

SEGMENT 1: For the Record

Today is Thursday, May 15, 2003, and this the beginning of an interview with Allen Sher at his home at 1603 River Ridge in Asheville, NC. Mr. Sher is 81 years old, having been born on November 22, 1921. My name is Jean Baker.

Interviewer: Mr. Sher, could you state for the recording, what war and branch of service you served in?

Mr. Sher: I was in World War II, and I was in the Signal Corps and Air Corps.

Interviewer: What was your rank?

Mr. Sher: When I was discharged I was sergeant.

Interviewer: Where did you serve?

Mr. Sher: I served in the CBI theatre, and I was In India and in China two years overseas.

Thank you so much. This concludes Segment 1.

SEGMENT 2: Jogging Memory

Interviewer: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

Mr. Sher: I was drafted.

Interviewer: And where were you living at the time?

Mr. Sher: I was living in Brooklyn, New York.

Interviewer: Why did you join? You were drafted.

Mr. Sher: I didn't really want to enlist; I was drafted and went through the regular draft process.

Interviewer: Did you have an opportunity to pick the service branch?

Mr. Sher: When I was drafted, we had an interview that was part of the reception center. The interviewer looked at my academic work, and the conclusion was I was assigned to the Signal Corps. Interviewer: Do you recall your first days in service?

Mr. Sher: Yes, I recall very well. It was February 12, 1943, when we went through the examination process. And while I just said I didn't care to be drafted, when we went through the

physical, I was hoping that I would make it because If I didn't, it would indicate that there was something wrong physically. When I went through the process, the only physical defect they found was a deviated septum in the nose; and, while it interfered with breathing a little bit, it didn't have anything to do with my ability to function as a soldier.

Interviewer: Tell me about your boot camp or your training experiences?

Mr. Sher: The first camp in which I served was Camp Upton in Long Island, New York, and that was considered a reception center. I spent 10 days there. It was cold; it was in February, and It was a very big, busy reception center because it had so many soldiers coming from the New York City area. And while there were four regular buildings for the troops that were coming into the service, it was so many, they had to build another one. And this was a tent area. We stayed in tents. This was in February. The tents were big enough to hold four soldiers. We had cots and there was a potbelly stove in the center of the tent. It was cold. While this was the Fifth Receiving Company, we use to call ourselves The Frozen Fifth." It was cold, but we were just waiting to see what would happen to us when we left the receiving company.

Interviewer: And where did you go from there?

Mr. Sher: I was assigned to Arlington, VA. Another soldier and I were going to the DC area, and we went as a group of two soldiers. From Camp Upton, we took the Long Island Railroad in to Pennsylvania Station. Then we took a Pennsylvania Railroad from New York City into Washington, DC. I thought someone would be at the station looking for me; this is Allen Sher who is going to Washington, DC. There was no one looking for me; there were millions of people around. Eventually, I found somebody who told me where to go.

Interviewer: How did you receive your training in the Signal Corps?

Mr. Sher: In Arlington, VA, there was a Signal Corps school, and I was sent there to learn cryptography. I wound up as a cryptanalyst, which was decoding Japanese weather; but, before learning cryptanalysis, I had to learn what it is to be a cryptographer. In weather squadrons, the cryptographer would take the weather signs and translate them into numerals. This was for people who were weathermen predicting the weather for our own air pilots that would go out on missions. I was selected to be a cryptanalyst which was to be working on Japanese weather. When I was sent to India (and China), the idea was we had Signal Corps intercept operators that would record the Japanese weather. They would give the Japanese weather to us, and we were able to decode what the Japanese weather was over Manchuria and Tokyo. We could give those weather observations to the forecasters, and they would help to land the B29's when there was a bombing mission in Manchuria or someplace in Japan. This was at a B29 base in western China near Chang Tu. It was a very big base because the B29s were the biggest planes at the time; and, when they were loaded with bombs, they needed a long, long runway. We used to help with the predictions, and then we'd watch the B29s take off on their bombing runs and, then, watch to see how many came back at the end of the day.

Interviewer: Did you have other training as well as the cryptography?

Mr. Sher: As a cryptanalyst, I had a background in Signal Corps operation and, then, I was transferred to the 10th Weather Squadron which was part of the Air Corps.

This concludes Segment 2.

SEGMENT 3: Experiences

Interviewer: You have already indicated that you served in WWII. Where exactly did you go?

Mr. Sher: From Camp Upton, New York, I went to Arlington, VA and, then, to Warrenton, VA for basic training. After Warrenton, VA, I was sent North Carolina to Seymour Johnson Field in Goldsboro. This was an ORTC (Oversees Replacement Training Center), and we received training there on how to cope with being overseas- We were given special clothing and special equipment based on where we going. When I was told that I was going to the China/Burma/India theatre, we received special clothing there. It was in the wintertime so we had our regular winter clothing. From Goldsboro we went by train to Norfolk, VA and from there, I went by troop ship to India. We went from Norfolk by way of the South Atlantic. We went to Cape Town, South Africa and stayed there one day for refueling and, then, the ship went into the Indian Ocean and up to Bombay.

Interviewer: What was your job assignment at that time?

Mr. Sher: As a cryptanalyst, it was to decode Japanese weather and give that information to the forecasters. Interviewer: Did you see any combat? Mr. Sher: When I was in China- it was at a B29 base- the Japanese knew about us because the B29s were leaving our air base and bombing Manchuria and Japan. The Japanese tried to retaliate by sending planes over, and they did drop bombs on our air base.

Interviewer: Did you see any casualties from your unit?

Mr. Sher: We were lucky in that the bombs that they dropped on us were small bombs, and I fortunately was not injured. I didn't see any other soldiers of my unit that were injured. When I was discharged I received ribbons and one was for being in the CBI Theatre, and I'll show you one ribbon that has a star on it. The star indicates that this was because it was a battle area, and the Japanese did drop bombs. The Service recognized this by giving a ribbon to people who saw that kind of action.

Interviewer: Could you tell me a couple of your most memorable experiences?

Mr. Sher: One experience has nothing to do with the war, but it has to do with something I learned by being in North Carolina that I had never experienced by living up North. This was when I was in Goldsboro. One weekend, I was able to get a one-day pass; and, on a Saturday, I went into the town of Goldsboro. I walked up and down the main street. There was one movie theater. I stopped to look to see what was playing. The person who sold tickets sat in a little booth that was V-shaped. On one side people would buy tickets if they were white; and, on the other side of the window, there was a window for blacks. This was one of my introductions into white/black ways of life in the South.

Interviewer: And, did the blacks have to sit up in the balcony?

Mr. Sher: I heard that; I didn't go inside. But, I did understand that blacks were not given the best of facilities. There were two other incidents related to discrimination that I encountered here in the states. One was just before I was going to go overseas. I had time to go up to New York City for a last visit with my parents. I went by train from Goldsboro up to New York. It was, I saw them on a Saturday and Sunday afternoon I had to leave in order to go back to Goldsboro to be there by Monday morning. The Pennsylvania Railroad was very, very crowded going between New York City and Washington, D.C. I got onto the train, but there were no seats. I had to stand for four hours. When the train reached Washington, D.C., many, many people got off, and I was able to sit down. This train was going to go through Washington, D.C. to Richmond, VA. This was where I had to go in order to go to Goldsboro. I sat down and I felt relieved that I didn't have to stand anymore. The conductor came into the car and said, "You're not allowed to sit in this car." I said, "Why not. I'm very comfortable here." He said, "This car is for Colored." What that meant was that the train was going south of Washington, D.C., and they had white cars and cars for the colored people. It was a new experience for me to have to see that in person.

Interviewer: Were any of your peers taken as prisoner of war?

Mr. Sher: No. We were in the western part of China; and, while I was overseas for two years, it was about a year in India and there was no combat, no action in New Delhi and Calcutta where I was. In the western part of China where the air base was, the Japanese hadn't reached us.

Interviewer: As a sergeant, were you involved in any plans regarding the battle or the activity of your unit?

Mr. Sher: I wasn't involved in any battles because I was a weatherman. The job was to decode Japanese weather, which we did and gave to our weather forecasters. That concludes Segment 3.

SEGMENT 4: Life

Interviewer: How did you stay in touch with your family?

Mr. Sher: I wrote letters to my parents as well as to my girlfriend. She wanted to be married, but I didn't want to because of the hazards of the war. We were engaged for three years; and, when the war was over, we were married as soon as possible. That was in February 1946. But I was a good, regular letter writer. During WWII, we had V-mail where we would write a letter and it would be photographed and reduced so there was less volume to be carried by plane. In China, all of our mail was censored; and, if I wrote a letter, I wasn't able to say where I was. I had to write just somewhere in China. If I said that something that a censor thought was significant information, they used a razor blade to cut that out. When I came home, my parents showed some of the mail they received. There were items that had been cut out.

Interviewer: What was the food like when you were in the service?

Mr. Sher: In the states, food was regular Army food. When I was in Virginia, they were close to the Chesapeake Bay. There was seafood that was available. Every Friday was fish day, and we would have fish whenever possible. I remember that we had oysters and other seafood that they got from the Chesapeake Bay. One day in India, it was on Friday, we had fish for dinner. I asked one of the cooks where he got this fish because it tasted good. This was in Karachi, India. There was an Indian man in a turban behind the table. I said, "This fish is very good. What kind of fish is this?" "Oh, sahib, this is Karachi fish." I just wanted to thank them for having good food. It was an experience of food in India. At one time, we had food with a lot of curry in it, and some of it was very, very spicy. This was prepared by Indian people. We had our own mess sergeants who were able to prepare food that was not so spicy.

Interviewer: Did you have plenty of supplies?

Mr. Sher: Yes. In order to deliver supplies to us as quickly as possible, there was a plane route that went from the States down to South America to Brazil and from Brazil the planes would go across the South Atlantic to Africa to India. From India, the planes would go across the Himalayas into China. Our nickname was the "Hump." If you flew over the Himalayas, it was flying over the "Hump."

Interviewer: Cigarettes seemed to be an item of interest during WWII. Did you smoke?

Mr. Sher: Yes, I did smoke. I stopped smoking in 1963. But, we are talking about WWII which was 1943-46. Cigarettes were available in the PX. Even when we were overseas there were PX's, and they would have planes coming in with supplies. We could buy anything that was sent over from the states.

Interviewer: Did you feel pressure or stress during your experience during the war?

Mr. Sher: There was plenty of pressure because we watched to see what was happening in Europe. When the war in Europe ended in 1945, we were pleased about that. That was in May when the Germans surrendered. We were just hoping that, as much emphasis as had been given

to the war in Europe would be transferred to us. We kept saying, "Hey, don't forget us. We're still here."

Interviewer: And that extended your stay a good bit longer, didn't it?

Mr. Sher: The big event in 1945 was the dropping of the Atom bomb. That was in August. The Japanese surrendered very quickly after that. There was a system set up for discharge of soldiers; and, based on how long you were in service, you received so many points. If you were overseas, you were given credit toward your discharge.

Interviewer: Did you do anything special for good luck? Did you carry anything or have a routine for good luck?

Mr. Sher: No. I didn't have anything for good luck. I do remember a Passover Seder that we had in New Delhi, India. This was at the time of Passover. It had to be in April 1944. Jewish soldiers and officers were able to get together and have a Passover Seder. The Jewish Welfare Board in the States sent over loxes and other items that were part of Passover. We felt very good that we were able to observe our Passover Seder even overseas. The Army was very liberal in people and their religious beliefs. There were Chaplains who would cater to soldiers regardless of their religion. If there was no Rabbi around, there were Protestant and Catholic chaplains who would provide service to those of the Jewish faith. And, there were Rabbis who were chaplains who would provide assistance to those of other religions.

Interviewer: How did you entertain yourself and how did the other soldiers entertain themselves?

Mr. Sher: We played a lot of cards. We played poker; we played pinochle. When I was going overseas when we boarded a ship, I found myself down on D deck of the troop ship. It turned out this was a ship that had been a passenger liner of the Canadian Pacific during peacetime but had been converted to a troop ship. There was a cabin that was used for storage for linen and other supplies for the ship. It was turned into an area for sleeping. This closet was converted so that we had twelve men sleeping in it- four (rows of) bunks one on top of the other. When we entered this little area, there was some recreational equipment that had been left for us. Everybody grabbed a piece of equipment. There were checkers and playing cards. I was the last one to go into the cabin. The last item that was there was a cribbage board. I picked up that cribbage board and learned how to play cribbage. I still have that particular cribbage board. And I still like to play cribbage.

Interviewer: Were you able to go on leave or travel while you were in the service? You mentioned your trip to New York, but did you take other leave?

Mr. Sher: No. I was on the east coast; and, if there were short periods or a break from the service, there might be just a weekend pass. When I was ready to go overseas, they didn't want to give us any real leave because we had received all the training necessary and they didn't want to see that

training wasted. When I was in India for one year, they thought we deserved a rest leave. I was stationed in New Delhi, and we went to a rest leave in the northern part of India in a place that was cooler.

Interviewer: Do you recall any humorous or unusual events?

Mr. Sher: One humorous event had to do with being on this rest leave. We stayed at a Red Cross hostile for one week, and they provided whatever recreational activities were available in that area. There was horseback riding available. Well, I came from New York City, and I didn't know much about horses. But this was a novelty, and I signed up to go horseback riding. I think I was the only one who signed up to go horseback riding that day. There were Indians in charge of the horses. Eventually, I found myself on top of the horse, and we went on a trail. The horse went slowly and carefully. It was supposed to be a one-hour trip. After a half-hour, I thought we should turn around. I pulled on the reins and wanted the horse to go back. The horse wouldn't go back. The horse stopped, turned around and just looked at me. I said to the horse, "Let's go back. Come on, let's go back." The horse just looked at me. Fortunately, there was an Indian who had been assigned to follow the horse and me. I guess probably to make sure the horse got back. He turned the horse around, and the horse started to go again. Somebody said I guess he doesn't understand English; you have to talk to the horse in Hindustani.

Interviewer: What were some of the pranks that you or others would pull?

Mr. Sher: I don't remember any pranks. I do remember one man in Virginia who always slept late when we had to get out. He was a solid sleeper. Four men took a corner of his bed and lifted the bed with him in it out of the barrack and placed the bed in a field. He slept through it all. It wasn't anything damaging.

Interviewer: Do you have any photographs?

Mr. Sher: I don't have any photographs. My wife who has passed away had the photographs. My daughter who lives in California said that she would try to send them to me. Interviewer: Do you think of or stay in touch with any officers or fellow soldiers?

Mr. Sher: I haven't been in touch with any of the men that I was close with. Here in Asheville, there is a group that meets from time to time of WWII veterans, and I enjoy getting together with them, listening to speakers, and sharing some of the adventures which we had.

Interviewer: What did you think of the officers and fellow soldiers?

Mr. Sher: The fellow soldiers were all doing the same job as I which was to decode Japanese weather. The officers were above us doing their jobs, and I didn't experience any difficulty.

Interviewer: Did you keep a personal diary?

Mr. Sher: No. I didn't keep a diary.

This concludes Segment 4.

SEGMENT 5: After Service

Interviewer: Do you recall the day your service ended?

Mr. Sher: Yes. I was discharged on January 3, 1946. One way I am able to remember this is I have my discharge paper from WWII. When I came back from overseas, I was sent back to Seymour Johnson field in Goldsboro for discharge. This is where I received my discharge papers and any ribbons to which I was entitled.

Interviewer: What did you do in the days and weeks after your discharge?

Mr. Sher: I wanted to become a teacher. Before the war, I had been to Brooklyn College for a bachelor's degree and to the University of Nebraska for a master's degree. I really wanted to teach, but the war came along and I wasn't able to. My aim was to get into the teaching profession. Living in New York City at that time, in order to become a teacher, you had to take an examination. They were given in different subjects. It took a while for the examination to be given in the subject in which I was trained. I was able to get into the Board of Education as a teacher. I taught in a few different schools before I obtained a regular job as an elementary school teacher. That started In 1948, and I taught in New York City Schools for 26 years.

Interviewer: Did you receive any additional training through the G.I. Bill?

Mr. Sher: After the war we had the G. I. Bill available to us so I went for an advanced degree. I attended Columbia as a part-time student for nine years and received a doctorate degree in education (EdD).

Interviewer: Did you join a veteran's organization?

Mr. Sher: I joined a group of Jewish war veterans two years ago just to have some link with WWII veterans.

This concludes Segment 5.

SEGMENT 6: Later Years and Closing

Interviewer: What did you go on to do as a career after the war?

Mr. Sher: I became a teacher and taught for 26 years in New York City. In 1972, my wife and I moved to Rutland, Vermont. With a doctorate I was able to get a job teaching in a college in Rutland, Vermont at the College of St. Joseph where I taught for 10 years. I've always been happy as a teacher, and here I am in Asheville, North Carolina due to some part-time teaching for the College for Seniors, for Brevard College, for Montreat College, and Continuing Education.

Interviewer: What was your specialty? What was area of study?

Mr. Sher: My specialty is in the area of recreation. I am a folk dancer and a square dancer, and I've taught folk dancing and square dancing. I've done that with children and adults. Folk dancing is one of my recreational activities now.

Interviewer: What did you teach when you were in Vermont?

Mr. Sher: I taught courses in education because I was happy as a teacher, and I wanted to help others who wanted to become teachers to enter that profession, too.

Interviewer: Did your military experience influence your thinking about war or about the military in general?

Mr. Sher: The war going on right now in Iraq and all of those military experiences which are unhappy with people being wounded and killed on either side. I just hope that we don't have to have any war in the future. Even before President Bush sent troops into Iraq, I sent letters to him and to the Vice President and to our Senators and Representatives. One day, I just sat down and wrote a letter to each of them, saying, "I hope we don't have to go into war in Iraq," but the President was able to have that action he wanted carried out.

Interviewer: How did your service and experiences affect your life?

Mr. Sher: I'm thankful that I was able to have three years of service. As far as physical injuries I had trouble with a knee, and I had surgery to remove torn cartilage. That was in Virginia and had nothing to do with actual combat. I'm grateful for having been through WWII and come out of it safely. I just hope that I can do whatever I can to help youngsters be aware of what the military is and to try to promote peace whenever possible.

Interviewer: We talked a little bit about one of the medals you received when you were in China, the one with the star. I think you may have others. Could you tell me about your medals?

Mr. Sher: One is a good conduct medal which I received for not having any violations of military law. There is a ribbon of the same color, and there is a regular medal that goes below the ribbon. I've saved these from the time I was discharged. This is a medal that I received for rifle practice. I was a marksman and I saved that. This ribbon, yellow with red, white, and blue vertical stripes,

is for being in the CBI Theater, and this is the same ribbon but it has a bronze star on it for being in combat when the Japanese dropped bombs on us in China. This is a medal for being a veteran of WWII in general. I saved them, but I suppose I'll give them to my children and grandchildren.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that perhaps we haven't covered that you would like to add?

Mr. Sher: The military experience, now that I look back on it, is one for which I've been grateful. I'm glad to say I was in WWII and did my part to promote peace and to put an end to the German regime and the Japanese regime. I think it's important that we do what we can now to promote good relations between us and Germany and us and Japan. We seem to be doing that; and, as I look at Orientals who are here in Asheville, I'm glad to see that they have a chance to get jobs and move up the ladder. This is 2003, and it's a good 60 years since WWII ended. I just hope hostilities are a thing of the past.

Interviewer: Thank you, Mr. Sher, so much for your time and your efforts to help us maintain this memory. Mr. Sher: You're welcome.

Interviewer: We have an additional humorous remark that Mr. Allen Sher would like to add to his interview.

Mr. Sher: This is an incident that happened on our return from India to the States when the war was over. It was in November 1945. We were on a troop ship, the Aldophus W. Krelley. I was a sergeant, and I had to do whatever tasks were assigned to me. I wound up in the galley of the ship. I was on the vegetable detail. Whenever there were vegetables to be prepared, this was part of my job. One Friday, when we were going to have fish, the cook was going to make salmon loaf. We had a few cartons of salmon that contained 1-pound cans of salmon. I opened many, many cans of salmon, and the cook mixed the salmon and made salmon loaves. He put them into bread loaf tins that were the same tins that were used for baking bread every day. The salmon loaves were put into the oven; and, when they came out, they looked very good. I said to the cook, "Boy, those salmon loaves look good." And he looked at me and he said, "They look good, but they ain't." I think he was just telling me how people knew that they had to have fish on Friday, and they just were not happy with fish, whatever kind of fish it was. On that same trip, as went through the Indian Ocean on our way home, we went up through the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean Sea to come home. I remember November 22, 1945, which was my birthday. On that day, I had to peel 50 pounds of onions. I knew we were going through the Suez Canal, and I had never been there and haven't been there since. I ran up from the galley to the top deck and looked to the left and looked to the right and said to myself, "Oh, the Suez Canal." And I had to go back to peel the onions.