

**EI-1432**

**FULL NAME: THOMAS J. PIEMONTE**

**BIRTHDATE: OCTOBER 21, 1925**

**AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 81**

**FULL NAME: JOHN F. STEVENS**

**BIRTHDATE: SEPTEMBER 7, 1922**

**AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 84**

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**INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D**

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: KATHERINE MEYERS**

**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:**

LEVINE: Today is October the 12<sup>th</sup> the year 2006. I'm here in New Jersey-- in Rockaway?—Rockaway, New Jersey. And I'm with two men who served in the Coast Guard and were at-- in signalman school on Ellis Island in the fall of 1943, September through November. And the men that I'm going to be speaking with-- Thomas J. Piemonte and John F. Stevens-- they were together in signalman school, but John Stevens was actually there a year earlier in boot camp at Ellis Island. So I think this is unusual in the sense that most of the Coast Guard in our interview are people who were at Ellis Island a shorter time. So this is great and I think maybe we could just start by saying how you two came together again after many years. What was the impetus to your getting together and then consequently this interview taking place?

PIEMONTE: Well, I wrote a book that was written about in the local newspaper. And John spotted my name and references to Ellis Island and signalman school and thought perhaps we had spent time together. And after a phone call, sure enough-- we did-- and we reunited after sixty-two years and here we are today.

LEVINE: That's great. So what—John, when you read the article, did you think that this was somebody you knew?

STEVENS: I wasn't sure. The thing that got me keyed up was the signalman school which-- it seemed about the same time that-- that I was there. And my wife contacted the editor and she immediately got back to us and gave me Tom's phone number. And I called Tom and then—and then I remembered I had these pictures and when I looked on the back of the one picture, sure enough, there was Tom Piemonte's name.

PIEMONTE: Yep.

STEVENS: So we were in the class, but I wasn't sure which one he was. I had an idea that this was him, but I wasn't positive. And this was more or less how we got together after all of these years. And we only live within a mile and a half of one another.

LEVINE: That's wonderful. Well, I just want to say that we have Tom's book in the Ellis Island Library and it's called A World War II Sailor's Journey: The North Atlantic to the Sea of Japan and it's a wonderful book for someone who is not very familiar with the Coast Guard. It's so clear and you learn a lot through reading it. It's a wonderful book. Ok, so—well-- let's now start at the beginning. Your birth-date, if you would say it for the tape, please?

PIEMONTE: October 21<sup>st</sup> 1925.

LEVINE: Ok, and how about you, John-- your birth-date?

STEVENS: September the 7<sup>th</sup> 1922.

LEVINE: And Tom, where did you grow up?

PIEMONTE: Orange, NJ.

LEVINE: And were you in Orange, NJ up until the time you joined the Coast Guard?

PIEMONTE: I was, yes.

LEVINE: And how about you, John? Where were you?

STEVENS: I was in West Orange, NJ.

(all laugh)

PIEMONTE: That is amazing.

STEVENS: Yep.

LEVINE: Ok, and you were there the whole time too, until you left.

STEVENS: Yes.

LEVINE: Ok, how about saying why you-- each of you-- joined the Coast Guard as compared with perhaps another branch of the service?

PIEMONTE: Well, I think what influenced me the most was that we would spend summers at the Jersey Shore and I was fascinated with the sea. And when the war broke out the German submarines were sinking-- at will, really-- our ships right off shore. And I think when I was sixteen I went down with some other older boys just to see if we could spot

submarines. And I was fascinated because the Coast Guard had been involved. At that time we didn't have much anti-submarine ships and the Coast Guard were the very first ones to do that-- even before the Navy at that time. And I think I was influenced that way more than anything.

LEVINE: So you had read about the sinking or the submarine activity offshore?

PIEMONTE: Oh sure, sure, there was a lot of it off Jersey. Yeah, yeah.

STEVENS: Hmm.

LEVINE: I see. How about you, John, what-- from what prompted you to join the--?

STEVENS: It's an entirely different story.

LEVINE: Great.

STEVENS: I did—I did like-- I always liked the water because my dad-- we used to do a lot of deep sea fishing. So I naturally did like the water. But when I went in in '42, to sign up for a regular hitch in the Coast Guard was for three years, and the Navy was six years. So I opt for the three years just in case things weren't going-- that the war didn't last longer than the three years. And that's really the main reason. Because I didn't know anything about the Coast Guard or really even about the Navy that much at the time-- except that I did know that the one hitch was shorter than the other and I took the three year hitch. Which I was in longer anyhow-- it was three years, eleven months, and eight days.

LEVINE: Well, did you feel like you were going to be drafted or did you feel like you wanted to sign up, or--?

STEVENS: Well we-- sure, we would have been drafted eventually, but I never had a draft card until I got out of the service. And then I got a letter one day from the army in East Orange and I had to get down there and sign up.

LEVINE: After you were--?

STEVENS: After I was discharged, yep.

PIEMONTE: And I-- I joined when I was seventeen and a half. So I wasn't draft age yet, but I would have been, you know, in another six months.

STEVENS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Can you say anything about the feeling-- I mean, World War II was so different from-- from wars that we've had since then-- the feeling about serving?

PIEMONTE: I think everybody-- I think every young man that was there wanted to serve. I think it was just the thing to do. I couldn't wait to get in. You know, when the war broke out I was sixteen-- a little over sixteen-- when Pearl Harbor was bombed.

LEVINE: Do you remember that day?

PIEMONTE: Oh yeah, I do. I remember where I was, what I was doing.

LEVINE: Go ahead, tell us.

PIEMONTE: Well it was right after church and I was in the licien [ph] shooting pool. And I had never heard of Pearl Harbor and I just looked up and said, "Where is it?" Little did I know that I would, you know, be there a year or two later. But everybody was caught up in-- in wanting to, I think, do their part. Everybody just wanted to join.

LEVINE: Yeah. Did you feel that way, John? Did you want to—or did you-- or did you just feel it was—it was a necessary--?

STEVENS: Well, it was something, you know, you had to do, and you would want to do it. And-- and I just wanted to-- to get out on the water. I wanted to be on a ship. That was my main thing, to get on a ship.

PIEMONTE: Yeah.

STEVENS: What I was doing on Pearl Harbor Day-- I was lying on my bed with my-- I lived with my folks at the time and I was listening to the Giants and the Brooklyn football teams in professional football. Then they interrupted the game and said about Pearl Harbor, and of course it was only a month later and I was gone.

PIEMONTE: Wow, that's right.

LEVINE: Was the reaction-- was it anything like the Trade Tower—when the-- 9/11 when the towers were hit? Was Pearl Harbor anything similar or was it a different kind of--?

STEVENS: I think it had to be different for us here because it was so far away that you couldn't quite visualize like with the—with the— W--. With the Trade Towers you were watching it right on television as it happened

and you know we never saw anything about Pearl Harbor until later on when they released all the photos and stuff. And you didn't have the television; it was all in the newspaper.

PIEMONTE [overlapping]: Good point, yeah.

STEVENS: But it was-- but you knew—you knew in your heart that you're gonna go, you know, that you were gonna have to go sooner or later, that there was no sense in postponing it.

LEVINE: Yeah.

STEVENS: And I was never sorry that I did what I did. I would have liked to have been on other ships in the—in the-- like Tom, he got to ride on the destroyer escort. I would have loved that. But I got on these little eighty-three footers and we did what we had to do. And we did serve in D-Day. And I was just reading the article again-- there's an article in that book there-- that we had sixty vessels of the same size— eight-three footers. They put them all up on Liberty Ships and took them over to England. And we went over. Four of the crew went on the ship with the-- with our vessel and the rest of us went over in a Navy LST to England over the North Atlantic. And it was very interesting: the envoy was attacked, ships were sunk right around us. It was a little scary. Yes.

LEVINE: Well first let's talk about-- when you got-- when you went in first you went to boot camp. So was Ellis Island your first--

STEVENS: Very first, yes.

LEVINE: --place you were sent. And could you say anything about that, either about boot camp or Ellis Island or any-- I know you said you don't remember much, but is there anything that comes to mind about that ferry?

STEVENS: Well yeah, they told us we were going to get sea duty and marched us down to the ferry boat.

(Both laugh a little.)

STEVENS: I said, "Where are we going?" you know, and we wound up on Ellis Island. And I said, "This is different," you know, never thinking in a million years that this was where I was going to wind up on my first day.

LEVINE: Did you know about Ellis Island, I mean was--

STEVENS: Well I knew about Ellis Island, but not as a Coast Guard—not as a Coast Guard boot camp.

LEVINE: And had anybody in your family come through there?

STEVENS: I believe that my grandmother and my mother did. We do have information and the name of the ship and that. And--.

LEVINE: And where were they coming from?

STEVENS: Up-- they came from the north part of Germany in the-- I think it was called Ludwighaven [ph] or something. It was a port anyhow— a seaport, so--.

LEVINE: And did they ever speak of it-- speak about the immigration experience to you?

STEVENS: Nope, no, never a word do I remember-- never hearing anything about it, no, no.

LEVINE: So you had boot camp there, then you went somewhere else. Where did you go then?

STEVENS: Went up to New London, CT, was stationed in Fort-- Fort Trumbull, which is also where the Coast Guard Academy is. And then from there I went out to an island in-- in Long Island Sound called Fisher Island and did beach duty there.

LEVINE: What is beach duty entail?

STEVENS: Walking the beach.

LEVINE: Oh just to—just to—sp—spy--?

STEVENS: Yep, that's just what it was. And I did that for quite a while, then I got out of there and went back, and then I actually went back to New London again and I was there for a while. And next thing I know I wound up at Ellis Island again at the signalman school which was fine by me because I knew if I got through signalman school I'm going to get a ship.

LEVINE: So how did you-- how did it happen that you got signalman school, that you went there?

STEVENS: I don't have the slightest idea why they sent me there, and-- but I'm very happy that they did.

LEVINE: And that's where you came to Ellis Island.

STEVENS: That's right.

LEVINE: So why don't you fill in where you went to boot camp and up until you got to Ellis Island?

PIEMONTE: Right. I went to boot camp at Manhattan Beach, Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn. And I think that was twelve weeks and then at the end of the twelve weeks or near the end of it they test-- they asked you what you would like to do and they tested you for different schools and for different ratings. And I picked signalman/quartermaster and was qualified at least from the test I took to go to school. And I didn't know where the school was-- it was-- it ended up it was on Ellis Island.

LEVINE: So in other words you chose that and then your aptitude tests revealed that you were qualified to do it.

PIEMONTE: Right, yeah, exactly

LEVINE: So why did you choose— why did you want to do signalman school?

PIEMONTE: Yeah, I-- I really don't know. I guess the choices might have been electricians' maid [unclear] or different ratings and that looked interesting to me. It was a signalman slash quartermaster school and signalman is communications, quartermaster is navigation, and they combined the two and if you qualified for one you were qualified for the

other. So it just appealed and I was happy I got into it. I enjoyed the rating and it was good.

LEVINE: And did you take a test, too, do you-- now that Tom's mentioning it do you--?

STEVENS: I-- I have no idea.

LEVINE: Ok, so you got to Ellis Island and how did it strike you? What was Ellis Island like, what--?

PIEMONTE: I remember getting off the ferry boat. I remember that vividly. I remember the buildings, huge buildings. And I also remember a duty we had-- you might remember this-- the sea wall, walking the sea wall.

STEVENS: Yes, we both did that, yes.

PIEMONTE: With guns without ammunition. Right? And--.

LEVINE: Now you-- I think you mentioned in your book-- is it your mother or your father?

PIEMONTE: My dad came, yeah.

LEVINE: He came through Ellis Island?

PIEMONTE: Thirty years earlier, right, right.

LEVINE: And were you aware of that when you were sent to Ellis Island, or--?

PIEMONTE: I was, yeah I was. I knew that he came. I didn't know at that time the exact date or anything, but I-- but I learned that later, you know, the date, the name of the ship, and everything.

LEVINE: And was that something your father talked with you about, immigration?

PIEMONTE: Not really, not really.

LEVINE: Yeah, people didn't, they didn't talk about it.

PIEMONTE: No, they didn't.

LEVINE: No.

PIEMONTE: No, they didn't. They arrived here and that was kind of it. As a matter of fact, my dad emigrated from Italy and yet I can't speak Italian because he-- he felt that we were here in this country, he wanted his children to speak the language. And we just never learned it—unfortunately, I think, you know-- but that was it. I mean he would converse with my mother-- my mother was born in this country-- but he-- he just believed that that's the way it was. And when he came over—he came over in 1913. World War I he joined and served in the army.

LEVINE: Oh.

PIEMONTE: So this was his adopted country. But other than that about Ellis Island and the buildings, I do remember that signalman school we had the crow's nest tr-- where they—classrooms, they gave them names, you

know, like the crow's nest and stuff like that. And we did-- I remember rowing around the Statue of Liberty.

LEVINE: For what reason was that?

PIEMONTE: Just-- just sea duty because in addition to signalman and quartermaster you still had to do—to learn more about seamanship and things like that.

LEVINE: Now do either of you remember where on Ellis Island your classes were or your living quarters were? I mean, are you familiar with it?

PIEMONTE: No, I mean I can see them but I don't remember what building it was, per se. Do you, John?

STEVENS: Were we in the Great Hall?

PIEMONTE: That's what I thought it was.

STEVENS: Because I--

LEVINE: A huge, a huge--?

STEVENS: It was a huge room just stacked up.

PIEMONTE: Yeah, the bunks were stacked.

STEVENS: Yeah.

PIEMONTE: Yes.

STEVENS: Yeah, I think that's where we were.

LEVINE: And was there any other activity of a different nature going on? Enemy aliens, immigrants?

PIEMONTE: I remember the hospital. I remember that when we did sea duty as a matter of fact I-- I had to go to the hospital for something, some same day treatment, I forget what it was now, but there was a huge--

LEVINE: Across the slip?

PIEMONTE: No, no, it was on Ellis Island there was a hospital.

STEVENS: Yes, but I think it was on the other side.

PIEMONTE: Oh, on the other side.

[All overlapping] Right, right, right, yes.

PIEMONTE: On the other side, yes.

LEVINE: So it was staffed I guess?

PIEMONTE: Oh sure, oh yeah, sure.

LEVINE: And do you know if other people were in there besides Coast Guard?

PIEMONTE: I don't know that. I don't think so.

STEVENS: I don't-- I'll say with Tom I don't believe so. No, there was--

PIEMONTE: I think the Coast Guard took it over-- when the war started. And it was strictly Coast Guard I believe. And I know I've since read where they had enemy aliens in there and so on and so forth.

STEVENS: Well if they did we didn't see them.

PIEMONTE: No.

STEVENS: No.

PIEMONTE: It's so hard.

LEVINE: That's strange because they were there.

PIEMONTE: Yeah, I know, I've read.

LEVINE: And even some people were coming in from—from—Eur--. I mean, well I guess during the war you couldn't-- ships weren't going across the Atlantic, so it would have been after, yeah.

PIEMONTE: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. Ok, well, so why don't you say whatever about the signalman school training? I mean, just for the uninitiated, what did you do, what did you learn and--?

PIEMONTE: Well, I guess we learned the Morse code which would have been for blinker and then the semaphore.

STEVENS: Semaphore flags.

PIEMONTE: Flags.

STEVENS: And didn't we have another one that they used-- the one signal flag--?

PIEMONTE: Right, the signal flag, the pictures you have, and the?

STEVENS: But there was one flag that you used like this, remember?

PIEMONTE: Right. Yeah, I don't remember what it looked like.

STEVENS: No, I don't remember what it was called, but they used to use that on the beaches for the beachheads, I think. Yeah.

PIEMONTE: Exactly. And we did an awful lot of just practicing. You would practice-- as a matter of fact,--

STEVENS: Across the canal.

PIEMONTE: --this Bill Smith reminded me, he said, "You were my partner." And I did remember, across the slip.

STEVENS: Yeah, across the slip.

PIEMONTE: And he said, "Do you remember a word I used to give you?" and I forget the word, what it is now, and he said, "You used to have a tough time reading it." Because what you would try to do is go fast-- so fast that your partner couldn't read it. Because you wanted to develop speed with semaphore and it was practice all the time with that and the flashing lights.

LEVINE: And did you use those things?

PIEMONTE: Oh, on board ship? Oh sure, sure, that was a very important part.

STEVENS: And I think that you would say that that was the most interesting part of being a signalman or a quartermaster because you were right up where all the operation of the ship was.

PIEMONTE: Yeah, where all the officers were.

STEVENS: Where all the officers were, your captain would be there. You were on the bridge and it was very important to-- you must--

LEVINE: Communicate.

STEVENS: --to communicate from one ship to the other with the-- either flags, or with the-- mostly with the blinker, or with the-- these here, this stuff—all this here, aboard, you would—

[It seems throughout the interview various objects are being pointed to and used. Here are for the next few minutes John Stevens seems to be using signalman flags.]

PIEMONTE: That all means something.

STEVENS: So, everything had a meaning and they would get a-- one ship would put it all up and then everybody would follow. And then when it was executed everybody would bring it down.

PIEMONTE: And the reason it's so important is you didn't break radio silence you could communicate and submarines couldn't pick up anything because they couldn't see it.

STEVENS: Didn't break radio silence.

PIEMONTE: That's the idea behind it.

STEVENS: It was very important—

PIEMONTE: It was a good rating.

STEVENS: --on a larger ship it was really-- it was really good. He-- Tom lucked out. He went right on a destroyer escort--

PIEMONTE: Yeah, I--.

STEVENS: --and that was--. He got to use what he went to school for. It was very good.

LEVINE: Well, now this is a naïve question, but like these-- do you call these flags? These flags all mean something?

PIEMONTE: Right.

STEVENS: Yup.

LEVINE: And then when you did the semaphore did you also have, like, banners or something?

PIEMONTE: No, the semaphore means A-B-C-D, so you had to spell out.

STEVENS: You had a flag.

LEVINE: But you did it with flags.

STEVENS and PIEMONTE: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: But they were just plain flags?

PIEMONTE: No, they were flags with a handle on them. In other words

STEVENS: If you were in the Boy Scouts—they would do that, too.

PIEMONTE: Sure.

STEVENS: That's how I more or less got interested [unclear], because we did it in the Boys Scouts, too.

LEVINE: I was going to ask you that though, the Boy Scouts would--?

STEVENS: We started out with A-B-C--

PIEMONTE: Yeah, I still remember that.

STEVENS: D-E-F-G-H-I--

PIEMONTE: There it is; you never forget.

STEVENS: I remember most of it. Yeah, I go through it in my head once in a while. But it means a lot-- the more you do it of course, the more proficient you are, and the faster you can do it. And then the thing is to get it done quick—especially-- and even with the blinker lights it's all d-d-d-d.

PIEMONTE: Right. It's dot-dash, right.

STEVENS: Dot-dash.

PIEMONTE: And you learn to read it quickly.

STEVENS: You have to learn to read it and the ship is going like this—like-- the whole time. I tried it on the LST and one ship is going like this and up and down and it's cold and you can't see, your eyes are watering and it's-- it's hard.

PIEMONTE: It is.

STEVENS: It was extremely difficult to-- to read it properly-- you might miss one little dot and that sets the whole thing off.

PIEMONTE: Yeah.

STEVENS: Yeah.

LEVINE: So when you were having the flashing light would you be also signaling with the flags?

STEVENS: Not at the same time.

PIEMONTE: No, one or the other.

STEVENS: You would have somebody standing there with you to take down what you were reading. You had to have-- just it took two men.

LEVINE: Uh huh, yeah, well, that is a very--

PIEMONTE: It's a good rating, it's a good rating.

STEVENS: Yeah. I thought it was a good rating.

LEVINE: So, let's see, when you finished your signalman training you went on a destroyer right off.

PIEMONTE: Destroyer escort.

LEVINE: Destroyer escort as you say. And where did you go?

PIEMONTE: First trip Londonderry Island.

LEVINE: Oh.

PIEMONTE: And then twenty trips total on the North Atlantic-- convoy duty mainly, that was it.

LEVINE: So you were what? You were the escort for, like, Navy, or--?

PIEMONTE: No, the escort for merchant ships.

LEVINE: Oh, merchant ships.

PIEMONTE: Carrying supplies to Europe, to the United Kingdom mainly and then eventually to France.

LEVINE: And you went on a smaller ship.

STEVENS: Eighty-three footer, that's all they were.

LEVINE: And what was their function? What were they--?

STEVENS: They were-- they were anti-sub—anti-sub duty. We-- we-- we were stationed at Sandy Hook and we just patrolled outside of New York Harbor more or less and down the coast. And I don't know what we'd ever done if we'd ever picked up a submarine.

PIEMONTE: But John, they were-- they were a lot like PT boats only-- only not as not as fast, but.

STEVENS: No, they weren't— they weren't as fast as—well, we could get halfway [unclear].

PIEMONTE: They were good little boats, though.

STEVENS: They were well-constructed. They could take a pretty good beating.

LEVINE: So-- so you really never saw the submarines even though that was—

STEVENS: This is one of them right here. This is the 83-464. I was on the 462. And in Europe we were the 41.

LEVINE: So you did go to Europe.

STEVENS: Oh yes, we participated in D-Day in the invasion.

LEVINE: Right.

STEVENS: Oh, yeah. Yes.

LEVINE: So how long did you stay on this Jersey Shore duty?

STEVENS: Uh.

LEVINE: Just roughly.

STEVENS: I—I-- really I-- it's hard for me to think how—how much-- I wasn't at Sandy Hook too long, maybe a few months.

LEVINE: Oh.

STEVENS: Then they took all these vessels, put them on Liberty ships, and took them over to England, and took them off over in England. And we went over on an LST and then picked up our ship there-- our vessel there. We later—we used to have death charges here and hedgehogs in the bow.

LEVINE: What's that?

STEVENS: That's something that's like on a rocket-- it's like a rocket, it's anti-submarine and it would shoot out. And then we had death charges on the stern and on-- on each starboard and the port.

LEVINE: And how many men would be on a ship?

STEVENS: This here would have about—we had about a crew of fourteen.

LEVINE: Oh. So would you serve with the same fourteen for a period of time?

STEVENS: Well, I was on this one for quite a while, yes. Then when we come back they—we-- I went back with-- I finally made it to Manhattan Beach

for a while. And then I went and I put in for some more sea duty. I wanted to get out of there. And I wound up on another one that-- the 83-300, which was the first one they made I guess. And I wound up on-- in California and we were stationed in San Pedro. And wasn't too long after that the war ended. But we would have been on our way over. You know, Tom, he-- he was already over there because he went right over to Europe with the—with the same destroyer escort— went to the Pacific with the destroyer escort.

LEVINE: So you started out in the European theater—

PIEMONTE: And then when that war was over we were—we were sent to the Pacific, yeah.

LEVINE: And then, but you were on a much larger ship.

STEVENS: Oh yeah.

PIEMONTE: Yeah, three hundred and six feet and the complement of men was about two hundred. Yeah so it was larger than an eighty three-footer but not as large as an aircraft carrier.

STEVENS: No, no.

PIEMONTE: Good ship. The destroyer escort was a good ship.

LEVINE: Now--

END OF SIDE A. BEGIN SIDE B.

LEVINE: Can either of you say anything about—I mean, it seems to me that people in military talk about the camaraderie as being a very significant part of the whole experience.

PIEMONTE: It is. Yeah, it is.

LEVINE: Can you say anything--? I mean, especially when you're on a ship. I mean, you're really together.

PIEMONTE: Well, it's like a family really. Yeah, you look out for each other because you do everything together, you know, it's just—and your lives depend on teamwork so it-- it is important and everybody does work together.

STEVENS: These are pictures of destroyer escorts.

LEVINE: Wow.

STEVENS: So you can see the difference. This is the same type of ship that Tom was on.

LEVINE: I see. Well, did the friendships last or once the war got over did everybody-- I guess had-- everybody was busy with their lives.

PIEMONTE: That's what happened, really. There were reunions. I didn't attend any of them, but there're still the reunions. But I think everybody come home, got married, started to raise a family or whatever.

STEVENS: Yeah, just everybody just seemed to go their own way.

PIEMONTE: Yeah.

STEVENS: Like I kept in co—I contacted a couple of fellows. In fact, the one fellow, this fellow right here, Archie King [ph]-- he was from Kansas. And we wrote back and forth for a while and then he got married and then it kind of-- things faded away.

PIEMONTE: That's exactly what I—yeah, I did the same thing, I corresponded for, you know, a couple of years even, you know, but then you just drift. And none of us ever talked about it and I decided to write the book primarily for the family after all these years. Most-- you know, most people from World War II just came home and went about their business.

LEVINE: Do you think it was painful to talk about or do you—why-- why, just because--?

PIEMONTE: I-- I guess-- not painful, just I know when we got out we said "That's it," you know.

STEVENS: Yeah, it all depends, you know, if your ship was hit and you lost some of your crew members--

PIEMONTE: [interjects] Sure.

STEVENS: --then it would be painful, you know.

PIEMONTE: Right, exactly.

STEVENS: I--I lost a good friend of mine while I was in England. We had gotten together-- he was on an LST-- and we pulled into South Hampton and

we got together and went out and had a couple of beers and talked about different things. And then when we went back on the next trip-- when I came back in I-- the same LST was there. It had a big hole in the rear end, which-- he hit a mine and he happened to get killed. And that said-- that said, that-- that kind of gets to you a little bit 'cause we were good friends. I have pictures of him here, yeah, when we were still-- in fact, we were both stationed at Fisher's Island at the time.

PIEMONTE: Oh boy.

STEVENS: Yeah, he left. I was on a Liberty and he was gone when I came back. And, uh, but he didn't make it back and uh-- very sad. Because his mother was a widow and-- and he had a sister and I did write to them when he-- knew that when he was killed, and. But I had to stop writing to her because she was try-- his mother was trying to put me in as her son and I was still in Europe. And it was very sad. We had to stop it.

LEVINE: Well, when you look back on that time now, how does it-- how does it-- how do you-- where do you put it in your-- in your [unheard] story or uh--?

STEVENS: Yeah, you never know how close you were to not coming back because you never know what's around you. And I think somebody was up there looking after us and that's why we're--

PIEMONTE: Yeah.

STEVENS: --here at age eighty two or eighty four.

PIEMONTE: Yeah, because, yeah because so many are not, that's true.

STEVENS: That's right.

STEVENS: I'm just going to show this book here, now. I'm reading about different ships that of our-- our ships, that lost entirely-- entire crews, a hundred and seventy men, two hundred men, just on one ship.

PIEMONTE: Yeah, on our first trip our sister ship was lost: a hundred and seventy one.

STEVENS: The Leopold.

PIEMONTE: Yeah, and the one kid from our class John Hanserack [ph].

STEVENS: Yeah, he's--

PIEMONTE: Which really affected me because I felt I could have been on that ship.

STEVENS: Yeah, yeah, yes, because it was the luck of the draw and how would you ever know, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah.

STEVENS: But that's the-- that's the sad part of it and--

LEVINE: Do you think it had an impact beyond the actual specifics of it on-- on you?

STEVENS: I think you grew—I think you grew up pretty fast.

PIEMONTE: Yeah.

STEVENS: I think it changed your life a little bit from being a happy-go-lucky teenager to being--

PIEMONTE: [overlapping] Right, right.

STEVENS: --something that you never expected in your life.

PIEMONTE: You do grow up fast.

STEVENS: And-- and it grows you-- you grow, it advances you, you know? Maybe it was good, you know, in a way, but it's hard to say. Yeah, we were only kids.

PIEMONTE: We were, really. We were just kids.

STEVENS: Sure, I was about what—I think I was-- I guess I was about nineteen then, eighteen and a half. That's when I first went in. (shows picture)

LEVINE: Oh my, look at that.

STEVENS: So you can the—you can see there's a—there's a big difference,

PIEMONTE: Yeah I saw that. (laughs)

STEVENS: About a hundred and forty pounds.

PIEMONTE: And my picture I put in the book, that was— I think when I was in boot camp, the one that I had in the book.

STEVENS: Yeah, well this is not too long after that, it's in my grandmother's backyard in West Orange.

PIEMONTE: We were kids is right. We were kids.

LEVINE: And how about your friends, like in the neighborhood-- I guess your friends were going in?

PIEMONTE: Everybody was joining, sure. Everybody was gone.

STEVENS: Everybody was gone. Yeah, even if-- when you come home on a Liberty there was nobody was around--

PIEMONTE: No.

STEVENS: --'cause all the young f [unclear]-- because all the young guys were gone.

LEVINE: And then how about when—do you remember when each of you heard the war was over?

PIEMONTE: Oh, yeah.

STEVENS: Oh, yeah.

PIEMONTE: I know I was in Pearl Harbor at the time.

LEVINE: Oh.

PIEMONTE: And I mention that in the book, that the pyrotechnics, the celebrations, were unbelievable, all the ships that were tied up. Because at that time we were preparing for the invasion of Japan.

STEVENS: We were.

PIEMONTE: And there would of been an invasion, had the bombs not been dropped, so--

LEVINE: Talk about coming full circle.

PIEMONTE: Yeah, exactly, yup, yup so yeah I remember. I guess you knew exactly where you were V-J Day.

STEVENS: Yeah, I was in San Pedro. Yeah, right, sitting down there at the Harbor and we got the news and, boy, it was good news.

PIEMONTE: Yup, absolutely.

STEVENS: Because I—I do f-- Tom will tell you the same thing, that if we ever had to invade Japan it was going to be a--

PIEMONTE: [interjects] Unbelievable. [unclear]

STEVENS: --it was going to be a bloodbath. Because it tells in-- I think it's in this book here, how they how they were prepared for the invasion, that we didn't even realize.

PIEMONTE: Yeah, I mentioned it in my book also.

STEVENS: Yeah, they saved-- they saved airplanes, they had everybody-- everything was in order and ready for the defense of their country. And a lot of people say that, well, we shouldn't have done this, we shouldn't have dropped them bombs. But believe me, it saved a lot of American lives.

PIEMONTE: And Japanese lives, because they would have killed-- [unheard, overlapping]

STEVENS: And Japanese lives because it would have been a slaughter both ways. I think that's the featured story here.

LEVINE: So did life change a lot when you got home?

PIEMONTE: Yeah, I think. Well, it was-- it seemed like it was a-- a brand new world when we got-- for me—anyway.

STEVENS: Everything was booming.

PIEMONTE: Everything was booming, the war was over. We thought at that time there would never be another war.

STEVENS: Everybody was—yeah, that's what it's supposed to be, but look what happens.

PIEMONTE: Yeah. It was. It was good times.

STEVENS: Everybody was happy, people were working and making good money.

PIEMONTE: Yeah.

STEVENS: And--.

LEVINE: Well, you went in so young you really hadn't started a career or anything.

PIEMONTE AND STEVENS: No, no.

STEVENS: We didn't have much of a chance.

PIEMONTE: That's right. I think that's what kept the country busy because when everyone got out we started our careers and going to school or whatever, whatever instances [unclear].

STEVENS: [overlapping] Whatever.

LEVINE: So why you don't you each give a thumbnail sketch of what you did when you did get out—what-- what did you do for work and--?

PIEMONTE: I ended up going to school, finishing the school that I interrupted by joining early, and getting into the newspaper business. I started my own newspaper and continued in publishing until I retired in 1990. Essentially, that's it in a-- in a nutshell, really.

LEVINE: And you married. Did you marry after the war?

PIEMONTE: Right after the war: 1947 I have two sons and one granddaughter.

LEVINE: Why don't you say your wife's name and maiden name.

PIEMONTE: Lois Apgar, my wife's name

LEVINE: A-P--

PIEMONTE: A-P-G-A-R. And my sons are Tommy and David and our granddaughter is Bianca. That's it.

LEVINE: And how about you, John, you-- what did you do?

STEVENS: Well, when I got out it was looking for a job. I-- I didn't intend to go to college or anything and I just--. I was on what they called the 52-20 for a few months and--

PIEMONTE: (laughs a bit) Right.

STEVENS: --then my uncle got me a job on the railroad, the D--Delaware Lackawanna [unclear, ph, name of railroad] Western which was right out here and over here. And I worked on the railroad for thirty six years. We worked for the DLMW Eerie Lackawanna and Con Rail [unclear, ph, railroad]. And I retired in 1982 under Con Rail and I was single most of my life.

LEVINE: Oh.

STEVENS: I got married in 1980 for the first time and the last time.

LEVINE: Why don't you say your wife's name and maiden name?

(brief silence)

STEVENS: (whispers) Margery—

(brief silence, then calls to wife)

Marge?

WIFE: What?

STEVENS: “Vecie” [ph] your maiden name, “Vecie”?

WIFE: Grant.

STEVENS: Gra-- Oh, that’s right, I should know that.

(All laugh.)

STEVENS: I’m in-- I’m in trouble now. I’m in trouble.

LEVINE: You said it humor [unclear] to the tape.

STEVENS: Yeah, somebody will like that. I hope I live through it. But Margery Grant and we got married in 1982. And it’s been—well, next year will be the silver is it, twenty five?

WIFE: What year did he say we got married?

LEVINE: ’82.

STEVENS: No, ’80, 1980.

WIFE: Oh, is he in trouble!

PIEMONTE: He’s in trouble now.

STEVENS: 1980. That’s when I retired, in ’82, that’s right. And I have a lovely stepdaughter and her husband, Michael and Dawn Chillier [ph], and three great-grandchildren, Kyle, Kelsey, and Kristen [ph]. And the oldest, Kyle, he’s in-- right now-- he’s smarter than I am-- he’s going to

the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. So he's doing well. And the other two will be on their way soon.

LEVINE: Great. Well, just let me ask in closing what would you say has given you a great deal of satisfaction that you've done?

STEVENS: I think surviving World War II is one thing--

PIEMONTE: That's one.

STEVENS: --and I think getting married was--no, really, this gal straightened me out-- straightened me out pretty good. I was a little bit of a heck-raiser, you know, but things worked out well and-- and we're doing fine, we're doing great, and that's probably the best thing that ever happened to me. Although I don't like to admit it. But, uh--

(PIEMONTE laughs.)

LEVINE: How about you, Tom, what's been of--you know, anything that you're proud of or that you're satisfied that you did?

PIEMONTE: I guess my family, you know, the family. And proud that they're well and they're doing ok. And as John points out, surviving World War II. So many didn't.

LEVINE: And you said you wrote the book for your family mainly that was the main--?

PIEMONTE: Yeah, one of the things that-- that I am happy about and proud about is that a lot of former shipmates have since found out about the book through an article that was in a Destroyer Escort Sailor's Association.

And the orders still come in. And that makes me feel good because these eighty year old men are writing “thank you for writing a book” and I sort of-- I didn’t do it for-- for commercial venture or anything like that. But they were happy that it was done and that makes me feel good, it really does, to bring memories back to them. But-- but originally it was just something to leave for the family, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah. I guess it was an important part of each man’s life, right?

PIEMONTE: Sure.

LEVINE: So then when they come upon this book it kind of reverberates.

PIEMONTE: Well, and some of the letters I’m getting are so-- so touching. I mentioned about our sister ship being lost; a hundred and seventy one of the crew were lost. I got a letter from the daughters-- no the sister of one of the people who was lost, and-- how does that work?-- and the niece of another one and they thanked me for writing. I devote a chapter in there to that partic-- and I name each one of the ones that were killed because it had an impact on me also. But I feel very good about that—that--

LEVINE: That’s wonderful. And throughout the book it seems to me you mention those that didn’t come back. [unclear bit as overlaps  
PIEMONTE]

PIEMONTE: Yeah, that’s really what it’s about; yeah, it was a tribute to them.

LEVINE: Well, is there anything more that I haven’t thought to ask that you can-- would like to say? About either your Coast Guard experience or particularly the Ellis Island part?

STEVENS: No, like I said before it's so hard to think about these things and to even remember it because so much was happening at the time.

PIEMONTE: Yeah.

STEVENS: But it's just-- you would think that it would be you can just look at the screen and it would be right there, you know, but it's not-- it's like sometimes it's like it never was.

PIEMONTE: Well, because we were living it at the time. You're going through it and you're not thinking about anything.

STEVENS: Right.

PIEMONTE: But sometimes when I look at the signatures and the pictures that are sixty-some-odd years old, like when I saw John's picture. And obviously he wouldn't recognize me and I wouldn't recognize him. When I saw his picture I remembered him immediately because he was a cut up. I-- I remember him, you know. I do. I remember the way he wore his hat cocked to the side maybe a little bit more than somebody else, you know

LEVINE: Has it been-- have there been periods prior to now when you were more apt to revisit that wartime period of your life?

PIEMONTE: I think so. I think at least I did. I would think about it from time to time but--. And also I got involved in the computer and if you google certain things you can find out a little more. So you'd find out more about what had happened and it kind of reminded you of the war.

LEVINE: Is it something you delved into, you know, different aspects of that war?

PIEMONTE: Well I did when I started the book because I wanted to research it too, to learn a little bit more about different phases, you know. But I think in general most of us when we came home we just forgot about it

STEVENS: Yeah.

PIEMONTE: And never-- I never talked to my kids about it that much.

STEVENS: Right.

LEVINE: You know, it's a funny thing I find. Like, I interview people, mainly people who immigrated, and this-- many of them then were in World War II. I mean, you know, they came here as children, they grew up and then they went into World War II and some-- very often when you get to that part of their life you can't stop-- you can't stop them.

PIEMONTE: Really.

LEVINE: They start talking about war experiences and I-- I mean I don't know what to make of it exactly--

PIEMONTE: Wow.

LEVINE: --except that it's like something that—it's like pressing a button and it just comes out.

PIEMONTE: Yeah.

LEVINE: So I guess there is something about-- I mean, maybe it's that people didn't talk about it for a long time and now they do, it could be, too.

PIEMONTE: Well, I think our generation is talking about it more now because we're-- we're in the twilight years, there's not many of us left. You know, I guess we kind of say, "We're-- well maybe we should have talked about it ten years ago or twenty years ago." But we-- our generation didn't, we just went about and that was it.

STEVENS: That was it.

PIEMONTE: For whatever reason.

STEVENS: I read an article in the paper here, oh it's a while back now. But one of the fellows here-- I think he was in the Coast Guard, too, and he had never said anything to anybody but before he passed away he told everything. He-- he just-- he kept it in him all of these years and then told so that his grandchildren would know what he did.

PIEMONTE: Yeah.

LEVINE: That's why he did it?

STEVENS: And I think that's probably the way it is with most everybody, yep.

PIEMONTE: I think so.

STEVENS: Because they all got grandchildren or they're great grandfathers or something and they want their kids to know just--

PIEMONTE: Yeah, I think that's what it is.

STEVENS: --just what it was. That it wasn't all hearts and flowers, you know, ice cream and candy. That there's a lot more to it, and--.

LEVINE: Uh huh. And I think, well doesn't that speak to that people are proud of it?

PIEMONTE AND STEVENS: Oh sure, oh yeah, absolutely.

LEVINE: And that they want their grandchildren to know that they that they did this.

STEVENS: Just what they-- just what-- what happened. Yeah, because eventually it'll be put on the backburner, you know, like everything else and--.

LEVINE: Well, there won't be people to talk about it.

STEVENS: That's it, right. And that's when it starts to slide by, yeah.

LEVINE: Well, I'm delighted that I got a chance to talk with you. Thank you so much.

PIEMONTE: Thank you.

STEVENS: We thank you. We thank you very much because it's very nice.

PIEMONTE: It is.

STEVENS: Never thought something like this would ever happen.

PIEMONTE: No, no, it's amazing.

STEVENS: You just made a couple of old turkeys-- made their day!

PIEMONTE: That's right, that's right.

LEVINE: Well, that's great and you know the nice thing about this is everybody benefits.

PIEMONTE: Yes, it's a win-win, right.

LEVINE: You're gonna have the tapes, your family will have them, they'll be at Ellis Island.

PIEMONTE: That's beautiful.

LEVINE: People will come and listen to them. Other people, you know, maybe they had someone who fought in World War II that wasn't interviewed, but at least they can hear--

PIEMONTE: What it was like, sure.

LEVINE: --what it was like, so--

PIEMONTE: It's a win-win.

LEVINE: It is. It really is. So anyway, thank you so much.

PIEMONTE: Thank you very much

STEVENS: Thank you.

EI-1432/PIEMONTE AND STEVENS

LEVINE: Ok, this is Janet Levine for the National Parks Service and I'm speaking with John Stevens and Thomas Piemonte and I'm signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW