

A Veterans Oral History
Heritage Education Commission
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Jimmy Katechis
Narrator

Stephanie Manesis
Interviewer

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via telephone Delray Beach, FL

SM: It's November 28, 2011. I am having an interview with Jimmy Katechis over the telephone, who lives in Delray Beach, Florida, and the interviewer is Stephanie Manesis. Mr. Katechis, can you please tell me a little bit about where you were raised and about your family?

JK: I came to this country January the 2nd, 1939, I landed in New York. I came on the French liner by the name of Normandy. My father was living in New York at the time; and so I stayed with him. We stayed in New York about a month and he decided we'd go to California. We stayed there for almost a year. After California he decided – well the times were not too good at that time, the Depression and everything. And we decided to go back to New York.

On the way back to New York by train, we stopped in Alabama where I had two uncles. One was George Orphan (sp?) who lived in Montgomery, Alabama, and the other one was John Orphan, who lived in Alexander City, Alabama, where I stayed for almost four years, when I went in the Navy in 1943. And I stayed in the Navy for almost three years, 35 months to be exact. After I was released from the Navy, I went back to Alexander City and lived there for the summer. And I went to Montgomery. And that's about it.

SM: So how old were you when you came over to New York from Greece?

JK: I was 13.

SM: So when you went with your father from California to New York, you never actually returned to New York you stayed in Alabama?

JK: Exactly.

SM: How old were you when you enlisted in the military?

JK: I was drafted when I was 18.

SM: Drafted when you were 18?

JK: Right in 1943.

SM: What month in 1943?

JK: I believe it was in April, if I'm not mistaken.

SM: Did you go to high school in the United States?

JK: Yes, I finished high school in Alexander City.

SM: And what month and what year?

JK: Well I lacked two subjects and I went back to school when I came out of the Navy in '46 for the summer. I took the two subjects and I got my diploma.

SM: So summer of '46, you went back to get your diploma. When you were drafted into the Navy, were you just finishing one of your years at high school?

JK: Yes.

SM: First of all let me ask, Mr. Katechis, how many brothers and sisters did you have?

JK: I only had one sister. She lives in Greece now. She never came over.

SM: She stayed in Greece the whole time?

JK: Yes.

SM: And was your mother in New York?

JK: No only my father. In those days, the man used to marry, leave the wives over there and come over here and work. Then after 2-3 years, they'd go back for a visit and that's how it was done.

SM: So was it a younger or older sister who stayed back in Greece?

JK: Younger.

SM: How much younger than you?

JK: Oh, I think she's about 6-7 years younger than I am.

SM: How did you feel about being drafted, especially when you were originally from Greece?

JK: I was really tickled to death. And I'll tell you why. Because when I lived with my uncle, he was in the restaurant business. I had to work after school in the summertime and on the weekends. So I never had time to go out and play football, or anything like that, with the other guys. I was really happy to go in the Navy because I knew I was going to have a day off. When everybody was off, I would be off, too.

SM: When you were drafted you said you were tickled to death. Tell me more about what happened when you were first drafted. Where did you go to boot camp and what happened?

JK: They sent me from Birmingham, we went by train down to, I believe it was Pensacola, and from there they took us to Saufley Field. S-a-u-f-l-y is the name of the air base where we had two-week boot camp training. After that we were sent to another air base which was located in Alabama by the name of Barin Field, b-a-r-i-n, Barin Field, which was about 2-3 miles south of Foley, Alabama.

SM: Now, Saufley Field was outside of Pensacola?

JK: Right.

SM: How long were you at Barin Field?

JK: I went the whole time that I was in the Navy, I spent it down there; except for three months that they had sent me up to Chicago to go to school for hydraulics specialist.

SM: So tell me what did you do at Barin Field, Alabama?

JK: Well, I was working on planes, grease monkey or whatever you want to call it.

SM: So did you do mechanics just of the vehicles or other things, as well?

JK: Just mostly mechanics. And see, there was a base for training our cadets, future officers, or airmen.

SM: So you did mechanics on airplanes as well?

JK: Yes.

SM: And how much training did they give you?

JK: Not really, it was on-the-job training at Barin.

SM: Tell me again, Barin in Alabama; where it was at?

JK: It was about 2-3 miles south of Foley, f-o-l-e-y, Foley, Alabama.

SM: Where is Foley, Mr. Katechis?

JK: In the southern part of Alabama.

SM: So you did mechanics on airplanes, as well as on vehicles?

JK: No, vehicles. We didn't have any vehicles to play with.

SM: Just on airplanes?

JK: Just on airplanes.

SM: So tell me what was your day-to-day like in the military?

JK: They woke you up with reveille at six o'clock in the morning. And you went to breakfast and from breakfast, you went to the hangar where they kept the planes. We stayed there half a day. When it was time for lunch then everybody marched off to lunch. Had lunch, after lunch you went back to work; and you were there until about 6 o'clock.

SM: How many mechanics did they have working in the hangar?

JK: Oh, they had a bunch of them. I don't know exactly how many but I guess there were about 25 - 30 of us.

SM: How many airplanes would they have there?

JK: They had a lot of planes because they were spread all over four hangars.

SM: How many airplanes per hangar, approximately?

JK: They just brought the plane in, pulled by a tractor into the hangar when they needed something to be done on it.

SM: When you were in the Navy, did they ask you if you wanted to be a mechanic, or that was just an assignment that they gave you?

JK: That was the general idea, if you went to an air base, that's what you had to do.

SM: How adept do you think you were as being a mechanic?

JK: Just fair.

SM: You did not consider doing that as your living when you got out of the Navy?

JK: No.

SM: Did you think at any point in time that you were going to be sent overseas?

JK: One time they wanted some of us to go overseas and they asked for volunteers. There was another guy from Brooklyn, New York, by the name of Kaplan. I forget his first name. The last name was Kaplan, k-a-p-l-a-n. He and I were the only ones who stepped forward to go. A few days later, we were ready to leave; and the draft was cancelled, so we didn't have to go.

SM: What year would this have been in?

JK: Oh, I guess might have been around '44.

SM: How did you feel when you found out you weren't being sent overseas?

JK: Oh, I was disappointed, because I wanted the glory and the ships and all that. Of course I didn't know what the heck was going on out there. But I still wanted to go.

SM: When you were in the Navy, did you ever hear anything about the Nazis and their occupation of Greece?

JK: Oh, yes. I used to hate Italians, because of Benito Mussolini, who attacked Greece, and I used to hate all Italians. But after I got in the Navy, some of my best friends were Italian.

Even to this day. I have a friend. He was a little older than I was. He was living in Connecticut. His name was John Libertoli (sp?). And I don't know if he was living or he's passed on, because I can't get in touch with him.

SM: That must be frustrating?

JK: Yes.

SM: When you say that some of your best friends were Italians, were they Italians that had come over from Italy, or their parents had come?

JK: No, they were Italians that were born over here.

SM: They were born in the States and their parents had come from Italy?

JK: Exactly.

SM: How much did you learn about the Nazi occupation in Greece during the war? Did you hear anything from any of your relatives by letter?

JK: Yes, it was very bad.

SM: Tell me more.

JK: Well, the Germans were really savages, to put it mildly. If the Communist guerillas in the mountains killed one German, then the whole town would burn down. They were really bad. Starvation was going on, like nobody's business. I remember reading one time that Mussolini had sent some milk to Athens to feed the starving children. And as soon as it got there, the Germans picked it up and sent it to Germany.

SM: So it was a pretty bad situation?

JK: Very bad situation.

SM: Did you receive any letters from your mother and sister during this time?

JK: No, there was no contact.

SM: Because it was impossible for them to write, or because they were not able to write?

JK: We had no communication with them.

SM: You must have had quite a bit of fear about the safety of your mom and your sister?

JK: Well, luckily they lived on a small island; and so there were a few Italians there, but they were not as bad as the Germans. They didn't bother you if you didn't bother them.

SM: So they were living in Ereikoussa at the time or in Corfu?

JK: No, they were living in Ereikoussa.

SM: So because they were living in Ereikoussa, which is a small island off of Corfu, did you have a pretty high confidence level that they were probably okay?

JK: Yes.

SM: This whole time that you were in the military, your father was living in New York?

JK: Right.

SM: Did your father and you have any communications via letters about what was going on in Greece?

JK: None whatsoever, except what you read in the Greek newspaper.

SM: Okay. And would he tell you that via letters what was going on or would he send you the newsletter, the newspapers?

JK: Not really.

SM: Tell me, Mr. Katechis, what was some of your most memorable experiences in the Navy?

JK: Well the most memorable was the fact we had a lot of accidents, airplane accidents at the base and a lot of people were killed. In fact, the name of the base was known as "Bloody Barin" because we had so many airplane accidents.

SM: How did the accidents happen?

JK: When you're flying up there, something would happen to the plane and it would come down and you were with it. You didn't have a chance to bail out.

SM: Some of the airplanes actually crashed near Barin Field?

JK: Yes, at least once or twice a week, would crash.

SM: Oh my gosh. That's a lot.

JK: Yes, bad, really bad. That's the reason it was known as "Bloody Barin."

SM: Why did you have more accidents than other airfields?

JK: I don't think so. We had about seven airfields surrounding the area of Pensacola.

SM: Was there something about the weather that made it more difficult to fly in that area?

JK: No, the weather down there was much better than it was up north or west or east.

SM: Do you think there was a lot of pilot mistakes or was problems with . . .

JK: Probably some pilot mistakes, mechanical mistakes, you never know.

SM: How often did the airplanes come down empty with the pilots having bailed out?

JK: Never.

SM: Oh, how sad.

JK: Yes.

SM: So that must have been awfully traumatic for all of you?

JK: Oh, it was.

SM: When you thought that you would be sent overseas, did you think that you would then be a mechanic on a base somewhere in Europe?

JK: I would be a mechanic on an airplane carrier.

SM: On an airplane carrier?

JK: Yes.

SM: How much did you hear about what was going on with the Jews in Germany? Did you hear anything while you were in Alabama?

JK: No, not a whole lot. All of that came after the war. During the World War, nobody knew what the hell was going on in Germany. There were rumors that there were concentration camps and all that, but there was no actual testament to that effect.

SM: When there were rumors of the concentration camps, did you know that they were primarily for Jews, or was it unclear who they were for?

JK: Most of them were for Jews but there were others, too. There were Russians. There were Greeks. There were different nationalities.

SM: Yes.

JK: Gypsies.

SM: And during the war did you know that the concentration camps were primarily for Jews, or was it unclear who they were for?

JK: Well, mostly for Jews.

SM: And during the war, you knew this?

JK: Yes.

SM: Tell me about your three months of training up north.

JK: I really went up there because I liked the liberty. The good times the city of Chicago provided for us. What do you call this? The mayor of Chicago had condemned some buildings and made them into serviceman centers. They were different than the USOs. There you could go in. You could eat. You could sleep. You could be entertained and it didn't cost you anything.

SM: And this was in Chicago?

JK: That was in Chicago. Yes and the people of Chicago were real nice to servicemen.

SM: Were they?

JK: Oh, yes.

SM: How often were you able to go out in Chicago?

JK: Oh, we went out every weekend.

SM: Did you?

JK: Yes.

SM: You had Saturday and Sundays off from work?

JK: Right.

SM: Tell me more about your training in Chicago.

JK: I went to airplane hydraulics school. Of course I didn't learn too much because I wasn't there to learn anything; I was there for the good times, for the excuse to be in Chicago.

SM: Chicago's a lovely city, isn't it?

JK: Oh, yes it is, especially along the Michigan Avenue. That's where we stayed. Most the time.

SM: It's beautiful there along the lake, isn't it?

JK: Yes.

SM: Do you remember what months you were sent up to Chicago?

JK: It was in the wintertime; but I don't remember the months.

SM: Do you think it was in 1944?

JK: I believe it was in 1944. Yes.

SM: They were teaching you more about hydraulics with airplanes?

JK: Right.

SM: Did you meet any new friends up in Chicago?

JK: I met some friends, but I've forgotten their names now. They were from all over; from other bases, too, besides Pensacola.

SM: And so these condemned buildings that were made into places where you could go out and spend the night, were there a lot of civilians that would go there on the weekends?

JK: A lot of civilian ladies would come in and entertain us, talk to us, and everything. They were really nice.

SM: Were they?

JK: Oh, yes.

SM: How did you feel about the winter in Chicago?

JK: Well, it was kind of rough, lot of snow, lot of wind and very cold. But, it was okay. I was young, so the cold didn't bother me.

SM: Tell me more about your social life when when you were in Alabama?

JK: Oh, not really much. I went to work and I worked for about three-and-half years. That was seven days a week, 10-11 hours a day, and I didn't have any time off either.

SM: So you had not one day off a week?

JK: No, not even one day a week.

SM: Oh, my gosh. So this continued even after the war was over. You still worked that kind . . .?

JK: When the war was over, then yes.

SM: You still had that schedule?

JK: Yes.

SM: Tell me do you remember the day that you found out that Roosevelt died?

JK: That day I believe I was in Chicago when Roosevelt died.

SM: What were your thoughts that day?

JK: I liked Roosevelt. He was a good man. I used to like him. We listened to him on the radio. We didn't have television then. And, fire – what would he call them? Fireside Chats. I thought he was a wonderful man.

SM: Did you get to listen to some of his Fireside Chats, or were you typically working?

JK: I used to listen to him when I was in the Navy. When he died, I was still in the Navy.

SM: Do you remember when you heard the news that Hitler was dead?

JK: No, I don't remember, but I remember reading all about it. He married the woman he was going with the last moment and then they committed suicide.

SM: So remember reading about this?

JK: Yes.

SM: When the war in Europe ended in 1945, were you able to have any contact with your family in Greece at all?

JK: Oh, yes. After the war was over, we could write and back and forth.

SM: And could you write back and forth immediately after it was over in Europe, but still going on in the Pacific?

JK: Yes.

SM: Tell me about the first letters that you received from your mother and your sister?

JK: I don't remember. I remember writing them, but I don't remember receiving a reply.

SM: I can imagine that you must have felt a lot of joy to be able to communicate with them.

JK: Yes.

SM: Do you remember where you were when you heard about the bombs in Japan?

JK: I don't remember where I was at that time.

SM: What did you think about the bombing in Japan?

JK: I think Truman did the right thing; because it would have cost at least two million American men dying to take Japan. Just like I don't believe about the damn war in Iraq, Bush had no business over there. They did it only for money, for the oil in Iraq. And that was Mr. Cheney who committed that crime. We had over 5,000 American boys dying over there, besides the ones that came back who were crippled for life. That's that.

SM: So you were very opposed to the war in Iraq?

JK: Yes, ma'am I was. I was against the war in Vietnam also, because we had no business going over there, anyway. But, of course, we had support our troops.

SM: Once the war was completely over in August of 1945, after the bombs were dropped, did your day-to-day schedule still stay the same?

JK: About the same.

SM: When did you get out of the war?

JK: In 1946.

SM: Do you remember what month?

JK: I'm pretty dang sure it was May, May 1946.

SM: So you said your schedule did not change. You were still working seven days a week?

JK: Right.

SM: In 1945 from August when the Japanese surrendered until 1946 when you were released from the Navy, do you remember if there was still an airplane crash almost every week at Barin Field?

JK: More or less, yes, because the training continued on to the end.

SM: Did you ever think about being a pilot?

JK: No.

SM: Can you tell me any more experiences during the war when you were at Barin Airfield?

JK: Not really. Except one night, I was on guard duty where we kept the airplanes, and I was smoking a cigarette. About that time, the security watch officer came up on me checking on the guards, and he caught me. And I'll never forget his name. His last name was Steinberger. He didn't turn me in. That's the reason I remember him.

SM: Because you weren't supposed to be smoking?

JK: I wasn't supposed to. I was supposed to be on duty, not close to a plane with a lit cigarette, because there was danger of an explosion, you know?

SM: Yes.

JK: From the gasoline fumes.

SM: So you must have been very relieved that nothing happened?

JK: Yes and I still remember the lieutenant's name. He was a Steinberger.

SM: So the gentleman that did not get you in trouble regarding this smoking, did you have a good relationship with him before that and that's why he didn't do anything, or was he just being nice that day?

JK: Nice human being.

SM: Were there any other memorable people that you remember from your military service?

JK: I remember the commander of the base. I remember one time a U. S. Marine colonel, who was the commander of the base, and his name was Campbell. He was a wonderful man. I remember when he wanted to pass an inspection, he came by with a smile.

We had another guy, by the name of DeWolf (sp?), who was a really, a mean-looking son-of-a-gun. Whenever we had an inspection, he looked all the way from the head to the toe. We were really afraid of him.

Again the next year or year after, we had this colonel, Marine colonel, by the name of Campbell, who was a really fine gentleman in every meaning of the word. He was really nice and everybody would do anything for him.

Whereas for DeWolf, we'd probably push him the water.

SM: What about any memorable comrades, any of your fellow people in the military that you remember really well?

JK: I remember John Libertoli. He was a good friend of mine. He and I went out on liberty into town. He didn't drink or smoke but he liked to go out with women. He was a really nice guy, easy going and not cursing or anything. After the war, he moved back to Connecticut where he was working as a mechanic in what was an aircraft factory, making engines. He worked there for many years. In fact, I think he retired from there.

SM: Now was he the only person that you kept in contact with after the war?

JK: Exactly.

SM: So you two were very good friends?

JK: We were good friends. One time when I was going to New York, I stayed with him for two-three days. He was married then, had a little girl; and later years, when he was going through on vacation to Florida from Connecticut, he stopped by my house in Montgomery, Alabama. We had dinner there and everything. We kept in touch all through the years.

SM: When was the last time that you spoke to him?

JK: I think it was a couple of years ago.

SM: When you got out of the military in 1946, how did you feel about leaving the military?

JK: I really liked to stay. But by the same token, I would like to have a family, wife and kids and everything. That's the reason I left the military, because I knew being in the military it's kind of hard on the family ... on the wife and the kids. So that's the reason I left the military; otherwise, I would have stayed.

SM: You would have stayed otherwise?

JK: Yes.

SM: Now was it in the summer of 1946 that you went back to finish your high school diploma?

JK: Yes.

SM: How was that going back to school when you were much older than the other students?

JK: You felt sort of funny, but it didn't bother me.

SM: Did you graduate from high school in Alexander City, Alabama?

JK: Yes.

SM: What happened after you graduated from high school?

JK: After I graduated from school? Let's see. Right after that I took a trip to Greece. I think we left here about September. And I stayed six months until the following year. And then I came back.

SM: So you went back to Greece with your father?

JK: No, by myself.

SM: By yourself?

JK: Well with friends, anyway.

SM: And your father went back to Greece in 1946.

JK: Yes, right after ... maybe a month or two later.

SM: Then your father stayed there for the rest of his life?

JK: That's it.

SM: So tell me how was it seeing your mother and your sister?

JK: It was nice. I really don't know how it felt now.

SM: Did your sister think about coming to the United States at that time?

JK: No, she about 15-16 years old at the time.

SM: She was very young?

JK: Yes.

SM: How did you meet your wife?

JK: I saw her when I was over there. But of course, I didn't have the money to marry or bring a girl over here. She had an uncle in Montgomery. I went to him and I told him that I liked his niece and I would like to marry her. So he sent the money and brought her over.

SM: When did she come over to the United States?

JK: I think it was in 1947.

SM: When did you get married?

JK: We married the first part of 1948.

SM: What did you do for a career when you got back to the United States?

JK: I worked in a restaurant.

SM: Did you do that for the rest of your life?

JK: More or less, yes.

SM: How do you feel that World War II changed how you viewed the world? How did it affect your life?

JK: I don't know. I'm happy that I'm here. I'm happy that I came over to begin with. Because I love this country. There's not another country in the world that's like it.

SM: So you're very happy here in the States?

JK: Yes, ma'am.

SM: Is there anything else about World War II that you'd like share with me?

JK: No, not really.

SM: Thank you very much, Mr. Katechis.

JK: Yes, Miss Manesis.