsepower engine and it’s a real fighter and that was a ball for ten hours there, and of course we were marked people at that point. We were on our way to fighters.

So, after graduation—graduation and commissioning were in one ceremony at Macon, Georgia. That was the first... Now it’s eighteen months since I left home. We were given, I think, seven days or ten days of leave, and told to report to

Tallahassee, Florida when we came back. So, that was my first visit home from the time I left Penn Station a year and a half earlier. Of course, none of us ever wanted to go home because we didn't want to break anything in the cycle of training because we might miss our gang and miss out on the war. My grandfather died and my family wanted to know if I could come home. I didn't even ask for it; one of my aunts died, I didn't go home. I wouldn't even ask for it. People would get sick and they wouldn't even go to sick hall because they were afraid that they'd be put in the hospital for a few days and maybe we'd ship out. At least that happened with one of my very good buddies up in UVM, up in Vermont. He got the worst sunburn I've ever seen and here it was up in the high latitudes of Vermont, playing out on the rocks along Lake Champlain, and he went to sleep in the afternoon, in the hot blazing afternoon. He was so sunburned, he was poisoned from the sunburn. He was falling over. We propped him up in the formation. He wouldn't go to sick call. But at any rate, after coming home for about a week I guess, I jumped on a train, my orders, went to Tallahassee, Florida. Tallahassee was just a classification place. There were P-40s, replacement training units flying P-40's in Tallahassee. I was sent down to Venice, Florida, south of Sarasota, and there was a replacement training unit down there and we flew P-40's extensively for several months. Again, now we're qualified combat pilots, get 1054's now or 1055's and I seem like a fighter pilot, but again the losses weren't that heavy and we didn't move as fast as we could to get overseas.

But, finally the day came and we were shipped up to the port of embarkation in Boston and then back to New York, and I forget where we got on the ship now; two different places, because as usual, the orders get changed and you go here and then you go there. But, onto a ship in a convoy and fourteen days at sea or something because of the routes they took and the slowness of the convoy. We didn't know where we were going. We were all company grade or lesser warrant officers or flight officers and second lieutenants. A few chaps had gone to pilot training because they were already commissioned. They were maybe first lieutenants, and maybe a captain or two, but nobody of any authority, so we were put into provisional tactics and some retread major from the First World War who wore balloon wings was put in charge of all of us while we chaps were on this ship. We were shipped over to be replacements or whatever and I guess it was the first time he'd been back to Europe since WWI and he wanted to go see Paris. We didn't know where we're supposed to go, so when the ship... One morning we woke up and the fog was so thick we couldn't see the railing. Finally, when the fog lifted, a little Coast Guard cutter came alongside and everybody's kidding around, "Oh my God, we went in circles, we're back in Boston or something." Well, you know, the U.S. Coast Guard came up to check the ships that were in the convoy and it turned out to be Le Havre, and so this colonel says, "Okay, we're getting off here," and everybody... The cargo slings unloaded all our footlockers and things and we got off in LeHavre. He takes us to a railroad station, puts us

on a train and we go to Paris. We wind up in Paris at some replacement depot and they didn't know who the hell we were. They had no inkling of who we were or where we were and the colonel disappeared. Nobody knew who we were, what we were destined for, nobody had our papers. Finally, we were there sitting in a tent in the garden of a chalet in one of the Parisian suburbs. I think it was one of the Rothschild's mansions or something. Still had signs in the garden, "Don't walk in the grass—mines, mines, mines." Because the Germans had used it for headquarters. Now this replacement depot was there. We were there another week. And somehow, they figured out we were supposed to be in the 8th Air Force in England. The 9th Air Force didn't need us and we weren't trained for that. "Go over there." They took us out to Orly or someplace and put us on B-17s and flew us over to London and there they gave us orders to get on a train the next day and, a couple of individuals, "Here are your papers, go report to such and such." We all went off in different directions to the different fields we were assigned to.

So, I wound up going to a fighter station of the Army 8th Air Force, that was at Air Force Station 133, right smack in the middle of East Anglia in a place called Bedford Forest. It was probably part of Sherwood Forest at one time; it was on the Norfolk-Cambridge border. Nice thing about it was that our field... The whole of East Anglia, which is the area north of the Thames and south of the Wash, is flat country. Wonderful airfield country. I mean there were airfields everywhere. The Royal Air Force, the 8th Air Force, anytime you took off you could see three airfields. But ours was in Bedford Forest which is about the only forest left in England. It's a cultivated forest. And the curvature of the East Anglian coast is such that if we came in in really bad weather and didn't have radio contact or something, if we lined our wings up with the coast and flew another ten or fifteen minutes, we came over the forest and looked for the field then. But at any rate, I had arrived in Europe in December of '44. That's when the convoy arrived. Could have gotten into the outfit a few weeks earlier had we not been dumped in the wrong place. We were supposed to have stayed on the ship until Southampton, we found out later. Nobody knew it but the colonel and he disappeared. But at any rate, so my first battle star was for the Battle of the Bulge. In all honesty, the outfit was there, I was there, but I wasn't yet in ops, so I didn't really do anything in that one but be awarded it because I was in the unit. The usual thing, you're in a fighter outfit and they hand you the book, and in a few days, you feel comfortable sitting in the cockpit familiarizing yourself with it, reading the book, reading the numbers reading what you're supposed to do, and when you're ready some chap gives you a blindfold check and says, "Alright, try it out." Which was an interesting thing. We were talking with Mr. Clark just a little bit before the interview about the different fighters—I flew P-40's in Florida, 51's in the combat unit and later on I was in the occupation and I was flying P-47's. But the P-51, the business of reading about something in a book and how it performs is interesting because I took off—a beautiful airplane—oh my gosh, it was

the greatest thing with propellers. After that came the jets, you know, it could do everything and nothing outperformed it. Some things matched it. The Tempest may have been just as good, but who needed the [unclear], you had the 51. On paper, I understand that if you read the performance characteristics except maybe for range, the Navy's Corsair seemed to be in the same category. But it couldn't be a long-range escort. The 51 could do everything with the additional drop tanks. But I took the thing up and I'm flying around, and oh, what a wonderful airplane. And all of a sudden, I get to about 17,000 feet; I got a kick in the ass. I thought somebody bounced me and I didn't see him. I thought I was hit by something. I didn't know what happened, the ship went like that [raises arms back] and all of a sudden, I looked around and nobody's there and I realized what happened. The turbo supercharger kicks in automatically at 17,000 feet and you don't realize you're losing engine power as you climb into thinner air when the supercharger kicks in and gives you more compression. You jump forward again. Once it happens, it's done. Thereafter you know it; you expect it. But the first time, when you've never been in the airplane before, you get these interesting experiences. So then I wound up going on ops, and that came to be the other paradox. I sent Mr. Clark some of my material, one of which was a piece I wrote about an incident over the Remagen Bridge, and the framework for that is, the paradox I wanted to talk about, I wanted to be in ground support. I really wanted to be in P-47s on the continent, in the 9th Air Force, so every time I took off I'd see some action, and I could do something that I felt would be physically visibly useful like supporting the troops. Not that supporting the bombers isn't a wonderful thing. They needed it terribly but by the time I was there they didn't need us that much. The Luftwaffe had pretty much been wiped out so all we had to contend with was the Messerschmitt 262's and the Messerschmitt 163's which were very infrequent—there were very few of those—but those were the rocket ships. The 262's were the twin jets. And we could see them, but we couldn't do anything about them except—the manner of protection that we gave to the bombers; it was the most incredible thing. It is wonderful to have lived through something that never before had happened in history and never again will happen. Armadas of aircraft—no country could afford them today. Aircraft cost millions of dollars apiece. In those days I don't know what they cost, but I think our 51 was only like \$50,000. When we wrecked one we had a joke, "Call up the taxpayers and get another one." But the 8th Air Force had 3,000 heavy bombers divided into three bomb wings. The first bomb wing was all 17's; the third bomb wing was all 17's and the second bomb wing was all 24's. I believe our wing was assigned to the first division which was all 17's, so usually we escorted P-17's. But there was nothing ironclad about that. Once we took out a bunch of Lancasters for a daylight raid; another time we were sent over to pick up some twin engines for the 9th Air Force and give them air cover because the 47's didn't usually do that. But mostly we were doing high altitude bomber escort and keeping the Luftwaffe fighters from attacking the bombers. It was bad enough the way they got chopped up every day by flak. I mean those fellas took a

terrible beating every day. It was such... At any rate, when the 262's and the 163's appeared, principally the 262's, the only tactic we could do to help to make sure our bombers were protected—each group would be assigned a segment of the bomber stream. So, you have a stream of five hundred 17's, going one after the other, making condensation trails, and by the time they get to the end of it they're flying in clouds of their own making. But at any rate, we'd spike down sideways; you'd never point your nose at another ship because those were six machine guns and they'd shoot back. They didn't give a damn who you were. Slid down sideways, check the markings, identify the group you're supposed to be in, if it wasn't the right one, go until you found it and then that's the segment of the bomber stream that your outfit is assigned to protect. Each fighter group had a segment that it was supposed to protect and our technique was to essentially not fan out, but at least several of us could sit right over the 17's at a couple of thousand feet above them and keep an eye out and then if the 262s would come up—of course, their orders, they were not to engage us, they were up there to get the bombers. They had no tactical advantage that they were speedy or anything else if we met them head on, so by sitting on top of the bombers that we were assigned to protect, we forced the 262s to go look for boxes that didn't have the fighters in place. It's interesting, one time, the only time I really got a good look at a 262, we were actually alongside the tail end segment of the bomber stream, and I saw a 262 come up through this cloud of condensation that stretched for miles. Undetected, he got into the condensation trail of the stream, came up and hit the last box of bombers before he broke away and disappeared. But anyway, the paradox that I was going to say was I wanted to do ground support and I wound up being a high altitude bomber escort, but had I gotten my choice at the stage at which I went through training, I probably would not have seen very much combat at all, because the 9th Air Force fighters, while their ships could take a beating, they always brought their pilots back. The P-47 was a tremendous aircraft for taking punishment. I mean someone [unclear] it would still be running. I mean the guys get home. And if they were shot up, the 47 had like an I-beam along the bottom, almost a landing skid—if you had no gear, you just slid in, nothing happened—so I probably wouldn't have gotten very many missions had I gotten my choice given how late I was getting through the cadets. But by being posted to the 8th Air Force I did get 29 missions in, but there again I had what I thought was the honor of being regularly assigned to be the wingman for Captain Raymond Wetmore—then a captain, later a lieutenant colonel, who died shortly after the war in an air crash. Ray Wetmore was the top-ranking yank fighter ace in the ETO at the end of the war. The other chaps, Purdy and Dubresky and so on, were either shot down or rotated or whatever, so I usually flew on his wing. The Army had decided that they didn't like the idea that all the aces got killed sooner or later, so they put out special orders, which applied to Wetmore and a couple of others, I think, and he was not allowed to go down and do any ground support. He wasn't supposed to go below 10,000 feet—they wanted to keep him alive. So, I was his wingman and when the other guys, when we

broke off escort, the routine was if there was no engagement, you had fuel and so on, when your assigned position in the bomber stream and your assigned time to be there was up, then you were relieved by another group, and you were free to break up, scatter around, look for a target of opportunity, shoot up German airfields, shoot up transport, especially transport, any trains you could find were fair target, any trucks, you know, wiping anything out that moved. So, there was a lot of ground attacking being done by guys standing out in fours and twos [unclear] and Wetmore and I had to stay at high altitude so I never got to do much strafing.

So anyway, thus was my career. The war folded up in Europe. At that point of course, we didn't know anything about the atom bomb, nobody did. Our guys were out in the Pacific getting ready to invade Japan and the whole thing...Everybody's expecting a long war out there. Obviously, they were going to fight until the last man. We saw how they did it in the [unclear] Islands, so a bunch of us tried to figure out what fighter groups in the 8th were going to the Pacific and get transferred and there was a traffic jam. There was terrible fighting for those fields trying to go see if they would take you. This was all a useless endeavor, you waited for orders. Then of course, then we found out the war ended... It ended in Europe in May, and what was it, July or August, it was over totally in the Pacific. So, then the outfit was sitting around out in East Anglia waiting to be rotated home. There were some groups that were assigned to go to the occupation in Germany. I had some good friends in the 355th group I knew, and they were going to Augsburg to be part of the occupation Army. When the war ended, I figured I wanted to go to Europe. I hadn't seen the place. I had no reason to [unclear] home. So, I volunteered for the occupation, but I was told there was no mechanism for transferring anybody from the 8th Air Force to the 9th Air Force. Again, but because I had volunteered to stay even though I had enough points to come home, ultimately, they did come through because the 9th Air Force needed officers badly. The 9th Air Force Service Command, the ground support units, the officers and enlisted men in those units had been there from the time the war started and the unit was organized until the time the war ended. They weren't like fliers who came in and had a tour of duty, and either got killed or captured or rotated and went home or whatever. Those guys had points up the kazoo and they were all entitled under this ridiculous system that the Army had of demobilizing and moving the units at the time. They were all entitled to go home, so most of them opted to go home. Very few wanted to stay. So, the 9th Air Force Service Command was just stripped of its officer corps and most of its experienced enlisted personnel as well. The guys all just left for home, leaving empty units behind. So, that's where I was sent with the occupation. I didn't go to one of the fighter units to be a fighter pilot; I went over to the 10th Air Depot Group which was in Castle, Germany. It was a big air depot—part of the 9th Air Force Service Command and had a half a dozen satellite fields it serviced and so on. I happened to run into the outgoing transportation officer in the officer's club the night I got there or the second night,

before we were given any assignments, and he took a shine to me. He said, "Look, why don't you ask, when they ask you if you have any interest in what you want to do," he said, "Ask to be transportation officer. Come to my office, I'll show you the ropes. I'm going home and it's a good job because you'll always have something to drive." Okay, I didn't know any better, so I said, "Okay." When we were asked if we had any interest in doing this or that, I said, "I'd like to be in transportation." So, I was made the Group Transportation Officer for the 10th Air Depot Group. The table of organization called for a major, the previous occupant had been a lieutenant colonel—a self-promoting guy who was looking for a permanent commission—and I was a first lieutenant. I took over the office and I had one flight officer who had no combat experience or anything. He was over there because he was sent there, not ready to go home, by the name of Worth Crouch as my assistant. The two of us were now running the whole transportation office with a German secretary and a couple of German office cleaners or whatever. It was incredible. That's when I learned I had a flair for administration because I solved all kinds of problems. I learned I had a flair for administration; I learned the ropes, and the Army is a wonderful place to learn anything because you can make expensive mistakes and nobody notices, except I didn't make too many mistakes. But I didn't know what the routine was with all the people in the service command, the quartermaster people and so on. They always ordered ten times more than whatever they needed in their requisitions, expecting if they got half of it, they'd be way ahead. The depot itself and the satellite fields needed coal for the winter. This is—now, we're coming into the winter of '45—and I had a coal allotment that was supposed to come from Cologne. The previous occupants of the office had all made trips over there, all these self-important guys who wanted to go over there and make a career for themselves and they came back empty-handed. They didn't have trucks to send over there to get the coal because they didn't have drivers for the trucks and the trucks weren't being maintained properly. I had a quartermaster truck company under my command. The CO of the quartermaster truck company and I became very good friends and hung out together quite a bit. He was using German drivers, largely, with a cadre of his own people who were still with his outfit. We just didn't have the transport to bring the coal which we were supposed to go pick up. I was told, "Don't waste your time; Colonel so and so went over there and he came back empty-handed," and so on. They can't do more than say no to me too. So, I took a truck and driver and I went to Cologne and I started looking around. I went to the appropriate office, the United States Army office, that was supposed to be in charge of this thing. As luck would have it, I got there at lunch time and the officers were gone. There was a wise old sergeant there who looked at me, and I guess took pity on me as, a first lieutenant flyboy's in here trying to do something. He said, "Look Lieutenant, let me tell you something. Get out of here before the officers come back." He said, "The guy who has the say so here is a British civilian by the name of Stavitz who is over an office called North German Coal Control. Go over there, see Stavitz, if he says you could get it by rail, you'll get it by rail. These guys won't do anything for you here. They'll just tell you you're

not authorized to get it by rail.” So, I said, “Thank you Sergeant,” and went out and jumped in the jeep or 6 by or whatever it was I had taken over there, and found Mr. Stavitz in North German Coal Control, told him my sad story—I have no transport, I have no trucks that will run, they can’t go over the mountains, they’re burning out their clutches, all the stuff I was told to say by the guys in the quartermaster company. Stavitz took pity on me and said, “Okay Lieutenant, your allotment will be coming by rail in about ten to twelve days.” And he sent everything I ever requisitioned. The 10th Air Depot in Castle, Germany, when it was closed up, had mountains of coal that nobody had burned because of the way these guys over-requisitioned, and I got everything that they had requisitioned. Trainloads came in and we had to go out and commandeer prisoners in all the outfits around Castle, hundreds of prisoners, because you can’t shovel briquettes. The German coal was soft and the way they burned it was they compressed it into briquettes about so long [moves hands about 6 inches apart]. You can’t shovel the briquette, you have to practically... You can’t dump them, its not a dump truck or... Rolling stock in the European railroads is terrible. They don’t have dump cars, they don’t have any of that kind of stuff. These things are open gondola cars, practically you had to pick every brick out by hand and throw it into a truck and move it somewhere. Hundreds of prisoners... I was almost embarrassed because I thought I wasn’t turning the trains around fast enough since rolling stock was at a premium since the 9th Air Force and the 8th Air Force had wiped out most of the rolling stock. You had to keep the freight cars going and ultimately came home. I’ve exhausted my monologue.

Changes tapes.

RvH: Tape 2. Interview of Mr. John F. McAlevey on 22 May 2001.

RvH: So, what happened after the war?

JFM: Well, I was in a fortunate position. I was able to time when I came home. I knew I would go back to college, and I had two years’ worth of credits in as a result of the way the brothers had accelerated programs and encouraged us to take all the courses we could. So, I planned my departure—interestingly, when I was in Castle I was also, as a chief transportation officer, putting together the packets. The troops would come through the depot to be put on a train to be sent to the cigarette ports. They had a series of ports of debarkation, I guess you would call them, from Europe to take the troops home and they were given names, Lucky Strike and Chesterfield and so on, and I would ship trainloads of GIs and the 40 and 8’s to whatever cigarette port they were destined for. But they loaded in Castle and I worked closely with, I guess it was with the 7th Army transportation people in Castle. Castle, Germany by the way was a rail hub, like the Chicago of Germany—everything moved in and out of there. When I was on ops, I remember being over Castle several times. It was one of the worst bombed cities in Germany. Bob Hope was there once on a USO tour and he said,

“Incredible, you can stand on a chair in the middle of the city and see the whole place.” I mean there was nothing standing except stairwells and chimneys here and there in the center of the city, because it had a Henschel locomotive works, it had big marshalling yards, it had a Tiger tank factory. It was a critical place to bomb and it was like leaving a target of opportunity if you couldn’t go anywhere else, put one on Castle. At any rate, there was a cute story while I was there, I’ll throw it in. I was a flyboy and all I wanted to do was fly and fight. I’m going through the [unclear] and oh, they gave us all this stuff about paperwork and so on. We were in... Especially in preflight at Maxwell, and how to become an officer and a gentleman, and this is what you do, and everything has to go through channels and the first endorsement and second endorsement and all that stuff—in one ear and out the other. Give me my machine guns and my airplane and I want to go. But the war’s over now and I’m flying a desk. I ordered a train in for shipment out for how many thousands of guys or hundreds of guys, I don’t remember. One of my first orders was a red set. The Army had put together trains that they called red sets. They were a string of 48 boxcars that had been cleaned out, supposedly, and fitted up to carry troops, instead of just putting them in any cattle car they could find. So, I ordered a red set and the first time I ordered one, he came into our yards and I went down to look at it, and I thought it was in atrocious condition. It wasn’t cleaned out; they wanted me to put troops in there and I’m supposed to ship them to the port. And I got really ticked off because if they sent me a train that’s supposed to take troops, I want the train to be fit to take troops. So, I went back to my office and I dictated a letter complaining to some general in the 7th Army Transportation Corps and didn’t go through channels. I just put it in the mail. [Laughs] So, a couple of days later I got called into the colonel’s office in the 10th Air Depot Group which actually I never saw very much because that colonel, I forget his name, poor chap, should have been a general but he had an alcohol problem and we very rarely saw him. We saw him when he greeted us the day we were there, and that was about it. But I saw him this day. [Laughs] This colonel called Lieutenant McAlevey in, “Lieutenant, do you know anything about procedure in the Army?” Anyway, I got a proper chewing out and then after a fashion I got patted on the back for doing a good job. He knew I was trying to do the right thing and he was very proud of me. “But, for Christ’s sake, it goes through channels from now on.”

So, we got out... The war is over and I timed my coming back so that I would arrive back in New York and go home and be demobbed in August of 1946, planning to back to school in September. I wasn’t going to lose any time. I couldn’t turn down a few extra weeks of getting a First Lieutenant’s base pay, 50% for flying, 10% for overseas and what do you get—3 or 5% for a fogie at that point? I was making good money, had no responsibilities and sending 100% of what I made home because we were living high by selling the cigarettes on the black market. I didn’t do that directly though. Cigarettes... I didn’t smoke. We had a carton of cigarettes in our weekly ration—we had a [unclear] ration, we had

a cigarette ration, whatever, you know. Cigarettes were the currency in occupied Germany post-war, or all of the war, and the carton of cigarettes costs fifty cents in the PX, no tax, and any other guy on the post would buy that carton of cigarettes for \$25. If you didn't want to do anything with it yourself, and I wouldn't go near the black market, but I sold it to another GI—whether he smoked it or what he did with it, I didn't care—but he gave me twenty-five bucks for my carton of cigarettes. But the guys who solicited the cartons of cigarettes and weren't interested in smoking them, took them to downtown Castle, where they turned them over for \$50 a carton to the next guy in the chain. Castle was the last place where our troop trains and supply trains left to go closed door into Berlin. So, the chaps who sold them to somebody in the 7th Army Transportation Corps for \$50 had made 100% profit on their \$25 investment, and those guys loaded them on the trains and brought them into Berlin where they went for \$70 or \$100 a carton or more. So that's where the money came from. People were not selling Army supplies or things to live high in the occupation; they were just selling cigarettes. There were some people who were maybe doing other stuff with equipment, but you could have all the money you could spend if you didn't smoke, just by disposing of your cigarettes or getting into the business of being a transfer agent for them. It got so bad that the Army had to put out orders. They issued currency control books because it was scandalous that guys were sending home multiples of their monthly salary. So, they had currency control books and you couldn't send home more than 100% of your pay. So, I sent home 100% of my pay, and still had a good time just on my \$25 a week from the cigarettes.

At any rate I came home in August of 1946 and went back to school—back to Manhattan College. I did a year there and hadn't known quite what I wanted to do, all I wanted to do was go back and try and figure things out. Decided I wanted to go to law school and applied to both... I was now back home and [unclear] and I bought myself a big 74 or 78 cubic engine motorcycle, the same model that New York City police used. That was my transportation. My father had a '36 Buick or something, and so I had a car when I wanted to go on a date or something. So, I used the motorcycle to run from my house in Brooklyn up to Manhattan College and then I walked my papers to 90 Church Street, I guess it is, and I got myself active in the reserves for a while going out to Mitchell Field to fly. I'd go out there once or twice, once a week anyway, maybe, doing this triangular run on my motorcycle to school and out there and back home until I got less interested in that and went through a few other phases in life. I didn't finish Manhattan College because I didn't need to. I was accepted at both Columbia and NYU law schools and it would have taken me another year at Manhattan to get a couple of points that I missed. It wasn't worth it. So, since they took me without my undergraduate degree—I think there was only two other people in my class at Columbia that were there without an undergraduate degree. When I sent my application in, I put in a picture of me in my captain's uniform and all that sort of nonsense. I'm sure it made a difference. [Laughs] Anyway, I

got in and went to law school and met a gal who had been in the Waves, had been in my class in high school, married her, and moved to a temporary housing project in Rockland County called Shanks Village that was converted from a portion of the old Camp Shanks, a port of embarkation and started on my civilian career.

RvH: Was it as a lawyer?

JFM: Well, yes. I already had a... My first son was born while I was taking my bar exams, and I used up my savings while I was married for a year before I finished law school and we set up housekeeping and so on, so I needed to work. Timing was not good. A little flap was going on over in a place called Korea at the time. June 1950, I got out of law school. I had a commission as a captain in the reserves. I could not get a job. I could not get a job anywhere. The first thing they wanted to know was, "What's your status?" "Well, I have a commission in the reserves," I said, "but there is no danger of me being called up." I was a fighter pilot; they don't need fighter pilots. Those of us who are married are probably all volunteering. They really didn't. They didn't call up fighter pilots involuntarily as far as I know. But that didn't matter. And I wasn't going to volunteer now—I had a wife and a child and I needed a job. So, I could not get any work anywhere. It got down to where I was looking at the newspapers and reading the obituaries of lawyers and going to the building where the lawyer had died and while I was in the building I would go to the top floor and walk all the way down and stop in and leave my resume in every office that I met. I couldn't get a job. So, my first job out of law school as a result of that problem of having a reserve commission was as Frosty the Snowman in the Macy's play department. [Laughs] And I never want to hear Frosty the Snowman again. Then in January, a friend of mine who had heard about a job that I took, I went and interviewed for, was hired right away—being in-house counsel to a national trade association. Again, all my life I've been in very fortunate circumstances. I've always been in places where I have initiative work or a command or whatever and they hired me to be the first attorney for this outfit to build the law department. Great, a lot of faith to put in a guy just out of school. But, that was my job and I was there for several years. There was a merger of that outfit and another one later on, and I lost interest in the job because now I was only in charge of the East Coast instead of the whole country. Coincidentally, things were going on where I lived in a village called Sloatsburg in Rockland County. There were some young Turks that had taken over Sloatsburg and were trying to do the right thing by bringing the Village into the twentieth century and were resented by the people who didn't want to be in the twentieth century—they didn't want zoning, they didn't want this, they didn't want that. And those fellas were all going to lose and I was asked to run for office and I ran and became the Mayor of the Village. I was still working for the trade association, but at this point, I did this because it consumed my energies and I really was running the Village on a [unclear] from my office in the city. I was really on top of everything because I didn't have as much to do as I

had previously before the merger of the two trade associations, and I made quite a splash as the Mayor of the Village of Sloatsburg and I did an awful lot of things and got a lot of recognition. I also rubbed a lot of people the wrong way because I didn't know how to play politics the right way. Then I was out of office for a couple of years and I thought I was in the dog house forever, and the Democratic leadership in Rockland County recruited me to run for Supervisor of the Town of Ramapo, which is the largest town in the county. Just as with Sloatsburg when I ran for mayor—my running mates and I came in and we took control of the village board. That was what made it fun; I could do what I needed to do because I had the folks to do it, and the same thing happened when I became the Supervisor of the Town of Ramapo. This was a 100% Republican town. They didn't expect the Democrats or our slate to win and take control. They just expected me, because of my high personality and my high profile in the town from having been Mayor of Sloatsburg and all the publicity I had and all the things I did, they figured I would get in as a minority Supervisor. But that didn't matter because under the structure of government in New York State at that time which, for want of a better term, call it commonwealth counties vs. the charter counties, the county is run ex-officio by the supervisors of the towns that comprise the county. Rockland County only has five towns; it's the smallest county geographically in the state. Ramapo is the largest of its towns. But they wanted me to win as an individual, so I went over there and wouldn't be irrelevant if my town was Republican and I was a Democrat. The Democrats wanted to control the County Board of Supervisors. They banked on me to do it. What they didn't expect was, and I wasn't sure either, I won with my whole slate and I took control of the town board in Ramapo. So, we had eight wonderful years of turning everything on its head and making all kinds of headlines. It was a grand experience.

RvH: And after that?

JFM: What did I do after that? I hung out a shingle. I didn't go back to the city. I went into the practice of law in Rockland County. I had another interesting exposure where I feel I made a contribution again to the public welfare. It's a long story how it happened, but to cut to the quick, I was appointed by Governor Carey to the Board of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. I represented four counties, Orange, Rockland, Dutchess and Putnam Counties. And I had a full vote; it was a nine-person board at the time, I think. I was there just short of ten years on the Board, and it was very time consuming and it cost me a lot of money, but I could afford it. I was in partnership with a gal by the name of Anne Lichtman. She was some years younger than me; my wife's age really. My first wife had died, this was a subsequent marriage. My wife's age, actually. But anyway, she tolerated my being absent a couple of days a week in the city doing this stuff instead of making money for the law office. We were getting along. She wasn't avaricious and I wasn't avaricious and my wife put up with it and she put up with it, and so I did it. This was the time when the city transportation system was a mess. I mean it was practically on the verge of collapse. Circa early 1979.

The trains were a mess. You remember the graffiti and the filthy stations, and the maintenance was no better; the whole thing—the busses were falling apart. The railroad that came in, the commuter railroad was a metropolitan division of Conrail which never put a nickel into it—those trains were falling apart. The whole transportation system in the metropolitan New York area was a disgrace and Dick Ravitch came in and replaced a chap by name of Fisher who, we won't say much more about, nice guy, but... Dick Ravitch was brought in to become Chairman of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. He is a tremendously effective executive. He comes from a family of builders, he's a builder himself. He knew how to get things done. He got the money we needed, he hired the right people to turn around the system, he went to Albany and got, not the money but the capital structure, and we rebuilt the New York City subway system and the bus system and we're proud of it today. And then at that point also, the congress was unhappy with Conrail, and Conrail was unhappy with having had to take over the commuter lines from the defunk freight railroads that it was put together to run. It felt that these things were a burden on it and they didn't want it and so on, so congress passed—I'm fuzzy on the years now, I'd have to go back and refresh my memory—but congress passed essentially a law that said, as of a certain date Conrail was to divest itself from any passenger traffic whatsoever; that the various commuter lines that it had picked up along with the acquisition of the railroads, the freight railroads, were to be either offered back to the local municipal entities that they served or, if those local municipal entities didn't pick them up, the act of congress created a thing called the Amtrak Commuter Services Corporation which had its headquarters in Philadelphia. The Amtrak Commuter Services Corporation was allocated seven or eight or ten million dollars or so, for organizational purposes and study purposes to prepare itself to take over any of the commuter railroads in the metropolitan areas around the country, anywhere in the country—Chicago, New York, it doesn't matter, Boston—if they weren't picked up by any local entity or authority. Dick Ravitch asked me to be on the Board of the Amtrak Commuter Services Corporation also, so I went down there a couple of times a month for three years. But as it turned out, I was then chairing—the reason why he asked me to go on the Amtrak Commuter Services Corporation Board, the federal corporation, was he had made me the Chairman of what was, when I came on the Board, the Conrail Committee which oversaw our relations with Conrail and the metropolitan division of Conrail which serviced New York. We converted that into the Metro North Committee, and we took the metropolitan division of Conrail which was a wreck and rebuilt it and created Metro North Railroad which services the Harlem Division, Hudson Division and the New Haven line, all the way to New Haven, with parts of it under contract with Connecticut and parts of it on the west side of the Hudson also. We have a branch that goes out to Port Jervis which is under contract with the New Jersey Transit, but the rest of it is run directly by Metro North which is one of the best commuter railroads in the country. I'm proud of that too.

RvH: We are getting down to the end of the tape, so let me ask you a couple of questions. You said you served in the reserves at Mitchell after the war.

JFM: I took a five-year commission. But I was separated and I got a gangplank promotion to captain and I was given a captaincy in the reserves. It was a five-year commission but during the Korean War, President Truman just extended them all. The commissions didn't expire because of the war for exigencies, but I let it lapse. I didn't renew.

RvH: What did you fly when you were out of Mitchell?

JFM: I went out to Mitchell Field—AT-6's, that's about what they had, the advanced trainer.

RvH: Oh, AT-6's. I thought maybe you might have hooked up—there was an all-weather fighter interceptor group there after the war.

JFM: There might have been, but I was unassigned. I wasn't in an organized outfit; I was simply keeping my hand in. I was entitled to go fly and there was some hangar there where I just went and checked in and checked out an airplane and fooled around and no responsibilities other than keeping some time in to keep my skills up.

RvH: The skies must have started to get crowded about that time over Mitchell and Long Island.

JFM: A little bit, yes. But it was not what it is today. And we didn't have all the air traffic control. I didn't have to check in with any center or anything like that. I mostly flew out to the other end of the Island. I stayed away from the city.

RvH: When you look back at it all what stands out the most in your mind about your WWII experiences?

JFM: There's nothing in the world like being in and surviving the combat experience. I don't know. I guess if you want a good synopsis of what I think is probably an accurate summation of the whole thing—Ambrose's book, Citizen Soldier gives it. We were just a bunch of guys, and the country was in trouble and we went

RvH: Are you proud of what you did?

JFM: Oh yes, absolutely. I have no criticism of Truman for dropping the atom bomb either.

RvH: Any last final thoughts you'd like to put on the table?

JFM: I don't know if you want this in on the tape, you can cut it out if you want. I'm distressed today. I wrote a piece for, an op-ed piece for the Times. I've been in the Times before. It wasn't taken. It was a dissenting opinion. I'm so outraged by this business of this spy-plane allegedly having to land on an island

in China. That son-of-a-bitch should have been court-martialed when he came back, not given a medal. He didn't complete his mission. In fact, he destroyed his mission and he created an international incident. If that plane, when he got it under control—good airmanship— he got the plane under control. After he got the plane under control, he was at 8,000 feet, he didn't need oxygen for his crew, the plane was flying. If it could fly west, it could fly east, and if he had turned east he could have made it maybe to the Philippines or Formosa or wherever and at least he would have been multiples of eighty miles away from China. Suppose he did have to ditch it in the ocean, in the meantime he could radio to the Navy to find some friendly ships in the area, rendezvous, get picked up, no international incident. The Chinese may never even have acknowledged that they lost a fighter if he didn't push it in their face. Outrageous. And I said at the time when he came back, that SOB should have been court-martialed, but I bet you he gets a medal. He got a medal. There's no responsibility anymore. Coincidentally, Senator Warner, Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, was having hearings a couple of days. The day I sent this thing into the op-ed at the Times, my dissenting opinion, he was giving the Joint Chiefs of Staff the what-for because they weren't holding people responsible for failing their duties. In that case, he was criticizing the slap on the wrist that the Captain of the Cole got for the bombing. But it's the same principal. I'm outraged that everybody wants to pepper over failures these days. I mean I saw those bombers with people with one-tenth or less of the flying experience that this chap had, this Osborne had, bringing home bombers with half their tails gone, with wings off, with two engines out. You just flew them back. That's all. If they stayed in the air, you kept them in the air. What's the panic to get down? I'm not convinced he couldn't have gone all the way back to the Philippines or wherever the nearest island would be, and if he didn't get back there, they were prepared to ditch. He wouldn't have lost anybody and he wouldn't have... that's my final word.

RvH: That's an interesting point.

JFM: I'm outraged. I wrote another thing that was just too much of a screed, called "The Wimp Factor in the Military Today". We don't hold people to responsibilities, we don't expect them to do anything. A case in point, I was outraged by this alleged success of this air war in the Balkans. Outrageous. Shooting from 15,000 feet, you can't tell a convoy from a refugee column. They were shooting up easy-to-hit infrastructure targets to punish the Serbs, when what they should have done was have the Warthogs and the gunships and things down at ground level, where they're effective, wipe out every piece of Serbian armor and rolling stock that went into Kosovo. Those guys should have had to walk home, not ride home with their tanks. That would have been effective and you wouldn't have to have the taxpayers rebuild the infrastructure that we destroyed.

RvH: Interesting point.

JFM: Too afraid of losing somebody.

RvH: Well, thank you.