

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Peter Lew:

Oakland Army Base Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Robin Li
in 2008

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Interview #1: 07-10-2008

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01-00:00:27

Li: This is Robin Li, speaking with Peter Lew, at the Castro Valley Public Library, July 10, 2008. So, we typically start with an easy question, which is please state your name and where you were born.

01-00:00:39

Lew: My name is Peter Lew. I was born in Oakland, California.

01-00:00:44

Li: What year and what day?

01-00:00:46

Lew: October 22, 1925.

01-00:00:49

Li: Okay. And were you born in a hospital, or were you born—

01-00:00:52

Lew: I was born at home, and the doctor was a female doctor.

01-00:00:57

Li: And where was your home at the time?

01-00:01:00

Lew: It's in Oakland. It was on Twelfth Street, between Wood and Pine. And it was property of the Pacific Coast Cannery.

01-00:01:12

Li: Okay. And how did your family come to be living there, at the cannery?

01-00:01:16

Lew: My father was assistant superintendent of the cannery.

01-00:01:21

Li: Okay. And what was his job there, then? Overseeing—

01-00:01:24

Lew: Overseeing the canning and cutting operations of that cannery.

01-00:01:30

Li: Was it Chinese owned, the company?

01-00:01:32

Lew: Yes. It was a Chinese-owned company by thirty-three partners, and—

01-00:01:40

Li: Were they supplying fish for the US, or for export?

01-00:01:45
Lew: It was both, I believe. It was a fruit cannery.

01-00:01:49
Li: And how did your family come to the Bay Area?

01-00:01:55
Lew: Okay. Originally, my grandfather came over in 1877 as a partner in a Kwong merchant—a mercantile company.

01-00:02:10
Li: They're from Southern China?

01-00:02:12
Lew: From Southern China, and the business was located in San Francisco, on the corner of—excuse me. I better leave that. Okay. He came over as a partner in the Pacific Fruit Company, and also the Kwong Company.

01-00:02:30
Li: And so your father was born in the US?

01-00:02:33
Lew: No. My grandfather, my father, and my mother were all born in China.

01-00:02:38
Li: Okay. And then they came—so your grandfather came, they went back—

01-00:02:42
Lew: Yeah.

01-00:02:43
Li: And then your father was born and came.

01-00:02:45
Lew: Yeah. My grandfather came in 1877, my father in 1910, and my mother came over in 1920.

01-00:02:57
Li: And how many brothers and sisters did you have?

01-00:03:01
Lew: We have a total of ten.

01-00:03:03
Li: Ten? And where are you in the family?

01-00:03:05
Lew: I am in the middle.

01-00:03:10
Li: So, did you go to public school in Oakland, growing up?

- 01-00:03:11
Lew: A public school. I went to Prescott School in Oakland, and also Lincoln School and Tech High.
- 01-00:03:25
Li: And so how did you first hear about the building of the Oakland Army Base? Do you remember?
- 01-00:03:30
Lew: I do not remember that. Well, all I know is that that was mentioned that they were hiring at the Oakland Army Base and a group of us students applied for it and were accepted. We worked at the Army Base on Monday through Fridays, three and a half hours in the late afternoon to—I think we quit at eight o'clock.
- 01-00:03:56
Li: And what year was that?
- 01-00:03:58
Lew: 1942.
- 01-00:04:00
Li: And so you were in high school at the time?
- 01-00:04:02
Lew: Yes.
- 01-00:04:03
Li: Were you a senior in high school?
- 01-00:04:05
Lew: Yes. I was a senior in—
- 01-00:04:08
Li: A senior at Tech High?
- 01-00:04:11
Lew: Yes.
- 01-00:04:12
Li: Can you tell me about the bombing of Pearl Harbor? Your memory of—
- 01-00:04:18
Lew: Pearl Harbor? I was living in the Oakland Chinatown area around where the I-880 freeway is now, around Fourth and Fifth and Oak. So did the Japanese. And the Japanese students were—they were evacuated in 19—what? 1942.
- 01-00:04:47
Li: Right. They were evacuated. And so how did that affect your high school?

- 01-00:04:52
Lew: Well, I had some Japanese friends that we associated with, and we only lived about two blocks from the Japanese church and the Japanese school.
- 01-00:05:03
Li: So would you say that the war felt like it impacted your life, your everyday life?
- 01-00:05:07
Lew: Not that much at that time, because technically China and Japan were at war at that time. So we had friends, but at the same time, we were not what you would call buddies.
- 01-00:05:21
Li: So did you experience any anti-Japanese feeling because you were Asian? Did you—?
- 01-00:05:27
Lew: Yes and no. The parents did; the children did not. Because we all went to Lincoln School. We were all mixed together at Lincoln School.
- 01-00:05:39
Li: Do you remember what time of year it was that you heard about the work at the Army base?
- 01-00:05:46
Lew: Ah, gee. I don't know. I can look it up somewhere, where I applied, but—
- 01-00:05:50
Li: But you don't remember if there was a recruiter on campus, or—
- 01-00:05:52
Lew: No, I don't remember anything.
- 01-00:05:53
Li: —you just heard about jobs.
- 01-00:05:54
Lew: I heard about them, and put in. First come, first serve.
- 01-00:05:59
Li: How was the job advertised? What kind of work was it meant to be?
- 01-00:06:05
Lew: Well, we went down there, and naturally we checked in, clocked in. Then they would assign us to the work for the day. I was assigned to what was termed Warehouse Number Two. That was the end warehouse. And Warehouse Number Two also had control of the Chinese Cannery, which was the former Pacific Coast Cannery at Twelfth and Pine Street.
- 01-00:06:29
Li: So was the cannery on the same land or next door to—?

01-00:06:34
Lew: It was on the other side of the railroad tracks.

01-00:06:36
Li: From the Army base?

01-00:06:38
Lew: Yes.

01-00:06:38
Li: But were the buildings of the cannery used by the Army base then?

01-00:06:41
Lew: Yes. It was part of the Army base warehouse system.

01-00:06:46
Li: I see. So you were back where you had come from. [laughter]

01-00:06:49
Lew: Yeah. Yeah. The Army warehouses were on the base side of the tracks, and the cannery was on the other side of the tracks.

01-00:07:02
Li: So that was like Oakland property, the city of Oakland, on the other side of the tracks?

01-00:07:07
Lew: Yes.

01-00:07:08
Li: Okay. But the Army base was—were they contracting for the usage—?

01-00:07:12
Lew: No. At the time I went to work, they already had the warehouses all built up. And they were all wooden warehouses. And the Warehouse Number Two, the one I was assigned to, and the cannery held mostly field equipment: field cooking equipment and such. Then adjacent warehouse there was Warehouse Four, and that had mostly rations, “C Rations” mostly. [C Rations were prepackaged food for the troops in the field. The present backpacker food is similar to it.] And that’s where we did most of our work, and we would load an unload “C Rations” most of the time.

01-00:07:57
Li: How many people were there from your high school that were working?

01-00:08:01
Lew: Well, there was a crew of maybe about a dozen of us at the assigned—

01-00:08:10
Li: And were they mixed Chinese, and white, and—?

01-00:08:16
Lew: Yeah. Well, it was a mix. It was mostly Chinese and Caucasians.

01-00:08:21
Li: Okay. And how much did it pay?

01-00:08:27
Lew: Seventy-five cents an hour.

01-00:08:29
Li: And how was that, compared to other kinds of jobs you could find?

01-00:08:32
Lew: Well, that was pretty good pay. Before that, I was working as a gas station attendant, and I was paid a dollar a day.

01-00:08:44
Li: Okay. So you were making \$2.25 a day—

01-00:08:48
Lew: Yeah.

01-00:08:48
Li: —working part time. Okay. And how long did you work there for?

01-00:08:54
Lew: I worked there until June, 1943, when I graduated from high school. I was seventeen and a half at that time, so I applied and went to work at the Naval Air Station in Alameda. I was hired there as engine mechanic helper, and I was paid eighty-three cents an hour.

01-00:09:21
Li: A little bit better. [laughter]

01-00:09:22
Lew: Yeah.

01-00:09:24
Li: So, in the months that you were working at the Oakland Army Base, was your job—every day, would it be something different that you would be assigned to do, or—?

01-00:09:31
Lew: Basically the same. There was once that we were loaded onto trucks, and we went over to San Francisco and did the same type of work at one of the piers.

01-00:09:52
Li: So were you employed by the Army? Or who—?

01-00:09:54
Lew: By the Army base. The Army.

01-00:09:56
Li: Okay. So your paycheck would come from the US Government?

01-00:09:59
Lew: Yes. From the government. San Francisco Port of Embarkation.

01-00:10:07
Li: Okay. And were there any women that worked at the Army base? Like from your high school?

01-00:10:11
Lew: Not that I know of.

01-00:10:17
Li: What was an average day like, then, when you would show up? Would you go after school?

01-00:10:21
Lew: Yes. We'd go after school. We'd start at school an hour earlier, and then we'd finish at about 2:30, and then we went down there and checked in, and worked three and a half hours a day there. And on Saturdays, we would work the whole day on a day shift.

01-00:10:36
Li: Okay. So would you get in and clock in, and be assigned your job?

01-00:10:40
Lew: Yes. Yes, they have time clocks that we clocked in on.

01-00:10:43
Li: And who would manage you? Would you all stay as a group, the group of high school students?

01-00:10:48
Lew: Yes. More or less, yeah.

01-00:10:52
Li: And did you have a single manager who would oversee your work, or did you—?

01-00:10:55
Lew: That, I don't quite remember. Because I remember most of the high school kids were assigned to that Warehouse Four, and apparently I was sort of the odd person, assigned to the Warehouse Two.

01-00:11:13
Li: And so you said you started school an hour earlier. An hour earlier than the other students?

01-00:11:18
Lew: The regular school hours, yeah. What they called the "A" period: the period that's the earlier period before the standard school hours.

01-00:11:27
Li: So had the Army base worked out that setup with the high school, or—?

01-00:11:31
Lew: No, I believe that was there already. It's just one of those things.

01-00:11:38
Li: An option you could take if you wanted to start.

01-00:11:39
Lew: Yes.

01-00:11:39
Li: Okay. How did you feel about the work that you were doing there? Did you feel like you were part of the war effort? Did you feel—?

01-00:11:46
Lew: Yes. We felt we were doing some good. Of course, at seventeen way, the thinking was pretty standard. All we know is that when we got out of high school, we would get drafted. And so—

01-00:12:02
Li: So you knew that was coming.

01-00:12:03
Lew: Oh, yes. That was definitely coming.

01-00:12:06
Li: Was there a sense of patriotism, then?

01-00:12:09
Lew: Well, I guess so. Not real high, but—[laughter] But it was a resigned fate, that we were going in the service.

01-00:12:20
Li: Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit about some of the other people who you worked with at the Army base, the other students? What they were like?

01-00:12:28
Lew: Well, we were all similar in family status, income, and everything else.

01-00:12:43
Li: And were these jobs coveted? Did other students want to work at the Army base and there weren't enough jobs?

01-00:12:52
Lew: Well, that never entered my mind at that age?

01-00:12:58
Li: So nobody was trying to get work at the—

- 01-00:12:59
Lew: Yeah. We were just interested in getting work, and having something to spend.
- 01-00:13:05
Li: Did you spend any free time on the base? Would you ever go there to socialize, or for events or parties?
- 01-00:13:13
Lew: No, we did not. No, no socialization. Strictly work.
- 01-00:13:16
Li: Yeah. Just work. And how would you get down there?
- 01-00:13:20
Lew: Well, I drove, and I carpooled. Let's see. We carpooled, six person—I carpooled five other persons, and they're all high school students also.
- 01-00:13:34
Li: Were you aware of government oversight on the base? Were you aware if the Oakland Police, or FBI, or CIA was concerned?
- 01-00:13:43
Lew: No, we were not aware of anything that—at that age, none of that entered our mind.
- 01-00:13:50
Li: Did it feel more like a civilian job, where you were just kind of working and doing labor, or did it feel like a military—?
- 01-00:13:58
Lew: No, we were working as civilian labor. In other words, we were not doing anything others were not.
- 01-00:14:10
Li: And were there any other Chinese working on the base, besides your friends from school?
- 01-00:14:14
Lew: Besides the high school kids? That, I do not recollect. Well, I do know that later on, after they graduated from high school, some of the Chinese girls did go to work at the Army base as civilian employees.
- 01-00:14:34
Li: Was there any negativity about—towards Asians? Because of the war with Japan?
- 01-00:14:40
Lew: No, not—I didn't feel any. At that time, most of the Japanese kids that we associated with were already sent off to a relocation camp.

01-00:14:54

Li: And you said that the cannery played a role during Japanese internment, that there was—that they stayed there for a little while, or that—when they were relocating the Japanese? You mentioned earlier.

01-00:15:10

Lew: Well, the Chinese and the Japanese, we lived in the same neighborhood. We shared the same neighborhood, and for all practical purposes, from where the Posey Tube is down to Fallon Street, and next to Fallon Street there, where the Peralta College Area is now was what we called hobo jungles.

01-00:15:32

Li: What were those?

01-00:15:34

Lew: Those were just weed patches on undeveloped land, tide lands.

01-00:15:44

Li: So, when the Japanese were relocated, you had mentioned earlier that people had gone to the cannery for a short time before they got moved elsewhere? Is that—?

01-00:15:56

Lew: No. You mean the Japanese people?

01-00:16:01

Li: Yeah.

01-00:16:02

Lew: They had nothing to do with the cannery.

01-00:16:03

Li: No, they never stayed—? Oh.

01-00:16:04

Lew: No. No, they had nothing to do with the cannery. But our neighborhoods were shared. Their Japanese church was right on the corner of Sixth and Jackson. Their Japanese school was a brick building right across the street from it. I think the brick building is still there. The Japanese church was moved up to Ninth Street, to Ninth and Jackson where it's now located. But that's the same church, but it's been relocated.

01-00:16:35

Li: So what do you remember about the time that you spent at the Army base? What were your—do you have any particular memories of—?

01-00:16:43

Lew: Well, like any seventeen-year-olds—[laughter]—we were like a blank mind.

01-00:16:50

Li: You would just go, and—

01-00:16:51

Lew: Yes, just go do our job. But we were conscientious about our job, and we did it, and the job was basically—it was normally the same thing. It was mostly “C Rations.”

01-00:17:03

Li: So would you move them off the ship?

01-00:17:05

Lew: No, we moved them from railroad cars. They came in by railroad cars. We unloaded them from railroad cars onto the wooden skids, you know, the wooden flats? And then they would haul that into the warehouse, and store, and stack it up. On other days, we would take from similar stacks and they would take it from the similar type stacks and over to the other side of the warehouse, where we would unload it from the stack into trucks for them to take down to the ships. In other words, the new supplies would come in, and they would store them in the warehouse, and they would use the older supplies and send out to the ships.

01-00:17:55

Li: Did you have to have an ID when you came on-base, that you would—?

01-00:17:59

Lew: Yes, we had a badge. It was a metal badge with our picture on it.

01-00:18:06

Li: And were they concerned about citizenship when they were hiring? Was everyone a US citizen that—?

01-00:18:12

Lew: I don't think that was any real problem on their case, because they drafted everybody, and—[laughter] Citizen or not. [laughter]

01-00:18:20

Li: Right. And you said that after you worked there, you went to the Naval Air Station.

01-00:18:26

Lew: Yes.

01-00:18:26

Li: Was that because you already had this experience on the Army base?

01-00:18:29

Lew: No, had nothing to do with the Army base in itself. While I was at high school there, we knew we were going to go into the service, so what I did is one of my classes was in aircraft engine maintenance. It was mechanics on aircraft engines. And everyone had the hopes of going to the Air Corps, because the Air Corps was part of the Army. So naturally, when I got through, I was seventeen and a half, so I went to work there, to get more experience and a little bit better pay. At the end of the year—okay. I was drafted on the first

working day of 1944 in San Francisco, and they had asked me, “Okay, what branch of the service do you want?”

I said, “I’ll take the Army.”

They said, “What part?”

I said, “Air Corps.”

And they said, “Well, the quota is filled for this month. We’ll put you in the next best thing: in tanks,” because tanks use aircraft engines. Didn’t think at that time, but I think back on it and say, “Gee, the first working day of the year, and the quota is already filled.” [laughter]

01-00:19:51

Li: I guess it was a popular—everyone wanted to work for the Air Corps?

01-00:19:52

Lew: I know, but that’s the first working day of the year! [laughter]

01-00:19:57

Li: So what do you think they said no to the Air Corps?

01-00:19:59

Lew: Well, now, I didn’t complain, because what it is, the person in front of me was drafted into the Marines. I didn’t know they drafted people for the Marines, but I found out real fast. [laughter]

01-00:20:13

Li: So did you feel pretty lucky to be—?

01-00:20:15

Lew: Oh, yeah.

01-00:20:15

Li: Yeah. So what did it involve, being on the tank corps, or the tank—?

01-00:20:21

Lew: What did it involve in the tanks? We did have aircraft engines. I was sent to Fort Knox for basic training, and I was trained in medium tank, and they did use aircraft engines. I graduated from basic training on D-Day, the day they invaded France, and I was reassigned to the United States. I was assigned to a special troops unit, and they had light tanks, and theirs was aircraft engines also, see? And being after they invaded Europe, they redesignated us from tank to amphibian tractor, and that used aircraft engines also. So I was sent out to the West Coast.

01-00:21:12

Li: So were you working as a mechanic, basically? An engine mechanic for—?

01-00:21:16
Lew: Yes and no, okay? My first assignment was as a reconnaissance crewman in a half track, in a light tank battalion. But when we were converted to amphibious, I was sent to mechanics school for additional training, and I became an amphibian tracked vehicle mechanic.

01-00:21:45
Li: And where were you stationed?

01-00:21:47
Lew: Well, we were based at Fort Ord on the West Coast.

01-00:21:55
Li: So you went to Fort Knox for your basic training, and then came back for the—?

01-00:21:57
Lew: Well, yes. Well, actually, I was in what they call a special troops unit. We were AGF Special Troops.

01-00:22:10
Li: What does AGF stand for?

01-00:22:11
Lew: Army Ground Forces.

01-00:22:16
Li: And so were you ever sent overseas?

01-00:22:17
Lew: No, because our unit was what you call—what the term is school troops.

01-00:22:25
Li: School troops?

01-00:22:25
Lew: School troops. In other words, we trained other divisions and everything, from '44 on there, into beachhead landings.

01-00:22:38
Li: Oh, okay.

01-00:22:38
Lew: Yeah.

01-00:22:46
Li: When was this, that you were working with the tanks? Was that from '44—?

01-00:22:52
Lew: Well, all through the service. All through the service.

01-00:22:53
Li: Okay. So, 1943 until—

01-00:22:58

Lew: No, 194—Well, from beginning of '44 until I got discharged in 1946.

01-00:23:09

Li: And so what was your rank when you were—?

01-00:23:11

Lew: Well, I was just a T-5, a technician.

01-00:23:18

Li: And so were you able to see your family very much during this time?

01-00:23:21

Lew: Oh, yes. Yes. I was based in the United States, and our unit was one of five combat-ready units that remained in the continental United States in World War II.

01-00:23:36

Li: Wow. Just out of five?

01-00:23:37

Lew: Yeah. Five battalions.

01-00:23:40

Li: Did you want to go overseas?

01-00:23:42

Lew: Well, at that time—you know, you're just eighteen years old, you're sort of like a hero. You think like an eighteen-year-old.

01-00:23:53

Li: So did you imagine going to France, and—?

01-00:23:57

Lew: Well, no. Actually, the ones I trained with, they were all sent to France right away. And a matter of fact, I ran into one down in Salinas on one of my first times out to town, and his tank had already got blown up in France. He was shipped back to England, patched up, and he was already back here in California on crutches, and his fighting days were over. And that was only about two months after we shipped out from Fort Knox.

01-00:24:34

Li: So did you ever request to go overseas, or—?

01-00:24:36

Lew: No. What I did do, in Kentucky, I had requested to go to the Chinese unit. The Chinese unit was based in—one of their units was based in Indiana, across the river, and they said, "You are now taking armored basic. You cannot go. You can apply again afterwards." So after I got through basic, I applied again, and they said, "You have finished armored basic. You cannot go now."

- 01-00:25:08
Li: What was the Chinese unit?
- 01-00:25:10
Lew: The Air Corps was part of the Army at that time. There were two Chinese units. They were aircraft maintenance units.
- 01-00:25:22
Li: And they were all Chinese?
- 01-00:25:23
Lew: Yes, they were all Chinese except for some of the officers.
- 01-00:25:26
Li: Okay. Was the intention that they would be sent to China, to—?
- 01-00:25:30
Lew: Yes. A matter of fact, quite a few of my relatives were in both the units. They were both down in Mississippi. They all went over to China, and they served as the maintenance group for the Flying Tigers. So yeah.
- 01-00:25:53
Li: So were they working with the Chinese Nationalists as well as the US Air Force? Were they—
- 01-00:26:00
Lew: No, no, no. They were a part of the American Army.
- 01-00:26:03
Li: But was the American Army there, were they working with the Chinese Army as well?
- 01-00:26:08
Lew: Not quite. Not that I know of. And then they were American Army assigned to service the Flying Tigers, and so they were scattered all over China.
- 01-00:26:25
Li: Okay. And who were the Flying Tigers? Can you tell me a little bit?
- 01-00:26:27
Lew: Well, they have their annual reunion. The Flying Tigers were American pilots that were not in the service, and they volunteered to fight the Japanese in China. And they were incorporated into the American Army and put under General Stillwell.
- 01-00:26:59
Li: So during this time, would you follow what was going on in the war like in the newspaper? Would you talk about it a lot, or were you—?
- 01-00:27:06
Lew: No, actually, I was the only Asian in that unit.

01-00:27:12

Li: In your tank unit?

01-00:27:14

Lew: In our unit, yeah.

01-00:27:22

Li: So during the war, did you keep track of what was going on with the war in China, with the war in Europe?

01-00:27:34

Lew: Yes. Well, we communicated by mail, in other words, write each other that you knew.

01-00:27:42

Li: You would write with your—communicate with your family in Oakland, or—?

01-00:27:46

Lew: Yes. I wasn't too far from them here.

01-00:27:50

Li: How far is Fort Ord from here?

01-00:27:52

Lew: Fort Ord's about a hundred miles from here. Monterey—it's just north of Monterey, about six miles north of Monterey.

01-00:28:05

Li: So when you left to join the Army, did any of your siblings go work at the Army base as well, like you had done?

01-00:28:12

Lew: No. Okay, let's see. No. Okay. When I was drafted, I was probably drafted faster than most of my other friends. It usually took them a few months to go wind up in the service. I wound up there in two months. Most of them had about a six-month leeway, but because my sister works for the draft board in Oakland, so they knew who I was, and so when I turned eighteen, I registered, and they said, "Well, Peter, being that you're now eighteen, why, we'll help get you in faster. Instead of mailing our next questionnaire, we'll give it to you." [laughter] So I didn't get it through the mail. They just handed it to me direct.

01-00:28:58

Li: So you were drafted pretty quickly, then.

01-00:28:59

Lew: I was drafted quicker than most of the people under the same circumstances.

01-00:29:07
Li: So once you filled out all the forms, how quickly was it that you had to leave home and go for basic training? How much time passed?

01-00:29:16
Lew: Pardon me, I didn't quite—

01-00:29:18
Li: How much time did you have after registering for the draft before they—

01-00:29:23
Lew: I think they gave me two weeks. I don't—

01-00:29:26
Li: Oh, just a few weeks, then?

01-00:29:27
Lew: Yeah. To get my things in order? Yes.

01-00:29:30
Li: And so did any of your brothers or sisters also join the military?

01-00:29:33
Lew: Well, my brother was drafted. He enlisted after World War II there, and he served in Korea before the Korean War.

01-00:29:46
Li: But just the two of you were the only—

01-00:29:46
Lew: Yeah.

01-00:29:48
Li: But you said your sister worked for the draft board?

01-00:29:50
Lew: My sister worked for the draft board, yeah.

01-00:29:56
Li: The base was built in 1941, is that right?

01-00:30:04
Lew: What, Naval Air?

01-00:30:05
Li: The Oakland Army Base.

01-00:30:06
Lew: Oh, that, I do not know. Like anything else, you're oblivious to all that.

01-00:30:13
Li: So you don't remember that being commissioned and built?

01-00:30:16
Lew: No, I don't remember much of that at all.

01-00:30:18
Li: Yeah. And have you stayed in touch with anyone else from the Army base, from the years that you worked there?

01-00:30:24
Lew: Well, no, most of them are dead. [laughter]

01-00:30:29
Li: But did you stay in touch after—would you ever go back to the Army base and visit people, or—?

01-00:30:35
Lew: Well, there was nobody to visit, because we knew nobody. That was an industrial complex. And we knew no troops in there.

01-00:30:46
Li: So you were pretty self-contained.

01-00:30:48
Lew: Yes.

01-00:30:54
Li: Is there anything else you can think of about the Army base that I haven't asked you about that was important?

01-00:31:01
Lew: Let's see. No, I—let's see. No, the only thing I know is I wrote down Edward Kwoc's name. I don't have his address, but I asked one of his in-laws last week, and they said he lives in East Oakland around the Fruitvale District.

01-00:31:25
Li: Who is this?

01-00:31:27
Lew: Edward Kwoc.

01-00:31:28
Li: Edward Kwoc.

01-00:31:28
Lew: Yes. And his grandfather was the main superintendent at the cannery also. See?

01-00:31:39
Li: Oh, okay. So did he also work at the cannery warehouses during the war? At the Army base?

01-00:31:45

Lew: Yes. But he did not work at the cannery. He was assigned to a different warehouse.

01-00:31:59

Li: But during the same time period that you were there?

01-00:32:00

Lew: Yes. He was part of my carpool. [laughter]

01-00:32:03

Li: He was part of your carpool? Yeah, I think we definitely would be interested in talking to him, if we can get a hold of him. Do you have contact information for him?

01-00:32:14

Lew: I can probably get it for you, but you can probably find his name on the internet, and he's in East Oakland. I understand his health is not that great, so I don't know.

01-00:32:29

Li: So can you reminisce just a little bit for me about what those years were like, the last year you were in high school and that sort of time period in your life?

01-00:32:40

Lew: Well, we never did attend a high school reunion, because we really never knew anybody in high school, because we went to school and about the only time you ever met anybody was in the locker room, and after you got out of school, you went to work. So I have never attended our Tech High high school reunions. What we do have, though, are grammar school reunions. I have attended two of them. And our ninth grade junior high school class, we still meet every three months. We get together for lunch. We have about twenty-something persons that we meet every three months. Of course, most of us are pretty decrepit now, but—[laughter]

01-00:33:34

Li: But you've stayed in touch all these years.

01-00:33:36

Lew: Yes, we have stayed in touch.

01-00:33:38

Li: So was that your social group during the time period?

01-00:33:43

Lew: Yes and no. Let's say we're close acquaintances, but not—okay. I do have one person in our class from grammar school, that we're in the same social—same poker group. We meet once a month, and we've been meeting since the fifties, so.

- 01-00:34:08
Li: So in this time in the early forties, what was your social life like? Did you have time to—
- 01-00:34:11
Lew: We didn't have any, because we didn't have any money.
- 01-00:34:16
Li: So when you would get paid from the Army base, what would that money go to? Did it go to your family, or—
- 01-00:34:23
Lew: No, we burned it. [laughter]
- 01-00:34:25
Li: What would you spend it on?
- 01-00:34:31
Lew: Well, for one thing, gas. A couple times a month, we used to go and drive out to Hayward Plunge, there, which was considered a distance then, and go swimming or something like that. And after school, we'd get together for a milkshake or something like that. That's probably it. There wasn't that much money to burn.
- 01-00:34:56
Li: And so what it pretty diverse, though? Would you spend time with non-Chinese and Chinese, or—?
- 01-00:35:01
Lew: No, most of our friends were Chinese.
- 01-00:35:04
Li: And did you speak Chinese, or do you?
- 01-00:35:06
Lew: Yes, I speak Chinese.
- 01-00:35:07
Li: Do you speak Cantonese or—?
- 01-00:35:08
Lew: Cantonese.
- 01-00:35:09
Li: And would you and your friends speak Cantonese with each other, or—?
- 01-00:35:12
Lew: Well, we speak what we call our—well, let's see. What would we call it? They call it Juk Sing Language, because the Chinese here have mixed dialects, so our Chinese is sort of mixed with different dialects. One word from this dialect, one word from that dialect. So we understood each other, but others would laugh at us, okay?

01-00:35:42
Li: Was it kind of a specifically Oakland kind of mix?

01-00:35:46
Lew: No, not specifically Oakland. Well, ABC. Or you might want to call it ABCD.

01-00:35:55
Li: What's the D stand for?

01-00:35:57
Lew: Dummy. [laughter] Because we couldn't read or write Chinese, okay?

01-00:36:05
Li: And you would speak this mix of different dialects?

01-00:36:06
Lew: Yeah.

01-00:36:08
Li: Did your parents think it was strange that you would speak—

01-00:36:09
Lew: Oh, no. They didn't bother. No consequences there.

01-00:36:13
Li: So you didn't attend Chinese school, then, growing up?

01-00:36:16
Lew: A few years, but interest wasn't there, so I really never learned much.

01-00:36:22
Li: Yeah. Reading, and writing, and—

01-00:36:24
Lew: Yeah.

01-00:36:27
Li: And so were some of the high school friends you worked with at the base, would you speak—

01-00:36:34
Lew: Well, we speak mixed. We speak mixed English and Chinese.

01-00:36:39
Li: About how many of the twelve of you were Chinese?

01-00:36:46
Lew: Okay. No, the group—there were more than that. There was a mix of Asians and Caucasians. At the Army base, you're referring to, right?

01-00:36:58
Li: Yeah.

01-00:36:59
Lew: Yes, this is a mix. So we worked together mixed.

01-00:37:03
Li: And was it Chinese, and you said Italian, and—

01-00:37:06
Lew: Yeah.

01-00:37:08
Li: Was there a large Italian population at that time?

01-00:37:12
Lew: Well, as far as we know, just who we knew.

01-00:37:17
Li: Was there an Italian neighborhood that—

01-00:37:18
Lew: Well, we lived in the Chinese neighborhood, the Italians lived in the Italian neighborhoods, Portuguese lived in the Portuguese neighborhood, see?

01-00:37:26
Li: And where were those, {inaudible}?

01-00:37:27
Lew: Well, the Italian neighborhoods were around Tech High in North Oakland. The Chinese neighborhood was—I'd say you've got a group in West Oakland, you've got a group here in the Chinatown area, and then the Portuguese neighborhood was around what was Roosevelt High then. It's down around Twenty-Third Avenue, that area? Fourteenth Avenue.

01-00:37:52
Li: So it was pretty diverse, then, the people that you knew?

01-00:37:53
Lew: Yes, pretty diverse. And most of the cannery workers were more Portuguese.

01-00:38:01
Li: The workers who were employed by the cannery company, or the—?

01-00:38:04
Lew: Yes. Most of the seasonal employees of our company when we had the company was Portuguese.

01-00:38:13
Li: So did you learn any Portuguese when you—?

01-00:38:16
Lew: No. No, my name was given to me by my Portuguese babysitter.

01-00:38:20
Li: Really?

- 01-00:38:21
Lew: Yes, the name Peter is given to me by my Portuguese babysitter, because our family was wealthy, then, at that time. So my birth certificate is written under my Chinese name.
- 01-00:38:36
Li: What's your Chinese name?
- 01-00:38:38
Lew: Lew Gwem Shew, you see, but my—
- 01-00:38:41
Li: Could you spell that? Sorry.
- 01-00:38:42
Lew: Pardon me?
- 01-00:38:42
Li: Could you spell that?
- 01-00:38:44
Lew: Lew is my last name, but the Chinese, you know, it comes—Gwem, G-W-E-M, and S-H-E-W was my middle name.
- 01-00:38:54
Li: Do you know what it means, Lew Gwem Shew?
- 01-00:38:58
Lew: Well, it's been explained to me, but like anything else, I'm Americanized. It doesn't sit in.
- 01-00:39:05
Li: Did you and your siblings share the same middle name? Were they all—?
- 01-00:39:09
Lew: Okay, my brother and I shared a same—
- 01-00:39:13
Li: Both Gwem
- 01-00:39:14
Lew: First. Okay, the last name and the middle name is different.
- 01-00:39:19
Li: Okay. So he was a Gwem something? Lew Gwem something?
- 01-00:39:23
Lew: Yeah. Yes. But his name is in English. He was born in Antioch, California.
[laughter]
- 01-00:39:30
Li: And so you said you had a Portuguese nanny. Did you each have your own nanny?

01-00:39:35
Lew: No, no. I don't know.

01-00:39:38
Li: A babysitter?

01-00:39:38
Lew: All I know is as a baby, I had a Portuguese nanny, and my name Peter comes from her.

01-00:39:44
Li: She gave it to you?

01-00:39:45
Lew: Yes. So all my American records are under the name Peter Lew.

01-00:39:53
Li: Did you ever change your name legally?

01-00:39:56
Lew: Before I retired, I worked for Civil Service. I was a planner and estimator for the Navy. I decided I had better get everything squared away legally. So I went to see an attorney, and the attorney said you had better just keep it the way it is and inform everybody else that you're AKA. So I notified Social Security, my employer, and everybody else, Peter Lew, AKA Lew Gwem Shew. And I got a passport and everything else same way. So those are the two names I use in English. I also have a Chinese name that is also alias.

01-00:40:52
Li: What is that?

01-00:40:53
Lew: Well, what it is is when I went to Chinese school, they asked me how I spelled my name and I didn't know, so the teacher wrote it out. And the word they used was Lew Gwem Shew, okay? But in later years, when I applied to join the family association in San Francisco and they checked back to the records in China, I was registered in the clan as Lew Gwem Shew. [laughter] So all of my names are aliases.

01-00:41:37
Li: So were you fairly active in the family association?

01-00:41:40
Lew: No, no. Not really.

01-00:41:58
Li: Did you stay with the military in some capacity—you said you were a civilian employee with the Navy before you retired.

- 01-00:42:04
Lew: Yes. No, okay. No. In 1951, a friend told me that they were hiring people for apprenticeships at Naval Air.
- 01-00:42:21
Li: In Alameda?
- 01-00:42:22
Lew: They were just opening up for veterans and everything there, so a few of us applied for it. Now, as you know, I was accepted, and the thing is I had another Chinese friend, he was in our poker group also, and he applied. He had requested for apprenticeship as a machinist, and I had applied and I requested an apprenticeship as a motor mechanic. Well, it turned out they assigned me as apprentice as a machinist, and for him, they assigned him as an apprentice into the motor mech trade. [laughter] Sound normal, does it?
- 01-00:43:11
Li: So starting in 1951, that was?
- 01-00:43:13
Lew: Yes, that was '51.
- 01-00:43:15
Li: And was that Alameda?
- 01-00:43:16
Lew: Naval Air Station Alameda. And my last fourteen years, I worked as a planner and estimator.
- 01-00:43:25
Li: In Alameda as well?
- 01-00:43:28
Lew: A civilian. Civilian employee at the Naval Air.
- 01-00:43:34
Li: How did Naval Air compare with Oakland Army Base?
- 01-00:43:37
Lew: Well, it was an industrial complex. It doesn't compare.
- 01-00:43:47
Li: So, do you think that your early experience working on an Army base affected your later career choices?
- 01-00:43:56
Lew: Yes, I was—well, everything affects you. You learn a little more each time. [laughter]
- 01-00:44:03
Li: Did you like the atmosphere, though, working at a military—?

01-00:44:08

Lew: Well, it's something you're used to. There's nothing that you—in other words, let's put it this way: I was not a rabble rouser. [laughter]

01-00:44:23

Li: And so what did you do between 1946 and 1951?

01-00:44:26

Lew: '46 and '51? Okay. When I got out, I didn't know what—So I went to City College in San Francisco as pre-engineering, but after a semester, I decided I was a little bit too far behind. It would take me a few years to catch up, because I had never started out with a college prep course. So I decided to look toward the vocational end of it, so I went to mechanics' school, auto mechanics' school under the GI Bill there, partway. After I got through with that, I worked as a tune up mechanic down for a service station down around Chinatown there. Let's see. When was that?

Okay, in '48—in the wintertime, it was cold, dreary, wet, greasy, and everything else, and this other kid that was working with me there, he came in one day and said, "You know, this is lousy weather." So I went down and he checked at the VA to see if they had openings there. He said, well, they had a messenger job open there. So he took it. So I said, "Well, heck! What have I got to lose?" Because this was miserable, you know?

So I went over there and applied the next day, and they said, "Well, we have no openings, but we do have a temporary opening as a clerk typist." They had a gal that was on maternity leave, and it would not exceed six months. I said, "Oh, well—" I figured it will get me through winter, anyway. So I took it. They gave me a typing test, and I passed it with flying colors, because I could type about eighty words a minute at that time.

01-00:46:44

Li: How did you learn how to do that?

01-00:46:47

Lew: Well, when I was in high school, I took as an elective course, I took typing. Because like anything else, insecurity, you didn't know what you were going to do, and I always wanted to learn how to type, so I took typing. So I did pretty well on that, and that also got me a better job in the—it didn't get me any rank in the Army, but it got me a soft job.

01-00:47:12

Li: And so you stayed there for six months?

01-00:47:16

Lew: Well, what happened there was when the girl came back from her maternity leave, they gave her back her job, but I guess I was doing my job pretty well, and a little faster than normal, so in between times they'd fill in my spare time, and the time I had spare, they taught me how to do premium accounting

on the GI insurance. So when the girl came back and got back her job, they promoted me into a premium accounting clerk job, which was two grades higher. [laughter] And that's where I worked until I applied for the apprenticeship.

01-00:47:57

Li: Oh, okay. So you got a lot of good skills from that experience?

01-00:48:01

Lew: Yes, well, like I say, you learn a little here and a little there.

01-00:48:08

Li: So did you ever attend college, go back to college?

01-00:48:10

Lew: Yes, I do have a lot of college units, but not—okay. I attended courses at San Francisco City College. I had courses at West Contra Costa College. I got my AA degree from there in 1955. And I attended programming courses down in San Jose City College, and Peralta College. I also worked a few years as an industrial engineering technician, and I also took courses from Merritt College for that, and naturally I attended Laney College.

01-00:48:57

Li: So you educated yourself continually throughout—

01-00:48:59

Lew: I have a lot of units, I just don't have a degree.

01-00:49:02

Li: Right! [laughter] So throughout your life, you kept on seeking new education.

01-00:49:04

Lew: Yes. So, like {short term?}, I'm like horse manure: all over the place.
[laughter]

01-00:49:19

Li: Oh, I almost forgot. Were there students from other high schools working at the Army base when you were there?

01-00:49:25

Lew: Pardon me?

01-00:49:26

Li: Were there students from other high schools working at the Army base when you were there?

01-00:49:30

Lew: Oh, yes. Like Fremont High School, I think. I'm not sure about University. I know there was an Italian kid from Fremont High School in Oakland.

01-00:49:44

Li: And would they keep your groups organized—

- 01-00:49:46
Lew: He was in our group, yeah. The high school students were more or less grouped under one area, and our work was basically light duty work. Rations are maybe, I don't know, forty-pound boxes, maybe?
- 01-00:50:03
Li: Okay. And how many of you were there all together, then, from all these different schools?
- 01-00:50:08
Lew: Yes, we worked as teams.
- 01-00:50:09
Li: You worked as a team. Okay. And how many were you?
- 01-00:50:14
Lew: I think the team's probably about four to six people. Probably about five or six people to a team.
- 01-00:50:22
Li: And how many teams, do you know?
- 01-00:50:24
Lew: Pardon me?
- 01-00:50:25
Li: How many teams were there?
- 01-00:50:27
Lew: That, I can't remember either. That's all vague. That is something—you never gave a thought, because you never figured you're going to live through it all.
- 01-00:50:40
Li: But they were from all schools, like all around Oakland?
- 01-00:50:42
Lew: Yes. Whoever heard of and applied.
- 01-00:50:47
Li: And did you get a raise at any time there, or did it stay seventy-five cents an hour the whole time?
- 01-00:50:51
Lew: I don't think I was there that long. I think I was only about six or eight months, I think. I can't remember that either. I can look back and check.
- 01-00:51:06
Li: Was that pretty typical? Most people would stay for several months, and then move on?

01-00:51:10
Lew: That's typical. Yeah. Well, when they graduated, they were gone. Mostly into the service right away.

01-00:51:18
Li: And would they hire more students from the school, then, to replace you?

01-00:51:21
Lew: [sneezes] That, I don't know. [sneezes] Excuse me.

01-00:51:29
Li: That's okay. Here. Okay, well, I think that we've covered all of the things relevant to the Oakland Army Base, unless there's something else you can think of?

01-00:51:40
Lew: Not much else. Like I said, we never thought we'd be alive. [sneezes] We knew we were going in the service, and that was it.

01-00:51:58
Li: You must have lost a lot of friends, then, who didn't come back.

01-00:52:04
Lew: No. No. I only lost a few friends that I knew.

01-00:52:10
Li: But during that time period, it felt like—

01-00:52:12
Lew: Yeah. But I had quite a few who were injured, you know? More war injuries than the—

01-00:52:20
Li: Was it hard, then, to make long-term plans, knowing that you would be drafted?

01-00:52:24
Lew: Never bothered to make plans. We just basically lived for the day, because we figured we're not going to make it, and I figured I would not come back out alive because we were assault troops. We were assault troops, and we were training troops for the invasion of Japan. And naturally, we were the most likely to go with them, so the idea of coming back alive is sort of—not too much things you think about. Because we were first-wave troops, see?

01-00:53:10
Li: Yeah. So did you feel good about the work that you did, then, when you were in the Army?

01-00:53:22
Lew: You have to do your share. You can't go slacking off. In the military, you do what they tell you to do.

01-00:53:37
Li: Is there anyone else besides Edward Kwoc that you think we should talk to?

01-00:53:42
Lew: Well, no, everybody else is dead (of old age) that I—[laughter]

01-00:53:46
Li: That you can think of who was—yeah.

01-00:53:50
Lew: You're referring to the Army base workers, right?

01-00:53:53
Li: Yeah.

01-00:53:56
Lew: I don't know. There might be one other alive, but I'm not sure.

01-00:54:04
Li: Do you remember his name?

01-00:54:06
Lew: Robert Chin.

01-00:54:07
Li: Robert Chin.

01-00:54:16
Lew: But that's about it.

01-00:54:19
Li: All right. Well, thank you.

01-00:54:19
Lew: See, the one—now, I remember that Italian kid, his last name was Pinos, P-I-N-O-S.

01-00:54:26
Li: Pinos?

01-00:54:27
Lew: That's about all I can remember of it.

01-00:54:29
Li: But you're not in touch with him anymore?

01-00:54:31
Lew: No, no, I'm not—well, just like everything else, you lose touch with everybody, because it's just like military. You train your 600 people, all the sudden only six of you went here, the rest of them went over to Europe. So you never saw them anymore. And likewise.

01-00:54:55
Li: So were Pinos and Chin, did they also go to Tech High?

01-00:54:59
Lew: No, no. I think he went to Fremont or Castlemont.

01-00:55:06
Li: And Robert Chin?

01-00:55:08
Lew: Robert Chin went to Tech High.

01-00:55:11
Li: And Edward Kwok?

01-00:55:13
Lew: He went to Tech High.

01-00:55:14
Li: He went to Tech High as well. Okay. We can try and track them down.
[laughter] All right. Thank you very much.

01-00:55:23
Lew: Yeah. That's about all I can do to help you, I'm sorry.

01-00:55:26
Li: That's okay. No, that's great. Thank you.

[break in recording]

01-00:55:29
Lew: —least with me.

01-00:55:33
Li: You mean like instead of—?

01-00:55:35
Lew: Well, the units change, the headquarters change, our command changes, but I always stay put. [laughter]

01-00:55:45
Li: Right, so you stayed in the Bay Area.

01-00:55:47
Lew: Well, yes. Okay, like after basic, the unit I was with, we worked out of Fort Ord, we traveled up and down the coast, but we changed from one headquarter to the other. We were part of the Eighteenth Armored Group. The Eighteenth Armored Group was part of the General Headquarters. Okay, our unit wore special patches. In other words, our Headquarters wore Armored Group patches; we wore our own amphibian patches. In other words, the patches that the tactical unit I was in, I guess they're probably no more than 10,000 troops ever were allowed to wear those patches, see? And then we

were never assigned to—like, Fort Ord was a replacement depot. We were just tenants in the depot. We were not part of the depot, see? And we traveled up, we stayed at Camp Cooke, and we stayed at Camp Pendleton (a marine base). We trained with Ninety-Fifth Infantry down in the San Clemente Islands for beachhead landings. We trained the Eighty-Sixth Infantry for beachhead landings in San Luis Obispo. But they had the Battle of the Bulge in Europe, and all the sudden they switched them over to Europe.

01-00:57:29

Li: So would you actually practice mounting the beach in the amphibious vehicles in San Luis Obispo?

01-00:57:32

Lew: Well, we traveled by ship. In other words, our tanks and equipment went out in the ocean and boarded the ship, back up into the ship and come back out of the ship. We didn't go by land under normal circumstances.

01-00:57:55

Li: So you were saying that the Army kept on moving with you?

01-00:57:59

Lew: Well, yes. Just like when the war ended and they deactivated us, why, they reformed some regular Army units, and they formed that unit down at Fort Ord, made them part of the Sixth Army, but we never wore the Sixth Army shoulder patches either, any more than we wore the Armored Force shoulder patches.

01-00:58:26

Li: All right. That's great.

[End Audio File 1]

[End of Interview]