

LESTER PIOT

Interview by Dolly Ferries
May 27, 1995

TOPICS:

World War I (Sinking of troop transport Tuscania)
Veterans
Depression

Transcription by John W. Weigel
February 6, 2000

[Interviewer's Note: Mr. Piot was 97 years old at the time of this interview.]

[Transcriber's Note: The interviewee's son, Lester Piot, Jr., was present at the interview. His remarks are preceded by an "S:."]]

Q: Today is May 27th, 1995. I am at the home of Mr. Lester Piot on Beaupre in Madison Heights. Hi, Lester, how are you today?

A: Very fine.

Q: Okay. And how long have you lived in Madison Heights?

A: A little over fourteen years...thirteen, fourteen years...somewhere in there.

Q: Okay. And where were you born?

A: I was born in Belgium.

Q: Okay. Oh.

A: Charleroi, Belgium. Charleroi, Belgium.

Q: How would you spell that?

A: C-A... let me go ahead...C-H-A-R-L-E-R-O-I.

Q: Okay. Charleroi, Belgium. And when did you come to the United States?

A: When I was seven years old. That was approximately 1905.

Q: Okay. 1905. And...and...what I was going to ask you, what year were you born in?

A: I was born in 1898, I think. Wait a minute. 1998. 1998? That's it. I'm sorry.

Q: 18...18...yeah...yeah...18...yeah...1898. Okay. All right. And where did you live in the United States when you first came?

A: In Pennsylvania.

Q: Okay.

A: And the town was...the first place we lived there was Grandville.

Q: Grandville.

A: That's an old country place just outside of Charleroi, Pennsylvania.

Q: Okay. Then when did you come to Michigan?

A: When did I come to Michigan?

Q: Were you in the service first?

A: Oh yes.

Q: Okay. You were...you were a World War One veteran?

A: Yes.

Q: What could you tell us of some of your experiences?

A: Well, I enlisted on...

S: January 2nd.

A: ...January 1st, 2nd or 3rd, somewhere in there.

S: 1918.

A: 1918 is right.

Q: Okay. And where did you take your basic training?

A: I didn't have any.

Q: Oh didn't you? They just sent you over.

S: [inaudible]

Q: Oh, that's right. January 2. Oh my goodness.

A: I...I was sent to this company that was all ready to move, and they...they were short for three men or whatever it was, and I one of the fill-ins.

Q: Oh my goodness. And you left...where did you leave to go overseas?

A: Where did I leave from?

Q: Mmhmm.

A: That was in...

S: I think he left out of New York

Q: Or Newark?

A: Where I...New York.

S: Hoboken.

Q: Hoboken? Hoboken?

A: Where my company was at this...

S: Hoboken?

A: No, make it out of New York.

Q: Okay. And how long were you on the ship?

A: On the ship? I got on the ship about the 3rd or the 4th day of January.

Q: And, oh how old...

A: Out on the ship. I went to my camp about that time.

Q: Okay. Okay.

A: And I got on the ship. Pretty much the same time. I was only there a week or two before we left to go on the ship.

Q: Uh-huh. How old were you?

A: Well, I was twenty-one.

Q: Twenty-one. Okay. And you...

A: My dad or mother wouldn't let me go until I was twenty-one.

Q: Right. Right. Oh I don't blame them. That...that was close calls going over there in those days. [To Lester Piot, Jr.] What...did you have the unit that he was in?

S: Yes. He was in the 20th Engineers, 6th Headquarter,

A: 6th headquarter...headquarters of the 6th Battalion.

S: Right.

Q: Okay.

S: 20th Engineers.

A: Did you get that out of my box?

S: Yeah. I just...

A: Mmhmm.

Q: Okay.

A: Everything was in there.

Q: And what happened while you were on the ship? Could you tell us?

A: Beg your pardon?

Q: Could you tell us what happened when you were on the ship?

A: Well, nothing happened for the fourteen, fifteen first days, and on this one day, which was the day before we expected to land, was a beautiful day on the ocean. The ocean just as...

Q: Like glass.

A: Quiet as could be. All big waves were dumping. And we had all kind of sports on that day, right up on top of the ship, and races, and whatever, and boxing, and...and then at supper time we all went back to our cabins of course, and I was...my group, which was the headquarters department...that's what I was in...We went for the first setting of the meal.

Q: Okay.

A: That was exactly five o'clock their time. And we had our meal, and all...we all got up, and we all started to go upstairs. I was already in our pleasure room, like a parlor, whatever you want to call it...

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And we played cards up there, and I was sitting at my chair, and I was dealing the [inaudible]. I have to stop now.

Q: Okay.

[The tape recorder was turned off, then back on]

A: While I was still waiting by myself for my partners to come up, the whole thing exploded...

Q: Oh my.

S: Just take your time.

[The tape recorder was turned off, then back on]

A: ...back in the war... down in the dining room where we just had left, and the second shift for dinner, they were all in water up to their waist.

Q: Oh my goodness.

A: And none of them were...had already fallen down over the tables and chairs trying to get out. And then it started to filling up. And then I started to walk around the ship. I...I didn't get excited at all.

Q: That was good.

A: I started to walk different places on the ship, second, third, fourth deck above me, and it was all dark. The lights had all been turned off or burned out, or whatever it was. And I went by three of my buddies, who were standing still right in one place.

[The tape recorder was turned off, then back on]

S: ...and then I...they finally...that was on February the 5th.

Q: Uh-huh.

S: 1918. The day the boat got torpedoed.

Q: Okay.

S: And then when...

A: What date have you got for that?

S: February the 5th, 1918. Just about a month after you went in.

A: Yeah, probably the 5th.

S: Dad, according to your army papers, it was.

A: It was?

S: February.

A: Anyway, these three boys that I passed, everything was dark. They were standing...two of them were standing up, the other one was lying down on the floor, completely naked.

Q: Oh my goodness.

A: Taking all his clothes off. And then one of them was reading his Bible. And the other one was just swinging his arms in the dark. And not moving. They just stood right there and I kept on walking. Walked around to where the barber shop was, and their lights were still on. And nothing was in there, nobody was in there. Then I went up to the next deck and there weren't anybody around up there...

Q: My goodness.

A: [inaudible] I went clear up to the top of the ship, and all of our officers and other men, either in the army or American...had something to do with the army but they weren't in the army, they were all up on top of the deck, up on top of the ship. Quite a few of them. I talked to a number of them, and in fact I talked to one of them that later...I'll go...I'll save that for later on. Then I went back down and I just kept walking around. I was all by myself, just looking at everything, unafraid of anything.

Q: Yes.

A: I finally went outside again, onto the board, sidewalk on the ship.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: I was walking around there, and it was a English ship, about 150 to a hundred feet away from me. And one of them called over to me and he said, "Better get a hold of that ropes"... "sailor"...or "soldier", "we're going to...we're going to cut it loose."

Q: Oh.

A: And I'm...got the...the rope. It was right up above me. So I jumped up, got...got a hold of that rope and they pulled me over there. And then from there they took me to Bum Cranna Harn [Buncrana in Donegal County?].

Q: Uh-huh.

A: That's where I got off.

Q: Okay. Was this on the coast of Ireland?

A: Yes.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: It was a...it was a shipping yard for...for whatever they were shipping...

Q: Right.

A: ...out of Ireland. I think maybe cattle, or chickens or whatever.

Q: Whatever.

A: And all the women were at their stands. Each woman from a farm had their own stands at this place, and they all had hot coffee and a little snack of bread for everybody.

Q: Mmhmm. This...the boat was torpedoed?

A: Beg your pardon?

Q: The boat was torpedoed?

S: Yes.

Q: Is that what happened?

A: The one I was one?

S: Yes the...

A: Oh yeah. It went down.

Q: Yes.

S: There were three torpedoes that were fired at them, and two of them struck between two smokestacks, and she...the boat listed almost immediately...

Q: Right.

A: Oh yes. It went over [inaudible] quick. It did not sink...sink, Fred, fast.

S: But it listed.

A: Most of our boys the...I say most of them that we lost, I don't know that for sure...

Q: Uh-huh.

A: But they're...a lot of them, they just jumped over.

Q: Right.

S: And according to this paper, Dad, a hundred and twenty-five men drowned after going into the water.

A: Uh-huh. They were probably the ones that jumped over.

S: Yeah.

Q: Oh, okay. And then...

S: And the place they landed in Ireland, on the Irish coast there, was named Marn, Limey County ate Anthram?

Q: Okay.

S: And they stayed at a place called the King's Arms there when they went to give them some beds and to...a place to rest, and sleep until they could move them out of there, and according to, I think, Dad, you were there about five days. Then they took you by train over to Dublin, and then from there they went to Winchester...Win...Winchester, England.

Q: Uh-huh.

S: And they stayed there...they got some more...they lost everything they had ...

Q: Right.

S: ...on..on board, including uniforms and their shoes and everything. And when they got there, they...they gave them some new English uniforms.

Q: Oh, okay. Did they fit? [Laughter]

S: [Laughter] They...they said they looked like a...like a sad sight. [Laughter] And then they finally, when they shipped out of there then, they went to, they shipped over to France.

Q: Okay, then.

A: We had plenty of protection when we went there at that time.

Q: Yes...yes.

A: We had four torpedo destroyers.

Q: Okay. When you were in France, where...what sectors were you in? Excuse me.

A: I...I...When we got to France?

Q: Uh-huh. Did you just...?

A: Well, we went clear away from anywhere near the front.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: What my outfit was I didn't really know until we got there and they started to establish their equipment. All day we were lumber men.

Q: Oh no. [Laughter]

A: We were clear out to the southern part of France, where there were acres and acres of pine trees...

Q: Oh, to take...

A: ...and they were there chopping down the pine trees to make ties and blocks, and whatever was needed at the front.

Q: Right. Right.

A: We were at least two hundred miles away from the fighting.

Q: Oh, that was good. [Laughter] Oh man.

A: The only fighting was among ourselves.

Q: Yes, right. [Inaudible]

A: I happened to be in headquarters department because I spoke French.

Q: Oh.

A: And I had the best of everything.

Q: Right, okay.

A: And I was with the commander all the time.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And I drove his car.

Q: Okay. And how long were you there?

A: In France?

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Well, just...just about a year.

Q: Okay.

A: Not much over that.

Q: So you were there after the armistice?

A: Mhmm.

Q: Uh-huh. And then you came home? And then...and then where did you go from, when you came home?

A: Went back home to California, Pennsylvania.

Q: Okay. [Laughter] And then when did you come to Michigan?

A: Michigan? Well that's quite a while.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: I got married a year after I was home.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And then I lived around California, and Charleroi, Pennsylvania for the next ten, twelve years, I would say. [Transcriber's note: both California and Charleroi are in Washington County, Pennsylvania, south of Pittsburgh].

Q: Okay.

A: Then I came to Detroit from there.

Q: Okay.

A: I came to Detroit during the Depression.

Q: Yes, uh-huh.

A: I came here and everybody told me, "there's no use going out there! There are no jobs!"

Q: Right.

A: But I came out and I got a job the first day I was there.

Q: Well, great.

A: It wasn't a good job, but it was a job in a shop...

Q: Uh huh.

A: ...in a store downtown...

Q: Cool.

A: ...where they sold all taken-over stock from bankruptcies...

Q: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

A: ...whatever. And I...I worked there a week, I worked in a restaurant a week, anyplace I could get a work, a little bit of work.

Q: Right. Right.

A: And then after about three months, I brought my family over and rented a home and I got a job at the...I had several jobs before I finally got one good one...employment that I have

Q: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

A: So I...I'm about a year getting established...

Q: Okay.

A: ...after I got to Detroit.

Q: Mmhhh. Right. Right. And...and you have...you...your family...you have how many children?

S: Six children...

Q: Six children.

A: We had six altogether.

Q: Okay.

A: We didn't have them all at one time.

Q: No. No.

A: That would have been a little...

Q: Yeah. Yeah. [Laughter]

A: ...that...that would have been a record that.

Q: You would have made the papers for sure. [Laughter]

S: [Inaudible] have four girls and two boys.

Q: Okay. And...

S: And there's four of us still...

Q: Still living. Oh that's good. Yes.

S: We just lost one last week.

Q: That's...that's sad. And how many grandchildren and great-grandchildren do you have?

A: Oh boy.

Q: [Laughter] Okay.

S: I knew that would be a hard one.

A: Yeah.

S: I...I think there's about...

A: Betty had four or five. What was it?

S: Betty had five.

A: Five.

S: And Lillian had four. That's nine. And Glen had four. That's thirteen. And Ruth had...let's see, Ruth had one, two, three...

A: About four.

S: About four, yeah. Twenty...twenty-two. And I had six. That's twenty-eight. And, let's see, we missed anybody? I think that's about it. I know it's close to thirty.

Q: Oh wow. That's great. And then...then great-grandchildren?

S: Yes.

Q: There...I know...

S: Yeah, there's... is at least...let's see...

A: I think we've run out of numbers.

S: Yeah. That's a high one on the great-grandchildren. I would guess there's got to be at least fifteen great-grandchildren.

Q: Oh wow. That's a nice family. Do you ever...are you ever able to get together?

S: Not too often, because they're spread all over the country from California to Wheeling and Birmingham, Alabama, ...[inaudible] for a long time. But they're pretty well spread around the country. We...we represent a lot of states.

Q: Right. Right. Right. Speaking right now is Lester Piot, Jr. He is from Alabama. Okay. Do you have some more that you would like to relate to us?

A: Beg your pardon?

Q: Is there anything else you would like to talk to us about?

S: Yeah, tell them a little bit about the survivor's group, Dad.

Q: Right.

S: They formed a survivor's...

A: Oh yes. We...we tried to...to have a reunion every so often.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And the first one we had was in Chicago.

Q: Oh.

A: And we had a little over a hundred for that one. And then about two years later I promoted one in Detroit.

S: Yeah, that one that Dad promoted in Detroit was held February the 8th, 1941 in the Hotel Teller.

Q: Oh my goodness.

S: ...in Detroit, and at that time there were twenty-three survivors. And then as late as about four years ago, there were only ten left at that time.

Q: Right.

S: And the following year, because they had had a list of them at that time...

Q: Right.

S: and following that time there were less than five, and we're not sure today whether there's any outside of Dad throughout the U.S.

Q: Right. Right.

A: Have you been able to contact anybody?

Q: No. No. But it's...isn't it...isn't it exciting...

S: Yes.

Q: ...to have all this information?

S: They...they had, in this group, they said the last one gets a bottle of champagne. If he's the last one, they don't know who's going to present it to him.

Q: [Laughter] Right. That's true. He'll have to present it to himself. Okay.

A: One of the men that was on that ship was...was a government man, and it turned out that about fifteen years after I was in Detroit, he was the man in charge, in Detroit here, of all of the government work that they were promoting for the unemployed. It was sort of a...it's during...

Q: The Depression?

A: What do you call it when nobody was working?

Q: Yeah, the Depression.

S: Yeah.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And he was in charge here in Detroit for the government of finding jobs or creating jobs, and putting as many back to work as possible.

Q: Right. Right.

A: And when I had my reunion, for the Tag...Tuscania members, he took the chair to operate it, and he paid all the expenses.

Q: Oh.

A: And...and everything, and he took the master's chair to...to...for the whole evening, and he brought all the...people that--they were all women—that he had sent to the White House the week before. They were all singers.

Q: Oh.

A: He...he had charge of all the people and the unemployed trying to get something for them to do to earn a few dollars.

Q: Oh.

A: And he...these people got together in groups to sing and he had...they were all at the White House the week before I had my reunion, and I got through his secretary, that's how I happened to get him for my reunion.

Q: Oh well that's...

A: His secretary told me, she said he'd be tickled to death to do it if we asked him.

Q: Oh good.

A: So that worked...I asked him as soon as I could. He took over and he brought that whole group of entertainers that had been at the White House the day before for my party.

Q: Oh that was nice.

S: I think his...I think his name, Dad, was Abner E. Larned, L-A-R-N-E-D.

A: That's right. That's right.

S: And I'm not sure what his...

Q: Title?

A: Title?

S: ...his title was.

A: I don't know. I never found out. I could never get his real name. The girl would not give me his real gir...name. He was a government employee.

Q: Right. Right. Right.

A: But he...that's when they were doing all kinds of jobs to put men to work.

Q: To work. Right.

S: Someday, Dad, I'll go to a library and look up in the...the records and I've got his name, and I think maybe I can find out for you what his title was. [Inaudible]

Q: Right. Right.

A: It wouldn't make any difference now. He's probably gone by now.

Q: Right.

A: Well, maybe not, he might be older than I am.

Q: [Laughter] Right. But that is really interesting, and all these...

A: Yes, you see that [map?]...that relation that I got with him was by being on the Tuscania. He was on the Tuscania for the government, some kind of work in the government. He wasn't, he wasn't a soldier.

Q: Oh.

S: Oh yes.

Q: Okay.

A: He was just a [inaudible] when I was roaming around talking to everybody. He had charge of everything in Detroit for the unemployed...

Q: Right.

S: Uh-huh.

A: ...and his secretary wouldn't give me his name, but she gave me his telephone number.

Q: Oh. [Laughter] Okay. Yeah, [inaudible] Yeah. That is very nice. Okay. Well, I think that is very interesting, and we're very happy to have you talk with us.

A: Who am I talking to?

Q: Dolly Ferries.

A: Dolly...

Q: Dolly Ferries.

A: And who are you with?

Q: I'm with the Historical...Madison Heights Historical Commission.

A: Oh yes.

Q: Right. Right. Okay. That...now I guess...how do we stop it?

END OF INTERVIEW